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Bielefeld University
Faculty of Sociology
P.O. Box: 10 01 31
33501 Bielefeld
Germany
Phone: +49 521 106-6944
Fax: +49 521 106-2980
www.uni-bielefeld.de

Éva Rozália Hölzle

Pragmatic Ethnography: Or How to Peel Back Layers of Meaning by Extending Research across Space and Time

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Pragmatic Ethnography: Or How to Peel Back Layers of Meaning by Extending Research across Space and Time[1]

Éva Rozália Hölzle—Social Anthropology, Bielefeld University

In 2014 Tim Ingold published in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* an article titled 'That's enough with ethnography!'. In the essay, he urges anthropologists to rid themselves of 'ethnographizing' (386) and instead advance participant observation as the principal method of anthropological knowledge production. He argues that calling fieldwork ethnographic is contradictory because this suggests that face-to-face interactions are conducted with 'one's back […] already turned to them' that is to interlocutors (Ibid.). Using the literal Greek translation, he specifies ethnography as a description of the people that is done after the fieldwork (385). Anthropology, on the other hand, represents for him presence paired with attentive observation from inside (388). While I agree with Tim Ingold that 'being there,' caring and attending are important ingredients of fieldwork, he does however miss one point. Writing does not begin after a return home but rather right at the beginning of the research. The continuous back and forth between recording the data, interpreting it and then probing the analysis amid the data gathering process while permanently writing down the acquired knowledge is what makes an anthropological inquiry ethnographic. As George Marcus (2016) writes, for Clifford Geertz ethnography was a way to think through the data and arrive at an understanding of humans, i.e., anthropology. Thus, anthropology can be done without utilizing ethnography and ethnography does not have to be anthropological.

In my paper, I wish to join the line of researchers, who since Tim Ingold's article came forward in defending ethnography through a series of publications. Thereby, I intend to draw attention to a specific kind of ethnography that I call *pragmatic*. Following the footsteps of scholars—such as Kristen Hastrup—under pragmatic ethnography I mean theoretical and methodical flexibility that is informed by a particular view of the social as emergent and contingent. A social world without a prefixed 'ontological status' (Hastrup 2005, 143) implies on one hand that theories can serve just as temporary answers in explaining the social world. On the other, it also suggests that the ethnographic field is not fixed but has to be redefined through ethnographic practice over and over again. A pragmatic orientation encourages researchers to

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continuously adjust to the possibilities and constrains of the actual field site (Kovats-Bernat 2002, 213). Since change occupies a central stage in pragmatic ethnography, it embraces *surprise* as a particular mode of knowledge production while its endeavour is always comparative. It motivates thereby not only a multilocal approach but also a temporal extension of the research agenda with the aim of tracking events across diverse spans of time.

How does this look like in practice—is the primary question I wish to tackle in this paper. I will proceed by first addressing very briefly the topic of my research that I conducted in Bangladesh between 2010 and 2016 and that galvanized a move towards pragmatism. Then, I will come to discuss two concrete research strategies that materialized during the fieldwork and that grew out from a pragmatic orientation. The first I call *mobile fieldwork* because the research approach was multilocal, nomadic and it extended in time through the strategy of regular revisiting. The second approach I term *zooming in on* a social phenomenon with the help of another, in other words connecting two seemingly unrelated social experiences.

Research Aims in Bangladesh

Spanning between 2010 and 2016, I carried out a research focusing on four different land dispossession cases all of which were state induced and affected indigenous farmers living along the north-eastern border of Bangladesh. The actual time spent gathering data in the four field sites accumulated to two years. Thereby, I distinguish three phases of fieldwork. The first fieldtrip, between July and October 2010, was a pre-fieldwork. The second research phase started in November 2011 and continued uninterruptedly until December 2012. The third phase of the research was characterised by four follow-up visits (in 2013 and 2014 for three months each, and in 2015 and 2016 for three weeks each). I considered these follow-ups as necessary to probe the previously gathered data and also to refine and share with interlocutors the already written analysis. With the help of the four case studies, my aim was threefold: (1) I set out to uncover the drivers of land dispossession, (2) but I was also interested in learning about different experiences of violence of the affected farmers and (3) how they dealt with critical circumstances in their everyday life. In order to find answers on these questions my approach was ethnographic combining extended case method with a mobile and multilocal approach.[2]

[2] For detailed description of what 'extended case method' is see Evens and Handelman 2006; Gluckman 1958; Kapferer 2010; Rössler 2003.

Mobile Fieldwork

While extended case study was a conscious choice prior the start of the fieldwork due to its relevance of analysing conflict and social crisis, mobile fieldwork paired with a multilocal approach was an adaptation tactic to a sensitive and combative field and thus grew out from the necessities and constrains of the actual field. For all of the places we worked—under 'we' I mean my research assistant Matthew and myself—are so-called nationally and internationally sensitive zones and our presence created suspicion and irritation among state representatives, who repeatedly limited our entry to the field sites. Concretely, this meant that it was simply impossible to carry out a classical village study—in which a researcher stays long-term at a field site—because state authorities just occasionally and for short periods of time allowed us to stay overnight in the villages due to 'security reasons.' These restrictions forced us to embrace a pragmatic mobility. This concretely meant that I divided our visits to the village sites into shorter stays of two to three weeks in order to remain as inconspicuous as possible in the eyes of the national and local authorities. However, in order to acquire informed knowledge, we kept returning to the same places, rotating in this way among the four different locations.

In spite of some resemblances this approach that I am calling 'mobile fieldwork' is not similar to 'multi-sited methodology,' which is an exercise in mapping different terrains across space and time without, however, adopting the goal of intimate representation (Marcus 1995, 99). It also differs from the type of 'multi-site ethnography' described by Ulf Hannerz (2003), where he clearly states that through this method he was 'not trying hard to get to know […] individuals particularly intimately' (208). My mobile approach emerged primarily due to state restrictions to accessing the four field sites and was therefore neither pre-planned nor opportunistic. With constant returning, conversely, the aim was to observe the progress of conflicts while investing effort into knowing research participants intimately. This means that the approach rather resembles the method that Tania Murray Li (2014, 4) adopted and that she terms 'revisiting', with the aim of tracking 'subtle shifts in everyday ways of thinking and acting' 'that are hard to glean from one-shot research designs, whether based on surveys or ethnographic research.'

Besides the above delineated constrains, two more factors contributed to adopting a multilocal and mobile approach. First, I aimed to understand land dispossession as deeply as possible in its complexity and multiplicity. I hoped that a comparative perspective would shed light on the different dynamics and facets of everyday life that are present in the midst of conflicts. Second, I was interested how conflicts and struggles related to land evolve over time. While staying in one place has the methodological advantage of researchers acquiring particularly intimate

knowledge of local orders, immobile fieldwork has its down sides, too. It injects a methodological blindness towards change and process and deprives the ethnographer of the possibility of 'surprise' as a particular method of knowledge production (Guyer 2013). The switching between sites provided me with the advantage of a far greater mindfulness towards variation and the subtle modifications of action (violence as well as agency), of spatial transformations and of actors' fluctuating involvement that constitute important aspects of events in progress—all of which might have remained unnoticed if I had stayed in one place.

Pragmatic mobility, combined with extended case study proved, therefore, to be a useful fusion in tracking processes in a comparative manner. Thus, while extended case study requires a long stay in the field, its proponents do not insist on a constant presence at one particular site. The fieldwork can be fragmented into shorter visits and divided between more than one location. It is the job of the ethnographer to establish connections between temporally and spatially parted events.

Moreover, mobile fieldwork provided us with an additional advantage of being able to set aside time for writing and evaluating. The recorded data was transcribed as fast as possible during our stay at our base between two fieldtrips. We thus returned to each place with already-obtained information from previous visits. This gave the opportunity to follow along the path of the already-acquired knowledge and to gradually deepen the understanding of a particular context while cross-checking the previously collected information. The disadvantage of not being able to stay a longer period at one place was countervailed with this strategy. Yet, all of these tactics did not offer solutions on how to approach violence in its complexity and here I transition to the second strategy 'zooming in on' a social phenomenon with the help of another.

Zooming in on

The interest in violence posed two methodological dilemmas. First, I was confronted with the limitations of participant observation, as the violent acts that shattered and simultaneously shaped the everyday life of the farmers in focus went beyond visible forms of physical brutality and instead lurked in the day-to-day structures of social life. This raised the question of how to observe something that is invisible. The only solution to this problem was complementing the observed with verbal data. Yet, asking direct questions about violence would have meant risking reification and emptying lived experiences. But even if I would have initiated straightforward discussions about violence, the overwhelming forms of violent acts were so deceitful that they lacked definition even among the affected farmers. This is not a novel

problem in the anthropology of violence. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004) assert, violence is a 'slippery concept' and it 'can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality—force, assault, or infliction of pain— alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value' (1). This simultaneously means that violence 'cannot be readily objectified and quantified so that a "check list" can be drawn up with positive criteria for defining any particular act as violent or not. […] Violence defies easy categorization. It can be everything and nothing' (Ibid.,2). If violence is such a fluid phenomenon, how can one approach it?

Many researchers contend that violence necessitates an approximation through the experiences and narratives of those who tackle it. Yet when we come to the problem of violence we are simultaneously confronted with what Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922) terms the 'limit of language.' The limit of language designates here not simply an inability to verbalize or an incapability of understanding narratives that describe specific experiences of violence, but 'the unknowability of the social world' (Das 1998, 184). The lived experience is characterised by unstructured knowledge and uncertainty. We are rarely fully conscious at every moment of the implications that everyday occurrences confront. How do we breach this problem methodologically? How do we gather evidence about something that is unclear, lacks definition, yet is still present? Confronting this difficulty was the point in my research that emotions came into the picture.

Thus, while I was listening to the accounts of addressing land conflicts, I came to realise that there is a metalanguage emerging out from the narratives, where informants were very preoccupied with describing how they felt in order to make me understand their situation. It took several months until I came to the realization that the emotional narratives I collected were more than simple verbalizations of feelings, but instead are about particular experiences of violence embedded in the language of emotions. Gradually, I started to see emotions as 'concentrated vessels' of (hi)stories or 'modalities through which people recall the sensorium of violence' (Feldman). The discovery of the relevance of emotions in relation to violence was what within the discipline one might term as an element of *surprise* or 'accidental anthropology'. Indeed, I did not set upon a journey to study emotions, rather the context presented it as something relevant. I would, however, do injustice to the complexity of emotions if I would reduce them to the level of merely experiencing violence.

Aside from a few notable exceptions (see especially Benedict 2005; Briggs 2001; Levy 1983; Mead 2001), early anthropologists exhibited reservations regarding feelings. This scepticism

can be explained by disciplinary divides underscored additionally with nature versus nurture and mind versus body dichotomies. While in the West, from antiquity until the middle of the nineteenth century, emotions belonged to the domain of philosophy and theology; psychology as an independent science gained an increasing control over the study of feelings after the second half of the nineteenth century (Plamper 2015, 47). Meanwhile, scientific diversification meant that anthropologists carved out for themselves the study of culture in post/colonial settings and sociologists settled for the understanding of how society is structured in the industrialized world. In both latter disciplines, emotions were considered as pre-cultural and pre-social phenomenon minimally related to either meaning or social organisation. Hence, there was no opposition to emotions belonging to psychology. Both anthropologists and sociologists accepted thereby the traditional idea promoted during the Enlightenment that emotions are opposed to reason. Until the poststructuralist turn, when the anthropology of emotions emerged as an independent subfield within the discipline, these dichotomies remained largely unchallenged. Yet, such refutations did not expel entirely the older convictions that emotions are primarily biological occurrences. Consequently, today roughly two different theoretical strands dominate the understanding of emotions: biological and cultural constructivism.

According to the first strand, feelings are hardwired physiological phenomena located in individual bodies. This theoretical line, following Paul Ekman's (1999) conceptualisation, acknowledges the cultural variations of emotional expressions, yet nonetheless emphasizes that despite disparities there are basic emotions shared universally and independently from cultural, social and historical circumstances (see especially Heider 1991). From the 1980s onwards, more anthropologists voiced their critiques of such universalistic and biological understanding of emotions (see especially Abu-Lughod 1988; Lutz 1988; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Rosaldo 1987;). Especially three views were emphasised: (1) 'emotional experience is not precultural but pre*eminently* cultural' (Lutz 1988, 5, emphasis in original); (2) not only emotional expressions vary but people in divergent cultural contexts feel radically different (Plamper 2015, 311-312); (3) the mind-body dichotomy is a Western construct and hence people from different cultures not only do not separate emotions from intellect and action, but might locate emotions outside the individual body.

While cultural constructivist theories effectively shattered the 'idea that feelings are timeless and everywhere the same' (Plamper 2015, 426), it, nevertheless, also has limitations. One problem is that by stressing the notion of radical differences, such theories run into the danger

of Othering and thus getting dangerously close to exoticizing cultural variation. Second, emotional variation implicitly implies that cultures are isolated and timeless. Therefore, cultural constructivists not only overlook mutual contact and influence for which historical and postcolonial theories offer ample evidence, but they also downplay eventual similarities. Third, by insisting on radical contrasts, they make cross-cultural comparison and understanding impossible and ultimately dissolve their own object of study, namely emotions, thus the word itself is a Western construct. Yet, without a meta-concept, the anthropology of 'emotions' would turn into a hopeless nominalism (Plamper 2015, 12). Finally, by embracing an overly discursive perspective, constructivist theories risk cultural determinism leaving the connection between emotion and action unexplored.[3]

Partly due to these limitations and partly due to the rise of neuroscience, cultural constructivist views have recently lost their prominence in emotional research. Today, biological explanations are celebrating a comeback and they have also gained significance in social sciences, propelling the emergence of what is called the affective turn (see for instance Massumi 2002). The underlying assumption of affect theorists is that affect, feelings and emotions belong to different orders. While affect is seen as a pre-linguistic/ pre-conscious phenomenon, i.e., a neuronal response in the individual body, emotions on the other hand are viewed as cognisant interpretations of feelings and thus culturally coloured. Such attempts are characterised by interdisciplinary cross-fertilizations between neurosciences and cultural studies. Yet, their risk is that instead of dissolving old dichotomies of mind versus body and nature versus nurture, they reproduce it. Thus, if affect is pre-linguistic reaction, this implicitly means that the body or the mind belongs in the realm of nature and it is untouched by culture or power (Ahmed 2004, 39; Das 2011). Also, the sequential separation of affect, feelings and emotions sounds not only mechanical but also remains rather speculative, since there is no empirical explanation for how affect becomes a feeling.

What is striking in these two dominant theories of emotions is that none of their followers consider feelings as methodological opportunities to gain insight into another social phenomenon (as an exception see Davies and Spencer 2010; Lubrich and Stodulka 2019), but rather they treat emotions as independent objects of study. In my research, I deviate from this approach since I treat verbalisations with emotional content as lenses or if you wish as entry

[3] Alternative concepts such as embodiment (Csordas 1990), lived experience (Jackson 2008) and subjectivity (Biehl 2005) suggest alternative paths to overcome these shortcomings, but they can be also interpreted as disguise strategies to implicitly deal with but also to avoid directly talking about emotions.

points into getting closer to everyday life circumstances shattered by the force of violence. Furthermore, my proposal is to see articulations with emotional components not as descriptions of subjective states, but rather as performative utterances. With this proposition, I wish to take a third path—a pragmatic approach to emotions—that builds upon the language theory of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. A pragmatic understanding of emotions does not deny that the mode through which certain emotions are verbally elaborated is contextually and historically dependent. Yet, in contrast to cultural constructivism, it offers solutions for how to link action and emotion.

According to pragmatic language theory, speaking is more than transmitting information—language is already an action. By talking we simultaneously perform. This should not be simply understood as speech involving bodily activities (such as moving the tongue and lips or gesturing), but that while uttering, we do things (I promise) or prompt (close the door!) further action. In his famous book *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin (1962) distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary utterances. While locutionary speech is defined as a meaningful utterance (the sky is blue), an illocutionary act is 'doing something *in* saying something' (I declare you husband and wife) and a perlocutionary act is 'doing something *by* saying something' ('I warn you') (Cavell 2005, 169). Both latter categories of utterances have, according to Austen, a performative force. None of these, however, can be found in their pure form in everyday language use. Instead, most of our expressions cover all three categories.

Where do emotions belong? According to Stanley Cavell (2005, 155-191), Austen stopped short when it came to the issue of emotions and did not fully utilize the potentiality of his own theory. In his essay 'Performative and Passionate Utterance', Cavell (Ibid.) sets up to bridge this gap and treats emotional expressions as performative utterances with perlocutionary force. According to Cavell, the interesting element in passionate utterances is that while they are formulated in the first person singular or plural, they nevertheless are not about 'me' or 'us' but directed toward a second person, towards 'you'. Formulated differently, not the 'I' but the 'you' ends up as the center when I utter the sentence 'I love you', because the phrase is not simply a declaration but simultaneously an expectation or maybe even a demand. This is similar to Wittgenstein's famous assertion that sentences such as 'I am sad' or 'I am in pain' are not descriptive statements of an inner state, but rather an invitation to share (Das 1995, 194). They indicate a request for reaction and therefore 'cannot be treated as purely personal experiences' but rather efforts towards establishing intersubjectivity or prompting acknowledgment (Ibid.).

If we take this argumentation seriously, then it is possible to claim that emotions have both a performative force, thus their expression might mark the beginning of a 'language game' in which the narrator and the listener become actively engaged through interactive exchange. However, they also reveal something about our relation to the world since emotions always involve others or circumstances incited by others. It is, therefore, not misplaced to borrow Catherine Lutz's (1988) assertion that emotions 'retain a value as a way of talking about the intensely meaningful that is culturally defined, socially enacted and personally articulated' (5). I, therefore, never asked if research participants really felt what they said. This was beside the point. Rather, I was interested in what is revealed about their relationship with the world when they evoke specific idioms of emotion. Or formulated differently, what does, for instance, fear, boredom or grief signify? By analysing the nuances of such dominant emotions, I was able to capture the micro-manifestations of violence that lurked in the everyday and that included acts of intimidation, humiliation, deactivation, deception or subtle but persistent harassment. Yet, since I approach emotions from the perspective of pragmatic language theory, I emphasize that emotional expressions are not simply descriptive statements, but rather are requests for acknowledgment of an active subject position. Such a conceptualization allowed linking emotions to actions and helped to see farmers not merely as victims but also as agents.

Conclusion: Ethnography Matters

In coming to the concluding part of my paper I wish to turn back to Tim Ingold and his disapproval of ethnography. I think such misunderstandings arise from the fact that ethnography is viewed merely as a method either for the sake of data collecting or for the sake of writing. Yet as Kristen Hastrup asserts

> In anthropology "ethnography" is so much more; it is neither simply a method (a synonym for fieldwork) nor a particularly thick description of local realities. Both of these are subsumed by a particular sensitivity to the world—a mode of perception that includes a reflexive awareness of, and respect for, local particularities and complexities on the hand, and the theoretical intervention implied by representation on the other. Ethnography and epistemology are simultaneously present in the anthropological object. In that sense, ethnography always transcends itself (2005, 141).

A pragmatic orientation during ethnographic fieldwork intensifies this sensitivity, because pragmatism encourages adaptation to the field while does not pretend to deliver definitive

answers in form of grand theories. As Jean and John Comaroff remark 'an anthropology-for-the-present on an ethnographic base that dissolves the *a priori* distinction between theory and method' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003, 172 cited in Hastrup 2005, 141). With its theoretical and methodical openness pragmatic ethnography moves with the 'moving frames of social life' (Hastrup 2005, 142) not only across space but also across different spans of time. Establishing connections across and within different time frames and not just across spatially dispersed events is from my point of view essential in peeling back the layers of meaning that emerge on the surface of the social field. Insofar, I regard my six years of fieldwork and its findings as preliminary research results and intend to continue revisiting the sites for years to come. Thus, in order to engage in meaningful research, it is not enough to dissolve spatial boundaries, but we need to resist a neoliberal logic creeping in our way of doing fieldwork that expects quick results within a short span of time.

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