

Guest Columnist Paul Atkinson**About the author**

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Paul Atkinson

Why do Fieldwork?

Why do fieldwork? It is a question I have asked myself on numerous occasions since I started doing empirical research of my own. I learned at a very early stage that it is hard, and time-consuming, and often thankless. In my final years as an undergraduate at Cambridge I – like many Cambridge anthropologists – had my first taste of field research in an Essex village, called Elmdon. It was used, with the long-suffering (if sometimes strained) co-operation of its inhabitants, as a proving ground for would-be ethnographers and as an ongoing research project in its own right. The choice of Elmdon was far from random. Audrey Richards – then the Reader in Anthropology – lived there in part of what had been the village school and teacher's cottage. She and Edmund Leach combined historical research on the village – which was documented from the eleventh century onwards – with firsthand fieldwork conducted by successive student researchers. A friend of mine, Julian Laite, and I volunteered to be part of the project in 1969. This involved spending a couple of weeks staying at the old school, and conducting field research in the village. We were asked to investigate some aspects of housing in the village. We worked through the materials that had been collected in previous years, conducted interviews, and analysed our data. In ten days we had done enough to have written (on an ancient manual typewriter) a ten-thousand-word report, including some pertinent observations on kinship, types of housing tenure and occupational careers. Towards the end of the project there was, I remember, a gloriously sunny Sunday afternoon. Julian, his girlfriend and I sat on the lawn and soaked up the warmth. Audrey was in her garden. 'Anthropologists work a seven day week' she chided us.

Since then I have had to do the chiding and encouraging for myself, helped by others, not least my life-partner Sara Delamont. When I spent time in the Edinburgh University Anatomy dissecting room observing first-year medical students working on their cadavers and prosectors preparing anatomical specimens, I wondered why I was doing it – especially as I had been more or less

forbidden to publish anything about the setting by the Professor of Anatomy. It made me envy some of the social psychologists I worked with who seemed to be able to do 'quick and clean' research on relatively docile subjects, under controlled conditions, with simple research instruments (such as projective tests) and in relative comfort. Moreover, their research seemed to be remarkably cost-effective. They seemed to be able to get enough data to write up while I was still trying to negotiate access. Similar thoughts crossed my mind as my research with Edinburgh medical students and their teachers stretched on, more-or-less unbroken, for another two years. 'Why am I doing this?' I would mutter as I walked the wards with the students, or sat peering glumly at surgeons performing operations, or stood with them while patients suffered the pain or indignity of investigative procedures. Depressed by visits to locked wards for the attempted suicide cases, or to the more distant depositories for long-term neurological cases, I sometimes needed a good deal of persuading that what I was doing was satisfying – let alone enjoyable. I also recall quite vividly that the existential Angst of such fieldwork was accompanied by phenomenological anxiety. I kept on doing the fieldwork with little idea of what I would 'find' or what I could write about. The fieldwork itself was often repetitive to the point of tedium: the same kinds of teaching sessions about the same kinds of clinical problems, with massively repetitive patterns of teaching at patients' bedsides; the repeated patterns of question-and-answer between teacher and student, student and patient, teacher and patient; the weekly performances at the clinical lecture; the cycle of Edinburgh inhabitants who were admitted, investigated, and treated, and who recovered, died, or simply disappeared from view. It would have been so much simpler to have studied the history of medical education at Edinburgh, or to have studied the students by means of attitude scales and structured interviews. I could have completed the thing so much more quickly, and in the relative comfort of the library or the study.

I asked myself the same question when I did my less protracted fieldwork in the United States and in the UK about haematologists. Especially while I was in the United States, I repeatedly asked myself why I was doing what I was doing. Choosing to spend part of a year's sabbatical leave in the university city of Boston was perfectly rational. Living for part of the time in a squalid attic room attached to one of the city's hospitals was less agreeable. So too was tramping across the city in order to spend hours a day at a different hospital, trying to make sense of yet more repetitious, sometimes barely comprehensible, professional encounters between highly specialised haematologists, clinical pathologists and patients. So was spending hours each day alone, writing up my fieldnotes, checking my tape-recordings, and reading textbooks about haematology.

More recently I heard myself asking again 'Why am I doing this?' Not all of my research interests have been medical. My most recent ethnographic project was with the Welsh National Opera Company, documenting in particular the processes of rehearsal and performance. Some of my friends and colleagues thought that my research was self-evidently 'fun', merely an excuse to watch opera. But it is not at all like going out to the opera for a grand night out to trudge through the winter rain to watch rehearsals day after day, or to wander in and out of an otherwise empty theatre late into the night to watch the crew break down the set of that night's performance, and bring in the set for the following day. Most books on the history, sociology or anthropology of the performing arts have singularly little to do with the systematic understanding of the everyday work that goes into their production and reproduction. And – like the rounds of medicine or pathology – the work is repetitive.

Not for nothing is one of the key roles in the opera that of the 'repetiteur' – the pianist who accompanies music calls and rehearsals, in the music room, the rehearsal studio, or the theatre. The repetition of passages of music, of scenes, of actions – they are at the heart of the process of creating a new production. It is often boring for long stretches of time. The repetiteur's fingers trace out the same accompaniment over and over again. An hour or two's rehearsal time can be devoted to a passage that will be over in just a few minutes in the theatre. It is often hard to go on concentrating, especially when one has nothing particular to do or to learn. I often found myself thinking that there really are easier ways of generating academic publications. I could probably have got a lot of mileage out of just a few interviews with singers and musicians. I could have focused on the semiotics of opera posters, programmes and the like. I could have worked mainly on the operas themselves as texts. Again, I could have done most of that work 'at a distance' in the library or in the study, without the long-term commitment of fieldwork.

But I want to insist that, notwithstanding the attractions of alternative modes of data collection, long-term ethnographic fieldwork remains of fundamental importance. It may seem a bit odd to advocate the conduct of 'fieldwork'. After all, many people claim to be committed to ethnographic research. In a number of major research fields and disciplines, qualitative research methods seem to predominate. The success of these approaches as attested by the virtually insatiable demand for monographs, texts and journals devoted to qualitative methods. But I do not greatly like or admire the designation 'qualitative' in this context. I think that there are now too many versions of qualitative research that are leading to the 'quick and clean' approach to data collection and analysis. (I use 'clean' here as a rather pejorative term: I think good research is usually messy, if not exactly dirty.) An inspection of much of the current literature re-

veals too many research papers and dissertations that are based on modest empirical materials, and are methodologically or theoretically under-nourished. This is partly because qualitative methods are too often felt to be self-justifying. The problem is compounded because those methods too often are treated and used in isolation, and also because qualitative methods are too often treated as alternatives for disciplinary or theoretical knowledge. But in the fashionable spread of 'qualitative' research, the inspiration of long-term field research is often overlooked. Too often, what we get in its place is built on a few interviews or a few focus groups.

The fact that it is 'qualitative' does not ensure the adequacy of work based on just one biographical or autobiographical text. A few unstructured interviews do not add up to a major study. A few shreds and patches of interview talk do not add up to a decent piece of research, however much the author may appeal to the 'voices' of informants. Just as the social psychologists I used to work alongside could snatch their data with paper-and-pencil exercises, or could administer research instruments that were superficially sophisticated but undemanding of their time and commitment, so many of today's researchers are encouraged to seek research solutions that are quick, cheap and easy. There is too much reliance on what Sara Delamont called (in 1997) 'data to go'.

There are, of course, many reasons for such developments. Sometimes research designs are determined by cost: they may reflect the limited resources and labour-power of many researchers, often working single-handed, and often working for their own higher degree; they may reflect the exigencies of externally funded research; they may be constrained by the short-term goals of policy-led research. Nevertheless, such practical constraints should not be allowed to dictate methodological preferences, nor should they become elevated to methodological principles. Whatever the pragmatic or personal reasons, it is my contention that too much 'qualitative research' is consistently reliant on varieties of one-shot data collection and single-strategy data analysis. My concern is not about specific methods or techniques: it applies irrespective of whether we consider the data furnished by focus groups, life-history interviews, visual techniques, or the recording of speech. My problem is that too much qualitative research is being reduced to 'quick and clean' research. There are too many research projects of limited imagination, and modest ambition, that are methodologically naive and devoid of theoretical significance.

My fieldwork with the Welsh National Opera helped me to appreciate two things: slowness and repetition. By 'slowness' here I do not just mean the extent to which operas can be relatively long entertainments. Rather, I want to stress the temporal progression of processes like rehearsal. Operas are rehearsed by the producer, the cast and the chorus over a period of five or six weeks. This

thorough rehearsal period applies to all principals as well as chorus members and those singing secondary roles. It also applies to the group of singers covering the roles (understudies). For the ethnographer, understanding the processes of dramaturgy and theatrical production involves thorough participation in the slow processes of rehearsal. The accumulation of shared, negotiated actions, the sedimentation of memory and habituated action – these are essential, *constitutive* aspects of the dramatic process.

It is an important clue to this process that – as I have said – a key role is that of the *repetiteur* – the pianist who accompanies rehearsals in the studio and in the theatre. The process is indeed repetitious. Scenes that will last just a few minutes in the theatre will occupy hours of participants' rehearsal time, with multiple repetitions, often with long periods of blocking the action, checking nuances of musical interpretation with the music staff, correcting faults of pronunciation with the language by the language coach (if there is one). Stage managers and staff producers repeatedly check and make notes on the singers' entrances and exits, their positions and movements, the movement of scenery, the need for and position of props, and so on. There are, in other words, repeated and protracted actions that are characteristic of such artistic work. They stand in sharp contrast to the 'highlights' of operatic work. There *are* moments of ecstatic, glorious success. There *are* displays of temper and artistic temperament. Producers *do* occasionally abuse singers. Performances *do* go wrong. But the world of opera has to be understood not only in terms of such 'dramatic' events, or in terms of narratives about them (which are abundant and freely shared). Drama is not always dramatic. Like most workaday activities, it is mundane. It takes long-term fieldwork to engage with its slow, repetitious character – which is true not just for each new operatic production, but also is repeated throughout the year: not only are new operas rehearsed and produced; old productions are revived. There is a cyclical, seasonal pattern to the work of the opera company.

As cultural products, productions of opera are cross-cut by multiple codes of significance. Indeed, for those of us who derive some degree of satisfaction from it, opera is a densely coded art form. There are complex relations between: text and music; text and production; one production of an opera and others; productions of different operas by the same producer or designer; traditions of interpretation and performance; tensions between notions of canonical 'authenticity' and interpretative innovation. Operas themselves are variously inscribed with images of nationalism, orientalism, honour and shame, romantic love, death and disease, family and kinship, or gender.

This is not the time place to go on elaborating on my fieldwork with the operatic company. I am using it to illustrate a more general methodological is-

sue. I want to emphasize the significance of field research – long-term participant observation, in other words. This is *not* based on a rejection of currently fashionable qualitative methods, nor is it derived from a traditionalist rejection of contemporary methodological preoccupations. But I am not convinced by the volume of research that relies unduly or exclusively on discourse analysis, or narrative analysis, or life-history interviews, or focus-group discussions. All of those approaches leave the sociologist or anthropologist virtually unable to document many features of *social action*. And while I do not subscribe to vague appeals to ‘holistic’ social descriptions, I am thoroughly suspicious of research approaches that successively decontextualise data. I do realise, of course, that talk is itself action, and that memory and experience are enacted. But too much current research collects actors’ accounts of their own or others’ actions and treats those accounts as surrogates for the study of everyday social activities.

To conclude, then. We need fieldwork that is sensitive to the multiple *forms* of social action; that is attentive to the repeated minutiae and the slow performance of everyday life; that is knowledgeable about its local culture. Such fieldwork must be reflexive, in being attentive to its own work of social reconstruction. It must also be reflective, in its attention to its own conduct. But it should not become a solipsistic account of the researcher’s subjectivity – an autistic exploration of the researcher’s personal experiences at the expense of disciplined and systematic accounts of social worlds. Above all, we need ethnographic research that is about *social action* and *social organization*. Far too much qualitative research consists of *accounts* of social life: there is a danger of forgetting to study what men and women actually *do* in their everyday lives. By the same token, contemporary qualitative researchers repeatedly lose sight of the social. There is a strange absence of collective action and social interaction in the published accounts of their research. We get recollections of persons’ experiences and their autobiographical reflections. What we do not get is the enactment of collective, collaborative actions in all their extraordinary variety of skills and layers of significance. That’s why I still do fieldwork.