

Bacup: why do fieldwork there?

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Abstract. Jeanette Edwards did fieldwork in the English town of Bacup. Why do fieldwork there? She writes that she is often asked this, whereas the question is unlikely to be asked of an anthropologist who does fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, because it is “axiomatically” an acceptable place for fieldwork. I present two responses to Edwards’ thinking, one of which concerns an asymmetry in how “skeptics” present their questions.

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Things that long ago I read

I must mark before I go to bed!

In her book *Born and Bred*, Jeanette Edwards presents us with fieldwork set in, or done in, Bacup. She considers the question of why Bacup. Why do fieldwork there? Regarding this question, she writes:

I am often asked, ‘Why Bacup?’ A question which requires me, I always think, to identify some significant or special feature that makes it a suitable focus for anthropological interest... perhaps the question, “Why Papua New Guinea?” is asked but it seems peculiarly irrelevant to anthropologists. (2000: 8)

I have some foggy concern about this suggested “Why not?” or innocent-till-proven-guilty style of rejecting the question. Anyway, let us simplify and just assume the following: the question “Why do fieldwork in Bacup?” is often asked of any anthropologist who did fieldwork there; and the question “Why do fieldwork in Papua New Guinea?” is never asked of any anthropologist who did fieldwork there. I shall present two responses to this situation.

Response 1: skeptical question asymmetry. There are people who are skeptical about the value of a British anthropologist, or one based in a British department, doing fieldwork in Papua New Guinea. I have met them. Now such skeptics may well have the following conception of social anthropology:

- (i) Anthropology involves fieldwork in which you immerse yourself in the way of life of a small group and report what you found.
- (ii) The groups studied are typically exotic from the point of view of mainstream British culture, such as previously undiscovered tribes.

And these skeptics probably conceive of Papua New Guinea as home to such exotic groups. Given their conception of social anthropology and this conception of that country and certain other countries, if they were skeptical about fieldwork there, they would probably just ask, “Why anthropology?” putting the whole discipline on the defensive. Or “Why these studies of faraway exotic groups?” If they were to give an example of such a group, it could be from Papua New Guinea, it could be from Africa, it could be from Aboriginal Australia, etc., but don’t be surprised if no example is given. From their standpoint, these examples are all interchangeable and anyone with an answer does not need an example to grasp the question.

We need to distinguish the person with these background conceptions who asks, “Why anthropology?” from a person who accepts social anthropology but asks, “Why fieldwork in this place?” including a skeptic about fieldwork there. This is a partial analogy: the person who does not accept boxing is typically not going to ask, “Why Sergei Lipinets versus Omar Figueroa?” rather they will ask, “Why boxing matches?” (or some equivalently general question); but the person who accepts boxing will sometimes ask about a particular match: why that match? It is somewhat misleading, I think, to suggest that the question of why fieldwork in Papua New Guinea is not asked. It is not asked like that.

Response 2: local questions. Jeanette Edwards is comparing a question about fieldwork in a whole country, “Why do fieldwork in Papua New Guinea?” with a question about a specific place in a country: “Why do fieldwork in Bacup?” I may well not ask the former question. But for me at least, one can generate questions at a more local level about exotic locations, though perhaps not as “local” as Bacup. If an anthropologist says, “I am going to study the Trobrianders,” then I am going to wonder why: are they double-checking Malinowski and are there not other tribes in the broader region more “in need” of fieldwork, since so little is known about them? (A reason for asking, “Why fieldwork there?” about some location in England is because one wonders whether beforehand there is some special reason to think that new knowledge will arrive by fieldwork there, assuming England is reasonably well-known.)

Appendix. I am surprised that Jeanette Edwards has not encountered someone skeptical about anthropological research in Papua New Guinea, assuming she really has not. Once an economist was asking me questions and I said, “Why don’t you ask him?” a specialist on philosophy-economics matters, and he said, “No, I don’t ask him.” And I wonder whether, when someone of a certain temperament has a question which is relevant for Jeanette Edwards, they don’t ask her or various others at the University of Manchester, rather they ask me: “You suppress your impatience more,” “Your answers are fuller,” etc. But I doubt lecturers can always skip this examination. (Presumably someone wants to know, “What tricks do anthropologists have to avoid certain costs when doing fieldwork, because it seems they, like various others at the university, cannot bear interaction with you?” Do I have to answer this as well?!)

Reference. Edwards, J. 2000. *Born and Bred*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.