

## FIELDWORK AS EDUCATION\*

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\*\*This paper emphasizes the experience of fieldwork as an integral part of understanding a culture alien to one's own, and of developing a sense of personal self-reliance which cannot be achieved solely in the classroom. A diverse sample of fieldworkers' views corroborate the authors' own beliefs concerning the inherent heuristic qualities of fieldwork.

Travel or work in foreign lands has been a standard prescription of European and American elders to assist the maturation of their young. During the past centuries, many young women were sent "abroad" in the expectation that this would prepare them for the responsibilities of adulthood and leadership by furnishing them with experiences that would increase their cultural sophistication and self-reliance. After World War II, even more young people went traveling, but in addition to those who went from the U.S. for formal study, there were significant numbers going as fieldworkers to collect social or ethnographic data, and even more going as community workers in action-oriented programs such as the Peace Corps or the service groups of religious denominations.

Because fieldwork has played such an important role in our lives (cf. R.H. Wax, 1972), as well as in the lives of many friends, we were curious to learn how other persons had been affected by this kind of experience. When an opportunity came to research the question, we welcomed it and proceeded in the fashion of fieldworkers to explore with the widest range of persons that could economically be reached. Wherever or however we could locate them, we and our associates interviewed persons who had lived and worked among the people of an alien community. Since we wanted to elicit their considered reflections upon what might have been a significant portion of their biographies, we relied upon an open interview schedule which focussed upon two primary issues:

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(1) what they considered the most important things they had learned in the process of doing fieldwork, and (2) how they would compare the process and content of learning in the field situation with that in the classroom. Our sample came to include anthropologists, sociologists, religious mission workers, Peace Corpsmen, Vista workers, an Army nurse, school teachers, traveling students, not to mention an American Indian, a Venezuelan, and a native of Ireland. They ranged in age from twenty-two to eighty-six (a grand old lady!) and in status from college student to professor emeritus. The sample size was modest, forty-three but so were funds and our time; and given the specification of the kind of person we sought, there was no economical way to secure a larger or more random population.

In the face of this diversity within the sample, the most surprising characteristic of the responses was the consonance. Regardless of age, status, experience, occupation, or level of education, almost all asserted that fieldwork had been an extraordinary and even unique learning experience. "Invaluable", "eye-opening", "enriching" were the kinds of responses. Going beyond the direct questions, almost all volunteered the observation that it was in the field that they first achieved a sense of themselves as self-directive and responsible adults. Some expressed this by saying that one of the most important things they learned in the field was self-confidence or self-reliance. Others said that they learned about their own strengths and weaknesses. Others, that they developed self-confidence because they were forced to teach themselves, to work out questions and problems for themselves, and because they were forced to assume responsibilities. As one young Peace Corpsman put it: "In the classroom I learned theories, but in the field I had to be responsible for them."

Some young people who went into the field in their early twenties expressed themselves with particular eloquence. For example: "In fieldwork you have to do it on your own. You have to make decisions. If you make mistakes, it's up to you to fix it. You learn to deal with problems independently." Or again: "Being in a different culture--all of a sudden you find your bare self. When we arrived we were like helpless children. I think that if you can find that and build on it, that's the right start."

### Areas of Learning

Most fieldworkers discuss two or more important areas of learning, and while their responses differ in character, they do not differ in presenting fieldwork as a valuable and even essential complement to more formal education. Almost half the sample emphasized that field experience had made them aware of the complexities of social or cultural situations about which they had entered the field with a simple-minded or biased definition of the situation or in complete ignorance of "what was really going on." Several added that it was this experiential understanding that forced them to abandon previously held biases. A young woman, who at age 19 participated in a Vista program, explained:

I learned how a city sort of works... and I learned a whole lot about the War on Poverty and social work, and I learned to be sort of distrustful of organizations. (Now) I can really understand the conservative point of view about wasting funds. The liberals are often wrong about that problem.

A male graduate student who had spent a summer in Micronesia, told us:

I learned what was really happening to Micronesians as they took part in what might be termed 'modernization'. To give a specific example, the thing that most affects Micronesians is that they are caught up in a situation of change and acquire certain felt needs with reference to modern life. They need money, and the only way they can get it is to sell land and when they sell land they, in effect, sell all their social security.

A young man who had worked as a teacher in Botswana, remarked:

I had a girl in one of my classes (in Botswana) who was really bright, and I asked her once why she was in school. She answered that she wanted to learn English so that she could beg from White People. That made me aware of what education was doing to some of these people.

A graduate student who had worked as a resource person to a group of American Indians, remarked:

I went into this project with an idealistic view of Indians...assuming they're all good people who'd been oppressed. This wasn't completely true. I also assumed that the Bureau of Indian Affairs people were pretty much self-serving...not interested in the Indians really... Later I decided this was wrong too...(there were) lots of good intentions that didn't work because of the structure.

A particularly interesting statement was made by a young man who had worked for several years in the Peace Corps, had then taken some graduate work in anthropology, and was presently writing to us from the field -- in Thailand.

In the Peace Corps I went through a rejection of America and glorified the more "simple" societies in which I was living. Of course they appeared "simple" only because I really did not understand much about them (and did not have the tools to do so); and second, because being a foreigner -- and a respected Peace Corps or other type of teacher -- I was insulated from innumerable hassles which the local people have to put up with. It is only this year (in Thailand) that I am really seeing how blind I have been. I was idealizing a pretty harsh social and economic environment...I glamorized their societies as ones in which individuals sacrificed their "petty desires" for the good of the larger social unit. Even now I sometimes get angry with myself over the lack of understanding during that period of my life. I have to remind myself that it

was not necessarily that I was stupefied -- just unknowing. Returning to school and studying anthropology helped me to see that much exploitation and denial of freedom are inherent in the structure of societies organized as these are...It helped me bring order and explanation to what I have observed overseas.

Highly important in the opinion of a third of the sample was that they had learned to relate to an alien people and to function in an alien situation. Indeed, two professional anthropologists in the sample asserted that this experience was more important than the formal data they had collected. As one of these anthropologists expressed it:

Even though I found some new kinship and land tenure material, that's not really the most important thing I learned...I learned you can relate to different societies and survive. I learned to know the situation so that I could live there comfortably with the people.

A male Peace Corps volunteer gave a more detailed description of the resocialization essential to his work:

You have to convince the farmers as well as grow a useful crop. (You have to) learn how to comport yourself, acknowledging the right people. You have to get in with the local village headman and not just work through the government employed headman. These things you don't learn in the training program. You have to pick them up in the field.

One-fifth of the respondents said that an appreciation of social and cultural differences was one of the more important things they had learned. Some emphasized that they reached this appreciation only after they had recognized the biases they had brought with them. Thus, a middle-aged woman anthropologist remarked: "The (field) experience is valuable in giving insights into how thoroughly one can be indoctrinated and not even realize it." And a young woman who had participated in a travel-work program in Rhodesia said: "I learned that somebody else has just as good a way of doing things as you do, and you don't realize that until you try it or see it their way." Some young people believed that their field experience had made them more tolerant.

I'm more willing to listen to others now. I realize every situation has its pros and cons. I think fanaticism is hopeless.

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I'm more willing to suspend judgment.

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I've become increasingly comfortable in situations where there is disagreement.

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It is interesting and curious that only eight of the twenty-two professional or student social scientists, when asked to describe the most important things they learned in the field mentioned the data they collected or the concepts and methods they employed. All are relatively young men engaged in furthering their careers.

### Comparison of Learning in the Field and in the Classroom

When asked to compare the content and process of learning in the field with the content and process of learning in the classroom, most respondents, predictably, spoke with more warmth and enthusiasm about learning in the field. But then, about ninety percent, proceeded gratuitously to assert that both class and field learning are essential to education. In the field, many said; learning is personal and humanizes, because "it deals with people". In the field, many of the younger respondents said, learning is practical or action-oriented.

Many respondents put forward binary contrasts. In the field one is obliged to discover new structures: in class one learns the structures discovered by others. In the field learning is holistic: in class it is segmented. In the field one is forced to learn many roles: "in class you learn just one role. You're just a student."

Learning in the classroom, on the other hand generally is described as impersonal, ordered, and limited. It deals with concepts, structures, theories, or sophisticated intellectual methods...but it provides an essential background, framework, or foundation.

But most responses were, like fieldwork, holistic, complex, and personal. Their character and quality can best be appreciated from examples. Thus, a young woman graduate student in sociology wrote:

I believe it (fieldwork) is an enriching experience, both intellectually and personally-- one that cannot be taught in a university setting...It humanizes both the researcher and sociology, which I believe, otherwise tends to segmentalize social life. Reality perceived through all the senses is more totally encompassing than that obtained through reading. By living within a "foreign" culture, one is exposed, at least partially, to the same stimuli and pressures as are informants. There is little opportunity of fully escaping into the world of the middle class American social researcher.

In participant observation the field worker is forced to acknowledge his biases because of the inter-actional aspect of this type of study; the same is not true when one is reading books and/or using questionnaires. In fieldwork one is sensitive to the manner in which others perceive him or herself, as well as to one's own perceptions of the total situation and aspects within it. One is not drawn away from life, but placed within it.

A young male anthropologist:

They are comparable in one respect: You get out of each what you put in. Otherwise they are not comparable. The educational system seems to maintain itself even if you don't contribute much, you somehow get a grade. But the momentum of fieldwork depends totally upon your own energy. In the classroom you get the impression that social realities are understood. The field trip taught me the open-endedness of social science--there's so much to learn. Then, one uses the field trip as a way of checking classroom experience. It has made me more evaluative of every theory and report I read... I realize now that our greatest social scientists had to guess as I have. Now I know that all anthropological propositions -- all hypotheses -- are subject to alteration and verification.

A young man who had been in the field before enrolling as a graduate student in anthropology, answered the question as follows:

In terms of learning and experiencing a particular environment, human or otherwise, one learns so much more in the field than the same time spent in a book that one can't really compare them. The classroom experience really falls far short. Being in the field one learns a lot of subtle aspects of a culture that you would never get in a book. (Gives detailed example.) Field experience keeps you emotionally or psychologically involved as a human being. You don't get this in a classroom. In a field experience, when you're participating with people, you're thinking of what's going on in their heads. But in a classroom you don't doubt that all the people in it share your values and background. It's a closed situation. But in the field there's give and take. If communication doesn't occur, you both take another look and try again, a little differently.

An American Indian, aged 44, said:

In the field you deal with human beings. In the classroom you deal with formal knowledge. The classroom is highly formal, intellectualized. You fill the mind with knowledge. Fieldwork is a highly personal thing. It's a different kind of learning. It gives another dimension of meaning to what you've learned in the classroom without which classroom learning is not very valuable.

An eminent female anthropologist, aged 86, said:

On a field trip you teach yourself. No one says: "There is this book on this subject or on that one. You, yourself, work out the questions. No one gives you the problem. In the classroom, it can simply be said that the problem is stated for you. Books give theory but field trips give facts."

College students who had served in the Peace Corps or as mission workers, offered as thoughtful and eloquent comparisons as the social scientists. Here is the response of a young woman who had worked for two years in Paraguay as a Peace Corps volunteer:

In class you just hear. You memorize with no application of the information. It's like a fiction movie. I don't think it's meaningful until you're out in the field and you see, hear, and can apply what you learned. Then you see how it fits together. In the field you have to work with the information, like using your own hands, it stays with you. I think you learn more in the field. Now I try to apply my experience to class material to make it more meaningful.

I think college was necessary for understanding my field-work. Down there I was able to apply what I had learned, but then I was also able to see what I was missing -- what I needed to get.

A young woman mission worker who had worked for a year in Puerto Rico:

I think both are needed. In the field you learn new perspectives toward practical problems. In the class you get sophisticated intellectual methods. Some fieldwork is good, but it is not sufficient... I don't think classroom work, in and of itself, is productive. Independent research must be included. In class the scope is limited, focused on certain problems. In the field, at least for me, the focus was action oriented. I had to do whatever had to be done first.

A young woman who had worked on a summer travel program in Rhodesia:

I think my last two years in college were much better because of the trip. A lot of the classes made more sense. But I think if someone asked me which is better -- to travel for a year or go to college for a year -- I'd say travel! You can always go to college. In the field you're on your own, it's up to you. In the class the teacher tells you do do such and such. In the field, if you're going to get anything out of it, you do it yourself. But in class the professor tells you what to experience.

## Conclusion

In the maturation of an individual, there is a dialectic between living within the small and familiar household or community and venturing into the unknown; each can be conducive or thwarting to growth. For within the small and familiar environment, growth does occur but eventually reaches its limits. There are an inevitable series of times

when the person must either be expelled or himself depart: the infant from the womb; the juvenile from the maternal circle, the adolescent from the home, and the young adult from the peer society. While Otto Rank could label birth as a trauma, yet without that traumatic separation, no further growth could occur. For many young people, the school and the home become a known and secure environment that seems sufficient for comfort, and yet the present research confirms what most of us have long known -- that extrusion from school and from the familiar provide the opportunity for further and intense growth.

For the parent, and for the educational administrator, the situation must needs be tantalizing. How can the risk for the child be minimized, while the opportunity for growth is allowed? The administrator is thus inclined to reinstitute the classroom and the school within the alien environment -- with group tours, lectures, and group housing. But unhappily this does not work. Youngsters (or adults) in these situations simply huddle more closely together than ever, and the sojourn becomes life within a transplanted and enclaved America.

If the individual is to grow and to enlarge his self, then the situation must place him relatively upon his own within a strange environment where, unaided by familial or national power and wealth, he must confront and depend upon aliens, strangers, whose initial response is disinterest. It becomes incumbent upon the fieldworker to recreate the conditions of humanity across the barriers of language and culture.

If the institution cannot shelter its students without destroying the fieldwork experience, is there anything that it can do, any function that it can perform? Surprisingly enough, it can do a great deal. If we reflect upon the anthropological experience we can note that ethnographers have been able to endure the most difficult and uncomfortable experiences because they were prepared for them, and because they had an audience of peers and elders who awaited them at home, and because they felt that their activities in the field would yield a product that would advance their science. If the example holds, then the institution can establish the larger conditions that increase the likelihood that the field experience can be developmental, not by monitoring the person nor by sheltering him, but rather by preparing him for the experience and urging the achievement of super-personal goals, which will necessitate his seeing an alien people in a new light and his learning from and about them (Hughes, 1960).

In the present day, with the rhetoric of colonialism, imperialism, and exploitation by white man, spread across the media, it is necessary to deal with some further issues, however briefly. We need to remind ourselves that ethnic isolation leads to weakness rather than strength. The greatest and most civilized societies have been those actively in contact with the other peoples of the world, by trading, raiding, or traveling. It is no accident that the classical Athenians were seafarers, or that the ancient Hebrews were caravaners, that the Norse and the English were pirates and merchants, and that Chinese travellers of the fifth and eighth centuries were recording observations of the culture of India and Tibet.

We need also to remind ourselves that science and learning are not the product of the U.S. or Europe but are great traditions which have been embraced by many peoples. It is an ancient and even holy enterprise for persons to go from their homes in order to wander among and learn from others.

If it be objected that those who leave the U.S. must, despite their intentions, become tools of imperialism or the CIA, then perhaps the simplest response is that our best sources of knowledge about what the U.S. is doing and how it and its agencies appear to the rest of the world will come from such of our young persons who go abroad and return with a critical vision. And, as we have seen in the remarks of the fieldworkers of our sample, the best critics of social policy are those who have themselves observed the events.

### References

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