 Anthropologist, 8(2): 89-92 (2006)

Anthropological Methodology in Advance of its Time? Some Reflections on the Usefulness of Data

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KEYWORDS Lineal. Cognition. Impressions. Outsiders.

ABSTRACT The complexity of human behaviour and the instantaneous nature of all cognition makes the careful impressions of anthropologists of greater value than attempts at lineal understandings.

INTRODUCTION

As one of the social sciences there are current tendencies in fieldwork for anthropologists to feel the need to be more scientific in their conclusions and to quantify their data and conclusions wherever this is possible.

This has provided plenty of data which is scientifically questionable because it is usually based on limited amounts of information about the infinite varieties of human behaviour in predefined restricted fields of activity and that this information is always of historical value by the time that it is available to the public.

If the aim of fieldworkers is to do no more than add to the store of knowledge about quasi-traditional communities in rural or urban environments and enhance their academic reputations then this approach may be justified. If on the other hand their aim is to influence those in authority who may read their reports and who have the powers to put into practice their recommendations coming from their fieldwork then their presentation has to be in a more lucid, abbreviated and contemporary form.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH INTO HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

When we know that human behaviour is both collectively and individually varied and that when we quantify we restrict what we are turning into percentages by excluding many factors lurking in the background of which we are unaware or cannot quantify even if we did know, then the methodology of fieldwork has to be re-examined. 'There is a wide range of sociological phenomena which are intrinsically inaccessible to investigation of any kind' (Leach, 1967: 77).

It seems logically inappropriate for the social sciences to continue with a restrictive methodology which we know provide less than accurate answers, if answers are what we are looking for and which we know have been modelled on the accuracies of inorganic chemistry.

This methodology can only be used when the available data can be regarded as comparatively 'hard' such as authenticated land holding documents, recorded tax details, housing plans from air-photos and hospital records, when the data may be corroborated from several unrelated sources. However these written records are not in reality primary evidence since their background and use is not known; they are no more than beads in a necklace or pieces on a chess-board which has many longitudinal social uses.

The 1921 court decisions in written in English on a boundary dispute between two Kachin villages in northern Myanmar were used in a rehearing in 1947 as just a piece of pressure in writing to keep the action on-going. It was evidence of nothing except that such a hearing had taken place with certain people present. It was about as useful as the reasons for divorce recorded in Sukuma lower court decisions which was usually that the couple 'did not get on'.

Social science researchers are only human if they want results and in the context of any potential failure to succeed, completed questionnaires and interview schedules provide evidence of possibly usable data, even if the visible results are known to be of limited accuracy in the understandings of both the researchers and the researched. To have boxes full of completed questionnaires or whatever is immensely satisfying when so much is unknown.

There is always the mirage of scientific accuracy in fieldwork concerning human behaviour because that is the background to almost all training in the social sciences based

on the Western developments from the 18th century Enlíghtenment. It is assumed methodologically safe to have a positivistic frame of thinking to the behaviour of those researched when they would not dream of attaching positivistic interpretations to their own behaviour or that of their friends and families.

Accurate reality is always just round the corner and the researcher never gets round to it because the data is based on circumstances which are dated, individualised and tied to environmental factors. What is written down is assumed to be facts and often given a reality out of all proportion to what is going on behaviourally. The personal observations of the field workers as to what has been going on is sometimes regarded 'as a form of advanced journalism' (Robínson,1997.) by official bodies commissioning research who have the same delusion of the exactness of statistics coinciding with human behaviour.

There is the growing recognition that lineal research in which there are controllable sequences of cause and effect does not and indeed cannot cover the permutations of human behaviour even in the most rigidly controlled experimental situations. The Zande of the Sudan exploit the potential for ambiguity in their language in order to protect themselves from supposedly hostile neighbours so that in researching them the anthropologist can never be sure of what is said to him or what he is saying is understood in the sense intended by the anthropologist translating his own thoughts from English into the Zande language (Evans-Pritchard,1963).

THE IMPOSITION OF CATEGORIES

Social science researchers almost as soon as they arrive in their fieldwork sites start to impose categories on to the social behaviour of the researched; this process is in the nature of scientific thinking and note-taking. It could almost be said that they have no alternative as they have been trained in the western tradition of scientific logic so they search diligently for exactness.

This process is not just confined to social scientists as Christian missionaries with their codes of religious rules, try and extract from traditional thinkers similar exactitudes as may theoretically exist in their own societies. They want to know when is a couple actually married according to customary law but the Sukuma of Tanzania cannot answer this and can only say that they are more or less married than they were at another time because there is no obligatory stop off point for any behaviour which makes a dichotomous frame work of thought obligatory or even possible.

The dead are not often socially rather than biologically dead or babies born on specific dates because in most societies biological and social realities operate differently and there are no exact calendars but one's which fluctuate with the moon or social activities; just as there are no clock times and indeed time may be quicker in the wet season than in the dry (Evans-Pritchard,1939).

The framework of the information which fieldworkers always goes into three categories; this is what we say we do, this is what we actually do and the anthropologists will see something different. The Sukuma were quite content to cooperate in the coding of their customary law within the paradigms of how they thought in the abstract (Cory,1953), but rarely if ever used it in their disputes. They argued that every case was different, although Westernised appeal courts treated what was written in time fixed codes of customary law as something equivalent to their understandings of legal reality.

Thus researchers as outsiders impose categories on people who do not think in such dichotomous terms except by recognising that there are some cases which are clear cut at the extreme ends of categories. It is almost as if these people in their non-literate cognitive realism recognise that the vast majority of behaviour is in the grey areas in which it can be this or that according to one set of circumstances but that in another set of circumstances according to the finesse with which each situation is judged by those involved. Any magistrate will have found it virtually impossible to get any quasi-traditional person to plead guilty or non-guilty to a charge without wanting to explain the circumstances in personal terms. 'The anthropologist is constantly made aware of the difficulty of fitting items of human behaviour and experience into numerical categories. It is not that numbers are necessarily false but that they draw the inquirer's attention away from what is of crucial significance' (Leach,1967: 82).

If we conclude that it is scientifically

impossible to categorise human behaviour because of its almost infinite personal and situational variety, then it may be more appropriate to abandon attempts to categorise. At its simplest what are the behavioural distinctions between someone aged 19 and 51 weeks and another who is aged 20 and one week The recorded difference on paper between a teenager and a young adult is an imposed one in order to create a statistical distinction.

Social scientists with the best of intentions create categories in order to make their information transferable to other societies to be used by other anthropologists and other systems of organisation; they are imposing a structure of arbitrary definition which does not allow for the realities of variation. It was salutary to see the mystification of Palaung elders in the attempts to make their ideas of criminal behaviour conform to the national penal code. Too much behaviour is excluded from these categories because they do not fit and perhaps even have not been seen or even recognised as relevant.

THE INFLUENCE OF LINEAL RESEARCH

If we exclude the reports which are written for academic reasons and consider anthropological writings as aimed in some general sense at influencing the understandings and decisions of those in political or economic power, then this form of realism fades away. These power holders and decision makers are reluctant readers because of the restrictions on their time and the plain fact that they see little relevancy in such reports unless they are tied into other more pressing needs. Is anyone in authority likely to read an article with tabulated conclusions which give black and white informants' solutions to questions as -487, -.436 and -.877 (Davidson, 1975).

At the most optimistic anthropologists will not have their reports read beyond one page conclusions if they have not caught the more popular eye from their readability and the wider importance of their conclusions. Oscar Lewis's series on Mexican families made their lives real to any reader (Lewis, 1964) just as Goffman's Asylums (Goffman, 1961) gave an accurate and popular understanding of important social issues. Both these studies involved deep personal commitment and an unscientific assessment from achieved personal interrelationships.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

The social scientists approaching a community of which they will have little or no knowledge but with whom they may live for some time, learn the language and have many local interrelationships, usually recognise soon enough that they are still strangers Even if they work hard and live there for prolonged periods they will still be outsiders without any real possibility of having the knowledge of what is going on which would be within the socialised understandings of those born there.

Most anthropologists who have accepted that this is the case whatever may have been the racial, political or national status reasons, have recorded as much detail as they could from living in surroundings which they accept from the start are totally different to their own communities. They were never under the illusion that they could become one of 'them' or that there could ever be an elision of cognition. It seems they took the stance that this was how they felt from conviction and experience as how these people behaved but not from any narrow scientific perspective.

Elwin's work on the Muria did not intrude on their communities (Elwin, 1947), Malinowski did not travel round the kula ring to check on its realities (Malinowski, 1935). My own work on the religion of the three million Sukuma which took three years and was confined to the northern area depended on perhaps six key informants (Tanner, 1969).

The many published studies by committed men and women were evocative pictures painted by intelligent and necessarily benign, a possible source of bias, outsiders who wanted to appreciate what they experienced within time, social and geographical limits and to pass this on to others. Since they were conceited people they certainly thought that they were recording information about these communities which were not previously available but it is doubtful whether they even started to think that they were recording facts in the scientific sense.

At its worst what these anthropologists did was to record impressions based on considerable personal experience made in isolation about matters to which they were individually devoted; perhaps an amalgam of guide-book and novel. At best they provided as accurate as possible information about people and issues not

previously recorded.

If one transposes this to more modern fieldwork situations we are faced with the alternatives between continuing with a methodology aimed at an asocial accuracy in which there is enforced categorisation, inevitably out of date and probably based on small segments of society or evolve and continue with methodologies which are wider in scale and impressionistic.

MODERN UNDERSTANDINGS OF BEHAVIOUR

We have to accept that lineal thinking is a rare form of cognition and behaviour and certainly not widely used in any society whether quasi-traditional or urban-industrial, non-literate or marginally literate.

Social scientists are beginning to think that a non-lineal approach is a more reasonable approximation of how the mind works. That consciously or unconsciously the mind takes in innumerable units of knowledge before reaching decisions which are virtually instantaneous paralleling the workings of even the fastest computer. Admittedly Parallel Distributive Processing (Rumelhart and McClelland,1986) in practice has not yet gone beyond the simplest of human activities and has loaded itself with the same panoply of definitions and mathematics as linear processes, but it does suggest that the human mind socially is at the centre of a whirlpool of coincidental factors.

So it would seem that anthropologists who look and listen and in fact record in sympathetic detail their impressions of what they think is going on have antedated what Parallel Distributive Processing is trying to do having concluded that lineal thinking for human behaviour is a dead-end of systematised inaccuracy.

CONCLUSIONS

There has been a failure of lineal explanations to provide adequate understandings of human behaviour so that its results are time bound and asocially restrictive. Furthermore there has been a gradual recognition of wider interdisciplinary relevance and that causation is enveloping so that it is difficult to distinguish primary, secondary and tertiary factors. More importantly it is accepted that the processes of human decision making are almost always instantaneous rather than lineal and logical.

Anthropological fieldwork cannot pursue any narrow lineal system of understandings because of limited time and limited understandings. Indeed this has rarely been attempted by those anthropologists whose works have significantly formed the basis of much progressive thought both within and without the social science professions. They worked from multiple instantaneous impressions just as the researched reach their own decisions and understandings. Anthropologists absorb data in ways that are not quantifiable as they have constantly changing impressions about situations which are themselves changing. In fact that have been practising a form of Parallel Distributive Processing all along in advance of their more systematised colleagues in other social sciences.

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