

On the distribution of why-fieldwork-there questions

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. Jeanette Edwards tells us that she is often asked about why she did fieldwork in the English town of Bacup, whereas she has not heard anthropologists who did fieldwork in Papua New Guinea asked why there. She commits herself to a certain explanation for this: potential inquirers assume that non-Western societies are legitimate objects of study for social anthropology but this is not assumed for Western societies. I propose another explanation: it is not about the legitimacy of the object of study, rather “your” levels of commitment. Would you do that for anthropology?

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“This is a cold place to use your head,

So there must be an alternative that you dread.”

In her book *Born and Bred*, Jeanette Edwards tells us about a question she is often asked, regarding the English town where she did fieldwork:

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. Non-Western localities are deemed axiomatically of anthropological interest and legitimate arenas of study. (2000: 8)

Evidently she has not heard the question “Why Papua New Guinea?” asked of an anthropologist who did fieldwork there. Let us assume that no questions of the form “Why

location X?” are asked of British anthropologists who did fieldwork in non-Western locations. On the naive reading, forgetting about the prospect of an Oxford-educated lawyer as defence, Edwards is committing herself to this explanation:

(Legitimacy explanation) The explanation for the pattern of why questions asked and not asked is that non-Western societies, or parts of them, are taken as obviously legitimate objects of study for a British social anthropologist, but Western societies are not. Some defence is required of fieldwork there.

There is another explanation. A person might regard all societies as legitimate objects of study for British anthropology, but they think there should be tests of commitment for becoming a fully-fledged member of a discipline and a British anthropologist who becomes a member purely by studying a Western society is not undergoing an adequate test. It is too easy. If I may write directly, “The person asks the question because they want to know what your commitment levels are, Professor Jeanette Edwards,” or at least they do on this alternative explanation. Such a person thinks the pursuit of anthropology by fieldwork directed at legitimate objects of study – forgive the word “object” – is not in itself enough of a test of commitment and the discipline in Britain is unstable unless it demands something more, such as fieldwork in a non-Western society first. Given this explanation, I suppose one might dramatically say, “The question is ultimately subject rather than object directed.”

Reference

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