



Anthropology Matters Journal 2006, Vol 8 (2)

Editorial: From play to knowledge: a workshop on ethnographic methodology

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It is our great pleasure to introduce this themed issue of Anthropology Matters. The five articles assembled here developed out of a workshop held at the University of Manchester, which set out to explore the role of play in ethnographic research and its transformation into different forms of knowledge. The impetus for this event had been provided by the fact that the process of conducting ethnographic research is commonly referred to as 'fieldwork'. And yet, in our fieldsites, some of us have spent considerable amounts of time playing football or learning to dance. This irony sparked off a series of questions: Could such enjoyable pastimes really be considered a kind of work? Conversely, could any activities that were taken seriously by their practitioners be seen to be nothing but a form of play? How did the meanings of play and of work differ cross-culturally? What sorts of skills were necessary to play competently and successfully? Could play be used as a research technique? And finally, how could knowledge gained of and through play be incorporated into standard academic formats?

The papers in this issue cover a wide range of disciplinary and epistemological traditions, geographic locations, and research topics. Yet in their diversity they also speak to each other. Shared concerns tie the papers together—whether concerned with the methods and ethics of working with marginalised or less powerful participants; the embodied aspects of play, for instance in the form of dance, music, or hill walking; or the challenge of incorporating play and its artefacts, such as sound recordings, videos or drawings into the academic text.

In the first article Jonathan McIntosh reflects on his research with children in a Balinese dance studio. McIntosh's fieldwork experience beautifully highlights the knowledge and skills required in knowing how to play, as well as making a strong case for the benefits of using play as part of the research process. Without a degree of linguistic competence he would not have been able to understand the children's songs and games he was interested in, let alone able to join in, and without struggling through the sequences of dance moves himself he would not have known the pain caused by unfamiliar positions and the exhaustion brought on by regular training. Being able to participate did not only add an important embodied dimension to McIntosh's research, but also changed his relationship with the children. Balinese adults tend to be figures of respect, who may initiate games, but tend not to play themselves. By being an atypical adult, McIntosh was able to let the

children take the lead and become his teachers, allowing him to learn about their everyday games and the role music and dance play in their lives.

Like McIntosh, Lucy Atkinson conducted fieldwork with children, but her fieldsite could hardly have been more different. She played with children from the Democratic Republic of Congo who were living in a refugee camp in Northern Zambia. Violence and war had loomed large in the children's lives, but Atkinson objects to the common depiction by NGOs and the media that reduces refugee children to the status of traumatised victims. Atkinson employed a more structured approach than McIntosh, but similarly her aim was to create a space for the children to express themselves freely, using a variety of creative media, such as drawing, drama, or film, as well as techniques derived from participatory consultation and decision making processes to achieve this. By talking to the children about their pictures and the people, places and events that featured in their dramatic sketches and video scenes, Atkinson was able to elicit what was important in the children's lives, such as the pride they took in their daily chores and the excitement of playing war. However, the incorporation of these incredibly rich sources into standard academic accounts has presented Atkinson with a challenge. Not only have image-rich publications required more advanced technical demands and higher production costs than predominantly text-based ones, but her concerns go beyond these practical issues. In particular the children's drawings, she contends, are not mere illustrations of the writing, but should be seen as more akin to quotes. However, she admits that this new status of the pictorial will require a major change in the conventions of how ethnographic writing is received.

Many of the aboriginal youths Brett Lashua worked with considered writing lyrics and making music the most important thing in their lives. As the 'sound guy' in charge of the recording studio of a school-based leisure programme for 'at-risk' youths in central Edmonton, Canada, most of whom were of First Nation descent, Lashua helped the young people to transform their lyrics into hip hop tracks. Selecting suitable samples and creating remixes provided the youths with a sphere over which they had a degree of control. Unlike much of their lives, hip hop offered a space to challenge racial stereotypes and discrimination and to give voice to their experiences of drugs, violence, crime and neglect. Writing lyrics and making remixes enabled this marginalised group to be creative and productive, thereby providing them with a powerful resource for the generation of self-esteem. Lashua's paper not only showcases the importance of music for these youths, but also sensitively points to the limitations of participation. He considered his role to be that of a facilitator—someone who was able to relate to the teenagers and was familiar with their music and shared the importance they attached to it—rather than a teacher. While the paper testifies to his ability to become a much-trusted confidant, it also does not keep quiet about the adolescents' persistent emphasis on his difference. Lashua's article is also an excellent example of how changes in technology can open up new fields of investigation and create different forms of representation—and it highlights the potential that the study of sound holds for ethnographic research.

In hip hop, creating samples—the recombination of existing tracks—and setting them to often extemporised lyrics becomes the playing field on which the artist can demonstrate his or her creativity and skill. The same tension between a style's convention and the imperative to invent can also be found in jazz improvisation. In his research, Will Gibson

was interested in the intersubjective knowledge involved in the production of improvised jazz performances, yet found that knowing how to improvise and being able to reflect on this activity verbally were very different skills. Dissatisfied with the degree of detail that conventional interviews produced, he decided to record incidents when he was playing with experienced performers. Gibson then played the recordings back to them, inquiring about their motivations and decisions when playing a sequence in a particular way. This approach allowed him to learn about conventions, a player's personal preferences, and the considerations concerning the skills and experience of other players that had influenced their improvisations. This innovative approach enabled Gibson to tease out the ways in which players orient themselves to each other and to the conventions of jazz improvisation.

Gibson uses the concept of play in order to explore ways in which participation in the activities being studied by the researchers can yield rich data for creating a detailed understanding of these practices. While doing his research Gibson was learning to play jazz guitar and, similarly, while studying the ways in which mountaineering experiences in Scotland are narrated, Katrín Lund was walking the Scottish Hills herself. Lund explored how mountaineers organised and abstracted their time in the hills in the form of lists, logbooks, photographs and drawings, and compares them to the official listing of Scotland's topography. Though taking different forms and displaying different degrees of abstraction, Lund argues, all artefacts of the mountaineers' endeavours are repositories of their embodied experience of walking the hills, and they re-evolve this experience in different ways when shared with others. Lund suggests that the experience of walking even permeates the records and classifications of the founding father of Scottish mountaineering, Sir Hugh Munro, thereby fuelling long-standing debates about what makes a mountain in Scotland. Storing their rambles in material form allows the hikers to reduce the scientifically measured and mapped topography of the Scottish Mountains to a personal level, turning their practices into a game. Playing a game can also turn the actors into objects of ridicule, as Lund shows for Scottish mountaineers out bagging Munros and the researchers fascinated by this pursuit. Yet the willingness to make a fool of oneself often marks an important stepping stone in the creation of new knowledge.

Certainly, to us as organisers of the workshop, encountering such interdisciplinary and original positions on the relationship between play and ethnographic methodology has been a stimulating and rewarding experience. We would now like to invite you to join in the play.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank C-SAP and the Department of Social Anthropology at Manchester University for their generous support, and the original presenters at the workshop for their stimulating papers. David Mills' advice helped tremendously to secure funding. Tony Simpson and Sarah Green were incisive and insightful discussants, Lynn Dignan organised lunch and Bill Brown took care of all audio-visual requirements. Without the help and encouragement of Rebecca Marsland and Ingie Hovland this themed issue of Anthropology Matters would not have been realised.

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