

Pilgrim vs Anthropologist: Becoming the 'other' - An Autoethnography

Introduction:

How far should an anthropologist go to 'become the other?' In this autoethnography I will be discussing and challenging the very entity of what it means to be an anthropologist conducting field work through immersive participant observation. I will examine the difficulties that can arise for an anthropologist. Ultimately, I will discuss that regardless of the trials of reflexivity and participant observation, becoming the 'other' is a crucial method to any anthropologist in order to establish sufficient data and a broader understanding of a culture. It will be mainly based on my own struggle transitioning between a pilgrim and an anthropologist during my field work which took place in a small multi faith community called 'Skanda Vale.'

Methodology:

To conduct my research, my main method was participant observation where I lived in and amongst the community for 24 hours. Within this I used unstructured interviews with open ended questions to allow for a freeing discussion between me and my participants. I chose to do this because I felt that my original research aims, examining gender relations, would have been too limited for a structured interview due to the potential controversy that structured questions could bring. By giving myself and my participants room to discuss the matter freely, this would mean that any controversy could be delicately discussed in a respectful manner and that as a researcher, this would allow me to respond appropriately to my participants reactions further allowing me to carefully structure any further questions. I recorded my data using pen and paper in a reflexive journal since the experience limited me from using other methods as recording technology was forbidden within the community.

Literature Review:

In the book 'Experiencing Fieldwork- An inside view of Qualitative Research', Sherry Kleinman (1991) writes a piece on 'Field-Workers' feelings' where she analyses her experiences, thoughts, feelings and initial reflexivity whilst conducting research in a health center. Kleinman expresses that having grown up in the political wave of the 60s and 70s, she had formed an ideological heart that contrasted the organisation of the health center. This in turn ultimately affected her research and she was left dealing with a struggle to fully immerse herself into participant observation as well as building a rapport and respect for her informants. 'In retrospect I see that, given who I was when I

began the study, I needed the Wholeness Center to represent, and its participants to live out, the ideals I felt I was living out only intermittently' (Kleinman, 1991, p.188). Kleinman had presumptions as to how she wanted the center to run which contrasted reality. 'I wanted to study something "different", something close to my ideological heart' (Kleinman, 1991, p.189). She explains how she felt a 'feminist anger' as women were seen as inferior in the hierarchy and organising of job roles and she recognises how 'outdated' this felt to her as a researcher caught up in the new wave feminist movement at the time. She also highlights how she felt feelings of frustration and anger at the fact that the members only seemed to discuss money and budgets rather than the alternative psychosomatic medicine that she had taken an earlier interest in leading to her research. Kleinman makes a point that she felt 'alone' with these feelings and that this pushed her to only feel like an outsider from her own research rather than experiencing a sense of full immersion that anthropologists feel is ideal in developing adequate research. 'My feelings increased my sense of isolation and my belief that I was the only field researcher who had this problem' (Kleinman, 1991, p.192). Reading about such an account which seems similar to my own experiences in the field has inspired me to challenge the entity of participant observation and the anthropologist rite of passage of full immersion and reflexivity. Do we as anthropologists need to completely forget our prejudices to fully immerse ourselves into our research? Should we suppress all feelings in order to interpret our experiences in a more positive manner? Or should anthropology as a discipline be left as initial reactions and interpretations of socio-cultural experiences without the surfacing of an anthropologists own baggage? This is what has lead me to write an autoethnography rather than a straight academic piece. For me, my time in the field with monks in a multi-faith community had to become personal. I couldn't conduct my research without the strong feelings of guilt and anger that arose from the recognising of my own prejudices and so my data was only to be viewed through my lense of judgement and the personal frustration that I felt transitioning between an anthropologist and a pilgrim of the religious community I was in.

Earlier Anthropologists such as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown were among some of the first to emphasis the importance of participant observation and building a significant rapport with the 'other.' They were 'concerned to recognize and include in their analyses the interconnectedness of each individual society's cultural forms and social structures' through living amongst and with their participants' (Davies, 2008, p.79). Malinowski in particular went as far as to learn the native language of his informants, the Trobriand Islanders, and encouraged his students to do the same. By going to this extent of immersing oneself into a culture by the share of the same language, Davies (2008) argues that this means that 'researchers are to some degree

already a part of the native culture' by the use of the fact that 'they share a common language and have access to a wider range of sources of information' (Davies, 2008, p.80). This recognition of an anthropologist transitioning from a researcher to a member of the society at focus has caused me to explore the notion of 'becoming the other' and the struggles that the reality of fieldwork may provide in doing so. For example, Malinowski was able to create important anthropological literature such as the 'The Sexual life of Savages' (1932) and 'Magic, Science and Religion' (1925) from his time living amongst the Trobriand Islanders in an extended piece of fieldwork based upon participant observation. However what I take interest in the most is the struggle that Malinowski had transitioning from a middle class British anthropologist to a member of the Trobriand Islanders, which surfaced in his controversial diaries that were published after his death. Malinowski had to suppress his feelings of frustration and dislike towards his participants in order to complete his fieldwork and establish his research. Again, this is another example of an anthropologist's guilt in needing to suppress one's thoughts and feelings in order to be respectful to their participants. Malinowski's own background and prejudices meant that at times it was difficult for him to solely think and react to experiences in a positive manner. It is the feeling of one being pulled back by their own background, upbringing, culture and ideologies when striving to see a new culture and society through the 'other's' eyes, through our own. An important transition as Davies highlights, 'the hallmark of participant observation is long-term personal involvement with those being studied, including participation in their lives to the extent that the researcher comes to understand the culture as an insider' (Davies, 2008, p.81).

My Experience:

For my first experience of fieldwork I was due to stay in a multi faith community called Skanda Vale amongst monks and sisters for a week. Originally I had made a research proposal to explore the gender separation and general gender relations that was apparent at Skanda Vale. However within the first day I had decided to focus solely on participant observation and immersing myself into the experience of being in such a place. I wanted to just 'be' in the community and record my interactions and overall experience in my reflexive journal. Unfortunately however I didn't achieve my aims and left the field early, only after 24 hours. For me Skanda Vale was not the ideal place for my first take of field work. It became a harder experience as it took on a very personal toll and I couldn't establish whether I was there as a pilgrim on my own journey or an anthropologist simply doing research. I have grown up within the Christian faith and attended church from a young age. At the age of 13 I was approached by a radical, barbaric and strict Christian organisation which some would recognise as a 'cult.' I was 'brainwashed' for a good 3 years before I was able to break away and leave. My time

spent within this particular community was damaging and I still to this day suffer with the painful memories. This has caused me now to be cynical to all organised religious communities and personally I now do not have a faith, although I would still consider myself as 'spiritual.' During Pujas and with interactions with the monks and sisters, I felt deeply uncomfortable and from early on I recognised my prejudices towards my participants. I was skeptical to talk to them and build a rapport as I feared that my position as a researcher would be undermined and that I would be viewed as a potential convert. It was in these moments that I realised I could not work out how to just be an anthropologist and respect the community when I only felt suspicion and anger towards the organisation. However, I also couldn't transition into a pilgrim and become the 'other' and fulfill my desire to fully immerse myself. I had the perception that this would mean surrender of my prejudices and ideologies in order to fully participant in their world and I was not willing to do so because of my irrational fear that this would mean I agreed with their beliefs. I built a wall between myself and my participants and therefore could not achieve a close proximity or 'verstehen' which meant I couldn't fulfill my role as an anthropologist either.

Sarah Pink (2006) looks at what it means to be an anthropologist and concludes that 'being an anthropologist is about having a particular way of constructing and analysing a problem, producing and critically reviewing 'evidence' and reflecting on the wider social and cultural contexts' (Pink, 2006, p.10). She also highlights how critically important participant observation is and living with and amongst the culture of the informants. 'The anthropologist learns how to speak the language of the organisation, understand its power hierarchies, and social and cultural systems' (Pink, 2006, p.11). Again, it seems that to be an established ethnographer and anthropologist, it is vital to see through the eyes of the other in the nature that anthropology is the task of simply understanding by becoming. Watson (1999) also explores this power of immersion within the field; 'through the employment of various techniques and strategies, of which 'immersion' is the most well-known; the anthropologist is able to engage in different styles of learning and understanding, acquiring discursive and practical knowledge, being simultaneously 'in' but not 'of' the other culture' (Watson, 1999, p.2). During my fieldwork I was trying to establish just that; how I could be in the culture but not of the culture since my own personal prejudices did not allow me to want to be a pilgrim of Skanda Vale. An example of this was an experience I had during one of the pujas. It was the second puja we had attended since our arrival. We were in a dark, dimly lit room watching a ritual based on the Hindu God Kali that involved the cutting of fruit and the burning of lots of incense. It was a sensory overload and that particular atmosphere in that specific temple made the ritual feel even more foreign and surreal to me. This for some reason allowed me to resonate more with what I was observing. I watched the monks in their

trance like state and began to notice fellow classmates joining in on the chants. To this point I had my 'anthropologists hat' on and only had observed the pujas without a want to participate or attempt to feel the 'energy' the monks had previously talked about. However in this particular puja, I began to try to transition into a pilgrim. I remember thinking that if I fully wanted to participate and immerse myself then I should try and partake in the rituals. I started to try and mimic the chants and closed my eyes to allow myself to feel anything. However I was quickly met by the shame that I was allowing myself to fall into 'the trap' since I really did not want to feel or believe in anything. But how could I see my participants world through my own eyes if I did not want to experience the phenomenon my participants seemed to be feeling. I stopped chanting and fell back into my anthropologist mindset which I continued to do so for every puja I attended after.

Participant observation in its truest nature seems to include the task of role taking; and that role is determined by the anthropologist and their aims within their field. 'We regard the anthropologist as a role-player; child, stranger, friend, fictive-kinsperson... each requiring different behavioural attitudes and each allowing access to different realms of experience within the community' (Watson, 1999, p.5). We have the belief that by becoming fluent in a culture, we can grasp wider and more abstract knowledge from our informants by adopting the roles that is asked of us by our research. 'So we try to do the same as anthropologists with the culture and organisation of a society, learning how to act, recognising and responding to cues, positioning ourselves appropriately on the stage and being sensitive to the demands of ensemble performance' (Watson, 1999, p.6). Therefore I felt required to take on the role of the pilgrim. The monks called us 'pilgrims' and we were not just viewed as anthropologists or university students. They treated us and expected us to behave like pilgrims. Therefore from the beginning we fell into the role of the pilgrim and so we were to interpret our experiences not just through our anthropological lenses but with the attitude of a pilgrim. But what if this transition was not achievable? Perhaps this is why I felt like an outsider and felt deeply uncomfortable causing my early departure from the field. I was labeled a pilgrim but I could not live up to that role and therefore my anthropologist role was subconsciously undermined because I was left with the guilt that I wasn't truly 'there' and I couldn't truly become the 'other.'

Gold (1958) also writes on the idea of the anthropologist as a role player. He explores this further and concludes that the anthropologist may adopt one of four roles during participant observation. These being, complete observer, observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer or complete participant. In my reflexivity I can conclude that I felt forced to take on the role of a complete observer even though I wanted to achieve the

role of a participant-as-observer. An interesting example of how immersion and full participant observation may affect negatively upon a researcher and their research aims is that of Kondo's (1990) research on 'how selfhood is constructed in the arenas of company and family' (1990). To do this research, as a Japanese-American, she did her field work in Japan. She accidentally found herself adopting a complete Japanese identity. 'She developed her understanding of self and the social world in these Japanese workplaces' and 'she experienced it as a fragmentation of her identity' (Davies, 2008, p.86). She experienced an internal conflict as she subconsciously fully became the 'other.' She felt that she was losing touch of her American professionalism and did not even recognise herself as she walked past a shop window one day; she saw a Japanese housewife walking in a characteristically Japanese manner. This led her to leave the field. However this full participation that Kondo experienced did allow her to have the depth of research and understanding that she had hoped for by completely adopting the role of the other to the extent of almost losing herself. 'Thus the near complete participation that Kondo adopted in her research was essential to the kind of understanding and explanations she develops of a particular nexus of power and personal identities in Japanese society' (Davies, 2008, p.86). This was exactly what I feared whilst in the field at Skanda Vale. Because of my religious skepticism and increasing need to feel separate from the beliefs and ritual practice at Skanda Vale, I had recognised at a subconscious level to not fully allow myself into the role of the pilgrim. Like a self-defence, I wouldn't and couldn't participate at this level which separated me therefore from my own research. My struggle caused me to only focus on wanting to leave the field rather than continuing my research.

Contrasting my own thoughts and feeling whilst conducting research, Robert Bellah (1970) explores specifically research being done within new religious movements and alternative religious communities such as those like Skanda Vale. His own research has led him to the conclusion that when observing these specific cultures, 'the researcher should avoid being reductionistic in his or her interpretation and should instead take the beliefs of the group seriously, treating them as true and worthy of respect' (Richardson, 1991, p.68). This he labeled as *symbolic realism*. Equally James T. Richardson (1991) put this idea into practice during his own research and he found that 'the interactions that occurred during our research were meaningful for all concerned, and our understanding of the group's belief system and practises was enhanced greatly as a result of these sometimes free-flowing discussions' (Richardson, 1991, p.69). I however did attempt to try and understand the beliefs surrounding those at Skanda Vale. I was able to have an unstructured interview with a monk over a cup of tea after a 5am puja in the morning. He explained to me that they performed multi theistic practises during their rituals because rather than being religious they were spiritual and believed in one divine

energy in which he invited me to open up to feel in the next pujas. The practises themselves act as a catalyst to reach this divine source through different belief systems, but that as monks they didn't have to actually be Hindu or Christian etc. I was able to express my feelings and the 'blockage' that I felt. He told me that as a pilgrim I didn't need to believe but instead he wanted me to attempt to feel this divine energy. Of course however I didn't view myself as a pilgrim and did not want to open up to any sort of energy. For a moment however during my interview I did feel a sense of wanting to fully transition into my pilgrim role, however unfortunately this was shut down when Brother Michael made a joke about whether any of us students would become converts. Richardson also found this; 'numerous researchers of religious groups who used more open methods have noted that they quickly became defined as potential converts, and much attention was focused on them because group leaders and members thought they had been "sent" to them for conversion' (Richardson, 1991, p.67). Having been previously converted by a different religious community in the past, I made the subconscious decision to return home as I now felt a sense of paranoia that I was being pulled in as a pilgrim and potential convert rather than as a student anthropologist. I did not want to take on my pilgrim role.

Ingold (2013) examines the usefulness of full immersion within participant observation as well. Firstly he recognises the importance of this method and how this is the bedrock of anthropology and creating an in depth foundation of understanding a culture. 'It is to join with people in their speculation about what life might or could be like, in ways nevertheless grounded in a profound understanding of what life is like in particular times and places' (Ingold, 2013, p.4). However he also recognises the 'paradox of participation observation' (Ingold, 2013, p.5) which is exactly what I experienced. To Ingold the 'knowing and being is turned inside out. Lessons in life become 'qualitative data', to be analysed in terms of an exogenous body of theory' (Ingold, 2013, p.5). This idea draws upon a more philosophical and abstract thinking that anthropologists are in fact, humans trying to understand other humans and that we try to become these other humans by exiting ourselves as humans. Although the research is far from objective, it is in that subjectivity that we learn about ourselves through learning about others. But like in my case, how can this create sufficient research when one is blinded by their own personal prejudices against their study focus? 'The paradox of participant observation, namely that it requires of the researcher to be both, 'inside' and 'outside' the field of inquiry at one and the same time... human beings, according to science, are a species of nature, yet to be human is to transcend that nature' (Ingold, 2013, p.5).

Karen Barad (2007) summarises this well; 'We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because "we" are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming' (Barad, 2007, p.185). So should I as an anthropologist had

taken on the role of the pilgrim? Or should I have just experienced Skanda Vale in the liminal subconscious that I was already in? That as a student anthropologist conducting her first piece of research within a field that I was highly skeptical of because of my own background.

Conclusion:

My overall argument has lead me to the conclusion that even though my first take on fieldwork was limited and was affected by my own prejudices which ultimately made my research drift away from my original aims, the notion of participant observation itself should still be highly valued by anthropologists. Even in my limited time in the field, my research became bigger than what I had proposed to do in Skanda Vale and took on a life of its own, causing this autoethnography. My struggle to transition between an anthropologist and a pilgrim has lead me to examine the nature of becoming the 'other' which I feel has given me value to my approach to anthropology. I can now recognise my prejudices and recognise when reflexivity should be used to not suppress deep feelings but instead use them to enhance my research. This experience has also made me cautious of not disrespecting other cultures which should be the foundation to any anthropologist. I, of course, did not set out to feel this way but perhaps my skepticism and overall fears during my trip caused me to think negatively of my participants when the reality was that they had kindly taken me in as a 'guest' and had opened their doors to us as researchers. I think that anthropology should be fully immersive and that researchers should try to adopt the different roles they are confronted with regardless of the paradox one may feel. However if one is presented with a dangerous situation or the fieldwork hinges negatively on mental health or other aspects then one should leave the field. Altogether however, I conclude that fully immersive participant observation is the most effective approach to a social science in order to gain a full understanding of another culture.

'And to anthropologists themselves it became virtually a rite of passage, without experiencing the trials of this sort of fieldwork, one could not really become an anthropologist.' (Davies, 2008, p.78).

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