T.R. Edward
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On the meaning of “legitimate fieldwork” in social anthropology

Anthropologist Jeanette Edwards writes, “Non-Western localities are deemed axiomatically of anthropological interest and legitimate arenas of study.” (2000: 8) But what is the concept of legitimate fieldwork? There are actually several different kinds of legitimacy and correspondingly several different concepts of legitimacy. I identify five kinds below.

1. Epistemic legitimacy. The fieldwork is done in such a way as to properly contribute to the knowledge of the discipline of anthropology. It has been carried out for a sufficiently long period of time, the anthropologist has taken notes, has got to know the language, has got off the verandah and participated in the way of life, etc.

2. Legal legitimacy. The fieldwork conducted is within the laws of relevant legal systems e.g. those of the country where people are studied and the anthropologist’s home country, if different. It seems possible that some fieldwork is illegal in a country but meets the epistemic standards of anthropology as a discipline, owing to the kind of criteria specified above being met (see also Malinowski 1922: Introduction). Anthropology amongst a group who are legally protected against anthropologists may achieve this, or anthropology in a territory which it is illegal to enter into. (Aside from the laws of countries, there is also a question of legal legitimacy in relation to the laws of a tribe studied within it, which I am setting aside here for the sake of simplicity.)

3. Consensual legitimacy. The people the anthropologist has studied consented to fieldwork relations. This potentially comes apart from legal legitimacy, for example a protected group give their consent, but the law of the land does not recognize it.

4. Ethical legitimacy. The concept of ethical legitimacy applies if the fieldwork done meets a reasonable standard so that it counts as ethical, even if it is not quite ethically ideal. Ethical legitimacy would presumably involve consent from those studied, outside of very unusual circumstances, but probably goes beyond mere consent. Anthropology throws up a number of complicated ethical situations. For example, what if the people only consent because the anthropologist seems too powerful to them to say “No” to, owing to the group they are from? (If many an anthropologist knocked on your door and asked, “Can I do fieldwork here?” you may feel you have to say, “Of course.”)

5. Populist legitimacy. The fieldwork appears legitimate to wider audiences. Perhaps there are cases of some kinds of legitimacy which are difficult to “sell” to wider publics, not specialized in anthropology and with little or no experience of the discipline. Legitimacy of some of the kinds above may sometimes be too complicated to justify briefly.

References

Edwards, J. 2000. *Born and Bred.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Malinowski, B. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.