

Assignment 2

The instructions for assignment 2 ask you to use the University of Wales Trinity St David ethics form and to write a proposal as if you were one of the following anthropologists, at a point in their career when they were about to undertake a period of fieldwork. These ethnographers based their subsequent writings on their fieldwork, many of them producing what have become acknowledged as classics of the genre.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 – 1942)

Audrey Richards (1899 – 1984)

Phyllis Kaberry (1910 – 1977)

E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1902 – 1973)

Margaret Mead (1901 – 1978)

Laura Bohannan (1922 – 2002)

Victor Turner (1920 – 1983)

Napoleon Chagnon (born 1938)

Some of these ethnographers are better known than others and the only one still living, Chagnon, is associated with a high degree of controversy because he presented Yanomamö as ‘contemporary ancestors’ (an oxymoron?), living in the ‘last days of Eden’ (the subtitle of one of his books). Despite the Eden of the subtitle, he also described them as being ‘in a chronic state of warfare’ (Chagnon 1992: 10). Because the ethics of his research have been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny by anthropologists, journalists and other commentators, it can be an intriguing challenge to try and imagine yourself in his shoes before his publications attracted such notoriety.

Other persons on the list had deeply interesting lives as well as being colourful characters. Margaret Mead, as noted by the online Encyclopaedia Britannica, was an ‘American anthropologist whose great fame owed as much to the force of her personality and her outspokenness as it did to the quality of her scientific work’.

In reading about the fieldwork of your chosen ethnographer, you will discover some links between certain of the listed individuals. Audrey Richards and Phyllis Kaberry were both mentored by Malinowski (Gladstone 1992). At one point in her career, Kaberry worked as a research assistant to Richards (Berndt

and Chilver 1992: 30-31). Others knew their predecessors through reading their publications – Victor Turner discovered Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* in a public library when he was living in a gypsy caravan near Rugby in England (Deflem 1991: 2).

Some of these people are associated with fieldwork in one particular place, while others developed fieldwork in different places (e.g. Evans-Pritchard among the Azande, Nuer and the Sanusi of Cyrenaica; Margaret Mead in Samoa and in the Sepik basin, Papua New Guinea; and Phyllis Kaberry among Australian Aborigines of the Kimberleys in Western Australia and the Bamenda region, now the Northwest Province of the Republic of Cameroon in Africa). In that case, write a proposal for one of the periods of fieldwork undertaken by your chosen ethnographer. When you fill in the ethics form consider whether she/he was a novice about to begin fieldwork at the beginnings of her/his career as an anthropologist or had already gained prior experience somewhere else.

Audrey Richards

You can see from the dates of birth of the ethnographers that their lives spanned one or two world wars. The circumstances that compelled Malinowski to go to the Trobriand Islands are well known. Less well known are the experiences that led to Audrey Richards becoming fascinated by studies in nutrition. In the 1920s, when she was in her twenties, she accompanied a Quaker organisation, a Friends' Ambulance Unit Family Welfare Settlement to Germany, where she spent a year and a half. During that time she experienced hunger. On returning to Britain she worked as a secretary in the Labour Department of the League of Nations, before enrolling in the Department of Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics (Gladstone 1992: 15-16). Her book, *Hunger and work in a savage tribe: a functional study of nutrition among the Southern Bantu* (1932) was indebted to Malinowski. But Jo Gladstone (1992: 19) commented that Richards gained her autonomy from him when she subsequently dropped all reference to the 'French Enlightenment word "savage" of the title of her first book'. By the time it was published, she had already started to do fieldwork among the Bemba in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), taking 'her tent, her Brownie camera, her bicycle and the latest Schoeffer's Bemba dictionary' (Gladstone 1992: 16). She went on to publish *Land, labour and diet in Northern Rhodesia* (1939) and the highly acclaimed *Chisungu: a girl's initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia* (1956).

Knowledge of the biography of the ethnographer you choose will help you flesh out their rationale, aims, objectives and methods for proposing the fieldwork in the ethics form.

Laura Bohannan's notebook

One of the ethnographers in the list is Laura Bohannan, who wrote a novel under the pseudonym Elenore Smith Bowen. As an undergraduate, she studied at the University of Arizona and in 1943 she married Paul J. Bohannan. She went to Oxford and was awarded a doctorate in 1951, based on their discontinuous periods of fieldwork in Nigeria between 1949 and 1953.

She converted her fieldwork experiences among the Tiv of Nigeria into a novel called *Return to laughter*. Bohannan's original publisher was keen to indicate the book's purpose, describing it 'a remarkable novel' in the blurb. When it was reissued it acquired a subtitle: 'an anthropological novel'. But what

Taussig (2011: 27) found really remarkable on reading it was that her reliance on her notebook as a field tool endowed it with the importance of a 'character'. At one point Bowen/Bohannon (1966: 57) wrote: 'I stroked my notebook in pleasant anticipation'. The role of this character-cum-notebook was, Taussig said, to anchor 'the outlandish and the strange with pen and paper'. One way of understanding the notebook's role is to see it performing at the point when Bohannon was amongst the Tiv, navigating a path through their worlds. Alternatively, Taussig suggested, she might have made the notebook take on this role later, when she was writing the novel, as a device to bring her storyline to life. 'Either way', Taussig declared, 'the notebook is magical' precisely because of the way in which it conflates the chief and the sorcerer in its storyline.

Something to consider when you fill in the form is what kind of recording your persona will propose to do and what will happen to these records after the research is completed?

Contingency in fieldwork

Laura Bohannon (1966) is also famous for presenting the plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Tiv people and for endeavouring to explain European concepts of kinship, justice and ghosts to her hosts. It is an episode in which the outlandish and strange were juxtaposed. Kerim Friedman (2006) revisited her account of the difficulties she encountered when attempting to make an act of cultural translation to an audience of elders who resisted accepting the premise of *Hamlet's* plotline. (Please note that in this blog, Friedman misspelled her surname.) Bohannon's account provides a wonderful illustration of the importance of contingency in ethnographic fieldwork. This is an aspect to consider when filling in the ethics form. Things do not invariably go to plan when designs for fieldwork are put into operation. In this case, Bohannon was able to put the incident to serendipitous use, but ethics committees will examine your form to look for evidence about how you will handle unanticipated outcomes involving risks.

You have been asked to do an academic assignment; remember to list the references on which you based your information at the end of the form. It is also a good idea to insert footnotes to indicate where you have cited words from your chosen ethnographer's writings. You can also use footnotes to demonstrate where things might have turned out differently from the proposal or to indicate more precisely where your persona obtained their methodological strategies or acquired their theoretical views.

References

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