

Facing the Consequences: The Case for Transformative Fieldwork in Undergraduate Curriculums

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that *transformative fieldwork* can and should be a pillar of an undergraduate education in anthropology. By transformative fieldwork, I mean long- or medium-term immersive participant observation that challenges the investigator's beliefs, bodily experience (embodiment), and/or ethics, prompting adaptive responses that, collectively over time, fundamentally alter their experience of the world. My proposal has two parts. First, I advance the "senior thesis" – an in-depth research project undertaken in the final year of undergraduate study – as a viable placeholder for substantive fieldwork in an undergraduate curriculum. Such fieldwork, carried out locally or online, has advantages in accessibility, affordability, and authenticity relative to the conventional undergraduate gateway to fieldwork experience: methodological "field school." Second, addressing a significant challenge to doing fieldwork on local (culturally familiar) terrain, I argue that such fieldwork can be transformative, and not merely a replication of familiar experiences, if students and their advisors design participant observation projects that carry significant consequences for the student's beliefs, bodily experience, and/or ethics. I outline strategies for designing such projects, illustrated by examples drawn from my own students' senior theses. The concluding section addresses three potential reservations about undergraduates undertaking "consequential" research.

Keywords

Transformative fieldwork, teaching participant observation, metanoia, enskilment

Introduction

In this paper I argue that *transformative fieldwork* can and should be a pillar of an undergraduate education in anthropology. By transformative fieldwork, I mean long- or medium-term immersive participant observation that challenges the investigator's beliefs, bodily experience (embodiment), and/or ethics, prompting adaptive responses that, collectively over time, fundamentally alter their experience of the world. My goal is to resolve a paradox that haunts our undergraduate curriculums. On the one hand, immersive participant observation, the discipline's signature method, is omnipresent in those curriculums, embodying the discipline's history, epistemology, and ethics. It lies at the heart of virtually every text on a typical undergraduate syllabus, and its practice constitutes a rite of passage for all who aspire to be anthropologists. On the other hand, practical and transformative experiences using this method remain unattainable for most undergraduates. The demands of anthropological fieldwork – time, money, travel, and ethical approvals – place it outside the scope of a conventional undergraduate education.

My proposal, in short, is that the "senior thesis" – an in-depth research project undertaken in the final year of undergraduate study – is a viable placeholder for substantive fieldwork in an undergraduate curriculum, and that such fieldwork can be transformative if students and their advisors design participant observation projects that carry significant consequences for the student's beliefs, bodily experience, and/or ethics. The paper proceeds as follows.

First, I argue that transformative fieldwork is not just appropriate but indispensable for an undergraduate programme in anthropology.

Second, I explore the educational significance of transformative fieldwork experiences by examining how three prominent anthropologists, Michael Jackson, Tim Ingold, and Cheryl Mattingly, have theorised them. Their works discuss, respectively, three concepts – metanoia, enskilment, and narrative re-envisioning – that I present here as educational aspirations for student fieldwork.

Third, I advance the senior thesis, including participant observation carried out locally or online, as a platform for transformative fieldwork. I argue that, in contrast to the structured environment of “fieldwork school,” the open-ended nature of thesis fieldwork offers greater accessibility, affordability, and authenticity with respect to a student’s personal means and interests.

Fourth, I address a significant challenge to the transformative potential of fieldwork when undertaken in familiar settings. Specifically, fieldwork carried out within well-known demographic and cultural confines may lack the disorienting or discomfoting experiences that are often crucial catalysts for adaptation and transformation.

Last, I suggest that advisors should therefore guide students in designing fieldwork projects that are likely to pose significant consequences for their beliefs, bodily experience, and/or ethical frameworks. I outline strategies for designing such projects, illustrated by examples drawn from my own students’ senior theses.

The concluding section addresses three potential reservations about undergraduates undertaking “consequential” research.

Why Transformative Learning?

Transformative learning is a revered topic within this journal, whose contributors have found great value in the seminal work of sociologist Jack Mezirow (Djohari, 2011; Spencer, 2011; McGranahan, 2014; McIlwraith, 2016; Timler & Lew-Levy, 2016; Feder, 2018; Kallimopoulou, 2021; Singleton et al., 2022). Yet why transformative learning befits an education in anthropology in particular has received little commentary. This omission may reflect a concern to not state the obvious. Nevertheless, for present purposes it will be instructive to outline three reasons that transformative fieldwork is not just fitting, but indispensable, to an education in anthropology.

First, transformations are definitional to becoming an anthropologist. Anand Pandian captures a widely shared sentiment when he says “one cannot become an anthropologist without a sense of the critical and transformative force of such implicatedness in the lives of others, because coming of age in the field depends on an exposure to these powers, in the texture of one’s own being and beyond” (2019, p. 112). The exclusion of such an essential disciplinary experience from a four-year undergraduate curriculum is unparalleled in academia. Just as chemistry students must step into a lab and music students must perform before an audience, anthropology students should undergo transformation through real engagement with culturally diverse communities and their practices.

Second, transformative fieldwork is central to epistemological practice in anthropology. Personal transformations are vital avenues through which anthropologists come to understand other cultural lifeways. Exactly how, and under what conditions, transforming oneself can yield valid knowledge of others has long been a topic of debate, discussed under such terms as culture shock (Anderson, 1971), adjustment transference (Evans-Pritchard, 1973), hysteresis (Bourdieu, 1977), *dépaysement* (Lévi-Strauss, 1961), dissolution of self (Kondo, 1986), and extraordinary experience (Goulet & Miller, 2007), to name a few. Summarizing across this trend, Clifford Geertz famously wrote that an anthropologist’s work “tends to be but an expression of his research experience, or, more accurately, of what his research has done to him” (1971, p. vi). The salience and diversity of views on this topic should affirm the necessity of fostering students’ practice with connecting their own transformative experiences to the study of other peoples.

Third, willingness to undergo open-ended, field-dictated transformations is a hallmark of anthropological ethics. Discussions in this vein frequently invoke metaphors of uncertainty and reciprocity as necessary counterweights to the trappings of power and privilege underlying academic production more generally. The field is a space for being a “vulnerable observer” (Behar, 1996), for “suffering alongside” the people we study (Holmes, 2013), and for engaging “in reciprocal exchanges of cultures, selves, statuses, and orientations” (Wu, 2021, p. 113).

Fieldwork is “an ontological commitment, an acknowledgement of our debt to the world for what we are and what we know” (Tim Ingold, quoted in MacDougall, 2016, p. 4). The field is where the anthropologist becomes self-implicated in other cultural lifeways, insofar as “some of the norms or particular values of the host society can often become part of the anthropologist’s self (which is hybrid, multiple, situated, and shifting)” (Maskens &

Blanes, 2013, p. 261). Transformations make anthropologists stakeholders in the societies they study and may thereby foster greater fidelity, kindness, and accountability in how they conduct their research.

In short, the absence of transformative fieldwork in an undergraduate curriculum is a grave disservice to students, given its centrality to anthropological history, epistemology, ethics, and professional identity. Students dedicating four years to the study of our discipline should rightfully expect an encounter with this method that lies at the heart of all things anthropological.

Transformations in the Field: What Are We Talking About?

What constitutes a transformation, as understood by seasoned fieldworkers, and what kind of learning does it engender? Let us consider the educational significance of transformative fieldwork experiences by examining how they have been theorised by three prominent anthropologists: Michael Jackson, Tim Ingold, and Cheryl Mattingly. I will explore the nature of the transformation each describes, the epistemological or ethical significance each attributes to it, and how the field acted as a catalyst. I suggest that we use their concepts of metanoia, enskilment, and narrative re-envisioning as provisional guidelines for positioning transformation as an educational goal in undergraduate fieldwork.

Michael Jackson, Metanoia, and the Enforced Displacement of Beliefs

In *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (2013), Michael Jackson, an important figure in the subfield of existential anthropology, connects the transformations he experienced in fieldwork to Kenneth Burrige's notion of "metanoia" ("changed heart," in Latin), defined as "an ongoing series of transformations each one of which alters the predicates of being" (Burrige, 1975, p. 10). Such transformations, in Jackson's words, push forward the "dynamic relationship between how we are constituted and how we constitute ourselves" (p. 8).

Jackson finds an example of metanoia, thus conceived, in his fieldwork conducted among Kuranko diviners in Sierra Leone. He recounts a period marked by intense anxiety, due to the sluggish pace of his research and a foreboding concern for his wife's health during her pregnancy. On one occasion Jackson awakens from a troubling dream and seeks out a diviner for a consultation. His purpose was initially methodological—he aimed to gain a deeper understanding of Kuranko viewpoints on divination by immersing himself in the practice, which required that he put to one side the fact that he "did not accept intellectually the assumptions underlying Kuranko divination" (p. 45). He is therefore surprised when he experiences relief and a regained sense of autonomy by undergoing the consultation and performing the required sacrifices. In this moment of transformation, Jackson discovers within himself an existential point of resonance with this alien cultural lifeway. It is a moment that illustrates his earlier point that "to participate in the lives of others, in another society, is to discover the crossing-points where one's own experience connects with theirs – the points at which sameness subsumes difference" (Jackson, 2010, p. 47). And it changes how he engages with uncertainties in Sierra Leone and in his life going forward. For Jackson, such moments of metanoia not only enhance the anthropologist's informed subjectivity and foster epistemological openness but also serve a greater educational purpose by providing "the best basis for practical coexistence in a plural world" (p. 47).

As we consider not just the nature of the transformation but also the role of fieldwork in catalysing it, it is reasonable to wonder if Jackson could have arrived at this transformation by other means – for example, by critically discussing Kuranko divination in a classroom in his native New Zealand. Jackson would, I think, find this an unlikely prospect. Like Mezirow, who believed that transformative learning most commonly stems from the necessity of adapting to "epochal . . . and painful" life circumstances (Mezirow, 1985, p. 24), Jackson believes that people do not question their worldview until circumstances compel them to. He writes that "in reality, understanding is usually a result of *enforced* displacement, of crises that wrench a person out of his habitual routines of thought and behavior" (2013, p. 11, italics in original). Apprehending other cultural practices "requires more than an intellectual movement from one's own position to theirs; it involves physical upheaval, psychological turmoil, and moral confusion" (p. 11). In Sierra Leone, it would seem that the anxiety of fieldwork and the isolation from his habitual routines of thought and behavior fostered in Jackson a state of heightened receptivity and an adaptive mindset, which in turn potentiated his transformation. The same or comparable existential pressures would likely not have obtained in a classroom back in New Zealand.

Tim Ingold, Enskilment, and Knowing from the Inside

In *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (2000), Tim Ingold, renowned for his work in ecological and process anthropology, discusses transformative experiences of fieldwork within the framework of an adaptive process that he terms “enskilment.” This concept encapsulates the gradual refinement of an organism’s abilities, enhancing its capacity to perceive and engage with its environment meaningfully. Anthropologists, through fieldwork, undergo analogous transformations, cultivating culturally validated skills for observation and engagement in their new surroundings and thereby augmenting their informed subjectivity. I will discuss two examples of enskilment: the first to illustrate the nature of the transformation, and the second to illustrate the epistemological significance and the catalysing role of fieldwork.

The first example is drawn from Tanya Luhrmann’s (1991) study of witchcraft practitioners in England in the late 1980s. Luhrmann approached this project from the perspective of a rational skeptic, noting that she was fascinated by “the problem of irrational thought, which is the problem of how apparently reasonable, pragmatic people can accept beliefs which skeptical observers – more ‘rational’ observers – simply can’t believe” (Luhrmann, 2010, p. 214). As part of her formal training in witchcraft, Luhrmann was required to take a nine-month training course that contained daily meditation and visualisation exercises. She reports that completing this training greatly transformed her mental life. Her mind began producing more vivid mental images (sharper borders, greater solidity, and more enduring), ultimately leading to hallucinations of fictitious people standing outside her window and other anomalous experiences. She writes, “And as I acquired those skills, the world became drenched in meaning. Nothing happened by accident anymore. A phone call, the kind of fruit the greengrocer sold, a book I glanced at in a window – everything seemed connected to my thoughts, my visualizations, and my dreams. ... Those experiences completely changed the way I thought about magic” (2010, p. 217).

The second example is drawn from Loïc Wacquant’s (2003) study of a boxing community in the poor, predominantly Black district of Woodlawn on Chicago’s South Side. Wacquant examined the social and bodily logics of boxing as practiced at the local Boys and Girls’ Club, revealing how these competencies take shape and are deployed amidst the stark realities of life in the ghetto. Taking a “pugilistic habitus” as both a topic and a tool of inquiry, Wacquant spent three years remaking himself into a boxer capable of competing in the prestigious Golden Gloves amateur tournament. This process of enskilment, requiring “a thorough physical rehabilitation, a genuine remolding of one’s kinetic coordination, and even a psychic conversion” (p. 69), profoundly transformed how he experiences his body and mind. This process was also a deeply communal one. Instruction from the head coach, DeeDee Armour, was minimal; instead, Wacquant’s learning emerged through rhythmic practice with peers, entailing observation, imitation, and feedback within the group. Progression also required the development of social competencies, such as building trust and garnering respect among fellow boxers, which influenced decisions in the selection of sparring partners and who could represent the Woodlawn Club in tournaments. Wacquant’s enskilment process was thus a socio-moral as well as a physical transformation, culminating in his elation at being embraced as “fully one of them” and recognised as “one of DeeDee’s boys” within the larger Chicago boxing community after his participation in the Golden Gloves.

In both examples, enskilment fundamentally transforms the anthropologist’s perception. This is most vividly illustrated in Luhrmann’s experience, which enabled her to (perhaps literally) see the world anew. This transformation exemplifies Ingold’s claim that “an education in anthropology ... does more than furnish us with knowledge *about* the world—about people and their societies. It rather educates our *perception* of the world, and opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being” (2011, p. 238, italics in original).

Both examples also illustrate what Ingold (2022) describes as “knowing from the inside.” Wacquant’s deep immersion in the boxing community exemplifies this knowing, since the pugilistic habitus he explores can only be fully grasped through active participation and a commitment that establishes him as an invested member of the community. For Ingold, who conceptualises fieldwork as an intra-active endeavour (2018), in which the investigator’s work both unfolds from and operates on the field of forces under study, an accurate and ethical understanding cannot be achieved from an external standpoint (e.g., from lectures in a classroom). He advocates for anthropological fieldwork as a vital antidote to research methodologies that are “divorced from life” and to “regimes of academic scholarship that define our relation to the world as one not of taking *in* but of taking *from*, of extraction rather than inspiration” (2022, p. 2, italics in original).

Cheryl Mattingly, Narrative Re-envisioning, and a Field that “Talks Back”

Cheryl Mattingly has made significant contributions to the “ethical turn” in anthropology, focusing on how individuals shape their lives as moral endeavors. In her research on the experiences of African American families managing chronic illnesses (2014), Mattingly uses a first-person narrative approach to illustrate how caretakers within a family juggle multiple and competing moral imaginaries. Her work emphasises morality not as a static norm but as a dynamic process, where people actively shape their present and future through experimentation in what she calls the “moral laboratories” of lived experience. She underscores, in particular, a transformative process she calls “narrative re-envisioning,” by which she means “the activity of coming to see oneself in a new way, coming to reform one’s sense of possibility and reframe one’s commitments. But it also includes the task of becoming a kind of person capable of formulating and acting upon commitments that one deems ethical” (2014, p. 20).

Jinting Wu (2021) has applied Mattingly’s metaphor of the moral laboratory to anthropological fieldwork, arguing that anthropologists likewise re-envision their moral striving as roles evolve amidst the flux of field conditions. She recounts a dramatic shift during her doctoral research in a rural Chinese village, where an accusation of espionage by the local authorities transformed her “from a researcher to a human being who was as vulnerable to the local power hierarchies as the people I studied” (p. 110). Later, an extended visit from her parents prompted the villagers to reassess her identity through the lens of kinship. While this visit enabled her to be seen as less anomalous, her moral strivings as a good daughter and a conscientious fieldworker frequently came into conflict. These moments in which the field “talked back” against her attempts at dispassionate objectivity were stressful yet deeply ethically transformative. She characterises fieldwork as a process in which “the anthropological heroism [Susan] Sontag (1970 [1963]) speaks about morphs into an open field of human becoming, a shifting morality of the self in contentious field circumstances, and an ethical responsiveness to what actually happened, what might happen and what might have happened” (p. 113).

Wu’s fieldwork led not only to personal transformations but also to a *new capacity for undergoing them* – a new capacity to “strive for moral experiments through becoming vulnerable (Behar 1996) and bringing [one’s] own humanness to the intersubjective encounters” (p. 113). This outcome resonates with the educational objectives that Spencer and Mills (2011) have articulated in this journal. They assert that an anthropological education should “inspire and guide [students’] moral journeys” beyond “high-level analytic thinking about morality” to embrace “the kind of habitual, embodied, pervasive morality that is the basis for a moral life” (p. 42, quoting Colby and Sullivan 2009, p. 3). Yet depth of moral engagement is not readily achievable in the conventional undergraduate classroom, which, while conducive to high-level moral analysis, lacks the unpredictable and evolving challenges inherent in fieldwork.

In the cases discussed above we see profound transformations in beliefs, bodily experiences, and ethical frameworks. The field acts as a crucible, exerting existential pressure that compels researchers to adapt their beliefs; or as a developmental medium, fostering the acquisition of new skills; or as a moral laboratory, in which an ever-broadening ethical perspective emerges from meaningful and consequential engagement with people. Finally, these transformations equip individuals to better navigate a plural world, deepen their informed subjectivity, and add a humanizing dimension to their academic research.

These examples, while not exhaustive, offer a foundation for contemplating the transformative potential of undergraduate fieldwork. With these desiderata in mind, let us now explore potential venues for such fieldwork.

Where Does Fieldwork Fit into an Undergraduate Curriculum?

If, as Lisa Feder suggests, there exists within anthropology “a lack of vigor in guiding students into having meaningful cross-cultural experiences” (2018, p. 14), part of the problem may lie in the absence of an obvious slot for fieldwork in undergraduate curriculums. Most commonly, undergraduate exposure to fieldwork is relegated, if anywhere, to a highly structured fieldwork methodology course, or “field school,” that entails an extended stay in a culturally unique community near the university (Wallace & Iris, 2009). While it is clear that some anthropology programmes produce outstanding field schools with transformative potential in one or more of the senses outlined above (see McIlwraith, 2016), my own experience is closer to that of Dimitrina Spencer’s, for whom these schools “tend to dwell on formal techniques for data collection such as sampling, surveys and interviewing; and more recently, on statistics, on standardized ethical guidelines or safety” (2011, p. 71). These carefully controlled simulations of fieldwork typically stress what Corte and Irwin term “form” over “flow”

approaches to participant observation (2017), situating our signature method firmly within normative science and containing very little of the transformative potential that I argue is essential to an education in anthropology. If our goal is to foster transformative fieldwork experiences, then an alternative or complement to field schools may lie, I suggest, in the senior thesis. From my perspective, the senior thesis has three advantages over field school: accessibility, affordability, and authenticity.

First, as a staple of undergraduate curriculums across North America, Europe, and China, the senior thesis is broadly accessible to students during the standard academic year, whether as an elective or a final-year requirement. In contrast, field schools are often scheduled during the summer break, attracting a smaller subset of the student body and potentially limiting the socioeconomic diversity of participants.

Second, fieldwork conducted for the senior thesis can be adapted to any budget and is therefore affordable for a wide range of students. Typically, such fieldwork is conducted locally, within a commutable distance from the university, or online, and therefore does not saddle students with costly travel or lodging. By contrast, field schools frequently come with a price tag that puts them beyond the financial reach of many students.

Third, because students typically self-select their research topics, their work on a senior thesis tends to score high in authenticity with respect to the student's personal interests, values, and politics. Choice of topic and field site is a deeply personal matter in anthropology. We seek projects that resonate with our personal ethics and unique life experiences (Maskens & Blanes 2013), and this bias in selection undoubtedly primes us for transformation in the field. We desire, tolerate, or endure transformations in the field because what goes on there matters deeply to who we are as moral persons. The senior thesis also taps into this priming power by allowing students to explore topics that matter *to them*. By contrast, field schools typically assign predetermined topics and tasks, and the extent to which students are willing to engage with these at a personal level can vary greatly in even the best programmes. As McIlwraith says, "not all students are transformed by an event that transforms their peers" (2016, p. 58).

Fieldwork conducted locally still retains many of the same challenges that doctoral students face in conducting research abroad. There are always, for instance, issues concerning access, ethics, and safety that must be carefully managed. Yet the biggest hurdle the senior thesis faces as a venue for transformative fieldwork, in my six years of experience advising fourth-year students, is that fieldwork conducted locally, in familiar demographic and cultural territories, may fail to impose the requisite disorientation or discomfort to catalyse the student's personal adaptation and transformation. The remaining sections of this article address this issue and propose methods to enhance the transformative value of local fieldwork experiences.

The Problem of Overfamiliarity with the Field Site: Nanxi's Flower Shop

To illustrate the challenge at hand – the difficulty of doing transformative fieldwork in familiar settings – I will discuss a senior thesis project, undertaken by a highly capable student, that I consider a definitive example of *non*-transformative fieldwork.

Nanxi (a pseudonym), a fourth-year anthropology student at a Chinese university, was studying the growing consumer demand in Chinese cities for fresh-cut flowers. A passionate gardener with considerable floricultural knowledge, she wanted to explore and describe a wide range of meanings that consumers in China's emerging middle class attribute to the gifting and display of flowers. For her participant observation fieldwork, she secured a job at a well-established local florist and worked there as a shop assistant for six weeks. This job put her in daily contact with a variety of customers and would occasion, Nanxi hoped, discussions in which customers shared their views on flowers. This work proceeded without incident, and Nanxi wrote a thesis that was well-received by the defense committee.

Her experiences in the flower shop, however, were largely absent from the thesis. The methods section mentioned this fieldwork, and a lush description of the shop floor kicked off the main text, introducing us to the shop's ambience and clientele. But that was it. Her interactions in this environment contributed nothing to the analysis; nowhere in the thesis did she call upon them to provide evidence, insight, or texture to the paper's descriptive narrative or lines of argument. Her defense committee wanted to know: Why did she exclude such carefully conducted fieldwork from her thesis?

Nanxi reported that, as her fieldwork was concluding, she felt that her experiences in the flower shop had not taken her beyond her preexisting knowledge of fresh-cut flower consumption. Her tenure there “didn’t add anything new” to her understanding, she told me. Consequently, lacking both data and direction for her thesis, she refocused her efforts on a second line of data collection outlined in her research proposal: in-depth interviews with student colleagues known to have a passionate interest in flowers. Originally intended to add depth, context, and contrast to insights gained from her fieldwork, these interviews now had to carry the empirical burden for the entire thesis. She expanded the pool of interviewees and the schedule of interview questions and ultimately made good use of some thought-provoking interview discussions.

Nanxi’s thesis illustrates a significant hurdle to achieving the goals outlined in this paper. Her uneventful apprenticeship with participant observation is, in my experience, a regrettably common outcome among fourth-year students. If Nanxi’s case is representative of undergraduate anthropology students more broadly, then our approach to the senior thesis as a venue for transformative fieldwork must acknowledge the challenge posed by students’ preexisting familiarity with conveniently local field sites.

When I ask my colleagues at universities in China and elsewhere how we might address this challenge, their responses often indicate that we must do more to cultivate students’ reflexive thinking skills. We should, for example, introduce strategies for “making the familiar strange” or help students decolonialize “the field” by recasting it in psychological or relational (or anything but geographical) terms. By such measures, they suggest, taken-for-granted everyday spaces may be charged with fresh experience and new interpretive possibilities.

While I agree that fostering greater reflexivity is always desirable, as a solution for this problem it sidesteps two larger and perniciously intertwined factors – one methodological, and one educational – at work in Nanxi’s thesis. Methodologically, I believe Nanxi’s participant observation failed to deliver a transformative experience because it did not pose any significant *consequences* for her given experience of the world; it did not destabilise her beliefs, embodiment, or ethics, thereby requiring her to adapt and evolve. Nanxi was simply too familiar with this particular field site – she knew the proprietors and had frequently visited the shop for three years before conducting fieldwork – to be meaningfully transformed by it in the comparatively short duration of her participant observation. Moreover, this situation could have been anticipated in the project’s design phase by her advisor (myself, in my first year advising thesis students). Although it is certainly possible that Nanxi could have encountered in the flower shop fresh challenges or cyclical rhythms requiring adaptive responses, it was not probable. Given that she had been visiting the same flower shop regularly for years, the likelihood of encountering something new or unexpected over the course of a few weeks was relatively low.

Educationally, Nanxi was primed for this failure not only by her advisor’s lack of foresight, but also by undergraduate coursework in which “consequentiality” – the disorienting consequences that fieldwork has for the fieldworker, encompassing moments of metanoia, enskilment, and narrative re-envisioning – is presented as the unavoidable result of fieldwork and not something to be theorised in advance of it.

The Problem of Laissez-Faire Fieldwork: A Disconnect between Professional Practice and Undergraduate Reality

Though anthropologists often caution students against associating anthropology with the adventurous (“anthropology is not Indiana Jones”) and the exotic (“anthropology may be done at home”), this advice frequently contradicts what students encounter in class. Undergraduate syllabi are packed with examples of swashbuckling fieldwork conducted in foreign lands and among marginalised people, where the anthropologist contends daily with matters of survival, subsistence, suspicion, and magic. Setting aside for a moment our concerns about the colonial undercurrents of such fieldwork, we should recognise that it is *laden with consequences* for investigators by virtue of their need to adapt to profoundly different worldviews, modes of embodiment, and social entanglements. Furthermore, such “consequential” fieldwork bears little resemblance to the relatively comfortable fieldwork that undergraduate students typically conduct in their own backyards.

This disconnect is problematic, because much of the professional wisdom conveyed in ethnographic texts does not transfer effectively to research conducted at home. For example, passages like this one by Bonnie Nardi commonly appear in introductory chapters of ethnographies written for a general audience, including undergraduates:

When I began my study, I had no hypotheses or precise research questions. Unlike research in most academic disciplines, where investigation proceeds according to a scientific procedure involving hypothesis generation and testing, ethnography moves in a “go with the flow” pattern that attempts to follow the interesting and the unexpected as they are encountered in the field (2010, p. 27).

Nardi here touches on an anthropological axiom, shaped by the discipline’s longstanding concern with hegemonic representation, that investigators’ pre-fieldwork theoretical leanings should not predetermine their fieldwork experiences. For a general audience, this commitment may seem risky in light of the investigator’s need to produce a defensible research output. After all, what if nothing “interesting and unexpected” happens in the field? What if there is no “flow” to follow? This problem seldom arises in practice because investigators typically choose field sites – often in distant lands – that guarantee the emergence of the “interesting and unexpected” by virtue of the many consequences that dwelling there will pose for the investigator’s beliefs, embodiment, and ethics. However, the same assurances do not apply when the fieldwork is local. A seasoned gardener in a familiar flower shop might not stumble upon anything out of the ordinary. And without a structured approach, like setting predefined hypotheses, to guide them in the collection of usable data, students can find themselves in the difficult position of lacking sufficient material for a thesis.

Consider another truism of anthropological research, as stated here by James Davies.

One’s adaptation to, or emerging relationship with, the studied community, invariably involves some sort of ethical, cognitive, or emotional transformation (Davies 2010, p. 80).

Intending no disrespect to Davies, it is unfortunate that such statements enjoy axiomatic status in our discipline, since they are patently untrue. When fieldwork is conducted locally, as in Nanxi’s case, such transformations are not “invariably” forthcoming. They are, in fact, quite rare. This unchallenged assumption risks leaving students to erroneously expect that they need only show up in the field and transformative insights will be forthcoming.

These gaps between standard ethnographic axioms and the realities of fieldwork conducted locally need to be addressed if we hope to foster transformative fieldwork experiences for undergraduate students.

A Partial Solution: Conceptualizing “The Field” through the Lens of Consequences

The single most effective strategy I have found to bridge these gaps is to redefine “the field” through the lens of consequences. Following Boellstorff et al., I take consequences to be definitional to participant observation:

Participant observation is the embodied emplacement of the researching self in a field site as a consequential social actor (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 14).

With students, I stress the phrase “consequential social actor.” I explain that it means our actions in the field have consequences: We influence what happens in the field, and what happens in the field influences us. Accordingly, “the field” can be understood as any sustained interactive context where the investigator’s participant observation carries significant consequences (cognitive, embodied, ethical-moral) for the investigator and/or the people under study. Focusing on consequences aligns students with a field that is inherently destabilizing, requiring adaptations and possibly transformations. It positions them to “go with the flow” of the interesting and unexpected, as they have been taught to do.

In the context of advising senior theses, my central aim in the project design phase is to help students envision the possible consequences of their proposed fieldwork. This process often helps students to rule out field sites that, due to preexisting familiarity, are unlikely to challenge the student meaningfully (e.g., Nanxi’s flower shop). It can also facilitate the discovery and comparison of potential field sites that might offer richer learning opportunities.

For ease of discussion, we can think of “consequences” in three domains: cognitive, embodied, and ethical-moral. These are, to be sure, arbitrary designations with overlapping effects, but they provide a useful framework for students to explore the potential impact of their fieldwork. Below I outline three imperatives and accompanying suggestions that advisors might consider as they guide this exploration. In my view, a proposal should imply consequences that will impact the student beyond the purely academic scope of the project in at least one of these domains.

Seek Dissonance (Challenging the Investigator's Beliefs)

A starting point is to guide students towards studying groups they perceive as distinct from themselves in pivotal ways. Students may be encouraged to seek dissonance arising from a misalignment between their internal constructs (beliefs, values, habits) and external realities (Davies 2010, p. 89). They can encounter such dissonance near any campus. Take, for instance, Luhrmann's exploration of British witchcraft practitioners and Nardi's study of American "semi-hardcore" *World of Warcraft* gamers, cited above. Both investigators engaged with communities that were culturally familiar in many respects, yet fundamentally alien in one or more aspects critical to their research. (Prior to fieldwork, Luhrmann was not an ordained witch, nor was Nardi a gamer.) Their work demonstrates that local fieldwork, when strategically chosen, can indeed facilitate deeply transformative experiences.

Seeking dissonance doesn't require that a student engage with a topic, space, or people that is completely unfamiliar to them at the project outset (though that is also an option). When students, like Nanxi, aim to dive deeper into familiar topics and well-known communities, I often suggest they devise a *contrast study* in which they examine the same phenomenon of interest from an unfamiliar angle. For example, as the resident "game studies" anthropologist on our faculty, I often meet students drawn to gaming culture who wish to conduct participant observation in their favourite games. I advise them to consider studying the same phenomenon from a vantage of fresh experience in a different game, preferably one that is categorically unfamiliar to them. Likewise, given the chance to re-advise Nanxi, I would suggest that she examine fresh-cut flower consumption in an unfamiliar context, like a funeral home or a temple.

Students can also be guided toward fieldwork that will help them to *unlearn a simplistic truth* about a complex social issue. Ethnographies conducted "at home" often aim to dismantle facile explanations by using participant observation to uncover overlooked elements. Philippe Bourgois, in his seminal study of Harlem drug dealers, confronts "blame-the-victim theories of individual action" (2003, p. 15) despite occasionally catching himself harboring similar biases, as when he reacts to a pregnant woman smoking crack. This internal conflict – struggling with ingrained beliefs while intellectually recognizing their shortcomings – represents a form of dissonance that students can readily encounter in even the most familiar settings.

To generate ideas for this sort of project, I ask students to identify popularly held views on social issues that they find inadequate, and to consider how participant observation might reveal additional perspectives or complexities that would challenge or expand those views. One of the most insightful senior theses I've encountered in this vein examined the emotional labour of "online escorts" in China's *pei liao* (online companionship chat) industry. Before fieldwork, this student's views aligned with the prevailing scholarly orientation towards this topic, which emphasised dangers inherent in the commodification of intimacy. However, she also questioned this discourse's failure to acknowledge the potential for positive emotional experiences among online escorts. Her three-month participant observation as an online escort (conducted without video chat), during which she explored exceptions to her own pre-fieldwork beliefs, provided a wealth of evidence that allowed her to critically reevaluate the dominant narrative.

Learn a New Skill (Reconfiguring the Investigator's Embodiment)

Another way to build consequences into participant observation is to encourage proposals that entail learning a new skill, one that might alter their bodily experience in a manner significant to the research undertaken. Examples include becoming proficient in a new sport, learning to live under new restrictions (e.g., in a silent monastery), or undertaking apprenticeships in manual labour. A particularly memorable thesis was produced by a student who, with no prior dance background, immersed herself in a K-pop dance studio to comprehend the appeal of the South Korean girl group BLACKPINK among young Chinese women. In her written account, she drew on her physical transformation and newfound social confidence resulting from this fieldwork to provide rich insights into how K-pop dance navigates and reshapes prevailing beauty and gender norms.

Where possible, I also suggest that students *raise the stakes* of participant observation by setting an objective that aligns with the informed subjectivity they seek. For instance, a student investigating gamification in the on-demand delivery sector aimed to determine if certain app features incentivised electric scooter riders to adopt riskier driving behaviors. To mirror the real-life conditions of his migrant worker informants, he ascertained an average of drivers' monthly remittances to family in their hometowns and set a personal earnings goal equivalent

to that average. Commitment to this goal meant fulfilling orders day and night, rain or shine, thereby enriching his participant observation with ecologically valid pressures and constraints.

Become Socially and Ethically Entangled (Rewriting the Investigator's Moral Narrative)

Where possible, I encourage students to engage in participant observation at sites where their involvement may have real significance for the community. This often entails volunteer or paid work in which the student supplies skilled labour – for example, teaching English in rural areas or in a high-pressure prep school. My role is to assist them in anticipating the consequences their work may have for their own ethical perspectives and, as the project unfolds, to make sense of their own shifting moral narratives.

The online escort thesis, mentioned above, stands out for its ethical depth and acuity. This student found that her work as an online escort had a powerful impact on her clients, many of whom were at a low point in their lives, suffering from heartbreak, academic failure, or bankruptcy, and the daily evidence of this impact helped her to understand why many online escorts claim to find this work emotionally rewarding. Nevertheless, these positive experiences were often juxtaposed with instances of sexism, emotional overreliance on her by clients, and invasive requests for offline interaction. Her reflections on these ethical complexities, experienced “from the inside,” effected a deeply humanizing portrait of the industry and its denizens.

Conclusion

It is time to offer students a firsthand encounter with anthropology's transformative power. We are not educating them just so a select few might become anthropologists in graduate school; we are training them to be anthropologists *right now* so that they can carry anthropological thinking and ethics forward into their careers. With that said, I conclude by addressing a few possible objections to the plan I have outlined here.

One possible objection is that guiding students to design a “particular type” of fieldwork, yielding transformative experiences that accord with the present literature, unjustly limits what participant observation is and can be for students. Such an objection might also express concerns about methodological fit – after all, not every research project requires deepfelt transformations. I agree with these objections at the graduate but not at the undergraduate level. In my view, an undergraduate education introduces students to the discipline as it has evolved to the present day, with attention paid to its unique characteristics vis-à-vis neighboring disciplines. From this vantage, it is reasonable to emphasise disciplinary strengths if doing so requires working within our present understanding of them and prioritizing them over tools (interviews, surveys) that students can learn in nearly any discipline. Far outweighing these valid concerns, in my view, is the unfortunate reality that transformative fieldwork experience is absolutely central to our discipline's history, epistemology, and ethics, yet is absent from most undergraduate curriculums.

A second objection might be that emphasising “consequences” could perpetuate the “anthropologist as hero” myth. Bundgaard and Rubow's (2016) brilliant study of fieldwork projects conducted by anthropology master's students in Denmark vividly illustrates a range of problems that can arise when students idealise the exotic and perilous as the epitomes of anthropological fieldwork. Although certain conditions specific to these students' situation, such as reimbursed international travel and a lack of ethical approval requirements, are unlikely to apply to most undergraduate programmes, this study demonstrates the need to help students perceive transformative fieldwork as an educational endeavour, rather than as a stage for reckless adventure, virtue signaling, or disciplinary mythopraxis.

A third objection might be that having undergraduates do such *consequential* fieldwork poses myriad ethical and safety issues. This concern can be raised from a developmental perspective (“undergraduates lack the maturity”), out of concern for student welfare (“someone could get injured”), or due to fears of legal ramifications that might arise from consequences endured by students. Yet, emphasizing consequences in undergraduate fieldwork does not require endorsing a reckless, “anything goes” approach towards them. It requires carefully weighing existing ethical and safety standards against students' proposals, rejecting those that fail to meet these standards, and establishing tailored safeguards and checkpoints for projects that do meet them.

Fieldwork devoid of consequences has little value in anthropology, whether in scholarly practice or undergraduate education. Erin Dean echoes a common sentiment among anthropologists when she writes that “education is supposed to be troubling. It is supposed to make one uncomfortable, to destabilize worldviews,

and to expose students to new ideas” (2014, p. 8). The essential question is not if, but how, to integrate such discomfort into our teaching to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. Our discipline’s rich legacy of transformative fieldwork provides a blueprint. It’s time to use it.

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