II

A SUGGESTION

> That charming and intelligent Austrian-American anthropologist Paul Radin has said that no one quite knows how one goes about fieldwork. Perhaps we should leave the question with that sort of answer. But when I was a serious young student in London I thought I would try to get a few tips from experienced fieldworkers before setting out for Central Africa. I first sought advice from Westermarck. All I got from him was 'don't converse with an informant for more than twenty minutes because if you are not bored by that time, he will be'. Very good advice, if somewhat inadequate. I sought instruction from Haddon, a man foremost in field-research. He told me that it was really all quite simple; one should always behave as a gentleman. Also very good advice. My teacher, Seligman, told me to take two grains of quinine every night and to keep off women. The famous Egyptologist, Sir Flinders Petrie, just told me not to bother about drinking dirty water as one soon became immune to it. Finally I asked Malinowski and was told not to be a bloody fool. So there was no clear answer, much will depend on the man, on the society he is to study, and the conditions in which he is to make it.[1]

The relation an anthropologist forms with the object of his observation - as well as the way he goes about doing fieldwork - has often been a source of preoccupation for me. When wondering about my fieldwork experience I have often been tempted to tell myself to take 'two grains of quinine' and stop being a 'bloody fool'. When faced with the awe-inspiring task of observing and recording

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[1] E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (abridged by Eva Gillies), Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976, p.240.

everything, even the commonplace,[2] one is reminded of Karl R. Popper instructing his students in Vienna: '"Take pencil and paper; carefully observe, and write down what you have observed!" They asked,of course, *what* I wanted them to observe. Clearly the instruction, "Observe!" is absurd. Observation is always selective.'[3]

Clearly, what anthropologists see, hear, observe and note during fieldwork depends on their personality. Furthermore, the evidence is interpreted in terms of their own intellectual make-up, conditioned by the period and culture in which they have been brought up, their social and religious background, current assumptions and presuppositions, their age and status, and so on. Perhaps few have faced this with the honesty of Osbert Lancaster, who prefaced a book with the words: 'My criteria, political, architectural and scenic, remain firmly Anglo-Saxon and the standards or judgement are always those of an Anglican graduate of Oxford with a taste for architecture, turned cartoonist, approaching middle age and living in Kensington.'[4] Such candidness may be illuminating, as far as it goes, but if we are to compare it with what would be required of a fieldwork anthropologist, further clarification would still be needed, particularly on the relation of such details to the author's work.

In the last few years I have followed with interest the activities of a centre of study and research on human relationships and communications named CAFE-ECOLE (an extension in Athens, Greece, of CAFE-ECOLE of the University of Montreal) under the guidance of Efi Georgiou and Professor Costas Fotinos (Faculté des Sciences de l'Education, Université de Montreal). Starting from a basis of Alderian psychology, they have developed an approach towards individual perception that may prove of interest to the fieldworker. Part of this approach seems to be helpful to our purpose, as it has a starting-point similar to that of an anthropologist setting out to study a community: perceiving the individual as a whole, trying to analyze the structures that regulate his life, and beginning the investigation with as few preconceived ideas as possible. In the attempt to describe and define the personality - the 'private logic' - of the individual, the approach is to analyze early childhood memories. This interest in the early history of an individual is not because it is believed that one can find there the causes of his later development - but rather,

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[2] 'Though he may not publish every detail he has recorded you will find in a good anthropologist's notebooks a detailed description of even the most commonplace activities, for example, how a cow is milked or how meat is cooked' (E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1972, p.80).

[3] Brian Magee, *Popper*, London: Fontana/Collins 1973, p.33.

[4] Stuart Piggot, *Ancient Europe*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1965, p.5.

by reconstructing the past, one gives perspective to his present-day problems, trends and attitudes. Decoding such memories unearths the 'private logic' of an individual.

Early memories truly emphasize and epitomize 'private logic'. The fact that out of the multiple events of our early years we normally choose to remember only a few, and the freedom of reconstruction that we enjoy due to the time distance that separates us from such events, make early memories a useful aid in summarizing our 'private logic'. (If readers find this suggestion odd, let them treat it in the same way as they would treat a puzzling piece of fieldwork evidence - which they would have to decipher in the context of the totality of their evidence in the field. After all, in so far as oneself is concerned, the context that gives meaning to a thought or action is never absent.)

The method is simple enough. Take three or four of your earliest childhood memories, as early as you can remember. Write them down in as short a form as possible (adding in parentheses the feeling that accompanies them). Then disembody the memory into the broad categories of 'actors' (persons and objects), 'actions and reactions', 'time' and 'place' (the last two may not be easily recalled). Find the semantic meaning that each word or term has for you in this particular memory. People are often perplexed, when they analyze memories, by the fact that they cannot remember the special meaning that a term had for them at the time that a particular memory happened. The answer is that the meaning we give to the term today is equally valid provided it is derived from the framework of that specific memory (e.g., 'father' in the context of one memory may mean 'power'; in another memory of the same person, 'father' may mean 'compassion and love'). After all, our memories of our early past are our own present-day fabrications of what the past has been. Having found all the 'special meanings' of the words or terms, substitute the 'special meaning' for the word in the memory and form it into a sentence. For example: I play with a ball in the garden (happiness); 'actors' - me: bold; ball: specific; 'actions' - play: experiment; 'place' - garden: my own area, familiar, a space I consider I know. Interpretation: when I am bold and in an area I consider I know, I find something specific to experiment with and feel happy.

Having done this for a number of memories, one may try to find the common elements that form the picture one has of oneself, of others, and of life in general. To be aided in this, one may try to combine the interpretation of all these memories into a single statement through their commonalities and differences. Examination and analysis of early childhood memories along these lines is reminiscent of the following comment by Leach with regard to Lévi-Strauss's view of myth:

> Now let us imagine the situation of an individual A who is trying to get a message to a friend B who is almost out of earshot and let us suppose that communication is further hampered by various kinds of interference - noise from the wind, passing cars and so on. What will A do? If he is sensible he will not be satisfied with shouting

> his message just once, he will shout it several times, and give a different wording to the message each time, supplementing his words with visual signals. At the receiving end, B may very likely get the meaning of each of the individual messages slightly wrong, but when he puts them together the redundancies and mutual consistencies and inconsistencies will make it quite clear what is really being said.[5]

In our case A and B are the same person - ourselves. One's messages are addressed to oneself.

When I first arrived at the idea that the method I have outlined above may be of help in understanding how one goes about doing fieldwork, I applied it first to myself and my fieldwork experience and was indeed intrigued by the results. I then contacted other anthropologists and again the results were of considerable interest. I even experimented on predicting through one's work what one's 'private logic' could be, and then cross-checking the results. I came to be preoccupied by the thought that a vicious circle could be created that might lead to a dead end, if the anthropologist analyzing a society was himself analyzed by someone else. Normally a person decides for himself the extent to which the conclusions he arrives at about himself have any relevance for his work. But this is very close to what the anthropologist does in the field. There are no other experts, apart from himself. It is true that an informant knows more than he does, or that another anthropologist might have been more competent. Still, he is in the last resort alone with his material and can do no more than make the best out of it.

The suggestion, then, is that the anthropologist does fieldwork on himself. When we examine our early past, what we are really doing is to examine ourselves today. In order to facilitate such an examination, we have to project ourselves into the past, into what one might call a more *exotic* environment. In an exotic society things do not necessarily have to be the way we expect them to be; when thinking of our early childhood we tend to permit ourselves a freedom of reconstruction that is less constrained than if we were to examine yesterday's events. It seems a reasonable hypothesis. It does not mean that we falsify our early memories - merely that our subjective truths are more apparent there. Early memories and fieldwork material: the conjunction may well be productive, and worthy of further thought.

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[5] Edmund Leach, *Lévi-Strauss*, London: Fontana/Collins 1970, p.59.