



Ethnography

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Ethnographic fieldwork, carried out according to the method of long-term participant-observation, is what defines social anthropology. The method is inductive and open-ended. As such, the method directs the anthropologist to study that which is of significance to the community studied rather than test a number of hypotheses formulated in advance of the fieldwork. Anthropology is a comparative discipline, seeking to unravel the complexity and variety of human understanding and human social and cultural life. For this reason, anthropologists have sought out societies that seemed to be very different from their own and, during the first half of the twentieth century, most went to undertake their fieldwork in small - often minority - communities in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. While this is still the case to a large extent, today many anthropologists have directed their ethnographic gaze toward communities closer to home. Thus the method of participant-observation is found to be useful by those who, for example, study life in a large bank, or the gay community in an American urban setting, as much as in a settlement in the Malaysian rain forest. The method is based on the paradoxical activity of participating fully in peoples' lives, while simultaneously observing it from a distance. To base one's study on the 'native's point of view', and to disentangle what really goes on rather than what people say goes on, is one central advantage of the method. This forces the researcher to allow herself to be open to the unexpected event or utterance. The ethnographer always engages with contemporary anthropological theory in her interpretations. Ethnographic fieldwork is thus performed in active relationship with anthropological theory.

Introduction: ethnography and anthropology

Ethnographic fieldwork is the method that defines social anthropology. The key word here is fieldwork. Anthropology is an academic discipline that constructs its intellectual imaginings upon empirical-based knowledge about human worlds. Ethnography is the practice developed in order to bring about that knowledge according to certain methodological principles, the most important of which is participant-observation ethnographic fieldwork. Current understandings of both anthropology and ethnography are the result of years of debate and practice. While anthropologists are endlessly debating the premises for their understanding of different societies, they mostly agree that anthropology has nothing to offer the world without ethnographic fieldwork. At the same time, ethnography is just an empty practice without a concern for the disciplinary debates in anthropology departments and publications. It is therefore wrong to separate them; they are part and parcel of each other. Anthropology and ethnography are so intertwined that together they have become a basic premise for the anthropological epistemology.¹⁴ This is how anthropologists understand the world. This is the premise for how they perform their fieldwork - wherever that may be - and this is the basis for their writings.

The following is a useful definition of ethnography: 'the recording and analysis of a culture or society,

usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution' (Simpson & Coleman 2017). Having said that, the empirical focus for ethnographic research is in flux. For example, in recent years, some anthropologists have moved away from face-to-face participant observation to studying alternative constructions of cultural life, such as emergent online virtual worlds (e.g. Boellstorff 2012). Ethnography is today used for both the actual fieldwork during which the anthropologist collects material, and the subsequent text – an ethnography. Here, ethnography will be used in the former sense, and this entry will seek to unravel the complexities that are hidden in the seemingly simple definition.

Participant-observation

The ethnographic method is called participant-observation. It is undertaken as open-ended inductive long-term living with and among the people to be studied, the sole purpose of which is to achieve an understanding of local knowledge, [values](#), and practices 'from the "native's point of view"'.¹⁴ The task of the ethnographer is to contextualise insight of local values and practices within wider local significations, and to render them *probable*; to show how theirs is a meaningful alternative as a way of life. That is the be-all and end-all of anthropology and, as such, central to disciplinary identity.

Regardless of where the fieldwork is undertaken, the ethnographer must first have obtained a thorough grounding in the basic principles of the discipline of anthropology. The main overarching issues to keep in mind are: what are the persistent questions – the essential perplexities (Needham 1978) – about human life to be investigated and how are these handled in each case? Which are the central theoretical concepts to be addressed? What are the 'gate-post' issues from a particular region – those that previous ethnographers have identified as significant there and that need to be addressed? Through addressing these issues, the anthropologist hopes to contribute to fundamental intellectual quandaries about the nature of social institutions and social life.

The choice of where to go is often dictated by two considerations: a place that the anthropologist thinks would be congenial to her taste, perhaps a place she has heard of or read about and which appealed to her imagination and sense of adventure; and a place that she thinks might help her to answer some theoretical issues that, through readings and lectures, have aroused her intellectual curiosity. Together these two concerns add up to a general desire to explore the unknown¹⁵: whether geographically, socially, culturally, or intellectually. Through rigorous and persistent study of the various institutions, ideas, and practices that are encountered, an anthropologist seeks to provide an ethnographic study of the community that is informed and anthropologically relevant. However, increasingly anthropologists are eager to investigate places or people closer to their own experience. The so-called 'anthropology at home' trend has shown that a place for investigation may nevertheless be as unfamiliar as life in distant places. A pioneering work, and subsequent classic, was the study of young Italian men in a poor part of Boston carried out by the Harvard

academic W.F. Whyte (1943). This has been followed by studies on a wide variety of local institutions and social groups in the anthropologist's own country (see endnote v). It is particularly common for anthropologists from the Global South to undertake their ethnographic research in their own country.

Anthropologists insist that what they do, and that which distinguishes their research from that of other academic disciplines, is participant-observation. At first glance that seems straightforward. The anthropologist goes to the selected group of people that she wants to study and settles down in their midst. She seeks to participate in daily and ceremonial life, preferably as a contributor as she becomes affiliated to a [household](#) or some other local group, and all the while she will observe, ask questions, and take notes. She may also use a number of other methods, such as formal and informal interviews, focus groups, and use audio/[visual](#) recordings. However, while such methods are shared by other disciplines, anthropologists argue that they gain a different and more holistic and profound understanding when they engage in a participant-observation regime. An ethnographic study seeks to come to grips with the complex socio-cultural institutions and practices that are more or less taken for granted by the people themselves. Through a holistic investigation in which patterns of behavior, utterances, and actions are contextualised and placed in relation to each other, a world view¹⁴ may be detected: ideas about human nature, gender, family, economy, politics and religion become discernible.

What those who undertake some form of 'qualitative research' often fail to appreciate, is that what people say they do is often very different from what they actually do. Such paradoxes become apparent only through long-term fieldwork. The anthropologist's antennas must be at work all the time in order to pick up the unstated and the taken-for-granted, as well as tensions and conflicts, all of which must be brought to bear on the analysis of the bigger whole.

Only through familiarity with local values and practices will the magic of serendipity come into play. Serendipity, in contrast to what many believe, is not just a chance event. It is the ability to make discoveries, by accidents and *wisdom*, of things which one was not in quest of.¹⁵ Wisdom required for serendipitous discoveries is obtained through the day-to-day participant observation that develops a particular way of being and seeing – a way that springs out of anthropological concerns.

Participant-observation is far from a straightforward or generally agreed upon project. But every anthropologist, whether a graduate student or professor, writes in their research proposal that participant-observation will be the major method to be pursued. Participant-observation is not a clearly defined practice. It is better regarded as a methodological 'onion,' with no firm centre. The method is based on the paradox of participating fully in peoples' lives, while simultaneously observing them from a distance. Nevertheless, it is the method that identifies the discipline. Full participation may be a fantasy. Nevertheless, most anthropologists would agree that it is an ambition which is central to the future identity

of the discipline. Regardless of whether the fieldwork is in an Indonesian village or a large company in a European city, that is what anthropologists strive to achieve. According to the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, participant-observation can never become more than a fiction, or an illusion (1968: 154). However close one gets to the people one studies, the anthropologist and the people know that she is not a real member of the group and that she will leave after one or two years; that her world is very different from theirs. But it is an illusion that is necessary in order to achieve the insights that are sought. It is only through this that 'thick description' becomes possible. That is why language is important; anthropologists try not to work with interpreters.

One often hears that 'the alien gaze' is a necessary component of ethnographic fieldwork because it is difficult to identify the significance of one's own practices. It is noticing the unfamiliar and the unexpected, however mundane, that sharpens the attention and renders everything to be of potential interest. This is one reason for undertaking fieldwork outside one's own socio-cultural domain. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that participant-observations presuppose a central premise, namely that any ethnographic experience must be preceded by an examination of ones' own 'pre-understanding' - to be reflexive about the understanding that is brought from home. To cultivate a reflexive alien gaze is particularly important when undertaking one's ethnographic research close to 'home'. Many will argue that such research is best carried out after having had the experience of fieldwork elsewhere - this was my experience¹⁶ - while others claim that a conceptual boundary between [home](#) and away is artificial.

A brief history of ethnographic research in anthropology

Although anthropology can be said to have started as a distinct academic discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century, ethnographic fieldwork was not a necessary part of it. Rather, in Britain a group of men subsequently termed 'armchair anthropologists' laid the groundwork for the comparative study of human society and culture. That was a time when intellectual life was heavily influenced by the theories of evolution developed by Charles Darwin (1970 [1859]). Herbert Spencer, Sir Edward B. Tylor, and Sir James Frazer were the most prominent contributors to the debate. Their research was undertaken in their offices in British universities - not out in the bush - where they developed their theories of the evolution of culture. They based their analyses upon the many texts that were available on life in 'primitive, uncivilized and undeveloped' parts of the world, from material collected by missionaries, traders, [scientists](#), and travelers. Although in many cases these provided well-observed details about local practices and ideas, they were, nevertheless, randomly collected from a biased western, Christian position without a theoretical model beyond the evolutionary one. The evolutionary school of thought maintained that humans had gone through a number of stages in order to achieve the assumed pinnacle of their own time. Religion, kinship, and marriage practices as well as technology were the chief criteria for allocating a particular social group a place on the evolutionary ladder. Both Tylor's *Primitive culture* (1871) and Frazer's *The golden bough*

(1890) became bestsellers and were printed in many editions. It was not until the arrival on the British anthropological scene of the Polish intellectual Bronislaw Malinowski (see below) at the end of World War I, whose path-breaking studies of the Trobriand Islanders were based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, that participant-observation became integral to the discipline of social anthropology.

A similar situation pertained in France where the sociologist Émile Durkheim established his influential group of armchair anthropologist-philosophers called the *Année Sociologique*. Again, 'savage and exotic' beliefs and practices were the focus for their studies, but they were analyzed in sociological terms, unlike the British and Americans (see below) who tended to look to the individual actor. The British and the French armchair anthropologists were extremely well-read about 'primitive' customs and beliefs, but they had never visited, let alone lived in, one of the 'exotic' social groups that they claimed to study. The situation in the United States developed in a somewhat different fashion. The lawyer-ethnographer L.H. Morgan took a serious interest in the Iroquois people who lived close to him in Rochester, New York. He visited them over a long period of time – from the 1850s until his death in 1881 – and learned to speak their language. Morgan undertook a systematic study of their kinship system. His discovery, that patterns of kinship terminology in other, even unrelated, American Indian cultures were very similar to those of the Iroquois, launched a systematic survey of kinship nomenclature that provided a template for modern studies of kinship in anthropology. His major work, *Systems of consanguinity and affinity of the human family* (1871) was widely read and highly influential; amongst its readers were Marx and also Engels, whose work, *The origins of the family, private property and the state* (1902 [1884]) drew directly upon Morgan's work. However, American anthropology got a powerful kick in a new direction – a direction in which ethnographic fieldwork became an essential part – when the German anthropologist Franz Boas established an anthropology department at Columbia University in New York in 1899. Boas argued that in-depth long-term field research was essential for an understanding of alien cultures and went to study the Kwakiutl society on the Pacific Northwest coast (1966) over a period of more than twenty years during the first part of the twentieth century. Boas trained a number of talented students, all of whom undertook their own field studies – mainly of various American Indian groups. Perhaps the most famous of his students was Margaret Mead, whose ethnography based on participant-observation study of teenage girls on Samoa (1928) created a lot of attention and debate in America.

Boas and his students were firm cultural relativists. That is, they argued that each culture should be studied according to its own beliefs and [values](#), that there is nothing essentially human that transcends culture. This gave rise to the so-called nature or nurture debate that, in some form or other, is still with us today. Today, however, the extreme form of cultural relativism is contested, not least through the experience of ethnographic fieldwork that refutes the notion of many humanities. Anthropologists argue for a psychic and cognitive unity of mankind. The job of the anthropologist is to demonstrate the many ways that humans imaginatively create socio-cultural worlds.

Malinowski and the birth of British social anthropology

In Britain, anthropology developed in a somewhat different direction following the groundbreaking ethnographic studies written by the Polish intellectual Bronislaw Malinowski, who went to the Trobriand Island off Papua New Guinea in 1918. Malinowski subsequently became a professor of social anthropology at the London School of Economics where he inspired a number of students, many of whom became central figures in the anthropology departments in British universities. Malinowski argued strongly for fieldwork and he did so from a clearly-argued theoretical position.

His chapter on methods in the book *The Argonauts of Western Pacific* became the 'bible' for British ethnographers/anthropologists of his own and subsequent generations:

The field ethnographer has seriously and soberly to cover the full extent of the phenomena in each aspect of tribal culture studied, making no difference between what is commonplace, or drab, or ordinary and what strikes him as astonishing and out-of-the way (1922: 11).

And, according to Malinowski, the final goal is 'to grasp the native's point of view, *his* relations to life, to realise *his* vision of his world' (1922: 25, original emphasis). The principles that Malinowski identified apply today as much as then. They apply not just to those undertaking 'exotic' fieldwork in small communities far away, but equally to those studying groups or institutions in their own country. As noted above, in order to perform good ethnographic fieldwork in 'modern' settings, it can be an advantage to have undertaken fieldwork in an alien small-scale society first (see endnote v). Either way, fieldwork is informed throughout by anthropological concerns. Ethnographic fieldwork used to be more open-ended than it is today, when increasingly anthropologists go to the field with a particular research question in mind. This may be due to difficulties in obtaining funding and high university fees, as well as a trend towards more policy-oriented research, often as part of a multi-disciplinary research group. However, the ideals of the participant-observation method guide all interaction in the field, and ethnographic field research continues to be inductive.

American cultural anthropology focused on identifying cultural values and ethos embedded in individual actors, and their field-research revealed much about religious understandings, mythology, and notions of personhood. British, French, and Scandinavian social anthropology was preoccupied with social structure and institutions. Ethnographers from these countries sought to map this primarily through the study of kinship systems. While American anthropologists were largely studying American Indians in their own country and in Central America, European anthropologists went to Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. The British and French tended to undertake their field research in their own [colonies](#), and continued to go to the same countries after they became independent. Ethnographic fieldwork demonstrated beyond doubt that there was no basis for maintaining the evolutionary model of human mentality. Formally speaking, a psychic and cognitive unity of mankind was accepted and the scientific interest lay in exploring the variations of socio-

cultural modes that human imagination gave rise to.

Representation and the *Writing culture* debates

Fieldwork has been debated over and over. Anthropologists have always engaged in soul-searching regarding their disciplinary practices. Debates about methods, the status of findings, and the profoundly personal and idiosyncratic nature of fieldwork have all been hotly discussed – in and out of print – since the famous London School of Economics seminars under Malinowski. However, in this anthropologists may be their own worst enemies. Indeed, they could be in danger of debating away ethnographic fieldwork as they did culture through the '[writing culture](#)' debate at the end of the twentieth century, leaving the ground open for other disciplines to claim it for their own. The effect of the *Writing culture* critics (Marcus & Fisher 1986) rendered fieldwork, especially in 'exotic' places in the South, politically incorrect in many university departments. The thrust of this postmodernist critique was directed at the kind of texts that had resulted from ethnographic fieldwork. These were, it was argued, pretending to provide an objective picture of the communities studied, on par with scientific research, whereas fieldwork is highly personal and idiosyncratic and findings are coloured by the training and personality of the anthropologist. Furthermore, anthropology was claimed to be an extension of colonial practice. Not only was there a concern that comparison simply extends the colonial gaze, but also it became politically problematic and [morally](#) unacceptable to study supposedly powerless small communities in former colonial domains, to make them, the argument went, into the reified 'Other' (e.g. Dresch 1992). As a result of these two aspects of the critique, many chose instead to do [historical](#) archival studies or studies 'at home' or so-called 'dialogical studies' (Borneman & Hammoudi 2009). However, many were critical of *Writing culture*'s assertions. Questioning who had replaced the 'other' as a result of this critique, Robbins suggested that the 'suffering other' at home had become the legitimate subject for anthropological ethnographic investigation (Robbins 2013). He further considers 'how recent trends in anthropology might coalesce in a further shift, this one toward an anthropology of the good capable of recovering some of the critical force of an earlier anthropology without taking on its weaknesses (Robbins 2013: 447). Many would agree and argue that for this to be achieved, the comparative ambition of anthropology must be cherished.

Two more points are worth making in regard to the postmodern critique of ethnographic practice in the South. First, most who have carried out fieldwork in rural areas of Asia, Africa, or [Latin America](#) do not agree that they 'study down' in any [post-colonial](#) sense. As they settle in unfamiliar and often uncomfortable circumstances, the relationship may be an unequal power relationship, but not in the sense the critics argued. More often anthropologists are at the mercy of the communities they study, struggling to gain acceptance, coping with unfamiliar language and trying to understand what goes on around them. They are rarely in a position to influence anything, even should they wish to do so. At the same time, as the people studied become [literate](#) and highly educated, they increasingly become active partners in the anthropological enterprise, thereby enhancing the understanding and knowledge of the field-worker and,

simultaneously, giving themselves a new window through which they can view their own society in a changing world.

To many inside and outside anthropology, policy-oriented research may today seem more ideologically correct, more useful and relevant in a rapidly changing world, than simply setting off for the Highlands of New Guinea. However, it is worth bearing in mind that much innovative theoretical insight of general import was gained from the early studies of small-scale societies in the Pacific, Amazonia, and Africa, and that these have shaped the anthropology of development and applied anthropology as much as they have academic anthropology. In recent years, equally high-quality ethnographic fieldwork continues to be undertaken in New Guinea and Oceania, not least inspired by the work of Marilyn Strathern (1989), as well as in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which has impacted contemporary theory. Gender studies have been revitalised, a new-found interest in indigenous [ontologies](#) and concepts of personhood has inspired much exciting theorising, and novel interpretations of exchange and classification owe their sources to both old and new ethnographic fieldwork from these places.

Not everybody goes to the jungles of South America or Southeast Asia, the villages of sub-Saharan Africa, India or the Middle East, the islands of the Pacific or far-flung Arctic settlements. Some go to urban areas on the same continents, others find places or topics in the Global North. However, regardless of where or what, most would argue that they perform a micro-study of some kind and that the same methodological criteria are adhered to. Many are part of a large, multidisciplinary team where the anthropological contribution is highly valued, while others carve out their own micro-field in a globalised world.

While the cutting edge in the discipline may be the most recent theoretical concepts, they often soon lose their attraction, whereas the old anthropological texts based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork rarely lose their salience. Ethnographic texts from two or three generations ago do not become outdated in the same way as fanciful theoretical treatises. While many may disagree with the early interpretations, they value and draw on the empirical observations of what may no longer be observed. Anthropologists return to them in seeking to enhance the understanding of their own material. Malinowski's studies from the Trobriand Islands is a prime example. Among the many others, one finds Schapera's work on the Khoisan people of South Africa (1935), Audrey Richards illuminating study on Bemba (Zambia) girls' initiation rites (1956), and Boas' work on the Kwakiutl Indians of the Pacific Northwest coast (1966). These, like all good ethnographies, are scrupulous in their attention to detail.

Multi-sited and multi-temporal fieldwork

In recent years two new approaches have appeared in anthropological methodology: multi-sited and multi-temporal fieldwork. Both are advocated as a means towards a fuller and more complex understanding. Multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) is a method of data collection where the ethnographer, rather than staying in the same community over time, follows a group, a material object, a particular topic, or social

issue through different field sites geographically and/or socially. Multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork arose as a response to new topics for anthropological investigation, such as the study of [reproduction](#) and reproductive technologies, new modes of electronic communication such as internet and mobile telephones, transnational [adoption](#), and local mobility and migration.

Multi-temporal fieldwork (Howell & Talle 2012) involves a continued relationship with the site of one's original fieldwork. The anthropologist returns again and again at relatively frequent intervals, thus deepening the relationship with the people and widening the scope of anthropological practice in subtle ways. The British anthropologist Raymond Firth, famous for his studies of the Polynesian Tikopia community, made the point that there are two kinds of re-study: the dual-synchronic - a comparison of then and now after number of years, and the diachronic study - a continuous study of people and events over time (Firth 1959). Today, the latter is the more common, due largely to the ease of modern means of travel. Multi-temporal fieldwork enables the ethnographer to follow the community through times of change, and to record their reactions to outside influences - economic, technological, and social - that challenge old values and practices.

With the rapid spread of mobile telephones and internet, communication may be maintained with many field sites after the ethnographer has returned home. This renders ethnographic research more dynamic than was previously possible.

Ethnography and fieldwork in other disciplines

It is first and foremost the fieldwork method of participant-observation and the kinds of anthropological questions, debates, and analyses that spring out of it as these are embedded in an holistic analysis - questions about [social production](#), and the cultural meaning of, for example: kinship, sociality, [labour](#), [money](#), exchange, social stratification, conflict, authority, gender etc. - that gives anthropology its special identity and that which distinguishes it from the other social sciences.

Due to a decrease in funding and pressure on publishing, PhD students as well as academic staff are having to change their research practice. A shorter period of fieldwork is becoming common and more topic-focused research questions are increasingly demanded. This raises the question of what insights anthropologists can provide that a clever investigative journalist cannot, or someone from Cultural Studies armed with an exciting theoretical concept (Howell 1997). Anthropologists will still claim that only the very nature of their ethnographic method of long-term participant observation can provide a unique contribution to knowledge about other life-worlds.

Recently, a number of other disciplines have taken to use 'ethnography' or 'ethnographic fieldwork' in the methods section of their books, papers, and research applications. Most anthropologists would be very skeptical of the kind of methodology that is proposed under that rubric. 'Qualitative research' is not the

same as ethnography. Open-ended interviews and focus groups do not replace the insights obtained from twenty-four hour / twenty months of informed 'hanging around'. This challenges anthropologists to make clear what they mean by ethnographic fieldwork and what is so special about it. It is important to clarify this for the future of the discipline; otherwise, '...our protest will be of no avail unless we can explain what we mean by ethnography in terms of what is cogent and intellectually defensible' (Ingold 2016). If anyone may 'do' anthropology, or ethnography, then what is so special about our contribution? Marilyn Strathern is reported to have said that anthropologists study social [relationships](#) by *making* social relationships. Perhaps that is the answer?

In his response to criticisms from the *Writing culture* debate, Spencer wrote, 'Anthropologists...[do not just write, they] wade into paddy fields, get sick and read bad novels rather than confront another day of mounting misapprehensions; they also take photographs, make films and tape recordings [...] the fact that they mainly do it by themselves in strange places is another oddity...' (Spencer 1989: 160). The main point is that not only do anthropologists undertake long-term deep immersion fieldwork regardless of the geographical location of their 'field', but they insist that ethnography and anthropology are two sides of the same coin. Others seem not to appreciate the epistemological consequences from such a unity. In his epilogue, 'Notes on the future of anthropology', to the volume of the same title edited by Ahmed and Shore (1995), the sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that anthropology has nothing unique to offer, that with the 'disappearance of the exotic' and the fall of [colonialism](#), the distinctiveness of anthropology is under threat. He goes on to state that:

[a] discipline which deals with an evaporating subject matter, staking claim to a method which it shares with the rest of the social sciences anyway, and deficient in theoretical traditions [...] does not exactly add up to defensible identity of anthropology today (Giddens 1995: 274).

The continued practice of participant-observation ethnography and the resulting theoretical development of the discipline of anthropology since that time clearly refute Giddens' claim. Further, to assert as Giddens did, that there are no more 'exotic' places to study, is equally uninformed. Anyone who has travelled in Central or Southeast Asia, Melanesia, or the African continent knows that there is no shortage of potentially interesting localities in which to settle in order to conduct in-depth anthropological fieldwork. They may not be isolated empty blobs on the map, but people live in an ever-changing world and they cope with new ideas and practices in unpredictable ways. At the same time, the notion of 'exotic' is being challenged as anthropologists study a range of urban communities in the Global North as well as in the Global South. Religious, gay, youth, poor, immigrant, bankers, hospital wards, and many more communities in the vicinity may be as 'remote' from their previous experience and as 'exotic' as any community in the Global South. Anthropology as a discipline without participant-observation fieldwork would have very little to offer the academic world, or the general public. The aim of ethnography is to continuously expand our knowledge about the richness of human imagination and the ways that humans organise their lives. In

order to achieve that, the comparative ambition of anthropology must be maintained. A substantial proportion of new recruits must continue to undertake long-term fieldwork in places far-away from their [home](#): places where they have to learn to communicate in a previously-unknown language. This is the key to render alternative solutions to the organization of social and cultural life meaningful and understandable to the outsiders. When all is said and done, some form of cultural relativism remains the discipline's trade mark. This is how anthropology differs from the other social sciences. There may simply be no future for the armchair (or even desktop) anthropologist.

In conclusion

Social anthropology developed from Malinowski and Boas through Firth, Evans-Pritchard, Mead, Leach, Douglas, Needham, Lévi-Strauss, Dumont, Geertz, Sahlins, Strathern, and many, many others. Despite their important theoretical differences, they had one thing in common: a commitment, through ethnographic fieldwork, to explore social, cultural, cognitive, and [moral](#) forms of life in places far from home – geographically and culturally. The aim was, and is, to use that knowledge to address overarching theoretical questions concerning the variety and similarity of human life as this is manifested through kinship, religion, classification, economic, and political life.

Anthropology is a discipline of amazement; knowledge of other peoples' lives obtained during ethnographic fieldwork never ceases to astonish, even stupefy the ethnographer. Studies that throw light upon alien practices and [values](#) often lead to self-examination. They make one acknowledge that so much of what is taken for granted, what is considered to be 'natural' and right, is very far from the case. At the same time, the ethnographer discovers that so much is also common across space and lived culture. This results in an appreciation of both difference and sameness. These ethnographic experiences render invalid claims of radical alterity or of human incommensurability.

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Note on contributor

Signe Howell is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo. Her D.Phil was obtained at the University of Oxford and was based on 18 months of fieldwork with the Chewong – a hunter-gatherer community in the Malaysian rainforest. She has subsequently undertaken fieldwork in eastern Indonesia and she has performed a major study on values and practices of transnational adoption in Norway. She has published widely based on her three fieldworks.

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[1] This potential confusion of the two terms is most commonly found in Anglo-Saxon anthropology. In France one talks of *ethnologie* or *anthropologie sociale* and in Germany it used to be *Völkerkunde*.

[2] The expression 'the native's point of view' is as applicable to the study of middle-class managers in a German town as it is to a South Sea island community. It is a methodological term independent of place.

[3] The desire to untangle the 'unknown' is not always the driving force behind an ethnographic venture. Some may be more interested in untangling the underlying sociality of their own world (see, e.g., Okely & Callaway 1996, Lewin & Leap 1996).

[4] The expression 'world view' is theoretically contentious in anthropology. However, rather than entering the debate, here I

use the term in its simple form as expressed by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world'.

[5] Definition adapted from 'Serendipity' (Little, Fowler & Coulson 1964: 1946).

[6] Having undertaken ethnographic fieldwork in two societies that correspond to the traditional perception of small-scale communities far away from my own home (the [hunting and gathering](#) community in the Malaysian rainforest [Chewong], and an agricultural community in the highlands of an island in Eastern Indonesia [Lio]), I turned my anthropological gaze homewards. I undertook a study of the practice of transnational [adoption](#) in Norway. Not only did I live in Norway at the time, but I had also adopted a daughter from Nepal. This made the research challenging in several ways and raised ethical questions on how far to delve into people's most private and personal lives. The practical business of doing participant-observation fieldwork here was very different from the previous two. It was also methodologically more challenging. As there was no community to settle in, I had to find alternative methods to come to grips with the kinds of ideas, values, and practices that constituted the diffuse world of transnational adoption. I interviewed a range of social workers and [bureaucrats](#) handling adoption applications, politicians who formed legislation, the NGOs that actually provided the supply of children, prospective parents and parents with adopted children, and adoptees themselves. I read [historical](#) documents that dealt with adoption and I became interested in changes in adoption laws in Norway, other Western countries, and in the countries that sent children abroad in adoption; I studied international treaties and conventions on children and childrens' rights and on the control of international adoption. The project took on global perspectives. In addition, I joined a group of adoptive families with children from Korea on a two-week 'return - or motherland - visit' to Korea, and a group of prospective parents on their mind-blowing journey to collect their children in Ethiopia. I supervised students doing fieldwork in Colombia and Brazil and in orphanages in China and in India. Through all these activities, and several more, I hoped to build up a holistic understanding of the complex picture of the practice of transnational adoption from the point of view of the many actors involved (Howell 2006). I am convinced that had I not had the experience of doing fieldwork twice previously, I would not have been able to complete my research on transnational adoption in Norway. I was less anxious about intruding into people' lives. My eyes had been trained to look in seemingly irrelevant places, my mind was open to notice the seemingly insignificant moments and make use of the unexpected.