CONTEXTUAL INDETERMINACY:
ON THE USE OF SURVEY METHODS IN FIELDWORK

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THE considerations that follow attempt to continue a conversation with Andrew Duff-Cooper in which I mooted the idea of 'supplementing' qualitative fieldwork with a quantitative survey. 'I suppose,' Andrew conceded in his best tone of supportive irony, 'doing what you're doing, you're going to have to.' What I was doing was ethnographic fieldwork, though not with villagers who shared in one 'form of life', as we both had pursued previously. Rather, my informants were London youth drawn from a plethora of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and growing up together in the post-immigration suburb of Southall. To do fieldwork in such a locale, Andrew knew, meant encroaching on ground cultivated by urban sociologists, policy researchers, and other social scientists who privileged quantitative data. The use of survey methods was thus politically opportune, if not indeed *de rigueur*.

Yet Andrew was sceptical about the benefits of data gathered by surveys. True, ethnographers had conducted censuses and used official statistics ever since the Rhodes–Livingstone scholars had shown them how, and Andrew was no exception. His own fieldnotes, too, contained tables on land tenure, domestic budgets, and even conviction rates in courts of law. But most ethnographies, on his bookshelves as on mine, persisted in clustering their statistical data in the early sections on 'backgrounds', demographic, economic or historical, rather than in the chapters that contained 'the meat', be it of insights encapsulated, structures made visible, or theories refined. The use of quantitative data in ethnographies seemed

limited at best, and the 'real' ethnographic enterprise was qualitative to a fault. It expected no insights from the peddling of questionnaires.

What I expected from the eventual survey was indeed not so much a source of new ethnographic insights, but evidence to assess the 'representative' quality of what informants had told me in face-to-face interactions.[1] Over two years of part-time fieldwork I had, of course, encountered a wide variety of opinions and viewpoints, generalizations, and claims to speak for others, too. But precisely how many young Southallians might think as Narinder or Joshua thought was beyond ethnographic fieldwork to find out. Here, I expected, the survey method could make a valid contribution, and one more important than the 'political' legitimation of fieldwork in an urban arena. It may have been permissible once to write ethnographies of rural 'communities' where 'the' people all seemed to speak alike, think alike and even feel alike. Yet even village ethnographies had taken leave of such assumptions of uniformity, and in a town of 60,000 it was surely desirable to quantify how widespread a view or an opinion might be, and perhaps to point to the social patterns associated with its spread.

Yet the use of samples to gauge the 'representative' quality of opinions collected must face two debilitating criticisms. First, every ethnographer is bound to question any sample that statisticians might claim to be 'random' or, for that matter, 'representative'. Both these terms implicate selective criteria that qualitative research can undermine at a stroke. Was a sample of Southall's youth, for instance, to represent the town's composition according to criteria of religion or of regional origin, of mother-tongue or of migratory history, of caste or social class? Empirically, these cleavages cut across each other, and which might be relevant when was a matter of context alone. Yet context, so the second point, is the one thing that questionnaires cannot capture.

Of the contexts informing hundreds of people responding to the same set of questions, nothing can be known. This is not so important when a survey asks respondents to report numbers or other information they may regard as value-free 'matters of fact'. There is little point in breaking into an epistemological sweat over asking how many television sets or books there are in a house. Even how many people 'live' in a house may be taken as a perfectly innocuous question, so long as one specifies whether 'living' means, say, eating together or sleeping under

the same roof. Both under-reporting and over-reporting often tend to follow fairly straightforward sociological fault lines. If a sample is large enough, one can discount to a percentage point the effects of, say, 'young males boasting'. The fact that questionnaires are filled out in a contextual no man's land is important, however, when it comes to eliciting opinions, rather than information that informants consider 'matter of fact'. These, of course, are the questions that interest anthropologists most. There can be no hope, I now consider, of 'supplementing' qualitative insights with quantitative corroboration. How many Southallians might think as, say, Narinder thought last Monday over dinner is not a question that questionnaires can throw any light on. For one, we do not know which Southallians might make a sample 'representative' or which of them might be 'comparable' to Narinder. Secondly, the mere fact of several hundred unknown people responding to the same question or statement must render survey data contextually indeterminate. If questionnaire data are to produce ethnographic insights at all, they must thus do so, not despite but because of their contextual indeterminacy. Consider, for instance, the responses of some 300 teenage Southallians to the following question: 'Southall has many cultures. Please write down some cultures that are around.'

The point was not, of course, to produce a neat list of 'cultures that are around' in the town. Rather, it was intended to elicit data on how Southall's youngsters might use the term 'culture' when no context was specified. The phrasing of the question copied the speech of scores of young Southallians observed over the preceding two years of fieldwork. Since they used the word 'culture' in a plethora of quotidian contexts, and used it in reified senses in many of them, the interest of the question lay in elucidating which criteria youngsters might use, in the absence of a specifiable context, to 'tell' one 'culture' from another. The question as phrased allowed each respondent to draw upon any of a variety of mutually independent markers of 'culture'. It might be expected that each would compile a polythetic classification juxtaposing, for instance, a 'Sikh culture' on religious criteria with a 'white culture' on the criterion of 'race', and a 'Pakistani culture' on the criterion of nationality. Yet the results showed a remarkable degree of uniformity, as is shown even by the crude classification in Table 1 of the criteria used by each of the 312 respondents.

Three-quarters of all respondents used religion to define at least one of the 'cultures that are around'. The fraction is even higher if one includes those respondents, probably the younger ones, who named a religious festival or ritual as the marker of 'culture' or who were unaware that 'Rasta' designates a religion no less than a sub-culture or life-style. I doubt that anyone could have expected, from qualitative research alone, that in the absence of a determinate context young Southallians of all religious backgrounds should show such a degree of convergence upon using religion as the criterion that demarcates 'culture'.[2]

2. Though the result might have been expected from Larson's (1989) qualitative research among Muslim children in Southall. At the time of her research, however, various national and

Criterion	Used Once or More by % of respondents
religion (e.g. Sikh, Hindu, Christian)	75
nationality (e.g. Indian, English, Jamaican)	31
region or language (e.g. Punjabi, Gujarati)	11
a named 'sub-culture' (e.g. 'Rasta')	9
a religious festival (e.g. Diwali, Christmas)	8

TABLE 1. Criteria Used by Southall Youth to Distinguish Local 'Cultures'

'But is your sample representative?', Andrew might ask, to remind me of our shared scepticism, 'and anyway, what does it show?' The problem of representative sampling must, I think, be faced question by question. The sample that a survey has managed to catch may be judged representative for one question and misleading, biased or irrelevant for any other.   The particular sample that so strongly focused upon 'religion' to demarcate 'cultures' in the absence of a specifiable context happens to mirror almost exactly the religious composition of Southall's school-age population. The criterion evinced is thus consistent with the criterion of sampling that validates the survey itself. Sampling and result thus make sense of each other.   None the less, for each question the relationship between sample and result has to be queried anew.

On the matter of significance, I would perhaps draw on Andrew's attention to 'the tone' of ideology (Duff-Cooper 1987).   What makes the consensus on 'religion' as the marker of 'culture' so telling is what it says about the 'tone' that underlies young Southallians' classification of 'cultures'. Southall, after all, is an ostensibly 'multi-ethnic' town, and its predominant civic 'ideology' is one of 'multi-cultural' coexistence across a wide variety of intersecting and mutually independent social and cultural cleavages.   Yet when asked what demarcates 'culture', most Southall youngsters answer 'religion'. The 'tone' of Southallians'

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international developments had so exacerbated the divide between Muslims and others that it had come to overshadow all social cleavages cutting across the Muslim/non-Muslim distinction. The same could not be said about other religious categories.

multi-culturalist 'ideology' is predicated on recognizing religion as the chief distinguishing feature of 'culture'. There is far more, of course, both in the way of qualification and confirmation, that cross-tabulations and sophisticated statistical techniques could make of such data.

The point, however, which should need no labouring here, is that data collected in a contextual no man's land may yield insights of their own, so long as two conditions are met. First, the criterion that makes a sample 'representative' must be related to the question in hand, and secondly, there is a difference in kind between contextually indeterminate data and those collected in face-to-face ethnographic encounters. The survey does not show who uses 'religion' to distinguish 'cultures' in one context or another, rather, it shows that in the absence of a specifiable context, most young Southallians resort to 'religion' in preference to, say, nationality, 'race' or language. One may add a third condition that should be met if surveys are to prove ethnographically useful. The question asked should bear some relation at least to local usages, representations and conceptions. There is no further need, if ever there were any, to ask 12,000 'Asians' in 'Middletown' whether they feel '(a) more Asian, (b) more British, or (c) a bit of both'. The answer, as any ethnographer knows, is 'it depends'; and what it depends upon only fieldwork can discern.

Fieldworkers, moreover, know that what exactly it 'depends upon' is not only context, but the difference, across all contexts, between what people say, what people do, and what they say they do or would do. Ever since Malinowski, ethnographers have noted the difference between words and deeds, between norms and behaviours, 'culture' and 'ideology', 'discourse' and 'practice', or however else we may put it as we refine our lexical tastes. These ambiguities, though, must surely lie beyond the horizon of quantitative enquiry. They must be the preserve of the face-to-face ethnographer. But perhaps not.

One of the questions, put to young Southallians of South Asian backgrounds only, was to explore the contrast between norms and stated intentions in the face of 'arranged marriages': 'Here are some statements that people have made to us. Please tick the ones you agree with.' The results are set out in Table 2.

Three-quarters of the respondents endorsed the normative statement that 'people should be free to marry whom they like', and less than a quarter endorsed the rule of caste endogamy so vital to 'arranged marriages'. Are these figures evidence of a cultural sea change, a normative abyss between generations? Reaching out for theoretical insights, one might consult Karl Mannheim's (1982) classic deconstruction of 'generation' as a sociological concept. Drawing on qualitative insights, one would describe a case where an 'arranged marriage' in the South Asian mould shows far more understanding of the spouses' wishes than could be observed in many a class-conscious English family. Focusing on the wording of the statements, each collected in the course of numerous fieldwork interviews, one might remark upon the distinction between 'culture' and 'caste' reflected in many responses to the normative statements. The qualitative research indeed shows an increasing awareness among young Southallians of an 'Asian

	Total	Boys	Girls
N =	172/174	76/77	96/97
People who marry should be of the same culture	36	26	44
People should be free to marry whom they like	78	83	73
People should marry in their own caste	19	17	21
I personally would prefer a marriage within my own culture	51	55	48
I would only enter a mixed marriage if my family agree with it	47	43	51
If I wanted a mixed marriage, I would do it against my family	25	25	25

TABLE 2. Statements about Marriage
as Endorsed by Southall Youth of South Asian Backgrounds (% of respondents)[3]

culture' that transcends the boundaries of caste and even religion. These, however, are ethnographic matters that I do not have the space to deal with here. What matters for my argument is only this: even quantitative research is not oblivious to the difference between normative statements and statements of personal intent. Table 2 reflects the distinction drawn by almost a quarter of the young Southallians who say, 'Yes, people should be free to marry whom they like', and who add in the same breath, 'personally, I would only enter a mixed marriage if my family agreed with it.'

Ethnographically, this is a frustrating point at which to break off. Yet for the dialogue with Andrew that this essay attempts to continue, it marks a better point

3. The discrepancy of 1 in the number of boys and girls responding to some of the questions is due to an error in the keying-in of the data.

than the one at which Providence cut us off. Quantitative research may, I agree, be a 'political' necessity as often as an ethnographic one. It can, however, produce insights in its own right if it follows a few ethnographic imperatives. For one, questionnaires can be worded adequately only when qualitative research has been allowed to guide the questions. Who would bother to 'administer' the 'Middle-town' question to Southallians? It may be useful, none the less, to ask questions of similar intent but in phrasings informed by observing local parlance, concerns and conceptions.

Whether the sample collected is 'representative' will still depend upon the question in hand. Since different social and cultural cleavages will often cut across each other, especially in plural societies, no sample can be 'representative' regardless of the question in hand, and perhaps even of the answers obtained. It may be necessary, therefore, to consider an interpretation of quantitative results as an act of qualitative judgement in itself. It would be useful, in that case, to 'field-back' statistical data, that is, to resubmit them to the qualitative commentary of those who produced them in the first place. Finally, the more that questionnaires focus on matters of opinion and judgement, rather than concerns that informants consider 'matters of fact', the more they will produce data of a special epistemological status. Survey data differ from the data of participant observation in their contextual indeterminacy. They thus cannot replicate or, strictly speaking, even confirm or deny the 'representative' quality of observational and interview data. Yet this special status does not require them to be relegated to being a merely 'political' exercise in the legitimation of fieldwork results. Rather, the survey method produces data of a fundamentally different kind that provide insights, not despite, but because of their contextual indeterminacy.

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