



The field as 'habitus': reflections on inner and outer dialogue.

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While Clifford (1997) regards fieldwork as a key marker of the discipline of anthropology itself, notions concerning fieldwork have undergone considerable change over the last decades. This paper elaborates on Clifford's suggestion that fieldwork practice constitutes what Bourdieu terms as *habitus* and examines some of the key elements of what that practice might be. The discussion interweaves a theoretical analysis with descriptions of my own thought processes prior to fieldwork and of what happened once I entered the field. The paper also seeks to be self-reflexive and examines some of the internal dialogue that takes place as a result of fieldwork.

Bourdieu (1977) describes habitus in terms of shared pre-dispositions to act in a certain manner under certain circumstances. Habitus essentially refers to a set of practices that become habitual and engaged upon without any great deal of prior reflection. This paper focuses on certain common practices in fieldwork that are virtually taken-for-granted, but ought to be spelled out in order to demonstrate how much part of the 'fieldwork habitus' they have actually become.

The field as habitus

Clifford (1997) regards fieldwork as a key marker of the discipline of anthropology itself, but argues that notions concerning fieldwork have undergone considerable change over the last decades. Going into the 'field' still involves an act of physically going out there, of gaining deep, cultural, knowledge and insight, through a process of interactive research and encounter. Yet, there is now considerable variation in practice, involving the possibility of a multiplicity of locations; locations that are over here as well as over there, involving varying lengths of stay, modes of interaction, repeat visits and grasp of languages (Clifford 1997: 54).

Clifford argues that for any research to be termed anthropological it should conform to two essential criteria. It should entail interpersonal relationships requiring intensive, 'deep' interaction. Such interaction should produce some form of deep cultural understanding. Clifford notes a shift away from fieldwork as essentially one of co-residence, such as planting oneself in the midst of the Trobriand Islands, à la Malinowski, to one that entails encounter. The field is seen here as *habitus*, rather than a place (Clifford 1997: 69). The field may be closer to home or it may require shorter, repeat, visits. Nevertheless fieldwork is characterized as intensive and interactive. Secondly, it should entail some form of displacement, some kind of recognition of travel to the field and out of the field again. Such movement out of the field is regarded as essential in order to provide the kind of analytical distance associated with a detached outside perspective (Clifford 1997: 89). Time spent in the academic environment may well provide the distance required to analyse fieldwork material. I shall try to illustrate some of the

complexities involved in this shift of focus away from co-residence to one that entails encounter by reference to the notion of habitus.

Notes on 'habitus'

Bourdieu describes 'habitus' in terms of shared pre-dispositions to act in a certain manner under certain circumstances. Habitus is 'understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks' (Bourdieu 1977: 82-83).

Bourdieu is seeking to explain the processes of social production and reproduction which individuals may be engaged in without being fully aware that they are doing so. Some of these practices are embodied in the manner in which individuals walk and deport themselves, as with gender differences among the Kabyle in Algeria (Bourdieu 1977: 94). Yet habitus is as much about a state of mind as it is about a state of the body. Habitus essentially refers to a set of practices that become habitual and engaged upon without any great deal of prior reflection. Lau (2004) focuses on the practical logic of practice, on the generation of a general set of expectations and ways of behaviour. How this works out in practice varies between individuals, but certain regularities may be discerned.

Lau seeks out a middle ground between corporeal habits and practices, largely pertaining to motor skills, and cognitive practices that involve reflection and consciously thought out strategies and plans of action. He states,

'selfhood arise not through a Cartesian cogito, but emerges from the bodily being-in-the-world... It is not in the form of a reflective "I think that", but of a practical "I know how" the self is distinct from the object world. The practical is, therefore, conceptual or cognitive but non-reflective. The practical is a non-reflective cognitive sense emerging from experience. Some experience is corporeal, but much social experience is not. In both cases, the practical is non-corporeal' (Lau 2004: 375).

Lau goes on to propose three components to this notion of the practical: 1) fundamental beliefs, unthought premises or taken-for-granted assumptions, 2) perceptions and appreciations or understandings, 3) a descriptive and prescriptive practical sense of objective possibilities, akin to an understanding of the do's and don'ts in any given situation (Lau 2004: 377). These practices are conceived as clusters of taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations around which social games can take place and in which agents act with a 'feel for the game' and a 'sense of placement'. in pursuing their interests (Lau 2004).

I shall now seek to demonstrate how anthropological fieldwork may to some extent correspond to certain features of habitus, in the sense described by Bourdieu and reformulated by Lau. In order to so, however, I shall rely mostly on a description of my own thought processes prior to fieldwork and on what happened once I entered the field.

Prior training and inculcation: fundamental beliefs

No anthropologist arrives in the field as a *tabula rasa*. Most anthropologists these days have received undergraduate and probably postgraduate training in anthropology. Most will have read dozens if not hundreds of ethnographies, accounts of fieldwork, textbooks on how to conduct research, etc. In addition, lecturers, professors, visiting speakers and fellow students will have shared on a more informal basis their own accounts of fieldwork, or stories they have heard about others doing fieldwork.

In my undergraduate days I was particularly impressed by visions conjured up by Malinowski arriving on the Trobriand Islands, Evans-Pritchard setting up his tent amongst the Nuer, or William Foote White pounding the streets in Street Corner Society. Later on, I discovered more nuanced accounts of fieldwork and was fascinated by Laura Bohannan's semi-fictionalized account in *Return to Laughter* (published first under her pseudonym Eleonore Smith Bowen, 1954). However most important became Geertz's (1973) account of 'social arrival' and acceptance within the field as a result of a police raid on a cock fight. Here Geertz describes his arrival in the field not in geographical or temporary terms but through the acquisition of a certain state of mind and set of behaviours adopted by the anthropologist. Geertz's unreflected but instant running from the police identifies him as part of the community.

Social arrival in the anthropological field thus entails acquiring a sense of the prescriptive do's and don'ts in society; a process seen by Lau as integral to the performance of habitus and one that is slowly acquired by the anthropologist (see Bacchiddu's paper in this issue). Whilst the precise nature of adaptive accommodation to local customs and expectations cannot be anticipated prior to fieldwork, there is, by now, a well-established expectation amongst anthropologists that some form of adaptation will take place.

Indeed, there are a number of prior assumptions that are clearly set out as part of anthropological training, though such assumptions will vary considerably from institution to institution, and will also vary over time. Lau hints at this element of inculcation and training prior to engaging in fieldwork by reference to Bourdieu's own teaching methods. Thus, Lau writes, 'Bourdieu sometimes describes habitus' acquisition with embodied motor skills in mind. Thus, in a lecture to post-graduate students, he talked about transmitting his method in the manner of a "sports coach" through practice, counting principally upon the embodied schemata of (the scientific) habitus' (Lau 2004: 374).

Thus, certain fundamental beliefs and assumptions about fieldwork, perceptions about the nature of fieldwork, the do's and don'ts of fieldwork, the main components of the practical logic of habitus are inculcated in the anthropologist even before reaching the 'field'. Yet, prior inculcation and training does not help to foresee what actually happens in the field, although it undoubtedly helps to shape what transpires in the field.

Fieldwork as habitus: the do's and don'ts of fieldwork

As noted earlier, Clifford (1997) believes fieldwork should entail interpersonal relationships requiring intensive, 'deep' interaction, leading to deep cultural understanding. I would like to look at some of the assumptions behind this statement. In the following I will seek to elaborate on Clifford's position on fieldwork as habitus. It

goes without saying that this should in no way be taken as prescriptive or indeed as an exhaustive list of fieldwork practices. I wish however to highlight certain key practices and relate these to my own fieldwork experience.

1. Choosing the ‘field of encounter’

There seems to be no recognized or universally agreed means of determining the choice of site or field for the anthropological encounter. In many cases, prior readings and literature review will determine the rough area of study, but specific choices may simply arise out of circumstances at the time.

My own research focuses on the construction of community and nation as represented in the narrative of four Jewish museums in Italy. The inspiration for my research came from a reading of Clifford’s article on four Canadian north-coast museums devoted to Native Canadian culture (Clifford 1997). Two of these museums were set up within mainstream institutions, whilst the other two were established by Native Canadian communities. Yet, they all represented very contrasting perspectives on Native Canadian culture. My research design, however, did not spring up fully formed, and was ultimately less neat and satisfying than Clifford’s four part schema.

Indeed, as Walford points out, research is about ‘compromises, short-cuts, hunches, and serendipitous occurrences’ (Walford 1991: 1). I had attended a Jewish Studies conference in 1998, at which I presented a paper based on my literature review. At the conference I met the curator designate of the Jewish museum in Bologna, due to be launched in 1999. As a result, I began to formulate a research design that would focus on four museums in Italy, the Bologna museum and three other Jewish museums in the area. Whilst I visited the Jewish museums in Venice, Florence and Ferrara, much of my data actually focused on Bologna. Whether I chose Bologna, or whether Bologna chose me, is a question that I cannot really answer. The following description of fieldwork experiences may provide some clues.

2. ‘Encounter’

A key element of fieldwork is encounter. As Clifford notes, fieldwork should involve face-to-face interaction with certain ‘others’ who become the object of study and hence are subjected to the anthropologist’s gaze. Clearly library and archival research, whilst ‘legitimate’ activities for PhD research, does not constitute fieldwork for the anthropologist. There is currently some debate as to whether research in cyberspace actually constitutes fieldwork (Kuntsman, this issue), but for most anthropologists, fieldwork does involve face-to-face encounter.

3. ‘Hanging out’

Fieldwork invariably involves the anthropologist’s gaze. The anthropologist is usually engaged in some form of interaction that allows for being with others, and, at the same time, allows for casual observation of how the ‘others’ interact with each other. As Evans-Pritchard notes: ‘from the door of my tent, I could see what was happening in camp or village and every moment was spent in Nuer company’ (Evans-Pritchard, 1940: 15). Or, it may entail ‘shadowing’ key informants and following them through their daily routines in the city, as was the case with Karen McCarthy Brown, who studied the practices of a voodoo priestess in Brooklyn, visiting the priestess in her home and

spending time with her in ‘a mixture of observation, dialogue, apprenticeship, and friendship’ (Clifford, 1997: 56). For want of a better term, I shall describe this as ‘hanging out and observing’.

In my case, I was able to ‘hang out’ in various settings within the Jewish community in Bologna. I had previously undertaken an intensive participant observation study in a low-income neighborhood of Nairobi, over a two year period, as part of my MA degree at Makerere University, and so had experience of undertaking ethnographic fieldwork (Clark 1975, 1979). This time fieldwork was different, however.

My periods of immersion in the Jewish community in Bologna were relatively brief, though I was able to engage in ethnography nevertheless. I visited Bologna six times, between March 1999 and June 2002, usually for a period of one to two weeks at a time. Teaching commitments in London, social and communal commitments in my home community in south London, all meant I could not spend more than a few weeks at a time away from home. Financial constraints also played a part in the equation.



Figure 1: Waiting in the ghetto for the official laying of the wreath in front of the memorial plaque commemorating the ghetto in 1593 and the deportation of the Jews in Bologna in 1943.

It is worth briefly outlining some of the aspects of my ethnography.

The Jewish community in Bologna consists of about 200 members. On the first day of my arrival in Bologna I contacted the Jewish community to find out the times of the evening service. It was the eve of the festival of Purim (at which the book of Esther is read out in the synagogue and children, as well as some adults wear fancy dress, lending a

carnival atmosphere to the proceedings). After the service that evening I spoke to a number of people in the congregation and was immediately asked by the rabbi to attend the service the following morning at 7.30am, as I would help to make up the required quorum (*minyan*) of ten men. I did not make it in time for the service the following morning, but went to the community centre and interviewed some of the leading officials of the community, including the rabbi. Two days later I was asked to attend a funeral. This gave me a role in the community, and also allowed me to meet and talk to members of the congregation. My willingness to be part of a group of ‘extras’, to make up a quorum of ten men, as and when required, gave me an opportunity to simply be there, in the field, and observe.

My status as a student put me in that category of potential volunteers to be drafted into community service for helping out in the office, stuffing envelopes and the like. This gave me an excuse for ‘hanging around’ the office and talking to people as they came

into the community centre. Fortunately the secretary of the Jewish community was sympathetic to my research and on each of my visits made sure that I had some task to do, some errand to run. She even arranged that when travelling to Venice or to Florence I would always have some package or message to deliver on behalf of the Jewish community in Bologna.

My status as a student entitled me to dine at reduced rates in the kosher canteen provided by the Jewish community, as long as I committed myself to eating there every lunch-time. This gave me further opportunities for meeting people, talking to people, and observing them, in an unobtrusive manner.

On subsequent visits to Bologna I continued my stints as a volunteer in the community office and gradually was able to join in some social events as well. I attended Friday evening services, followed by a communal meal, led by the rabbi and his family and attended adult education classes led by the rabbi. I was there for the launch of the Jewish Museum in Bologna. I was present for a party welcoming two new converts into the community and I 'hung around' the community centre during the elections for communal representatives to the main organization representing Italian Jewry, the *Unione delle Comunità Ebraiche Italiane*.

4. 'Recording'

Another element in the practice of fieldwork is the recording of everything that has been observed. As is common practice, I kept detailed notes of my fieldwork and this has informed the subsequent analysis of my data. Such notes provided me with essential material in which to contextualize whatever information I was gathering on the actual Jewish museum in Bologna. It also provided valuable information that enabled me to understand the politics of resistance and community in-fighting that became evident after the opening of the museum.



Figure 2: The Chief Rabbi of Bologna fixing the mezuzah on the doorpost of the museum entrance.

Such observations and recordings also helped me to obtain a more rounded picture of community organization and opinion. Witcomb (2003) notes that any self-representation of a community within the parameters of a museum exhibition results in a partial representation, only representing a segment of that community. This has wider implications for the process of consultation with ethnic minority or community groups more generally, since consultation with official

representatives or office holders may not be sufficient to ensure a broader consensus. The key to understanding this dilemma is to recognize that communities are never fixed

entities, but are constantly being constructed and renegotiated. Hence, any attempt to fix representation will be resisted by those who feel that they have been left out. Such formulation uses Foucault's notion of productive power that runs throughout the social network, so that while inequalities persist, privileging some groups against others, such relationships, and the discourses they generate, may be challenged and resisted (Foucault 1980: 119).

5. 'Asking questions and gathering information'

The fifth element in fieldwork practice is asking questions and gathering information, whether through formal interviews, unstructured interviews, informal conversations, listening to stories, or just listening to what people are saying. I set up formal interviews with key personnel involved in the Jewish community and the Jewish museum in Bologna, and this formed the basis of much of my dissertation. Yet, I also used the various settings outlined above as opportunities for talking more informally to members of the Jewish community, and this too provided valuable insights.

At this stage I also met up with a fellow PhD student, Jeffrey Feldman, from the University of Virginia, who was completing his fieldwork in Bologna, undertaking a study of the Jewish community there (Feldman, 2002). At the end of my first visit I was able to compare notes with him, about my perceptions of the Jewish community in Bologna, and this too helped to place some of my observations in the wider perspective of the dialogic nature of my research.

Fieldwork as habitus: encounter and dialogue

Clifford notes the manner in which fieldwork is much more loosely defined in contemporary anthropological practice, embracing a wide range of practices. While the essential features of fieldwork are harder to pin down, Clifford still hangs on to the notion that fieldwork involves human interaction and deep cultural understanding. Fieldwork also requires movement in and out of the 'field', wherever or however the field may be defined, if only for the sake of obtaining a measure of perspective and objectivity. Clifford uses the term habitus to refer to the varied and constantly evolving and changing practices associated with anthropological fieldwork. In this paper I have sought to take this notion of habitus and extend it even further.

Using Lau's reformulation of the concept of habitus, I have sought to point out some of the prior assumptions, beliefs, expectations and modes of operating in the field that are acquired by the anthropologist prior to entering the field. Lau (2004) outlines the practices linked to habitus in practical terms that combine both cognitive elements, such as fundamental beliefs, and experiential elements, such as the appreciation of the do's and don'ts in any given social situation.

I have pointed out how prior readings may determine the choice of 'field', whilst expectations concerning interface encounters, hanging out, recording observations and asking questions also play a part in setting the scene for carrying out fieldwork. Equipped with such 'taken for granted' assumptions and expectations, the anthropologist is thus ready to engage with the demands of fieldwork.

Nevertheless, what actually transpires in the course of fieldwork is much more unpredictable, however well prepared the anthropologist might be. The practice of fieldwork enables a certain kind of process to take place, but cannot really dictate how that process actually unfolds. Deep-encounter and cross-cultural understanding can only take place if there is a process of mutual recognition and dialogue. The anthropologist comes with prior expectations, but must also learn to shed some of these expectations, to accept that the anthropologist is also the object of gaze and will be expected to adopt and adapt to new styles of walking or talking, wearing clothes or behaving in public. The anthropologist must be willing to adapt to the kind of habitus expected in the society being studied, as Bacchiddu explains:

'I had to adapt my taken-for-granted walking ability to a completely different kind of terrain (muddy and very slippery)... I was able to express myself using the regional expressions in the peculiar local accent; I was able to interact with other islanders in their own way, I had internalized their typical gestures and bodily postures. In addition to these embodied aspects of culture, I was increasingly familiar with the "internal rules" that are hardly voiced because they are taken for granted... I had naturally and effectively adopted my hosts' mentality. Or so it seemed to me at the time' (Bacchiddu, 2004: 5).

In terms of my own research in Bologna, I also had to learn some of the rules and expectations of the local Jewish community: coming to synagogue for early morning prayers, especially on festivals; attending funerals even if I did not know the deceased or the bereaved; running errands for the community centre and generally being available for communal activities.

Thus, the anthropologist acquires more than one habitus and learns to juggle the demands of the professional expectations of anthropological fieldwork as well as the expectations of the community or group chosen for the study. The success of such an enterprise can only be gauged by the extent to which genuine dialogue takes place, leading to cross-cultural understanding.

And yet, in addition to the anthropological outcomes, whether in terms of dissertation, journal articles or ethnographies, there is often another dimension that is seldom touched upon in the literature, namely the internal dialogue that emerges from fieldwork experience. Each fieldwork experience is different and unique in its own way. Here I would like to focus on just one aspect of the unique quality of fieldwork, namely that aspect that each and everyone of us brings to the field experience, namely ourselves. Clifford (1997) notes the manner in which much ethnographic writing in the twentieth century appears to be written from a 'detached' perspective, as if the writer were de-gendered, de-raced, de-classed and indeed de-personalized. There is now an increasing recognition of the interactive qualities of gender, race, ethnicity and religion within the field. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) note the shifting locations and subject positioning of 'indigenous' researchers within the ethnographic encounter, never an insider to all those in the 'field', but having shifting relational positions in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality and culture.

In terms of my own research, I want to focus here on my own biographical journey and my own quest in relation to Judaism. I grew up in Italy, between the ages of 6 and 13 and

I speak Italian; moreover I had my Bar Mitzvah ceremony in the main synagogue in Rome and, all in all, I feel quite at home in the country. In terms of reflexivity, I was effectively attempting to inscribe myself, in some fashion, within the Jewish community in Italy, in a manner I had not been able to achieve as a child, when I had been very much a marginal outsider, seldom participating in the life of the community. Forty years had elapsed between my Bar Mitzvah and my entry into the field as an anthropologist in Bologna. In the meantime I had found my own community, my own way of being Jewish, by immersion in the life of a Jewish community in south London. I am currently a warden of a reform synagogue, as well as a Sunday class teacher.

My ethnography of community life in Bologna did more than just provide insights for my dissertation. It was also fulfilling an altogether different function. In order to undertake such an ethnography I was actively placing myself and inserting myself in some ways into the Jewish community in Bologna. I was also connecting with an Orthodox Jewish community in a manner that was not readily accessible to me in London, where I belong to a Reform congregation. Inserting myself into an Italian Jewish community provided me with some sense of continuity and a sense of belonging, which was important to me at a number of levels, and this too was part of the dialogic process involved in completing my dissertation.

Conclusion

While at times the process of research may seem a little serendipitous, I cannot but feel that the 'field' is never completely chosen at random. As Clifford remarks, 'sojourning somewhere else, learning a language, putting oneself in odd situations and trying to figure them out can be a good way to learn something new, simultaneously about oneself and about the people and places one visits' (Clifford 1997: 91). To put it in another way, the practice and habitus of fieldwork involves both an external encounter and dialogue with 'others' out there, and an internal dialogue that emerges out of that encounter.

Habitus can be analysed in terms of a set of prior assumptions, beliefs, expectations and modes of operating in the field that are acquired by the anthropologist prior to entering the field. Habitus can also be experienced as the new kinds of demands and expectations being imposed on the anthropologist by the group or society being scrutinized. Effectively, in order to operate at all, the anthropologist needs to combine and juggle both forms of habitus and engage in a dialogical process.

Moreover, it should also be stressed that the nature of fieldwork as habitus is constantly changing, constantly being reformulated and renegotiated, as new cohorts of anthropologists come on to the scene, facing new challenges and bringing with them fresh perspectives. Clifford alludes to the changing perspectives brought about through the work of indigenous, postcolonial, diasporic and minority anthropologists (1997: 77-83). More recently, the wide range of topics and approaches presented at the *Future Fields* conference held in Oxford in December 2003 is clear evidence of the new visions and perspectives emerging in anthropological practice.

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