

## **Sociality shock: Fieldwork, social isolation, and the generation of theory**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reconsiders the epistemological foundations of anthropological theory by re-interpreting fieldwork not as a site of data collection, but as a condition of radical exposure and transformation. Drawing on both classical and contemporary sources from Malinowski's *Diary* to recent work on affect and embodiment, it argues that the true origin of anthropological theorizing lies not in cultural observation per se, but in the fieldworker's disorientation, estrangement, and social isolation. The term sociality shock is introduced to replace the misnomer "culture shock," emphasizing that what the novice anthropologist experiences is not primarily cognitive or cultural, but affective and relational: the temporary loss of social intelligibility and existential anchoring in an unfamiliar social world. Far from being incidental, this vulnerable state becomes the engine of theoretical production. Against the backdrop of postmodern reflexivity and the politics of representation, the paper critiques earlier paradigms that framed fieldwork as either an objective science or a self-reflective narrative, arguing instead for a model of fieldwork as a structured epistemological ordeal. Drawing from phenomenology, postcolonial critique, and field-based testimonies, it proposes that theory emerges through embodied confrontation through the anthropologist's gradual re-entry into sociality under novel terms, and the rebuilding of perspective from a position of self-induced social blindness. The argument culminates in a call to re-imagine fieldwork training and ethnographic pedagogy: not as a matter of mastering methods, but of preparing the ethnographer for dislocation, affective rupture, and epistemic reconstruction. Ultimately, this work reclaims theory not as a product of analytical distance, but as the outcome of having been undone and remade in the field.

**KEYWORDS:** fieldwork epistemology, sociality shock, embodied knowledge production, anthropological training, ethnographic pedagogy

## **On the impossibility—and futility—of objectivity in the social sciences**

*No production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances.*

*Edward Said, Orientalism (1978)*

Today, few would dispute that anthropology, as a professional academic discipline, has a history steeped in knowledge imperialism and served, however inadvertently, as a tool of colonial corroboration. Despite ongoing controversies surrounding the discipline's formation, it was precisely this history that enabled the golden age of professional anthropology in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Eriksen, 2006). The conditions under which professional anthropology emerged have been examined in countless books, articles, and critiques, to the extent that they may seem thoroughly excavated. Yet some fundamental issues may still remain insufficiently re-examined. Among them is anthropological scientism rooted, at its worst, in the pursuit of objectivity in its various guises, and at its best, in the epistemological quest for both veracity and relevance. Both trajectories remain central to ongoing debates over knowledge production within Western-style social science. The belief that social science can, and must aspire to the same kind of objectivity as the so-called hard sciences is a true child of the colonial 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

From today's perspective, it is not difficult to see why anthropologists of the time—often employed in political enterprises that determined the fate of entire colonized nations—were so invested in claiming scientific legitimacy for their observations and conclusions. It was only with the emergence of the so-called postmodern critique, which foregrounded the voices of the Other, that anthropology began to retreat from epistemologies obsessed with objectivity. Instead, it turned toward modes of inquiry grounded in epistemological revision and self-critique, drawing inspiration from literary theory, linguistics, and semiotics. Feminist scholarship, post-structuralism, postcolonial theory, Geertzian interpretive anthropology, and Foucauldian postmodernism all contributed rigorous critiques of anthropology's earlier knowledge practices. What emerged were newly configured perspectives that fully explored a powerful conceptual shift: the idea of multiple chains of representation as the very condition of human sociality. In this framework, the emanations of human life were no longer treated as fixed “things” but as text, narrative, and discourse: forms of socially resonant communication. The nature of these “things,” within human worlds, appeared not as intrinsic essences but as ideologically mediated appropriations and conceptualizations.

Efforts were made to break free from the paralyzing grip of positivist and colonial-era analytic categories—concepts like culture, race, and ethnic group—inherited from earlier generations of scholars. No longer treated as fixed, reified entities, these categories were instead reconceptualized as attributes of interconnected social processes. Analysts shifted their focus toward modeling fluidity, complexity, and the shifting boundaries within and among human communities. Since then, culture has ceased to be seen as an overarching, bounded force encapsulating a people and their history. Instead, it has been re-framed as an adjectival quality—applied to discrete elements such as ideas, material productions, practices, and ways of thinking. Similarly, categories like race and ethnic group are now understood not as inherent properties but as historically contingent perceptions, meanings, and social functions. Scholars describe relations and social processes as ethnic, or analyze the social reality of difference through the lens of ethnicity as a discursive formation. This epistemological shift redirected inquiry from the products of meaning-making to the processes of meaning production themselves. To borrow a conceptual gradation: social science became an investigation into the diverse, socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), imagined (Anderson, 1983), and discursively constituted (Foucault; Habermas) notions of sameness and difference (Barth, 1968).<sup>1</sup> At the core of this transformation is an emerging realization, explicit or implicit, that all social processes in human societies rest on three fundamental features of human nature: humans are creatures of obligate gregariousness, compulsive culture-building, and a uniquely evolved sense of time. This last feature, the human brain's predictive machinery, enables us to anticipate, project, and construct social reality (cf. Clark, 2023).

Despite the enduring intellectual value of these theoretical traditions and their propensity for insightful analysis, at least three major limitations inherent to this mode of modeling human societies became apparent with the epistemological shift that unfolded between the late 1960s and the 1990s. First, this style of theorizing was deeply embedded in the intellectual landscape of post-World War II, postcolonial libertarian thought, which shaped the political and academic left in the latter half of the 20th century (cf. Kuper, 2000, p. 201ff). As one of the most renowned postcolonial thinkers observed, this open-ended mode of inquiry confined itself to the question, "How does it work?", while systematically avoiding the more fundamental question, "What does it mean?" (Deloria

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<sup>1</sup> In the Introduction to his seminal 1968 edited volume, Barth states (p. 9) matter-of-factly, while critiquing the then-dominant primordialist views of anthropologists on culture and ethnicity: "Since culture is nothing but a way to describe human behaviour..." The significance of this seemingly offhand remark has been largely overlooked, in part due to the way Barth framed his critique of the theoretically unproductive understanding of culture in relation to ethnic groups and their boundaries. Yet his assertion is profound: culture is both a shorthand for behavior exclusive to our species and a constitutive, obligatory trait of human nature.

Jr., 2001, p. 63). Much of this social science functioned as an intellectual counterpart to Western political libertarianism rooted in a critique of past positivism—just as leftist politics of the time were defined less by concrete alternative programs and more by opposition to the political heritages of the past. Second, both postmodern theorizing and leftist politics operated within an open-ended, structuralist orientation, prioritizing the deconstruction of systems over the development of actionable analyses. Consequently, in the post-Cold War era, these analytical traditions were increasingly dismissed, often reduced to a banalized caricature suggesting that they purported "nothing in the human world is real." In some cases, this conflation of critique with negation contributed to a broader resignation from theorizing altogether (cf. Knauff, 2006). In contrast to this intellectual ambiguity, the 1990s saw the rise of social-scientific fatalism epitomized by Francis Fukuyama's deterministic vision which, despite its theoretical shortcomings, proved remarkably effective in producing self-fulfilling prophecies (cf. Samuel Huntington). This shift was met with stunned moral indignation from the academic left (cf. Baudrillard, 1997)<sup>2</sup>, yet it aligned seamlessly with the rise of neoliberalism and the collapse of European socialist regimes in the late 20th century. Third, libertarian postmodernism, while initially committed to exposing the constructed nature of social categories, paradoxically began affirming difference as an inherent value, particularly in opposition to global homogenization. As James Clifford (1988; 10) famously remarked, culture is a "deeply compromised idea that I cannot yet do without." Kuper (2000, p. 212) frames this not as a political issue but a moral one, observing: "The concept of culture provides us with the only way we know how to speak about the differences between the peoples in the world." Thus, he argues, culture should be nurtured not as an analytical category, but as a political commitment: a means of resisting Westernization, modernization, globalization, or even simple misrepresentation.

Postcolonial, libertarian social science did not resolve the enduring tensions between objectivity and relevance; rather, it posed a series of new questions. With the emergence of early postmodern and postcolonial critique, the focus shifted from objectivity per se to issues of credibility and legitimacy; specifically, the politics of representation, particularly in relation to research data gathered through non-quantifiable methods. In anthropology, this marked a turn away from discipline-specific concerns toward a deeper anxiety:

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<sup>2</sup> In his 1997 essay *La conjuration des imbéciles*, Jean Baudrillard, reflecting on the convergence of rightist politics and bad art in France at the time, observes a reversal in the roles of leftist and rightist discourse. He writes: "The real question, then, becomes whether one can still open one's mouth, utter anything which may sound strange, irreverent, heterodoxical, or paradoxical without being automatically called a fascist (which is, let's admit it, a way of paying tribute to fascism). Why has every moral, conventional, or conformist discourse—traditional rightist discourses—migrated to the left?"

How does the anthropologist affect the very people he is observing, and with what consequences? It was frequently speculated that the presence of the anthropologist could, or already did, result in profound and unpredictable “contamination of culture” effects (cf. Bennett, 1996). On a seemingly more light-hearted note, postcolonial critique exposed that the Other often viewed colonial science not only as intrusive, oppressive, distorting, and dangerous, but also as inherently laughable, a perspective immortalized by Vine Deloria Jr. (1969) in his classic chapter *Anthropologists and Other Friends*. This was powerfully echoed by Edward Said’s (1978) assertion that Orientalism is, at its core, the West’s incapacity to take the Non-West seriously.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most unexpected outgrowth of postcolonial and postmodern critique, however, was the rise of a substantial discourse under the banner of reflexivity: an internal turn that would transform both method and self-understanding in the human sciences.

Several professional generations ago, Franz Boas famously rejected Morgan’s model of linear social evolution, asserting the equal value of all cultures. Yet this foundational shift paradoxically ushered in what Bennett (1996, p. 24) calls the discipline’s “baroque era”: a period marked by precisely the kind of exoticizing reconstructions of “primitive” pasts that Boas had sought to overcome. A similar irony unfolded decades later with the rise of reflexive anthropology. The critical question: Who produces anthropological knowledge? most authoritatively posed by Marcus and Fischer (1986) and Clifford and Marcus (1986), returned not a fundamental epistemological reckoning, but rather a flood of personal disclosures. By the 1980s and 1990s, it had become fashionable for ethnographies to include autobiographical reflections, with authors detailing everything from class backgrounds and parental relationships to sexual preferences, all in the belief that such confessions would shed light on the nature, scope, or bias of their fieldwork. Yet instead of clarifying epistemological positions,<sup>4</sup> this wave of (self)-reflectionism became

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<sup>3</sup> Said’s contention was anticipated at least by Frederick Gearing (1970). Writing about (ethnic) distance between the Fox (Mesquakie) and their non-Native neighbours in Tama City in Iowa, he explained that the latter see the former as nearing cultural extinction (assimilation) because they did not find their ways of thinking and living believable.

<sup>4</sup> Philip C. Salzman (2002) is one of the categorical critics of reflexivity and “positionality”. While some of his starting points are valid, his dismissal of the importance of the anthropologist’s self-inspection falls somewhat short of analytical standard and is curiously paradoxical. While he agrees offhandedly that anthropologist’s responses to the stresses of fieldwork are “sources of insights, impressions, ideas, and hypotheses”, he nevertheless feels that “insights and impressions are not knowledge” (p. 808). While it is difficult to think of anything but insights, ideas and hypotheses as the only possible ways of producing knowledge, it becomes clear towards the end of his piece that Salzman thinks of “knowledge” in terms of intersubjectively verifiable “facts”. However, facts are not knowledge, much less knowledge production. He even goes as far as to suggest that “[t]he way to improve ethnographic research is, thus, not for the solitary researcher to delve within him- or herself ... but to replace solitary research with collaborative, team research, in which the perspectives and insights of each researcher can be challenged and tested by the others” (p. 812). The proposition that factual “knowledge” is in the consensus of a group of scientists is equally authoritarian as is Salzman’s surprisingly categorical Westerner-supremacist finale.

another strategy for producing a new kind of “scientific” objectivity, one that aligned, not coincidentally, with the ethos of political libertarianism. Here too, scientific credibility, even at the cost of personal exposure, trumped the more difficult work of scientific thinking. Given this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that social scientific fatalism, alongside a resurgent neo-realism that imagines itself as finally rendering human sociality “real” rather than imagined, feels no obligation to address these issues at all. Instead, these approaches often uncritically re-deploy the old positivist lexicon: binary oppositions, linear progressivism, radical Otherness, and systems of cultural gradation<sup>5</sup>, as if the debates of the prior decades had never occurred.

What did occur, however, notably between 2000s and 2020s, was a marked shift toward political hypercorrectness. Alongside the metaphorization of human conditions—for example, “person experiencing homelessness” rather than “homeless person”, or “person with disabilities” in place of “disabled person”—we witnessed a hyperinflation of adjectival abstractions describing social processes: intersectionality<sup>6</sup>, historicity, coloniality, positionality, culturality, and others. As with many fundamentally moralizing discursive projects, the outcome was less about clarity or justice, or even social scientific analysis, and more about performative righteousness. In missing its emancipatory intent, this rhetorical shift introduced not coherence, but a new kind of conceptual clutter, and with it, no small amount of what one might call “hypocrisy”.

Such shifts in the politics of knowledge (cf. Stoler 2006, p. 2), often recidivist in their colonial disposition, ultimately re-affirm the banal yet crucial truth: that all (scientific) knowledge is pre-theoretically ideological. Yet for the epistemologically conscious social scientist, the real confrontation lies elsewhere: in the unavoidable relationship between

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<sup>5</sup> The two works that mark off the era of social scientific fatalism, Francis Fukuyama’s *The end of history and the last man* (1992), and Huntington’s *The Clash of civilizations* (1993, in: *Foreign Affairs*) both made use of outdated, ideological understanding of culture, nation, and more nebulous still, civilisation; both also projected the analysis of contemporaneity into asynchronous linearity. That Fukuyama should exploit the opus of Alexandre Kojève, one of the key inspirations of Marxist libertarian thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is perhaps elegant in the context of his neo-liberal (or neo-authoritarian) project, but hardly authenticates it. Similarly, neo-realist social science is once again drawing on philosophical resources that employ compromise and commonsensical (as opposed to analytical) conceptualisations (e.g. John Searle’s compromise theorising on linear progression from non-socially constructed to socially constructed realities); or else, on purportedly “hard science” “facts” produced by modern (population) genetics (cf. e.g. Jones, 2002; and response: Wildcat, Šumi & Deloria, Jr, 2003), etc.

<sup>6</sup> It is by no means my intention to deride Kimberlé Crenshaw’s original and incisive observation regarding intersectionality, particularly as it applies to structured and prescriptive contexts such as legal proceedings where overlapping forms of disadvantage often go unrecognized. Crenshaw’s work (cf. Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) illuminates how a person’s compounded social positioning may be rendered invisible in institutional frameworks, such as when a hypothetical employer fails to acknowledge the converging reasons behind an individual’s marginalization. What is surprising, however, is the way the term intersectionality has since been adopted into both academic and everyday discourse as a kind of self-diagnostic label for one’s perceived social vulnerabilities, often expressed in statements like: “My intersectionalities are...” followed by gender, ethnicity, age, and so on. In this shift, Crenshaw’s critique of institutional blindness becomes reframed not as an analytic of structural power, but as a facet of personal identity.

the self as producer and the knowledge that is produced. No degree of political legitimacy or institutional prestige granted to science as a superior mode of knowing has ever been sufficient to shield the researcher from this encounter. For anthropologists, this reckoning typically arrives during their first fieldwork experience often in the context of a novice's doctoral project. Since the demise of the naïve belief in objectivity, the pressure to perform some version of it remains strong, whether through scientific narrative, self-reflexive confession, or, more recently, ethical concern for the dignity of one's interlocutors. Yet this pressure has led to a subtle displacement: the moment of epistemological crisis is habitually relegated to the personal, rather than recognized as relational or structural. What is rarely shared, let alone theorized, is the private distress many anthropologists experience during fieldwork, typically dismissed as mere culture shock. Two recent, notable exceptions are Stodulka, Dinkelaker, & Thajib, 2019;<sup>7</sup> and Okely, 2020.<sup>8</sup> Still commonly regarded as personal and psychological, culture shock is not often acknowledged for its deep relevance to the fieldwork encounter, to interpretation, or to scientific knowledge production itself. Indeed, the countless handbooks, textbooks, and disciplinary histories of anthropological method routinely neglect this interior dimension of fieldwork. Far fewer still offer any concrete guidance on how to cope with it, or how to make sense of it: the unspoken epistemic weight borne by the fieldworker in the process of making knowledge.

### **What shocks more in fieldwork experience: culture, sociality, or the self?**

*Man is not born human: he becomes human only by education and insertion into a society.*

*Claude Lévi-Strauss, Savage Mind (1966)*

It is part of anthropology's disciplinary exegesis to trace the emergence of fieldwork—this method unique to the discipline and long regarded as its superior mode of social scientific observation—back to Franz Boas and Bronisław Malinowski. It was Malinowski who, despite his professed distrust of psychology in general and psychoanalysis in

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<sup>7</sup> This important recent edited volume titled *Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork* offers a valuable corrective to the long-standing marginalization of emotion in anthropological methodology. The collection makes meaningful strides in validating the emotional labor of ethnography and expanding space for reflexivity in the discipline. Its strength lies in the range of personal reflections and testimonies that illuminate the affective realities of field engagement. Yet, the volume generally treats affect within the bounds of narrative retrospection and ethical reflexivity.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Okely's significant work titled *Anthropological Practice: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Method* offers a timely critique of disembodied methodological traditions and instead foregrounds the emotional, sensorial, and gendered dimensions of participant observation. Her insistence that anthropology is a fully embodied practice, and her reflections on fieldworker vulnerability, resonate strongly with the argument developed here. However, Okely's approach largely remains within the scope of practice and retrospective narrative.

particular, entered the canon as the more psychologically revealing figure, not least because of his now-infamous private diary (1967), published posthumously, which he kept during his first fieldwork in Papua New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands between 1914–1915 and 1917–1918. In this diary, Malinowski recorded his romantic frustrations, persistent physical discomfort, and self-chastising inner monologues. He documented periods of emotional detachment, and even hatred toward members of his host community; his deep disaffection with Britain and the British; daydreams and memories of the life he had left behind; a handful of professional reflections; and several unsettling dreams. Upon publication, the responses ranged from scandalized to apologetic to sympathetic. What remains under-explored, however, is the theoretical significance of such records of intellectual and emotional self-examination under extreme conditions, and the implications they hold for debates around representation and relevance in anthropology. Although many prominent figures—among them Raymond Firth, Robert Lowie, Clifford Geertz,<sup>9</sup> and James Clifford—have commented on Malinowski's *Diary*, two questions still linger: What role do these inner confrontations play in the production of theory, and how might they reshape our understanding of fieldwork as a mode of knowledge-making?

The publication of Malinowski's *Diary* illuminated a fundamental, but often neglected, aspect of fieldwork: the anthropologist, especially during his first immersion experience, undergoes a process of radical self-testing, now commonly labeled as culture shock. Yet this term is a misnomer, one that exposes several unresolved tensions within the discipline. First coined by Kalervo Oberg in 1954 to describe the adaptation challenges faced by foreign students and expatriates, the concept was rooted in psychological models of adjustment to external environments. Its uncritical adoption into anthropological vocabulary, without re-theorization, reveals the lingering belief in the shocking Otherness of unfamiliar "culture" as reified Otherness: a notion long critiqued in theory, yet still deeply embedded in practice. It also reflects the continued entanglement of anthropology with exoticizing habits, despite decades of reflexive and critical scholarship. These conceptual slippages contribute to a persistent confusion over both representation and the epistemic foundations of anthropological knowledge. Despite extensive debates that have discredited the binary between "us" and "them," many anthropologists continue to prefer fieldwork in distant, unfamiliar locales and remain skeptical of the value of anthropology at home. The assumption endures that perceived "cultural sameness" be-

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<sup>9</sup> A particularly insightful summary of the polemic that followed the publication of the *Diary* was offered by Hortense Powdermaker in her 1967 letter to the editors of *The New York Review of Books*, written in response to Clifford Geertz's strikingly unflattering assessment of Malinowski's personality (Geertz 1967).



tween observer and observed, often defined through simplistic markers such as shared citizenship or the nebulous idea of “Western culture”, compromises the objectivity of the research encounter. Practically speaking, anthropology at home still carries less academic prestige.<sup>10</sup> More consequentially, the belief that “real” anthropology only happens when the researcher is confronted with alien logics and bewildering self-understandings has fueled one of the discipline’s most enduring debates: does humanity share a fundamental mental unity? Over time, taking a position in this debate has become less a matter of empirical evidence and more a professional article of faith.

Kalervo Oberg’s original concept of culture shock was rooted in a psychological framework designed to explain the emotional disorientation experienced by expatriates and foreign students adjusting to unfamiliar cultural settings. His model, consisting of four stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment, treated the phenomenon as a personal adaptation to an external cultural environment. Anthropology, however, absorbed the term without rethinking its underlying assumptions. The result has been a conceptual misfit: culture shock became a prescribed ordeal of hardship for the fieldworker, without adequate consideration of how it differs from the affective and epistemic ruptures encountered in fieldwork. The anthropologist does not necessarily enter a world defined by radically alien repertoires. His research is not, contrary to certain dogmas within the discipline, compromised by familiarity with the language, religion, or daily practices of the people among whom he works. What defines the fieldwork encounter is not cultural alterity, but the absence of a social safety net. The fieldworker is thrust into a situation devoid of familiar relational anchors: no friends, no kin, no colleagues, no intimate social cues to fall back on. Thus, what the fieldworker experiences is not properly culture shock, but sociality shock: a deep disruption of the mechanisms by which we typically inhabit the social world. It is not the foreignness of culture per se, but the loss of embeddedness, the collapse of habitual relational scaffolding, that produces the crisis.

Remarkably absent from disciplinary discourse are discussions of how fieldworkers cope with this rupture, or what purpose such a confrontation serves. These dimensions remain something of a professional secret, passed on not so much through teaching or literature, but through a kind of painful rite of passage: a solitary mortification not unlike those found in spiritual traditions of vision-seeking. When it is addressed at all, it is often mischaracterized: either psychologized through reflexive autobiography, objectified via psychoanalytic interpretation, or, ironically, used to reaffirm exoticizing assump-

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<sup>10</sup> This debate has, in the early 2000s, taken a turn into polemicizing especially about the credibility of the “new anthropologies” and their practitioners in the former Socialist countries in Europe, cf. Buchowski 2004; 2005, and Hann, 2005.

tions about the people and practices being studied. Even the most insightful first-person fieldwork accounts such as Jean Briggs' *Never in Anger* (1970 [2006], 1987) or Waud Kracke's reflections (1987) tend to fall short of reconceptualizing the experience in non-exoticizing terms. Briggs and Kracke both reflect deeply on the emotional toll of fieldwork, but continue to frame the encounter as one between two mutually alien cultures. Kracke, for example, writes that fieldwork is "a complex experience that depends in large part on the particular cultures involved" (1987, p. 60), as if the anthropologist were somehow a carrier of a coherent, bounded national or civilizational identity, and the host community likewise. He attributes the anthropologist's discomfort to "ethnocentric prejudices" (p. 58) and the need to sort out "cultural differences from personal differences" (p. 61) as though these could ever be cleanly separated.

Yet Kracke also cites a manuscript by Walter Sangree that gestures toward a deeper insight: that the fieldworker suffers not simply from missing home or misunderstanding others, but from the grief of losing the techniques and habits through which one normally navigates the social world: the cherished ideals and expectations that become inappropriate, or simply unusable, in the new context (1987, p. 62). This grief, existential, relational, and epistemic, goes far beyond Oberg's original framing. Sociality shock, then, is not an emotional inconvenience, but a structural dislocation, a moment in which the anthropologist must renegotiate how to be a person among others. It is not the culture of the Other that shocks, but the loss of one's own socially embedded self.

### **Social blindness as knowledge gaining technique**

*We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are.*

*Talmudic proverb*

Many of the symptoms of sociality shock, often misread through the lens of culture shock<sup>11</sup>, have been well documented, particularly the emotional trajectory that typically marks an anthropologist's first fieldwork experience. This trajectory often begins with a period of exultation, during which the fieldworker perceives the new environment as endlessly fascinating, idealized, aesthetically beautiful, or even socially harmonious. But this initial euphoria tends to give way to a profound emotional crash. The fieldworker may experience a sense of social exclusion, a growing realization that his social skills

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the inventory of symptoms across the three stages of fieldwork experience is based on testimonies I have gathered, shared and discussed with numerous fellow anthropologists in Europe and the United States during 2004–5, and presented during a focused postgraduate seminar at Goldsmiths College, University of London, in September 2006.

and background knowledge feel irrelevant, a painful absence of personable contact, and, paradoxically, a total lack of privacy. These conditions frequently provoke a sense of meaninglessness, doubt, and epistemic paralysis. During this phase, anthropologists often report grave self-doubts, disturbing dreams, a compulsion to reanalyze their past, and even hostility or paranoid projections toward their host community. Ironically, it is often the sensitivity of the host community, their ability to intuit the fieldworker's desolate state, that initiates the famed breakthrough: the moment the anthropologist is finally accepted into local social life. What follows is a period of gradual re-orientation, during which the anthropologist learns to communicate more effectively and forge meaningful relationships, now shaped by the deep destabilization they have endured.

The three stages described above are each marked by distinct mental and emotional processes experienced by the fieldworker. During the honeymoon phase, the anthropologist often perceives uncanny resemblances between members of the host community and familiar figures from home. New acquaintances may appear to possess similar facial features, social demeanors, speech patterns, or mannerisms, prompting a strong sense of intuitive recognition. Person So-and-So from the host community may seem strikingly reminiscent of a Dick or Sally back home, leading the anthropologist to assume, often mistakenly, that these are the people with whom social contact can be most easily initiated. This "mirage effect", the spontaneous transposition of the home social environment onto the unfamiliar one, is a common, if unacknowledged, mental strategy for navigating the unknown. Similar projections may take the form of imagining host families as mirror images of one's own, or identifying emotionally with individuals thought to resemble close relations. These associations may also skew in negative directions: the fieldworker may form premature antipathies toward prominent local figures, or feel an impulsive allegiance with those perceived as oppressed: judgments that often unravel with time and experience. Another frequent early dynamic is the fieldworker's strong emotional attraction to a figure of authority in the host setting, a phenomenon Kracke (1987, p. 70ff.) also notes. These and other acute first impressions, whether positive or negative, are not simply personal quirks, but part of the urgent perceptual work through which the fieldworker tentatively maps and appropriates the new social space. While often misleading, such projections are rarely random: they speak to the deep, unsteady labor of locating oneself socially in unfamiliar terrain.

Once the fieldworker's early strategies, for example the reliance on first impressions and hastily formed social intuitions fail to yield meaningful results, the experience often gives way to the depression. Confronted with the persistent failure of familiar social

skills and deprived of a supportive network, the anthropologist may descend into profound loneliness, a sense of inadequacy, and even emotional regression or physical numbness. In this state, the mind often turns toward various teleological narratives to explain the crisis: that fieldwork is not, in the end, about anthropology at all, but about confronting one's past, atoning for personal failures, or learning life lessons. Some interpret the experience as a form of cosmic punishment, a karmic reckoning for unresolved guilt, or a painful revelation about a long-abandoned or overextended romantic relationship. For those with a more narcissistic disposition, this emotional collapse may be projected outward: ultimately onto the host community itself. Its members may be judged as malicious, ignorant, or insufferably ordinary, a complete betrayal of the rich cultural depictions the anthropologist had once read. Not only do they appear to lack a "wonderful culture;" their very existence seems to defy the theoretical models that colleagues have claimed to observe among them.

Compounding the situation is the weight of ethical obligations, which the anthropologist may begin to resent. These include the demand to suppress personal emotional economy, to refrain from forming exclusive friendships, from expressing personal frustrations, or from confiding in anyone outside the field diary. One is expected to engage everyone equally, without retreating into selective socializing or opinionated debate. The anthropologist must often endure views and behaviors he would actively resist at home, all while denied the comfort of intimate companionship or ideological affirmation. Throughout this phase, the emotional and cognitive labor of fieldwork becomes almost entirely internalized: confined to private thought, restrained affect, and, perhaps most cathartically, the pages of a personal diary.

Let me reiterate the central point: it is not the foreignness of the host community's practices that constitutes the true shock of entering the field. Cultural practices, no matter how unfamiliar or seemingly bizarre, are often intelligible and tolerable when experienced in the presence of people whose attitudes toward us we can predict, or whom we trust to receive us in socially legible ways. Indeed, if fieldwork progresses favorably, the anthropologist will eventually find just this kind of relational anchoring within the host community. But initially, that trust does not exist. The shock of entry arises from the anthropologist's voluntary, if largely unsuspecting, entry into a social setting where his persona is profoundly exposed, and where no pre-existing social network offers immediate inclusion or recognition. The fieldworker's illiteracy is not primarily cultural (though he may temporarily feel so disoriented that he doubts the culture's existence altogether), but social. He is, in effect, socially blind, or, as Kracke (1987, p. 68) suggests,

approaching a state of sensory deprivation, and must feel his way forward in a web of unfamiliar relations where no social anchors exist. These anchors must be constructed from scratch, all while observing a unique set of constraints: the fieldworker cannot follow his ordinary personal life economy: seeking comfort, choosing company, expressing preferences. He must instead constantly position himself where the best view is, i.e. where social meaning can be observed, learned, and later interpreted. Ironically, there may be no moment of better visibility than at the very beginning, when the anthropologist's blindness is most visible to others. It is precisely then that he is most likely to become the object of amused, dismissive, or cynical reactions, as well as attempts at manipulation, playful trickery, and more or less rude practical jokes, not as a punishment, but as a reflexive response to his conspicuous vulnerability.

The place of best view is anything but a position of objectivity. As should be evident from the discussion above, such a position simply does not exist in a situation where a human being studies human relations. When it is believed to exist, it is invariably the position of power<sup>12</sup>, not neutrality. In contrast, the anthropologist's vantage point is defined by sustained and exceptional exposure, from beginning to end. Unlike in everyday life where most of us retain some ability, real or imagined, to limit our contact with what is repulsive, disturbing, or emotionally overwhelming, the fieldworker is not permitted such shelter. The ethos of the discipline implicitly demands that the anthropologist resist the instinct to withdraw, even in the face of discomfort, confusion, or threat. In this sense, the fieldworker's required demeanor is not unlike that of a professional bodyguard: trained to suppress the adrenaline-fueled impulse to fight or flee, and instead to step deliberately into the line of fire. Following this metaphor, we are prompted to ask: What exactly is it that the fieldworker is meant to intercept with his body? What danger, pain, or revelation must pass through the anthropologist, through his very personhood, before it can be transformed into knowledge?

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that conducting fieldwork among people we construct as "different" is, in itself, an act of self-empowerment. In response to an exam question posed in a course on the history of American anthropology at Haskell Indian Nations University in the Spring of 2007, namely, Is there a place for anthropology in Native American communities? most students offered a polite and cautious consensus: that anthropology could indeed have a place, provided it actively contributed to the conservation of Native cultures, languages, and histories, and ideally was practiced by Native anthropologists themselves. One paper, however, stood out. Reflecting on our brief, two-hour fieldwork exercise in observational techniques conducted in downtown cafés in Lawrence, the student vividly described a strong sense of empowerment and entitlement she experienced during the act of observation itself.

## Intercepting social processes through self

*The observer is not outside the observation but part of it.*

*Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1972)*

Let us affirm what might be considered an extreme phenomenological position: the fieldworker literally intercepts social processes with their body. What passes through the anthropologist during fieldwork are not abstract data points or neutral observations, but live, embodied social dynamics. Far from the traditional notion embodied in the contradictory syntagm of the “participant observer”, the fieldworker is, at the outset, barely observing at all. He is too pre-occupied with the effort to regain the very faculty to see. The psychological distress he experiences is not internal in origin; it is a symptom of external processes, social, relational, communicative, that move through him, often unnoticed or deeply misunderstood. These processes are saturated with social meanings which, from his perspective, are not merely unfamiliar but incomprehensible gibberish. Lacking any coherent position as an interlocutor, that is, someone capable of interpreting and responding, he occupies the space of a helpless, disconnected intruder, exposed and targeted by social forces without a shared frame of reference. During the early phases of fieldwork, he is not merely unable to participate or observe; he is also unable to choose among these supposed positions. Immersion is not available to him. Description is impossible. The idea of offering a “native point of view” remains a fantasy. He is, in this stage, socially blind, and his primary task is not observation, but the struggle with that blindness itself.

The deprivation of meaningful social relations, the very relations that ordinarily provide us with a sense of security, orientation, and the ability to (however skillfully) navigate social reality, triggers a deep sense of emotional and social isolation. The fieldworker retreats into a kind of self-imposed solitary cell, emotionally turning against himself, against his host community, or both. At this stage, what the anthropologist can and must observe is not the surrounding society, but his own emotional and intellectual reactions to the experience of disconnection and social blindness. He must document, with meticulous care, his psychological (and at times physiological) responses to the absence of relational anchoring: his missteps, resistances, projections, and gradually, the slow, uneven acquisition of understanding. This process unfolds through trial and error: a painful learning curve toward provisional intelligibility and, ultimately, acceptance into the host social network. What follows is the final phase of fieldwork: the moment when feelings of endangerment and self-doubt begin to subside, like so many nightmarish images fading in daylight. Early assumptions are overturned, relational dynamics begin to make

sense, and the fieldworker finds himself embedded in a web of meaningful social ties. By the time departure nears, it is not uncommon for the anthropologist to feel a sense of personal loss, as he prepares to leave what has become a likeable, coherent, and emotionally significant human community. He may even feel that he is leaving just as things are beginning to truly click, perhaps even at the very moment when the idea of “making a life” within the host community no longer feels implausible, but genuinely possible.

More often than not, despite the abundance of sources detailing fieldwork techniques, experiences, and best practices, no one tells the fieldworker in advance about the depth of agony he is likely to undergo, let alone about its true epistemic value. As a result, he may emerge from the experience feeling that he has wasted time agonizing over nothing, and that his data are insufficient or fragmented. He may blame himself: Had I only indulged less in my inner drama, I could have conducted more interviews, collected more testimonies, followed up on all those fascinating leads I never quite had the time or energy to pursue. These self-doubts often conceal a deeper anxiety: that the host community, as encountered and experienced, may not pass as sufficiently Other in the eyes of colleagues, supervisors, or examiners back home. But more crucially, this anxiety reflects a blind spot in the discipline’s lore and professional mores: the failure to articulate a key insight, namely, that fieldwork cannot be evaluated solely in relation to the quantity of positive “facts” gathered. Fieldwork is, in essence, a one-time, non-repeatable event, much like a theater performance or live concert. Outside of now-dated analytical frameworks such as tracking “cultural change” through repeated observation of a single, arbitrarily bounded “community” there is little to suggest that repetition or comprehensive data accumulation correlates with theoretical success. What matters is not how much was “collected,” but what was intercepted, experienced, endured, and eventually rendered intelligible through the anthropologist’s own transformation.

### **Theory: born from loneliness and phantasmagoria**

*There is no such thing as a private thought... all thinking is fundamentally dialogic.*

*Mikhail Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays (1986)*

At its core, anthropological fieldwork is the radical experience of a human community with all its diverse non-human assemblage (cf. Braidotti, 2019) by a non-member, someone who, at first, lacks the necessary social skills, and chooses to acquire them the hard way. Unlike in private life, where painful or disorienting situations (including episodes of exclusion) are typically addressed through coping mechanisms, support systems, or

intentional avoidance, the fieldworker must do the opposite. In the field, he is required not to resist inner turmoil, but to dwell in it, to give in, prod at it, analyze it, and record it as meticulously as possible. Whereas daily life offers family, friends, or institutional scaffolding, i.e., social networks that soften disorientation, fieldwork often offers nothing but solitude and a diary. As such, the most crucial element of the entire experience may be how the anthropologist faces and documents the effects of prolonged social isolation on his own self. Yet many novices are not taught that this self-monitoring is essential to the ethnographic process. As a result, they may retroactively censor their field experience, either through embarrassment, disciplinary expectations, or simply because they failed to document it in the moment. This is especially likely for those with strongly idealistic social views or for personalities inclined to systematically evade introspection. For them, the emotional and epistemic material at the heart of their fieldwork remains not just undocumented, but unacknowledged: lost precisely where theory might have emerged.<sup>13</sup>

In the course of fieldwork, the anthropologist may indeed gain what he will later treasure as profound and singular insights into his own person. Yet these insights are not the content, and certainly not the purpose, of the ordeal. What is required is a rigorous, step-by-step analysis of what exactly triggered the emotional reactions to social deprivation and exclusion, and how these reactions unfolded. This does not necessarily need to take the form of a detailed personal narrative inserted into an academic publication. Rather, it is the private diary, as in Malinowski's now-infamous case, that remains the appropriate repository for such raw material. But the professional output of this internal process must be something else entirely: it should take the form of theoretical models of the host community. Not the positive data, interviews, testimonies, or cultural artifacts gathered along the way, but the analysis of the anthropologist's own struggle, the intimate agony of entering a foreign social world unequipped, and the strategies developed to survive and interpret it is what ultimately generates anthropological theory. Such an understanding of theory as a process of continuous transformation parallels Biehl and Locke's (2017) vision of anthropology as an "unfinished" practice of becoming. That theory, in turn, concerns not just a specific field-site, but the fundamentals of human gregariousness, communication, and self-understanding regardless of the particular topic of research.

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<sup>13</sup> Neither introversion nor a lack of introspective habit should be seen as disqualifying traits for anthropological fieldwork. On the contrary, individuals who are more socially withdrawn may, in some cases, acquire ethnographic skills more readily than highly extroverted, socially adept individuals who may struggle to disengage from their personal social economy, a crucial requirement in the field. Ethnographic investigation, in this sense, does not rely on innate talent, but on the development of skill. It is not a gift, but a practice, and it is learnable.



Let us state this once more, clearly. The hard facts gathered during fieldwork—observations of practices, recorded testimonies, and other forms of empirical material—will, of course, form the core evidence for the anthropologist's topical investigation and subsequent reporting. These elements are indispensable to the descriptive and comparative dimensions of the discipline. However, the theoretical models that frame, deepen, or challenge these topical insights do not spring from the data alone. Rather, they emerge directly from the fieldworker's own history of confrontation with exclusion, from his sustained effort to make sense of a prolonged condition of social dislocation and epistemic vulnerability. It is precisely this struggle for a meaningful position within the host community, a condition the fieldworker has voluntarily exposed himself to, that generates theory in its most vital and enduring form.

The fieldworker's initial exposure is, in essence, a painful crash course in local social relations. Once endured, this experience enables him to begin understanding the social discursive small print: the gestures, silences, affective cues, and extra-verbal signals that structure community life. This understanding is not gained from the perspective of a "native," nor from any kind of "objective" or even meaningfully "comparative" position. Rather, it arises from the perspective of one who has exposed his own body and mind to the flux of social relations he was, at first, wholly unequipped to comprehend, let alone engage with in a socially coherent way. Crucially, as Kracke (1987, p. 71) has noted, the fieldworker's analytical capacity is sustained not by distance, but by a progressive breakdown of distancing. The analysis emerges not from standing apart, but from moving through successive layers of misrecognition, affective misalignment, and partial re-orientation. In contrast, our everyday lives within our own cultural and social networks—networks that, for any one of us, are typically far smaller in scale than a nation, a language group, or even a village—unfold in the opposite direction. As members of what are, in fact, non-imagined communities (to reverse Anderson's famous phrase), we begin life in a state of total immersion and involuntary trust. Over time, we develop a more or less detailed and functional understanding of our primary social environment; an understanding that allows us to navigate, negotiate, and manipulate it to varying degrees of success. Rarely do we confront challenges within our primary social worlds that are so severe or disorienting that we are forced to abandon our most deeply held assumptions. Even our most intense conflicts typically engage interlocutors who share our fundamental perspective on the nature of the conflict, even if they stand on the opposite side of it. Fieldwork is different. It begins from a position of zero social skill, zero relational assurance. What it triggers is, in effect, a condensed, analysis-driven, reverse mode of socialization: a re-entry into society as if from the outside, accompanied not by

developmental innocence, but by analytic intention<sup>14</sup>, and if that is the case, one must then ask: what, precisely, is the purpose of such an experience?

Within Western social science, Edmund Husserl's early 20<sup>th</sup> century insight that all human cognition and learning are rooted in sensory, bodily experience did not meaningfully enter methodological discourse until decades later. In sociology, it was most notably introduced through Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), while in anthropology, it gained ground through the popularization of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological work. By the 1980s and 1990s, these ideas had crystallized into a robust theoretical interest in the body and embodiment, becoming one of the more fertile conceptual developments in anthropological thought. Yet this entire intellectual shift that Bryan Turner (1994, p. 30) describes as "elevating the body to the place occupied by subject, agent, and social individual" was, almost without exception, framed as a re-organization of the gaze upon the observed. The body was theorized in relation to the field site, the host community, the cultural subject, rarely as the site through which the fieldworker lives, suffers, and interprets. Barbara Tedlock (1991) speculated that the key to profound understanding of one's fieldwork experience is in deftness to understand "dreaming" in the manner of psychoanalysis. Tedlock's suggestion may offer one of the most direct invitations to consider the anthropologist's inner life not as noise or bias, but as a valid and vital pathway toward theoretical insight. Unlike the self-inspective narratives of 1980s reflexivity, this model does not simply insert the fieldworker's biography into analysis, but instead reconstructs theory as a product of disorientation, estrangement, and social re-entry. This is not a call for epistemic relativism, but for a reconceptualized rigor, one that values discomfort as a necessary condition for insight.

Many anthropologists have since then reflected on the emotional and perception turmoil they encountered in fieldwork engagement. Maria Concetta Lo Bosco in her article (2012) about her own engagement with parent-activists of children on autism spectrum summarizes thus these efforts:

In her book *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (1996), anthropologist Ruth Behar argued about the need for anthropologists to embrace

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<sup>14</sup> Anthropological lore is replete with anecdotes and warnings about the dangers of excessive immersion and the outer limits of empathic engagement. The admonition against "going native" still cites the case of Frank Hamilton Cushing and his controversial immersion among the Zuni. Ralph Linton famously advised that one should leave the field the moment one realizes one can "think native." More significantly, there are documented cases of anthropologists abandoning research projects, or even academic careers, after fieldwork in conditions of extreme violence, war, genocide, or starvation. In such circumstances, the ideal of observation carried out with full "canonicity" (Hastrup, 2007) can break down altogether, as the very premise of scholarly reporting is nullified: there may no longer be any stable moral or institutional instance within academia to whom, or for whom, such knowledge can meaningfully be conveyed.

their own emotional involvement in fieldwork. Behar brilliantly debunked the false and conventional idea that scientific credibility implies a detached and neutral observer. From then on, anthropologists have addressed their personal emotional experiences as a form of meaningful knowledge (Davies & Spencer, 2010), acknowledging the transformative potential of teaching anthropology when emotions are embraced amongst the strengths of its qualitative method (Spencer, 2011).

Similarly to Lo Bosco, Dimitrina Spencer's (2011, p. 81) piece on the emotional world of an anthropologist on fieldwork stresses the potential, and the need for endorsement of the affective experience of the anthropologist both as a methodological strength of the fieldwork method, and the formalization of this understanding into anthropology curricula and mentoring spaces that include emotionality:

These spaces have to be facilitated professionally in order to avoid turning them into a defensive space rather than a space for articulation of the emotional and its place in methodology and theory. Fieldwork methods courses prior to students departing on fieldwork, or peer groups and ethnographic writing courses for those who have returned from the field are obvious sites to start from. Developing emotional reflexivity is an ongoing process and just one occasional class would not be sufficient to address it. Ideally, it will be integrated throughout fieldwork methods courses. In addition, students could be encouraged to engage in various forms of personal self development where emotional reflexivity is central.

### **Wherefore anthropology?**

*Anthropology, at its best, unsettles certainties. It refuses to allow us to remain at ease in our world, and obliges us to think and feel our way into the lives of others.*

*Michael Jackson, Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects (2005)*

I have tried, if in a subdued manner and in passing, to state that knowledge production, especially the formulation of models or theory in the social sciences, is by no means a unique invention of "Western civilization." It exists across human communities, through time and space, and operates in fundamentally similar ways. Before knowledge becomes a systematic process of empirical exploration, it must be ignited by an urge to challenge assurances, resist dogma, and dismantle "hard facts." In this sense, it is an iconoclastic practice: a deliberate rebellion against one's own socialization, with the explicit aim of

shattering internalized conceptions of reality. This process is rarely smooth. It is accompanied by personal discomfort, crises of self, and a spectrum of socially idiotic, obsessive, or neurotic behaviors, often purposefully self-induced. The knowledge seeker, whether anthropologist, shaman, or theoretical physicist, will encounter phantasmagoric mental states: dreams, revelations, emotional extremes, symbolic visions. These are not distractions, but vital epistemic moments. From Newton's apple to Poincaré's bathtub, such mythologies surround even Western science as stories of dreamlike rupture rather than rational progression. By entering unknown social terrain and triggering a process of self-mortification, the anthropologist participates in a millennia-old knowledge ritual: a technique so ubiquitous that it can likely be regarded as universal and intrinsic to the human condition.

Yet this raises further questions: What happens when ethnography becomes routine? When the fieldworker's sensitivity is replaced by skill? At what point does repeated re-entry into unfamiliar communities cease to produce epistemic transformation and instead generate technical replication? Is there a limit to how many times one can endure the shock of social blindness before familiarity dulls its edge? Several anthropologists I have interviewed spoke of the "excitement of discovery," or even the "excitement of the hunt," replacing the initial disorientation of first fieldwork. Many felt that the routinization did not compromise the legitimacy of their insights. Doubts, however, remain, and call for further discussion.

A good ethnography, I suggest, derives its power not from comprehensiveness or cultural coverage, but from the theoretical lens forged through the author's own dissonance: the tension between ingrained beliefs and the restructuring of perspective demanded by sociality shock. In this light, anthropology's signature methodology, fieldwork, should not be treated merely as a tool for data collection, but as a generative site of conceptual innovation. Framed this way, anthropology regains relevance not by explaining the world, but by experiencing it otherwise (cf. Eriksen, 2006). Concerns over the dissolution of categories like "culture," "ethnic group," or "civilization" are misplaced. These constructs will persist in the folk theories of human communities with or without scholarly endorsement. The task of anthropology is not to reify or redraw these boundaries, but to analyze the social processes that create and contest them. Perhaps the postmodernist revolution in epistemology, the insight that meaning is produced, not inherited, was never fully realized. Or perhaps it was overtaken too quickly by ideological and libertarian agendas.

While this paper has primarily focused on sociality shock as it arises, variably and individually, within person-to-person immersion, the concept can, and should be, extended. In increasingly globalized or multi-sited fieldwork where anthropologists move through dispersed social worlds, digital contact zones, or brief immersive contexts, sociality shock may no longer unfold as protracted solitude, but as fragmented, recurring disorientation across overlapping domains (Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 2003). Likewise, in ethnographies involving non-human agents, affective rupture may result not from social blindness, but from ontological friction: the challenge of attuning to unfamiliar modes of being, agency, or communication (Haraway, 2008; Tsing, 2015). These extensions do not undermine the concept; they clarify its generative range and re-affirm its relevance in contemporary anthropological practice.

What follows, methodologically, is a call, echoed by many before me, to rethink how we train, supervise, and support fieldworkers. If fieldwork is not simply data collection but an ordeal of epistemic rupture, then preparation must address more than ethics protocols, recording technologies, or cultural knowledge. It must cultivate the capacity to recognize, endure, and metabolize disorientation. Aspiring anthropologists should be taught to expect the breakdown not as failure, but as initiation. Field diaries must be re-framed as more than travelogues or data logs: they are laboratories of reflexivity, and often, the only witnesses to the anthropologist's theoretical becoming. Supervisors, in turn, should resist the urge to over-structure or pre-script the field experience. Rather, they should help students cultivate what I call "disciplined vulnerability": the ability to remain open, porous, and unsettled, while maintaining rigorous attention and reflection.

We need new pedagogies that frame fieldwork as transformation rather than technique: workshops on writing rupture, on recording projection, on analyzing one's own disorientation. We must prepare future ethnographers not simply for cataloging grief, rage, alienation, or intimacy, but for reflecting on how such moments reshaped their thinking and stood in for the elusive ideals of objectivity, positionality, or ethical supercorrectness. Ultimately, we must teach students not only to be good observers, but to trace in their writing how their own body and mind became the site where observation turns to theory: through discomfort, through dreaming, through being remade. Not in the least because, in fieldwork,

...a complete immersion, day and night, in a very different environment, made it easier to trigger critical reflection, particularly on bodily experiences. Our findings show that when one steps out of one's comfort zone, encountering people with different epistemologies and world-views that challenge our own taken-for-

granted assumptions about social reality, the emotionality and bodily reaction of fieldwork becomes more visible (Bielenin-Lenczowska & Kaliszewska, 2021, p. 7).

Comparable reflections can be found in Hedlund and Sampson (2023), who examine emotional management and the balancing of involvement and detachment during fieldwork, further supporting the argument that the anthropologist's affective self is an integral part of epistemic practice.

Wherefore anthropology, then? Perhaps because no other discipline asks its practitioners to wager basic comfort for insight: to offer their own social being as the instrument of knowing. Anthropology is not the science of cultures, nor the archive of human difference. It is the ritualized practice of becoming undone, and learning through that undoing. Its relevance lies not in the cataloging of traditions, but in its method of approaching the human world as something to be felt, survived, and interpreted from the inside out. If we remember that theory is born not in detachment, but in exposure, not in mastery, but in receptivity to rupture, then anthropology remains indispensable, not despite its discomforts, but because of them.

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## Povzetek

Avtorica preudarja epistemološke temelje antropološke teorije, kjer terenskega dela ne razume zgolj kot zbiranje podatkov, temveč kot stanje radikalne osebne izpostavljenosti in preobrazbe. Na podlagi klasičnih in sodobnih virov, od *Dnevnika* B. Malinowskega do razmislekov o afektu in utelešenosti, zagovarja tezo, da resnični izvor antropološkega teoretiziranja ne leži v opazovanju kot takem, temveč v terenski izkušnji dezorientacije, odtujenosti in družbene izolacije. Avtorica namesto neustreznega »kulturnega šoka« vpelje izraz družbeni šok (*sociality shock*) in poudarja, da izkušnja novinca na terenu ni prvenstveno kognitivna ali kulturna, temveč afektivna in relacijska: začasna izguba družbene razumljivosti in eksistencialnega sidrišča v neznanem medosebnem in družbenem svetu. To ranljivo stanje postane vir teoretske produkcije. Na ozadju postmodernistične refleksivnosti in politik reprezentacije izriše zgodnejše pristope, ki so terensko delo opredeljevali bodisi kot objektivno znanost bodisi kot samorefleksivno pripoved, ter predlaga model terenskega dela kot strukturirano epistemološko preizkušnjo. Ob upoštevanju fenomenologije, postkolonialne kritike in terenskih pričevanj avtorica pokaže, da teorija nastaja skozi utelešeno soočenje: skozi postopen ponoven vstop antropologa v družbenost pod novimi pogoji, in v proces ponovne izgradnje osebne perspektive s položaja začetne družbene slepote. Poziva k prenovljenemu izobraževanju in usposabljanju za pripravo etnografa na dislokacijo, afektivni prelom in epistemološko rekonstrukcijo.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: epistemologija terenskega dela, družbenostni šok, utelešena produkcija znanja, antropološko usposabljanje, etnografska pedagogika

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