

Writing up and feeling down: introduction

By Ingie Hovland

Does writing always have to be this deadening?

You might be one of the lucky 1%: you love writing up, you gain a new sense of meaning from it, and you can imagine doing nothing else for the rest of your life. Or you may be among the vast majority: you narrow your eyes suspiciously when anyone asks you how the PhD is going, and later when you find you have to carry on writing articles, you promise yourself twenty Twix bars for every page you manage to hammer out. It is not uncommon for PhD students—and established academics as well—to feel somewhat dejected while writing. Yet it is often surprisingly difficult to untangle the various pressures, anxieties and hopes that create this situation. In this journal issue we wish to draw out some of these.

The first thing that strikes many PhD students when they sit down to start writing up is that there is a strong tension between the very ‘lively’ experiences of fieldwork and the ‘deadening’ process of writing them down afterwards. In the words of one apocryphal PhD student, captured by Jean-Paul Dumont (1978:6): ‘How is the writing going?’—‘Oh it should move along quite well, once I get through beating the life out of my material...’

The deadening aspect of this process can feel magnified because it is carried out in a strange form of isolation. A clip from my usual experience at parties while I was writing up will give you the idea:

Friendly person: So, what do you do?

Me: I’m writing a PhD on Protestant missionaries in nineteenth-century Europe and their ideas of distance and closeness and a dying Christ.

FP: Ah. So... What else do you do?

Me: What else?

FP: You know... outside the PhD.

Me: Outside the PhD?

[End of conversation. Exit right.]

To make matters even worse, the paragraphs that we manage to produce can often—especially, I found, the first time I read them back—seem deeply depressing, because they are so clearly not the masterwork I dreamt they would be. And then true despair finally strikes when your first written pages are critiqued by your lecturers and fellow PhD students—and a host of additional problematic issues about your writing are pointed out that you had not even thought of yet. Anthropology departments try to

prepare their PhD students for the intensity of fieldwork, but they come nowhere close to preparing the students for the intense emotions that writing triggers—such as anxiety, loss of self-confidence, and anger, to name but a few—or how to deal with these.

Given the way things are set up, it is perhaps not surprising that the result is, as Mary Louise Pratt (1986:33) notes, that,

For the lay person, such as myself, the main evidence of a problem is the simple fact that ethnographic writing tends to be surprisingly boring. How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books? What did they have to do to themselves?

And—perhaps more pressingly—is there anything else that they can do to themselves to be able to cope with the pressures of writing up in a way that would allow them to produce better writing? The first two articles of this issue deal with this question in different ways.

On the writing process

First, Paul O'Hare maps the path he took—with some of its detours and blind alleys—in 'Getting down to writing up: navigating from the field to the desk and the (re)presentation of fieldwork'. He especially highlights how difficult it can be to leave the field, since this requires building up a new kind of confidence in our collected data (Is it good enough?) and in ourselves (Do I know what it all means?). O'Hare takes us through the phases that he went through in order to get to grips with these new questions. He then discusses the initially onerous task of drafting lengthy and complex case studies, with a mountain of fieldnotes and material to draw on. He reflects on the reasons why this is so daunting, and shows us how in the end he found ways of making some decisions that allowed him to complete the case study chapters—and to recognise that they would never be perfect.

Next, Melania Calestani, Ioannis Kyriakakis and Nico Tassi tell their stories in 'Three narratives of anthropological engagement'. They each recount a part of their own process of being disciplined into what and how to write and not to write in order for their work to be deemed 'anthropological'. Tassi discusses the particular language used by the academy, and how this language can at times seem strangely alienated from the life experiences that it is drawing on—in turn making it seem alienating for anyone wishing to retain the integrity of those experiences. Tassi describes the mimicking and fear of exclusion that form part of the PhD process, and he unpacks the contradictions that this throws up for students, while still retaining faith in anthropology itself and its possibilities.

Kyriakakis goes on to give a vivid account of an experience from his fieldwork in Ghana: he fell ill, but recovered after he had turned (unsuccessfully) to the fetish priestess and then (more successfully) to a prayer to Jesus be released from the bonds of witchcraft. At the time, this experience gave him both increased means of communicating with the people he was researching, as well as increased insight into their own experiences. When he later turned to writing up his thesis, however, he found, as he says, that 'my most valuable tools of survival and communication did not find any space within that format' (p. 7). He leaves us with the question of what this says about anthropology and the way that anthropological writing is taught.

Calestani draws the article to a conclusion with honesty and integrity as she discusses her own bonds to the people she was researching in Bolivia, and how her first writing was, in many ways, a tribute to them and to the life they had allowed her to share in. Once her writing had been through the ritualistic critique of the post-fieldwork seminar at her university in London, however, she was advised to conform to a 'more academic' style (read: devoid of any personal emotion). After much thought, Calestani chose not to go down that route. Instead, she started to think of her writing as weaving—evoking the woven cloths made by the people she had come to know in the Andes—and this allowed her to weave her personal experiences into the text while also highlighting strands of analysis.

So far we have looked at PhD theses. The third article deals with a different set of expectations and pressures that suddenly and without warning make themselves known if you are one of those anthropologists trying to write for a non-academic (or even just non-anthropological) audience. Harriet Matsuert, Zahir Ahmed, Faruque Hussain and Noushin Islam explore these in 'The dangers of writing up: a cautionary tale from Bangladesh'. Right from the start of their article, which opens with a description of a tense meeting where their written output caused a confrontation with the Bangladeshi Agricultural Extension Department, key questions are raised: How can applied anthropologists ensure that their work is read, and understood, by the people they are doing applied work with? And then, once it has been read, how can they deal with all the consequences? Matsuert, Ahmed, Hussain and Islam give us glimpses into the actor-oriented methods that they found most useful, and the extended processes of consultation that they started using as they slowly shaped the written output. They conclude that, as applied anthropologists, the process of sharing and discussing very rough drafts with different groups of people was probably far more important than the final written piece.

New research

The final contribution to this issue is not about writing; instead, it presents new research from Meher Varma. She does, however, start her article 'India wiring out: ethnographic reflections from two transnational call centres in India' with an incisive critique of Thomas Friedman's writings on India in *The World is Flat*. How, she asks, could Friedman's descriptions of what a call centre looks like from the inside be taken as proof of a globalised world? To make her point, Varma takes us to two Indian call centres where she did brief stints of fieldwork, and introduces us to the call centre agents, who have taken on North American names, speak with North American accents, have the clocks turned to North American time, and are able to chat about Thanksgiving turkey. Slowly but surely Varma draws out the paradox of this scenario. As she reaches her conclusion, it is not hard to agree with her that far from being paragons of globalisation, the call centres are in fact deeply ambivalent spaces that both break down borders and make them insidiously entrenched at the same time, through 'conveniently divided economies and psychologies' (p. 7).

For further inspiration...

In sum, it is always a pleasant surprise to encounter good anthropological writing that opens up another part of the world to us. And, since writing is our primary form of communication, yet for many the most vexed part of the research process, it deserves

as much attention as it can get. This journal issue highlights some of the problems faced and resolutions that people have chosen. For further inspiration, browse through old issues of Anthropology Matters where we have made other stabs at similar questions—see, for example, Rebecca Marsland’s workshop report ‘Ethnographic Writing in Practice’, in the 2000 issue (www.anthropologymatters.com/journal/2000/index.html), or Kate Woodthorpe and Celayne Heaton Shrestha’s articles in the most recent issue on ‘Fielding Emotions’ (www.anthropologymatters.com/journal/2007-1/index.htm).

Elsewhere on the web, the anthropology news blog www.antropologi.info posted a lengthy comment last year on ‘The secret of good ethnographies’, and over on the anthropology blog Savage Minds, Thomas Hylland Eriksen has penned a readable essay on ‘What is good anthropological writing?’ (<http://savageminds.org/2006/01/16/what-is-good-anthropological-writing/>).

But, if you are deep in the mires of writing right now, and you find that not even Eriksen is of help to you, then I recommend Jorge Cham’s www.phdcomics.com as a great source of insight—and means to procrastination. Perhaps you should go there first.

References

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About the author

Ingie Hovland completed a PhD in Social Anthropology at SOAS (University of London) in 2006, entitled *Distance Destroys and Kills: An Anthropological Inquiry into the Nature of Faith in a Lutheran Norwegian Missionary Society*. Her research interests include religion, sincerity, gender, historical anthropology, and ethnographic method. She is editor of the *Anthropology Matters Journal* and is happy to receive submissions to the journal for review—she can be contacted at ingiehovland@yahoo.co.uk