

About Fieldwork

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About Fieldwork

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1. The beginnings of fieldwork

What exactly is fieldwork? It is, of course, just as it sounds—working in the field, going to certain locations in order to conduct work related to academic research. The field, in these cases, refers to the location(s) at or in which the phenomenon subject to academic research actually occurs. Put very simply, it is the act of physically going to a place where you will be able to see what it is that you are investigating.

Referred to in these terms, fieldwork can seem like nothing more than the natural thing to do. However, there was a time when all the world's phenomena were considered to be dream or illusion, and that the only truths in the world were the ideals and rules put in place by an omnipotent God; we should not forget that such beliefs were long held throughout the history of humankind. It was not until around the 17th century that people began to take a different approach, based on the idea that truths could be found in the physical, visible world, and indeed that by discovering those truths man could use the rational mind given to him to lead him to God's truths. This led to the birth of modern science, which holds experimental proof above all else.

Conducting research in the field became the norm for the natural sciences early on. In the Renaissance period, although Galileo could not travel to the moon, he managed to observe its surface through a telescope, and with regards to the structure of the human body, anatomy was already developing around the time of Leonardo da Vinci. In the 18th century, naturalists went out into the world collecting specimens, and by the 19th century, Darwin was dreaming up his theory of evolution on the Galapagos Islands. In the field of humanities and social sciences, comparative linguistics, which looks at how the languages spoken in the world are grouped together, became popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, while archaeological excavations began in earnest from the 19th century.

But for those fields which study that which cannot be seen—human society and culture, beliefs and religions—fieldwork as a research style was not really established until

the turn of the 20th century. That was the result of the conscious suggestion by the anthropologist Malinowski.

2. Malinowski's 'Declaration of Fieldwork'

Bronisław Malinowski was a Polish-born scholar who studied anthropology in Great Britain. During the First World War, he spent several years in the Trobriand Islands, part of Papua New Guinea, living within and studying the indigenous culture. His findings were published in 1922 in his work *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. The introduction to the book outlines the fieldwork methods he used and their significance; it can reasonably be described as a 'Declaration of Fieldwork' for those disciplines in the humanities and social sciences which seek to study the ways in which people live and think.

Proper conditions for ethnographic work. These, as said, consist mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages... There is all the difference between a sporadic plunging into the company of natives, and being really in contact with them.... it means that his life in the village, which at first is a strange, sometimes unpleasant, sometimes intensely interesting adventure, soon adopts quite a natural course very much in harmony with his surroundings.
(Malinowski 1961: pp 6-7)

The advantages of this method are the large amount of information that can be obtained and the breadth of its scope. This is not only because people's lives often expand across diverse aspects including politics, economy, and religious beliefs; it is also because all of these aspects take place in coordination with each other. Interest in all aspects of life

results from the concept of culture proposed by cultural anthropology, and it is characteristic of fieldwork in cultural anthropology. The work conducted by researchers in the field is less concerned with focusing on specific, pre-identified topics, but rather “the whole area of tribal culture in all its aspects has to be gone over in research” (p 11).

At the same time, living among native people for extended periods does not, of course, mean that the researcher becomes one of the natives. What the researcher must do during fieldwork, according to Malinowski, is to carefully observe the behaviour of the native people and record that behaviour. An extended stay in the field is required to make that possible. As Malinowski puts it, “it must be remembered that as the natives saw me constantly every day, they ceased to be interested or alarmed, or made self-conscious by my presence”, and that “I ceased to be a disturbing element in the tribal life which I was to study, altering it by my very approach” (p 8).

Malinowski described the content of research conducted in such an environment as follows:

Thus the first and basic ideal of ethnographic field-work is to give a clear and firm outline of the social constitution, and disentangle the laws and regularities of all cultural phenomena (pp 10-11)

Living in the village with no other business but to follow native life...the Ethnographer is enabled to add something essential to the bare outline of tribal constitution, and to supplement it by all the details of behaviour, setting and small incident (p 18)

Besides the firm outline of tribal constitution and crystallised cultural items which form the skeleton, besides the data of daily life and ordinary behaviour, which are, so to speak, its flesh and blood, there is still to be recorded the spirit—the natives' views and opinions and utterances (p 22)

the final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight...is, briefly, to grasp

the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world. We have to study man (p 25)

The subject of Malinowski's research was the nature of culture in “uncivilized societies”, which was the main interest of anthropology at the time, and the significance of spending extended periods living with native people is emphasised. But Malinowski's assertion that it is only by travelling to the field to live with the native subjects that one can really understand their lives and ways of thinking can be taken as guidelines for fieldwork for researchers following in Malinowski's path, not just in anthropology, but for a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

3. Types of fieldwork

Since Malinowski, fieldwork has become a vital methodology for anthropological fieldwork, and has also produced significant results as an archetypal method of qualitative research in sociology. In recent years, fieldwork has also been advocated in any number of humanities and social science fields, beyond anthropology and sociology.

Just as the subjects of research in all of those fields differ, the actual ways in which fieldwork is conducted to meet the objectives of research also vary. The subject of research in cultural anthropology, for example, may be culture or community, which are located in the backgrounds of people's lives, intangible yet characterising the lives and thinking of whole groups of people. Often, those same people are unaware of the presence of the culture or community in question, so it is not the case that one can simply go along and ask some questions and expect to get clear answers. We have already seen how important it is to spend long periods of time living with the people on whom the research is focusing, in order to personally experience the culture or community in question.

In sociology, this type of research often focuses on certain specific social groups, such as young people or factory workers. As a result, rather than entering into their everyday lives, it is more likely that fieldwork will be conducted by making regular visits over a long period of time to conduct interviews and follow-up interviews.

In linguistics, the subject of research will be the lan-

guage spoken in a region or regions, so persons able to speak that language are selected, and the language spoken by those persons will form the focus of the fieldwork material collected. Rather than simply have those persons speak what they want, interviews will have some structure. For example the persons may be asked to tell a folk story or to answer questions about vocabulary or terminology.

In ethnology, research will often focus on interviewing people who are highly familiar with the area in question. The subject of ethnological research is often the way people live or how they think, as with cultural anthropology. While anthropology normally looks at the people of different cultures, however, ethnology is more interested in people in the same country only, or the origins and history of a certain custom in a certain location.

When fieldwork is conducted in those fields which take as their subject actual, physical objects which can be found in the target location—such as archaeology, art history and architectural history—that fieldwork does not focus on people, but rather on the excavation and identification of objects and pieces of art. The focus of work in the field is on observation and measurement.

So we can see that fieldwork in the humanities and social sciences will vary according to the objective of the research and what it takes as its subject. It may require extended stays over many years living in the area of research, or it may only take a day trip to gather the required data from observations and interviews. Common to all types of fieldwork, however, is the fact that it derives its significance from observations made in the field or materials collected from the people being studied.

4. The thrill of fieldwork

The thrill of fieldwork, however, is not limited to the importance of being able to collect materials directly in the field. Sending researchers who seek to discover the secrets of humankind out into the field allows them to meet real-life, in-the-flesh people. This is the biggest difference with those academic disciplines that seek to close in on humankind through experiments in a laboratory or records left in literature.

The field is where real people are living real lives, which is exactly why they are not always living those lives

in tranquillity. Rather, there are squabbles and arguments, romantic relationships and friendships, births and deaths, even conflict and war. For the people who live within these “fields”, this is their life, and there is simply no scope for this to be conducted for the purpose of research materials. This applies not just for speaking and doing, but also for written records and images, or objects such as tools and buildings, which are all part of the real lives of the people living in the field.

Fieldwork is the act of venturing into the real settings of people’s lives. This is exactly why the most important point about fieldwork as a research methodology is not what the researcher does when he gets to the field, but rather the procedures he takes before going there, such as communicating to the people in the field what he is trying to do and obtaining their consent, and equally, how he maintains relationships with the people, by communicating the results of his research on project completion, for example, and not simply leaving once research is completed.

The people living in the field selected by the researcher are not just the researcher’s “subjects”; they are also human beings living real lives in that field, and the researcher will go and meet with them as another human being. Fieldwork comprises encounters between people, which is also why sometimes it will lead to unpleasantness. But this is all part and parcel of the real lives of real people, and the sense of tension and of being in the moment that is inherent in being able to touch people’s lives directly serve as impetus to go back into the field. It is here that the real thrill of fieldwork lies.

References

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