THE SECRET LIVES OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Lessons from the Field

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INTRODUCTION

Pulling back the curtain

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"People and their cultures are messy", an anthropologist once said to me, "and the work of trying to understand them is even messier" (Calvert, 2018). The work of anthropology is indeed "messy", at once unfamiliar, exciting, and generally unlike what most researchers expect – perhaps in part because so much ethnographic research occurs as we sit "around the fire" living with, observing, and listening to the life stories of people throughout the world. Their stories matter. As novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2010) expresses, "Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity." The story of *how* the telling of these stories came to be surely matters as well. As "participators" and "observers" of human behaviour, inexperienced researchers are often unprepared for the complexities of getting into the field, and, once there, the intricacies of living locally while living across cultures. Courses covering anthropological research educate in the ways of theory and methods, but generally lack insight into the many mundane, life-changing, challenging, and unspoken topics of fieldwork.

Whether conducting research with hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, street children, or southern California sorority students, the authors in this book "pull back the curtain", providing a glimpse into the everyday experiences of seasoned researchers and those they live and work with in the field. ("Pulling back the curtain" alludes to a line from the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, imploring Dorothy and her friends to "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" [Langley et al., 1939].) Their stories draw attention to and capture the often hidden, intimate details of the work of anthropologists, their personal and professional struggles, successes, and failures. Each chapter highlights the methodological and theoretical frameworks used (or tossed aside) and, ultimately, lessons learned. The "secret" stories of anthropologists in the field.

"It is", lamented one contributor during the early stages of this book, "very difficult to write like this and about these things." This was a sentiment shared by several of the authors. As researchers, we are used to writing in an "academic" style about "academic" things. It is hard to step aside and write to *reveal*: not only who we are and what we do, but to incorporate this within the contexts of the research we conduct, the methods and theoretical frameworks we use, and the ethical and social implications of working with and living amongst those who generously let us into their homes, hearts, and lives. Even as multitudes of scholarly journal articles, book chapters, and books are generated from field research, most of the preparation and work involved in the published (and therefore public) production occurs behind the curtain. This includes, but is never limited to, the complexities of coming up with interesting (and fundable) research questions, grant writing, obtaining IRB and ethics committee approvals, and the fits and starts (by default or design) of getting to the field.

And, once *in* the field the challenges of seemingly mundane, simple things can be incredibly taxing, if not overwhelming. Depending upon the site, the work of fieldwork often begins with simply figuring out what water and food are safe to consume, where to live, bathe, and use the toilet. Then add to the mix the struggles involved in learning the local language(s), learning who to trust, who to be wary of, how to act appropriately, how to give back to the community, and how to deal with illnesses, culture shock, homesickness, and loneliness. Fieldworkers must also navigate local and/or national politics, wrestle with various ethical and moral dilemmas, grapple the challenges of gendered relations, issues of safety, and maintenance of mental and physical wellbeing (of ourselves *and* our research participants). And given these challenges, what keeps us coming back to the field? A heady addiction? A quiet joy? Adventure? Academic questions? Requirements to publish for university promotion? What sets us on the path in the first place may be something quite different from that which keeps drawing us back.

Each of the chapters demonstrates the variety of ways individual researchers find their own path into and ways of being within the field. While the themes running through these essays may be similar, the stories are as unique as the writers telling them. I have tried to keep the "voices" of each contributor as close to their own as is possible, given for many English is a second, third, or fourth language. A few capitalized West/Westerners, others specifically asked the terms be left in the lower case "western". Several also conducted research in the same areas, with the same or similar groups of people but had very different experiences, stories to tell, and ways of representing themselves and their research participants, (e.g. Bombjaková and Moïse with the BaYaka; Fürniss, Le Bomin, and Verdu with the Bongo; Takada and Howell with the San).

Anthropologists venture into the field as individuals, with their personalities, cultural worldviews, and biases firmly intact. Readers of these essays may find they disagree, strongly, with the sentiments expressed by the authors, the choices they made in the field, the terms they chose to use, or the advice they give. Well, good. That is partly the point of this book. But also by pulling back the curtain of

academia, we are allowed a peek inside the lives of anthropologists and those whose lives they share in the field. And we need to pay attention to the workings behind the curtain, for many reasons, but particularly as doing so helps us to better understand the men and women in front of it.

Finally, it is our hope the secrets and lessons contained in the following pages bring to light not only the *work* of conducting research in the field, but how ordinary life around the world extraordinarily unfolds.

A few secrets I wish I'd known

The first time I went "into the field", to the Central African Republic (CAR), I discovered the following – that goat babies in the village sound like human babies and how heartbreaking their bleating "maaaa" sound is when you desperately miss your own children. And, speaking of goats, I also discovered their turds look like coffee beans, and when mixed together, as they often were, make for an interesting-tasting morning cup of coffee (Hewlett, 2012). I also found my first time in the field how alone one can feel in spite of being constantly surrounded by people.

I wish I'd known how adapting to the field is a process of learning and overcoming not simply the loneliness that comes from being away from friends and family, but the *aloneness* and shock of being a stranger in an unfamiliar world of bewildering languages, beliefs, and customs. The field taught me that when we as anthropologists transverse the world (or neighbourhood) to learn about and from other cultures, we transverse the inner world of self as well.

I wish I'd understood from the start the importance of listening to the forest, not just the people. As I adapted to life in the field, I learned over time to hear the sounds of the forest, how the forest buzzes like an electrical current, and how the animal and insect noises change in tone and frequency as the day shifts into night, and again when the night eases into day. In the forest, I saw how darkness settles from the canopy of trees on down. I learned the feel of the heaviness of air before a storm, and where on the forest trail I was by the particular smells in particular areas, the spicy, earthy damp smells of the rainforest. I've learned that coming to more fully understand a culture involves coming to understand an environment as well. After all, the natural environment is our background, our context, the milieu from which we've emerged (McCarthy, 2015; Hewlett, 2012). Fieldwork involves coming to understand and appreciate not only the language, and practices of people, but also the sights, sounds, smells, and tactile feel of the natural environment they live within. In my experiences with Aka foragers, all these various aspects of experience are as much a part of their lives as are the languages, beliefs, and practices. Ways of understanding a culture, ways of knowing, involve all of our senses. Cultural learning is multi-sensory learning (Hewlett, 2012).

Looking back, I wish I had known how much we can learn not only *about*, but *from* other people. And, it would have been helpful to have had a better understanding of how every day may present a challenge of some sort and/or an ethical dilemma to untangle. I wish I'd known that who we *are* in the field determines in

part the research questions we choose to ask, the theoretical frameworks and methods we use, how we represent the data, and, importantly, how we represent the research participants themselves.

I was taught many things in the classroom, but it was from the field I learned what it means to "participate" and "observe". I wished I'd known becoming an anthropologist involves not only engaging all our senses, but also being open to the many experiences of stumblings and failures, sorrows and delights. And as we venture far afield (or conduct fieldwork nearby), it is when we can find humour in all of this, when we can navigate our way through unfamiliar spaces in culturally appropriate ways, when we can feel comfortable and find comfort in a far-away home, that we know we've set out on the right journey.

This text is designed to bridge critical gaps in the understanding of the daily lives, methodological challenges, experiences, and journeys of anthropologists conducting research in diverse cultures around the world (but see Chagnon, 1968; Cassell, 1987; Mulder, 1996; Shostack, 2000; Davis and Konner, 2011). While many texts may provide vivid accounts of the experiences faced by researchers in different locales and from different disciplines, they often present as travelogues or field stories with no underlying theme, little mention of methodology or theory, and no take away in terms of the need for adaptability and how to use this information to conduct better quantitative and qualitative ethnographic research in diverse settings.

Most theoretical and empirical field method texts, on the other hand, focus on specific methods and provide a limited number of examples of what "it's really like" in the field (e.g. Bernard, 2017). They do not "pull back the curtain" and detail the daily challenges, dangers, and delights of fieldwork, or the underlying feelings, thoughts, and experiences of the fieldworker. This lack of attention to adaptability in methods, theories, and personal wellbeing is enigmatic, given that by studying these accounts it is possible to gain an understanding of how anthropological research unfolds. *The Secret Lives of Anthropologists* provides not only richly detailed stories from seasoned fieldworkers, but each author also includes a description of their theoretical approach, methods used, practical advice and tips, and the individual ways they adapted to the risks and uncertainties of fieldwork.

Conceptually this book is organized into parts of related field experiences, methods, and themes. Contributors briefly introduce themselves, the topic of their field research, field site, and participants, methods, and theoretical approaches. Each contributor was asked to provide a narrative of a difficult, dangerous, humorous, or unpredictable field circumstance leading to modifications and adaptations in their methodology, approach, or in securing their own personal wellbeing or the wellbeing of the people they work with. The authors demonstrate how their field stories relate to the key concept(s) of each section, provide insight into how they altered their behaviours or methods to respond to local research circumstances, and then offer what they learned about the unspoken realities of being in the field. Each chapter ends with a series of reflection/discussion questions for readers.

In what follows below, I provide a brief overview of each essay to illustrate some of the major themes, issues, and general nature of that process as captured on the page. And, while I pose questions within these summaries, it would be wrong to suggest the chapters provide definitive answers. Rather, the researchers demonstrate the variety of ways individuals adapt to challenges in the field, whether the field is a laboratory in Indiana or a camp in the Kalahari Desert. Their accounts, while detailing particular experiences and perspectives, also thematically cut across the sub-sections and theoretical orientations of the book (e.g. historical, political economic, human behavioural ecological, symbolic linguistic, and cognitive). This is, in part, what makes this a unique collection of essays.

Highlighting the experiences of anthropologists, both seasoned and those just starting out, *The Secret Lives of Anthropologists* aims to "pull back the curtain" revealing aspects of fieldwork seldom mentioned in field courses, presenting an intimate, at times humorous, at times poignant, view of the infinitely complex world we live in.

Paths into the field

Travelling to Dugong Creek in the Bay of Bengal to conduct fieldwork among the Andaman Islanders (Ongees), Vishvajit Pandya describes the beginning of his "*rites de passage*" (van Gennep, 1960) into the world of the Ongees and anthropological research. His long, stumbling hike through the humid rainforest, with its biting bugs and stinging leeches, filled him with nagging doubts and disturbing feelings of isolation (feelings common to ethnographers in any part of the world). Why was he there? Could he "endure"? What if he fell ill? How would he procure food and water? As yet, he couldn't hunt and butcher wild boar, or locate edible tubers in the forest. He would be completely dependent upon the "goodwill" of the community. Less immediate, but no less troubling, questions accompanied him on his first walk down the path into his "new life" in the forest. A "sacred tenet" of anthropological research is living with the local populations, participating in their lives and observing their behaviours (see Moïse, Chapter 7). As Pandya details, it is one thing to "observe", but how, when, and where does one "participate"?

The first steps, as Pandya recalls, are the most difficult. And, overtime, he learned the "when, how, and where" of participant observation: he cut up wild boar, found food in the forest, became proficient in the language, and walked without stumbling through the "honey-combed" forest. He found that to become *eneyobe* (knowledgeable), one needs to immerse oneself in the forest world of the "extraordinary, ordinary" Ongee people of Dugong Creek. In his essay, Pandya describes learning what it means to become an "anthropologist" from the actual field, through experiences of discovery, through the doing of anthropology. Vishvajit Pandya's journey down the path and into the world of the Ongee has continued for thirty-five years, an ongoing walk through the "learning fields".

But how does one determine what particular path to follow, what line of research to pursue in the first place? For Benjamin Purzycki, the path found him, beckoning

with a song, or rather Tuvan throat singing. Given his intense curiosity about (or bewilderment of) moral behaviour, traditional religion, shamanism, and "the sacred", it was a serendipitous calling. Anthropological research often carries us to places we may not have chosen or even been aware of, and just as often leaves us questioning our work, our impact upon the people who "host" us, our intent, the ethics of what we do, and how we go about doing it. We are left unsatisfied with the incomplete understandings we carry away. Our self-confidence is worn down. But if that elicits from us a humility and further zest for understanding, then we can begin to learn from the field. Perhaps finding as Purzycki did, that the broader cultural "truth" (if there is indeed such a thing), is not revealed when we rely only upon ourselves and a few "key" informants. Purzycki's humorous chapter highlights how, as we participate together with our transnational, transgenerational human family in the "fumbling comedy" of "Trying to Figure It Out", the complexity and wonder of lives lived and shared across cultural borders are revealed.

After the first year of my own "fumbling comedy" in the field, in spite of ants, goat turd coffee, and caterpillar meals, or perhaps because of all these things, I knew I had to go back, to experience again the tranquillity and haunting beauty of the rainforest, the hot, dusty business of the village, and the kindness and generosity of the people I had come to know. I began my research in Africa by working with Aka and Ngandu youths. They readily shared their experiences of life in and at the edge of the forest, detailing their social-emotional development, family and friend relations, issues of gender, male and female adolescents' views of their lives.

Working with the adolescents, I noticed how very often they spoke of death – those of their parents, relatives, siblings, and friends. My next field study arose from their tragic accounts of loss, and I began a comparative research study examining responses to death and loss among these two culturally distinct adolescent groups.

I remember one young boy in particular who had lost both his father and mother within one week (four years before the interview). He said his mother's younger brother provided for him, "He is like a father, he gives me food and I live with him and we go fishing." I then asked if he had someone who was "like a mother". With tears welling up in his eyes, he began sobbing and said to me, "No one is like a mother to me. I miss my mother." This was the last interview I conducted on the topic of loss. I am a mother who just happens to be an anthropologist. The deaths, the losses, the tragedies these kids were relating to me became overwhelming. These young people deepened my academic and personal understanding of the nature of loss, grief, and healing but I was devastated by their experiences and saddened because the questions I'd asked often prompted their tears. Adapting in the field can mean stopping what you're doing and moving on. At times this is necessary and ok (Hewlett, 2012). Taking care of one's mental, emotional, and physical health (both in and out of the field) should be a priority, as there can be serious consequences for not doing so (see for example, chapters by Bombjaková, Howell, and Kovats-Bernat). The field finds (or eludes) us, teaches us, and sometimes breaks our hearts.

Armed with a provocative and insightful line of inquiry – the evolution of female coalitions, competition, and friendship – Nicole Hess began what would be a tortuous, convoluted quest for what repeatedly turned out to be (initially anyway) an elusive field site. She began her field site search with a trip to Venezuela to work with two indigenous Amazonian groups: the Yanomamö and Ye'kwana, who subsisted on fishing, hunting forest animals, and some horticulture. These two small-scale cultures were seemingly ideal for evolutionary anthropological research. As populations living under ecological conditions much like those regularly encountered by humans in the distant past, it would be possible to study ancestrally evolved psychological, behavioural, and social adaptations. Ideal that is until politics, Venezuelan and otherwise, intervened, forcing Hess and the rest of the team out of the country. Her second attempt to find a field site failed as well but this time due to safety, the third attempt to funding. Demonstrating it takes *a lot* of drive and perseverance to get to the field, Hess wrote a grant proposal, which was funded, to conduct work in Melanesia. But at the last minute, she chose to step away from the funding, and a promising field site, because of what she felt to be a disturbing dynamic of power existing between her as a female student and a senior male mentor.

Nicole Hess did discover a field site as her chapter ends, one she calls "unconventional", in southern California at a Greek college sorority, where she studied female cooperation and conflict. Reflecting on her path into the field, "it was clear", Hess acknowledged, "being a female was costly."

Gendered relations and other challenges in the field

Inappropriate conduct, abuses of power, and sexual harassment are, at times, endemic in hierarchal institutions in the US and abroad. Where histories of exploitation, fear, silence, and misuse of authority are part of the landscape, many still deny these abuses are real and happening around them. The recent dialogues about sexual abuse and harassment need to continue, as does responding sensitively, appropriately, and quickly to the needs of those who've been abused. Sometimes the path into the field becomes a dark, long tunnel, exacting a price no one should have to pay. We all, men and women alike, bear that cost and cannot afford to keep this part of our lives as anthropologists "secret".

"This is Susanne. She is a man. And she lost weight since the last time I met her." So goes an introduction for the guest speaker, Susanne Fürniss, PhD and ethnomusicologist during a professional conference in Africa. Her experiences of "being a woman in the field" conducting research in Cameroon and the CAR have been at once bounded by gender discrimination and sexual harassment on one hand, and, on the other, the "true joy" of sharing the language of music with Central African musicians. Fürniss reflects on how her experiences have changed over the course of her career, sharing sage advice, "don't have sex in the field" and raising important questions: when do we as women alone in the field rail against patriarchal and/or hierarchal systems that misuse authority, disrespect us, our

expertise and experience as scholars, our very bodies? And when do we make use of those same systems allowing us special privilege and access (see also Le Bomin, Chapter 5 and Moïse, Chapter 7)? As anthropologist Scott Calvert commented after reading her chapter, "It is clearly invaluable for young female scholars just starting out, but also for male researchers, as it gives some needed perspective into what their colleagues face in the field and in academia." Indeed, an important lesson from the field even for experienced fieldworkers is learning to, as Fürniss eloquently writes, "find the right balance between demanding and following, knowing and learning".

Often "learning and knowing" in "the field", entails negotiating our particular sense of self, our "own" social identity with an identity reflected back to us from the "foreign culture" we find ourselves in. It is, frequently, not what we'd expect. Like an antelope, for example.

Sylvie Le Bomin, a French ethnomusicologist working in Gabon was given various nicknames (being as she describes, "dragged from one gender to another"), including: *Ninzona*, the female creative entity; Mr. Sylvie, a female who has entered the secret *bwete* brotherhood of men; an antelope (referring to a woman who behaves well and pays attention to others); and a wanderer, a "too much woman" (due to her tenacity, desire to learn, one who "transcends her status as a woman"). And, finally, in the language of Fang, *Mienda*, a guardian of the village, of the family. Being named means becoming part of a social relationship, with all the rights, privileges, (and sometimes overwhelming) responsibilities such titles confer embedded as they are within kin and age categories. Le Bomin is not simply "an antelope" or woman–man, but a daughter, mother, grandmother, sister, a member of the community and family. Le Bomin's chapter explores the transitions her field identity has undergone over the course of twenty-five years of working in Central Africa and elucidates how the people she works with see *her* and her way of being within their cultural world.

Our gendered selves, our sense of self as a woman or man (or third or fourth gendered person), how others view us, and the ways in which we navigate the gendered relations in our lives in the field arise from the cultural framework we are born into; a culture transmitted by our parents and peers, speaking of lifeways within a broad social history, symbolic, and integrated into the very fabric of our lives. Culture influences our perception and classification of reality; what being a man and/or woman means, what the roles and rules "assigned" to gender are, how men and women interact. And, as we see in the chapters by Quinlan, Bombjaková, Le Bomin, Fürniss, and several other contributors, we do not merely feel differently, or do things differently from others, but we feel strongly about our cultural ideas, ideals, beliefs, behaviours, classifications, and worldviews. It is no wonder we so often encounter challenges in the field.

Daša Bombjaková shares a list she compiled of some of these "Challenges in the Field", harvested from the ethnographies of more than fifteen anthropologists, covering a span of fifty-seven years. Ranging from "avoidance of unwanted

marriage proposals; difficulties with ethnographic interviews; gaining trust of informants; emotional responses to discriminative behaviours towards studied community; payments to informants" to "problems with sharing and gifts; and ethical dilemmas concerning giving medical help and sharing medicine". It is quite a telling list. Many researchers have experienced most of these challenges (myself included), and a few others to boot. Bombjaková demonstrates a keen appreciation for the effectiveness of culturally appropriate responses to fieldwork challenges. It is not just the "observer", after all, who feels strongly about their particular cultural ideas, practices, and beliefs, but the "observed" as well. And wise is the ethnographer who appreciates that what might seem to be vast cultural barriers stretching out between two cultures, is often in fact a partition quite thin and permeable when sensitively approached.

The observer and the observed: the metamorphosis of research, methods, and the researcher

The key methods of ethnographic research, participating in and observing the contexts of daily life, asking questions, having discussions, collecting demographic data, are often complicated and can be challenging in ways one would never expect. Never more so for me than in 2003 when the World Health Organization (WHO) called and asked my husband and fellow anthropologist, Barry Hewlett, and I for assistance with Ebola control efforts, in a small village in the Congo (Hewlett and Hewlett, 2008). The Ebola outbreak had just started so not only were Barry and I unaware of who the contact cases were (those suspected of having been exposed to Ebola), but four schoolteachers were attacked with machetes and murdered the day before our arrival. (It was thought they had special knowledge about Ebola they were using to cause harm to others.) As we rode into the village, people began angrily shouting at us, "No Ebola here!"

Our research was made even more difficult by the fact that we had to distance ourselves in various ways from the local people. Atypically we couldn't live in the village, we couldn't shake hands, we often had to wear gloves, we bathed in bleach water, our car was hosed down every day with bleach, we couldn't eat or drink with the local people, we lived in controlled settings with a few other international team members. We had to take care who, where, and how we interviewed and observed people. To complicate matters even further, one healer whose help we thought to enlist in educating the populace and taking care of Ebola victims, calmly told us he had ordered the murders of the school teachers. He further informed us we could take care of the practical matters of Ebola control efforts by providing gloves and education – he would take care of the "darker matters". These threats and limitations meant conducting our research required constant vigilance, caution, and focused attention in our interactions with others. We had to adapt our methodologies immediately because we learned first-hand that outbreak ethnography (any research in "dangerous fields", see Kovats-Bernat, Chapter 12) is unlike most other anthropological settings as the risk of mortality is a daily concern. As a

fieldworker, both observed and observing, one has to adapt, often on the spot, to uncertain circumstances.

Armed with a degree, a travelling fellowship award, and an anthropological toolkit, Robert Moïse set out for the "learning fields" of Africa. His journey took him from the CAR, studying forest-oriented BaYaka pygmies, to sheltering in a friend's kitchen in the middle of a *coup d'état* in Bangui, capital of the CAR (prompting a change of venue). Demonstrating the variable paths to the field, from there he next began consultancy work in the American private sector and as of now is working with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) advocating for land rights of local forest populations in the Congo Basin. Oh yes, and not to be forgotten, a few side meanderings including becoming a social media sensation, with a video of him dancing at a Cameroonian wedding having gone viral (over two million hits), and of course his acting and filming career as *Le Blanc Camerounais*, a comedy co-produced with a Cameroonian filmmaker.

Moïse's chapter illustrates how the field teaches us, mentors us, haunts us with unanswered and unanswerable questions, points the way to new analytic enquiries, and even, at times, causes us to ponder our place in an unsettled world. The field, as Moïse describes, elicits feelings of alienation, bewilderment, frustration, humour, and pain, as we are both observers of human behaviour and objects of scrutiny, continually negotiating and reinterpreting our research, our subjects, and ourselves. Ever the "school of hard knocks", the field sometimes spits us out and demands we begin again. For Moïse, the "field", the fumbling comedy/tragedy that is ethnographic research, not only found him, but transformed him from a young, novitiate anthropologist into a "white Cameroonian", advocating for local land management and forest conservation in the Congo Basin. In the "learning fields", research interests, topics, methods, theoretical frameworks, and the ethnographer him/herself are all subject to metamorphosis; we can find ourselves identified as and even transformed into *le blanc Camerounais*, an antelope, or, as Quinlan writes, a *Spāß€min*.

"[I]if aliens are here", Carl Sagan once wrote, "I want to know about them" (1996: p. 73). Sagan would have been delighted to know aliens are here and, according to Robert J. Quinlan, anthropologists are them. Or, at least, they are *Spāß€min*. Using an alien metaphor, Quinlan reflects on the transformation of methods, research, and the researcher, as well as the hazards of ethnographic research, the odd questions researchers often lob at research participants, the "observing and being observed" taking place in the field, and asks, "Why would anyone want me to study them?" Quinlan's instructive and engaging chapter describes his own path into the field(s), and the multiple challenges one can face. Sound advice is woven throughout his essay: keep goals simple, failure/crash landings are inevitable, be open to experience, don't fully trust your "own cultural perception(s)", and remember we may be aliens to others even just a neighbourhood away.

Quinlan also explains (in part) why ethnographers do what they do. Fieldwork is compelling. Fieldwork "puts everything into new perspective". Fieldwork is addictive. And, there are, he goes on to say, "many approaches to feeding a

fieldwork addiction". Having the opportunity to work in many different sites (feeding his addiction, as it were), conducting many different studies, has given Quinlan the wisdom, and edge, of experience. Such as knowing how to ask a question, and understanding that simple responses to questions may cover up the complexity of reality, knowing "not all methods fit all populations or researchers", and knowing, too, mixed and evolving fieldwork methodologies are dependent upon the field site, the research question, the data being sought, the skills, time, and resources available, and whether one is working in teams or alone. He also understands sometimes it is appropriate and necessary to simply leave the field, and conduct another research study in another place, at another time. The "work" and challenge for "Spāß€min", Quinlan further suggests, is to experience fully and observe with care, so that we might see the "possibilities that others miss" (McCrae and Costa, 1997). Perhaps, much like a child.

Children, Carl Sagan believed, "are natural born scientists – although heavy on the wonder side and light on the scepticism" (1996: p. 322). And, as Victoria Reyes-García found, they make great little natural born anthropologists. Oblivious to the pressures of academic research and scholarly demands, global economic-political disparities, climate change, what's culturally appropriate or not, and many other "adult" stressors, kids, as Sagan writes, "are curious, intellectually vigorous. Provocative and insightful questions bubble out of them. They exhibit enormous enthusiasm" (p. 322). Just the mindset needed for successful ethnographic research: enthusiasm, curiosity, the ability to pose interesting and insightful questions (over and over again, "but why?"), and a no-nonsense-stumble-down and get-back-up approach to life.

Reyes-García (and her partner, Vincent Valdez), collected ethnobotanical knowledge data from the Tsimane', a hunter-horticulturalist society in the Bolivian Amazon. They "quickly fell in love" with the rural, intimate lifestyle of the Tsimane', and inspired by the families around them decided to start a family. Soon, their firstborn, Clara, was absorbed into the extended household and cultural life of Marta, her Tsimane' "babysitter". As a toddler, Clara quickly picked up the Tsimane' language, behaviours, and customs, often helping herself to food in her friends' homes, playing with the other toddlers, and reporting on the happenings in the other Tsimane' households. And, shockingly for her mother, Clara was calling out the names of plants, demonstrating a grasp of Tsimane' ethnographic knowledge Reyes-García was so very interested in. These observations of her little daughter's easy familiarity of Tsimane' language and culture led Reyes-García to begin exploring the transmission of cultural knowledge. How was Clara learning? From whom was she learning? When do Tsimane' parents start teaching their children? How does the "process of social reproduction" occur? She adapted her research, and research methods, to reflect provocative lines of inquiry based upon what she saw happening before her.

Some years and another daughter later (Lea), Reyes-García reasoned it seemed to be that children learn from other children. Siblings, like Clara, Lea, and later Ana, pass on a "considerable amount" of knowledge to each other. Mothering in

the field (and inspired by observing her own children) prompted her investigation into the acquisition of cultural knowledge – how, when, and through whom does transmission occur? Continuing this line of inquiry, Reyes-García now supervises graduate students in India and Africa, who've provided "further evidence of the importance of child to child (horizontal) transmission of cultural knowledge".

Anyone wanting to learn how to be a good field researcher should spend time watching little kids explore and interact with the world. As the field teaches and guides us, so too do our children.

Chronicling the metamorphosis of his research interests and methods, Akira Takada tells a fascinating story of how, with detailed observations, he endeavoured to understand the "subtlety of the interactions" through which the San children living in the central part of the Kalahari Desert, derive meaning from, and construct reality through, their interactions within the immediate socio-cultural and natural environment. Shifting from individualistic theorizing to an analytical approach he refers to as the "anthropology of interaction", he investigates the developmental process of socialization among San children. Providing examples of this approach, Takada demonstrates how paying attention to the minute details of interaction between individuals reveals how San children learn to navigate, and "(re) generate" culturally specific activities and patterns within the social, and natural, environment.

Over the course of many years of field studies in the Kalahari, Takada has observed the rapid changes occurring within San society, but writes of his new appreciation for the creative adaptiveness of the San and their "evolving", relationship with the natural environment. He ends his chapter with advice to young researchers, whose career paths "have become far narrower", with "high expectations for achievement" (see also Moïse, Chapter 7). His counsel is for graduate students to be themselves, like the San, adaptive and creative. Facing the adversities of (academic) life, as Takada writes, requires a willingness to be open to the "occasional deviations" from the research plan, to new experiences, to the many challenges, and quiet joy, of fieldwork.

Dangerous fields

Fieldwork, as Nancy Howell clearly demonstrates, can be not only joyous, but also risky. Howell's chapter details the "story behind the story" leading to her important study of the hazards of fieldwork contained in her 1990 American Anthropology Association (AAA) report, *Surviving Fieldwork* (I *highly* recommend it for anyone heading into the field). In bravely sharing her tragic, and very personal experience, she raises the consciousness of inexperienced researchers entering the field unaware and unprepared. Nancy Howell's chapter provides essential knowledge about the many and varied threats to personal safety new fieldworkers (or their research participants, see Crittenden, Chapter 15) may face, even in "safe" settings (Williams et al., 1992).

The perils confronted during fieldwork may include, but certainly are not limited to: infectious and parasitic disease, violence, shootings, car and plane

crashes, accidents, physical and mental illnesses (Howell covers culture shock, depression, and anxiety in her 1990 report). Discussions of and preventative steps suggested for violence, terror, personal injury, illness, or death, need to begin in graduate fieldwork courses, be written about in methodological literature, and become openly shared throughout the larger academic community of field researchers via seminars, publishing, or professional meetings (see also Kovats-Bernat, Chapter 12). In order to engage properly and prepare students for the risks of the field, we as writers, teachers, and seasoned field researchers, need to raise the awareness of the existence of field hazards, and offer preventative measures to minimize the risks. While dangers to personal safety are site, community, and country specific, the adaptive strategies and methods of risk reduction in the field should begin in the classroom (Howell, 1990; Kovats-Bernat, 2002).

Drawing upon his twenty-five years of experience working with street children in Port-au-Prince, Kovats-Bernat richly captures the intensity and stress of fieldwork in Haiti, reflexively acknowledging how often the reality of lived experience is kept "secret", edited out of "anthropological theory, methods, ethics and text" (Kovats-Bernat, 2002: p. 1). "Dangerous fields", to Kovats-Bernat, are those field sites where the risks and threats to the "safety, security and well-being" of anthropologists and research participants are profound, persistent, and demand the anthropologist either, "negotiate or fall victim to them". Given the myriad issues facing the world in the twenty-first century, anthropologists are increasingly conducting fieldwork in perilous areas, such as Port-au-Prince, communities fraught with conflict, violence, political instability, disease, and poverty (see also Atran, 2010). Ethnographic work carried on under these conditions, the lived experience of anthropology on the frontline, exacts a physical, mental, and emotional toll. The human self cannot reason away what has been seen, heard, felt, and experienced. We do better as fieldworkers when we are aware our lives are forever infused with the harsh lessons learned and memories of work in dangerous fields.

Ethics, advocacy, and other everyday moral dilemmas of research

Literally every day in the field there are likely to be not only difficulties, sometimes dangers, but certainly moral dilemmas and ethical concerns (see also AAA, 2000; Cassell and Jacobs, 1987). For instance, many times during my fieldwork in Central and East Africa, I've seen sick babies, children, and adults, some near death – should I give them medications or not? I've seen women and children being hit or beaten – how do I intervene, should I? How? Will my intervention help or make the situation worse? When working for the WHO during the Congo Ebola outbreak, we met the healer responsible for organizing the deaths of four teachers, we had to ask ourselves, given this knowledge, how could we possibly collaborate with an assassin? As anthropologists what could we recommend to the WHO what the future role of healers working with international teams during outbreaks might be?

In an Ethiopian orphanage where I have been conducting research, I found most of the children there had mothers and fathers, and/or extended families. They were social orphans. Many of those same mothers and fathers expressed extreme sadness in having felt that the best choice they could make for their child's survival was to give them away.

Promised by "baby brokers", and/or adoption agencies and owners of the orphanages that not only would their child be given a better life abroad, but the parents were assured of being able to see their children again, and they'd be given money so they could provide a better life for their remaining children. One young unwed mother saved up for a bus ride into town to visit her one-month-old baby girl she'd relinquished to the orphanage. She was certain her child would someday return to visit her. Should I have told her the chances weren't so great? Many of the parents I spoke to believed they were giving their children to a family, which they, as the child's biological parents, would remain a part of forever. The grief they experienced was raw and hard as time passed and they discovered the reality: the ties to their children were forever severed. Many of the parents asked if I could find information about their child, or asked if I knew how to get in touch with the adoptive parents, or if I could somehow get a photo of their child. Do I question those adoptive parents and agencies making promises that aren't kept? Do I try in some way to hold accountable, to question, and to make public their actions?

Other babies in the orphanage had been abandoned, often alongside a busy road where they'd be sure to be seen and rescued. I'd heard about a few babies who'd been killed: do I also speak to those mothers and fathers? I learned I had to be very careful in the questions I asked about these sensitive topics. I was also given the opportunity to interview people known to be involved in child trafficking. It was dangerous, I turned it down. I learned I had to be flexible, honest, respectful, and I had to choose my battles. I think it is important to know what you can and cannot do, to know your own limits. Contributing author Kovats-Bernat once said sometimes the best we can do is write what we experience, what we observe, and let others hear the stories we've been told.

Thomas N. Headland, along with his wife Janet, share a few of their stories of the experiences they had raising a family in the remote Philippine rainforest. They lived on and off for forty-eight years in an Agta village, learning the language, developing an orthography, creating and publishing a bilingual dictionary, and, while working for the Summer Institute of Linguistics, translating the Bible into the Agta language. The Headlands tell of the difficulties of "embracing" new perspectives and culture: including sleeping practices and customs of sharing of food. It is often adapting to the most basic of living practices that become the most frustrating, daily challenges to the ethnographer – sharing or not sharing, eating foods outside ones' own food categories (e.g. caterpillars, snakes), sleeping, bathing, using the toilet … (see also Bombjaková, Chapter 6). It is remarkably easy, though unintended, as ethnographers to blunder at times in the new social milieu we find ourselves in: we often make huge "goofs". We learn new meanings (e.g. "honour/shame"), we learn new ways of being, new ways of understanding. In his delightful

and poignant chapter, Headland confesses to a serious cultural "goof" in front of a family whose eight-year-old son "stole" a pen from Headland's study. The shamed father reacted by chastising his young son, then a few minutes later chopping down his house and leaving the settlement. Headland describes this as one of his worst experiences in his many years with the Agta.

The Headlands also struggled with the ways of being "contributing members" of the Agta society. Overtime, the Headlands provided medical care, advocated for the needs and lives of Agta individuals; rescuing a young girl from slavery in Manila, fending off (for a time) a logging company's bulldozer, publishing accounts of violence directed at the Agta (including massacres, poisonings, rape, and slavery). The Headlands begin their chapter with a quote, "I have met few ethnographers who were not personally affected in some profound way by their fieldwork" (Agar, 1980). Certainly, it must also be that ethnographers affect, for better or worse, those they live with and "observe" as well.

The stories from the field the Headlands share highlight dilemmas often faced by ethnographers: how should anthropologists give back to host communities? How do we reimburse research participants for their time and contribution to our research, our lives, in "culturally appropriate ways"?

Paul Verdu, a French geneticist at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, recounts his experiences recruiting, obtaining voluntary consent, and compensating Central African research participants for his research project, reconstructing, in part, the "genetic histories of hunter-gatherers and neighboring agricultural groups". The many ethical considerations he encountered during his field study arose in part from the interdisciplinary nature of the scientific research he was conducting. Customizing an informed consent which, (1) communicated their aims and data collection procedures, (2) followed the guidelines and recommendations on the ethical treatment of human subjects; and (3) passed university review boards (IRB) and national ethics committees.

While the informed consent, as Verdu suggests, can help "young researchers build their protocols … break the ice", and, importantly, give "local participants a voice", the document is often recommended to be obtained in "written form". Difficult to do with a "paper-free" non-literate population. Thinking innovatively, Verdu adapted the written form into an oral script which he then videotaped. Once in the field, and as is often the case, other issues quickly arose, namely, were the participants really volunteering? Or is there a subtle interplay of coercion, and/or social and political pressure? How actually volunteer is volunteer participation? Ethical questions that arise nearly daily in the field, however unfortunately, often remain unresolvable. "Bulletproof" informed consent procedure notwithstanding, Verdu then encountered the common and difficult dilemma so often faced; the consideration of "benefits and compensations". He found even the words he used, "work" and "salary" versus "research project" and "time compensation", mattered and determined the success or failure of participant recruitment and data collection. How does the researcher give back to the local people for their time, effort, and participation? What is the "culturally appropriate" currency of compensation? Medicine? Money? Food,

clothing, pots? "Shoats"? Advocacy? How much and to whom? And do we "give back" so we can leave feeling better about what we've taken?

Alyssa N. Crittenden, a behavioural ecologist, writes of similar issues encountered in Tanzania. During an interview with a long-time informant, a Hadza woman poignantly recounted she was "tired of giving parts of her body to strangers". Not knowing the research team the elderly Hadza woman was referring to, or their "collection process", Crittenden was unsure how to respond. Asking if there was anything she could do, the woman replied, "No. Just keep coming back." Soon others gathered around and asked for her guidance and assistance as well. Many of the issues the Hadza women brought up centred around "compensation, communication and approval of research projects by the Hadza themselves".

The interaction was pivotal for Crittenden, who began questioning the "collection and commercialization of nutritional and biomedical data from the world's few remaining foraging populations". Her work took on a different consideration: are there ethical ways to involve and include the host community in the research practice and process? How can informed consent be ethically articulated and obtained? Especially when, as Verdu also noted, the benefits of volunteering as researched subjects are at best limited, and at worst potentially risky. Are we forever debtors then, taking more than we will ever be able to give? Should one form of "giving back" be advocacy? Where does our responsibility towards others begin? Should anthropologists be guided by personal morals, and/or professional ethics, by "a sense of reciprocal obligation to and solidarity with those other human beings of different culture", those whose "differences anthropologists have made the subjects of their scientific careers" (Turner, 2006)? For Crittenden, the answer was simple: she is now a part of a "small group of researchers and human rights activists" working with the Hadza community to help them obtain funding for "capacity building and the creation of their own code of research ethics". In Crittenden's chapter, we see how standing to combat abuses of human rights can be taken on as an ethical responsibility, an obligation based upon our "theoretical convictions" (and, of course, individual convictions, as not all researchers feel comfortable in the role of advocate), we also see demonstrated the courage we sometimes must find in the field (Turner, 2006).

But what if the "field" is a mother–baby behavioural sleep laboratory in the US? And the rights you are courageously fighting for are safe sleeping arrangements and practices for millions of parents and their infants? James J. McKenna writes about the controversial area of research he has conducted within the world of paediatric sleep medicine and the struggles involved in fighting SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) and infant sleep position subcommittee, sponsored by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (a "powerful, ideologically driven medical committee") and the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Much of McKenna's last twenty-eight-plus years has been spent championing the benefits and importance of breastmilk,

safe co-sleeping or what he now calls "breastsleeping" with evidence-based, inter-disciplinary, scientific data sets (resulting in literally dozens of peer-reviewed scientific papers). Defending the rights of parents and infants to co-sleep became an integral and critical part of McKenna's "field" experience, as has communicating the results of that field research to the press and worldwide public; his way, perhaps, of "giving back". And, ultimately, whether our path takes us to a laboratory in the US, a village in Central Africa, or a rain forest in the Amazon, as Paul Verdu so eloquently writes, it is important to remember "our ethical responsibility is to the people we hope to learn from and about".

Conclusion

The path into the field of anthropology begins with long hours spent reading volumes of materials, attending multitudes of classes, symposiums, and professional conferences. Armed with (hopefully) pertinent/intriguing and fundable research questions, grants (which may or may not be approved) are written to obtain funding. Jobs are sought in a narrowing and highly competitive market. All this, so that we, as field "junkies", "Spāß€min", "antelopes", "*patrons*", women viewed as men, or *Mienda*, the many identified selves that we are and become, might get into, and keep returning to, the field. The very reason many of us are anthropologists in the first place (and speaking of "the field" I am referring not only to the "place" but, more importantly at least for myself, the people).

It is, after all, the field which is our true teacher. A mentor challenging us, spitting us out, demanding from us, changing our perspectives, our very selves, forever. The field teaches us to be patient, to observe, to learn how to fail and get up again. The field teaches us how to handle ourselves in dangerous situations, and, too, when it is time to just quit and go home. The field teaches us to understand, accept, and *value* that there are other ways of knowing and being. The field teaches us we can learn not only *about* but *from* the people into whose lives we enter first as strangers, then someday perhaps, as family. The field teaches us to remain open to experience, to learn culturally appropriate ways to negotiate and navigate as individuals through worlds unknown and foreign. The field teaches us to question our work, the questions we ask, the methods we use, the permissions we ask to be granted, the ways in which we live and interact with research participants, the cost to them, and ourselves, of our presence in their homes and communities. The field is a hard teacher, demanding that we as researchers question our personal morals, our professional ethics, and our responsibility to those who share their homes and lives so generously with us. For some researchers, this responsibility is felt as a call to advocacy. Others work to tell those stories that would not otherwise be told, to amplify those voices that are not otherwise heard, imploring others to "Look, come see!"

Ultimately, beyond the lessons and stories shared in the pages of this book, and no doubt like many of the scholars and people from around the world represented

here, my hope is that the work I do, that we all do, will, paraphrasing Ruth Benedict, "make the world a better place, a safer place for all". It is up to each of us to pursue that opportunity (Fessler, 2011: p. 12). And this, I believe, is the most important secret of all.

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PART I

Paths into the field

1

LEARNING FIELDS

Vishvajit Pandya

In 1983, soon after I defended my research proposal, the Department's Chairperson handed me an envelope containing a letter that looked like an old colonial decree. It was on the official departmental letterhead, with a golden embossed seal at the top, typed neatly and presented ceremonially with a small trimmed ribbon. That moment was probably a degree less in excitement than the actual moment in the future when the doctoral degree would be conferred on me. The content of the letter declared I was a doctoral candidate on fieldwork among the Andaman Islanders (Ongees) in the Bay of Bengal and that any help extended for my study would be much appreciated. As the letter was ceremoniously handed over at the departmental seminar room, faculty members reminded me of the cardinal rules of doing fieldwork. The first of these was never to get politically involved with any one group or individual in the context of conflict and, second, never ever get emotionally entangled with any member of the community at the field site. And, last but not least, was to keep in mind that one had to return from field and write up a thesis. This marked my "*rites de passage*" (van Gennep, 1960), I was now to be separated from my cloistered existence in a world class academic department and enter the space of a community of hunter-gatherers, on an island tucked away in the Bay of Bengal, several thousand kilometres away from the Indian mainland. I was, in brief, about to meet the ninety-eight odd Ongees who were confined to a protected Tribal Reserve on the island of Little Andaman.

The long walk into the field

In September of 1983 I landed at a small sleepy port town called Hut Bay in Little Andaman. The town used to have electricity provided by a gasoline generator for five hours after sunrise and two hours after sunset. Around the eight-square kilometre town was a government-owned red oil plantation and a thick forest

providing wood for the matchstick industry on mainland India. Little Andaman island's circular coastline was surrounded by a ribbon-like sand beach intersected by cliffs and small streams. From Hut Bay the local policeman guided me to a stream of the river Chetamaley where a dugout canoe with an outrigger was arranged for me to ride upstream to a trail to Dugong Creek, the Ongee settlement. The *tehsildar*, or the local district official, Mr Neel Ratna, had come to Ramakrishnapuram, a settlement on the fringes of forest, to see me off. Wearing his Khaki pith helmet and escorted by an armed local policeman, he introduced me to two Ongee men who would be my companions on the trek to Dugong Creek. It felt like a brief postcolonial ceremonial occasion. I was introduced to Totanagey and Teelai as an "outsider", known to the senior-most administrators, who had come to learn all about them. Totanagey, who was then a strong young man of about thirty years[1] immediately asked, "so should we bring him back in two days?" The *tehsildar* explained that I would be staying longer and would be not only living with them but like them! He reminded Totanagey that it would be just like it had been when he came to survey their reserve for making maps. Totanagey's next question was, if he was alone, where would my supplies come from and who would make my food? Neel Ratna, who had been convinced that I would manage without any assistance by non-tribal orderlies, reassured Totanagey that I would fend for myself in exactly the same way as the Ongees did. "After all he is here to learn your ways, help him to learn well!"

My sealed university letter was apparently of no help and my zeal to be a counter-colonialist had compelled me not to take any field assistants. Totanagey, the strong fellow, was associated with the local Medical Department of the Andaman and Nicobar tribal welfare administration. He had learned a smattering of Hindi from his interactions with the local welfare officers. His job was to bring Ongees out of the forest to a local medical facility and offer them first-aid material in case of small injuries or seek out a government doctor to organize medical check-ups. Totanagey always had a smiling face and his deep-set eyes reassured that "all was well". Teelai, in contrast, was eldest among the ninety-eight or so Ongees at Dugong Creek. The pepper curls on his head had turned white and he had a few strands of hair on his face, a rarity among Ongee men. On the day I was introduced to these men, Teelai was returning to Dugong Creek after getting stiches removed from his forehead at the Hut Bay government hospital. Henceforth both he and Totanagey were going to be my "*Eneyobey*" my teachers, guides, and points of contact for all matters pertaining to my new life in the forest. I now knew only two out of the ninety-eight Ongees, thanks to the local *tehsildar*, Mr Neel Ratna. My introduction to the ninety-six other members of the community and the unknown depths of the forest still awaited, dependent on the goodwill of Teelai and Totanagey.

All of a sudden I felt as though my mind and body were overwhelmed by feelings of foreboding and anxiety and bombarded with a welter of sensorial experiences I hadn't felt before. Was the flimsy dugout canoe safe? Was I sure that I wanted to leave the last point of the known world behind me and venture into a

place where I didn't even know how to look for food or water? I didn't know the language and I had no friends to call upon or family to return to. New Delhi seemed light years away from Little Andaman!

Yet nothing was as quiet and peaceful as the forest I had just entered, leaving behind the small outpost of Ramakrishnapuram. The distant sound of a transistor radio from the last teashop at Ramakrishnapuram faded out as did the view of the magisterial presence of the *tehsildar* with his pith helmet. From this point on there was no government, no Indian state, only the possibility of the colonial romance of doing ethnography – and it was exciting. Yet I constantly asked myself was it right to just go and impose myself on the Ongees? Would I not be badgering them constantly, seeking answers to questions which may or may not be theirs at all? All this was generating an emotional, intellectual churning and turmoil in me. I began to feel the "isolating" effects of "fieldwork" even before it could begin. I had come overloaded with ethnographic ideas and expected to gather more, but with whom would I talk "anthropology"? It is only now I realize that one is never really out of "doing" anthropology.

Most often fieldwork starts with the chatter of ethnography but soon enough gives way to long moments of silence when the peculiar but compelling experience of conversing with oneself takes over. These isolating moments of talking to oneself about anthropology and the experience of doing fieldwork in any location is most often a disturbing experience, a predicament very difficult to share. Yet the myth of fieldwork endures, as an exemplary human experience akin to a romantic adventure, a heroic act, or a sort of morality play wherein a foolhardy or self-inflicted misery is seen as a route towards self-realization. The actual predicament of trying to accomplish anthropological fieldwork often leads to situations the fieldworker is loath to share. My cohorts and I have often wondered what happened to our classmates who returned from the field to write up their theses. Of course, some went "native" and anthropology ceased to be a "calling" for them. Just as doctors are reluctant to talk about a failed treatment or procedure, anthropologists seldom talk about the miseries and failures that confront them in the field. In fact, the extremely personal and often ambivalent experience of doing fieldwork engenders an aura of secrecy. To start fieldwork is difficult and involves the tortuous process of demolishing many pre-conceived ideas about oneself as well as the culture and society one intends to be absorbed in.

Totanagey pushed the canoe through the murky waters with a pole. As the water rushed towards the rapidly receding sea, drawn out almost forcibly by the low tide, my poetic imagination gave way to rational observation; I began to see the waters more closely. At first, I just saw a lot of waste, paper and plastic, wood, and then vast swathes of industrial sludge followed soon after by a thinner layer of dead leaves and small logs. I clinched my backpack and camera tightly to divert my mind from the dreadful thought that I couldn't swim! I watched disturbed mud skippers scurry about and occasional crocodiles slowly swagger out of tangled mangroves and wade into the stream. I wanted to photograph the crocodiles but I was too concerned about the precariousness of my seat and the constant seepage

of water into the dugout canoe. My fellow traveller Teelai did his best to keep bailing out the water as it trickled in.

As we glided through the forest I heard small creatures constantly moving around and making sounds. I had no idea of what I was being bitten or stung by all this while. There were little red humps all over my arms. My fear lingered on the crocodiles that swam along the canoe, ergonomically designed for the Ongee, who never grow taller than five-and-a-half feet, and into which I could barely fit my legs. My mind conjured strange images of a smoked ham leg next to a slicer at a butcher's counter every time the crocodiles splashed water nearby. The apprehensions were far too many and combined with thoughts of both present dangers and those that might befall in the coming days. I started thinking how I would be moved out if I fell ill. What if it was a debilitating illness that could strike me for life? Why did I come to do fieldwork here after so many mild (and stern) warnings from friends and well-wishers? But I felt I was giving up too soon. The first steps into the field are difficult for all anthropologists and it would only be a matter of time before things would begin to look less terrifying. I resolved not to fall ill, to complete my work, and to walk back into the room where I had defended my proposal to finally present my thesis.

After two hours in the canoe and still only halfway to our destination, my companions suddenly got into an intense argument and we slowed to a stop. At the end of this debate, Totanagey informed me that due to the low tide the canoe could not be pushed further and we would now have to walk. I had no option but to abide by my initiators/teachers. I had imagined that much like Malinowski among the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski, 1922, 1935), I would just land at Dugong Creek and enter into instant "ethnographic relations" with the Ongees. But once again my romantic preconception was rudely shattered. I was completely dependent on my two new friends to at least reach Dugong Creek, and then of course would have to further surrender to their will to survive in the forest.

Before we started walking towards the settlement, Totanagey asked me if I knew how to cut up a wild boar, then if I knew where to locate potatoes in the forest. He winced at my hesitant responses and soon switched into a commandeering tone and said – "Tomorrow at sunrise we will start walking back. You can return to your home, you cannot be with us if you are of no use." I gasped at this sudden hint of rejection but realized that Totanagey was telling me that I had to have a role to play, some way of "participating" as a member of their community or else I couldn't stay with them. He was merely confirming what was an essential component of my ethnographic training. Mere "observation" would be a very colonial hegemonic practice. To paraphrase Malinowski (1935) and Urry (1996); I could not just sit in "my tent and watch the natives go to garden". I wondered if Malinowski ever went out to do gardening. Did Radcliffe-Brown venture beyond his "verandah" and go hunting pigs? I had no idea how or where to dig potatoes in the Ongee forest. I loved my pork but always bought my favourite portion from the array of meats in my neighbourhood supermarket. How would I know how to hunt, kill, and butcher a wild boar? I realized that nothing really prepares you in terms of field methods and probably

methods are different in different contexts! Perhaps this was ethno-methodology – methodology derived from the field of study.

Before we started the walk towards Dugong Creek we sat around and had some water and biscuits I had brought in my backpack. The biscuits had become soggy by now and were covered with an army of fierce red ants. I realized I was in a world where I had no control. The place around me looked deceptively calm, green, and soothingly moist. But on a closer look every nook and cranny of the forest floor was alive with the sounds of ceaseless creeping, crawling, or buzzing. After a brief halt, we were on the trail again. I kept asking myself, "Why am I here? Do I really want to endure what lies ahead?"

I had also begun to feel a bit alarmed when I thought of what Totanagey had told me a few hours before. Even before I could start my fieldwork or get acquainted with the Ongees, I was told that I would be sent back, as I was evidently of no use to them. They clearly saw me as a "sloppy city boy", some administrative official from Port Blair who was just going to survey parts of the reserve and leave. They expected me to spend a few hours with them and ask them what provisions they wanted from the government. They had no idea that I was about to impose myself on them. My explicit ignorance about anything related to hunting or gathering was perhaps rightfully deemed a liability at the campsite. All my images of my own self as a student of Anthropology, trained in one the best schools in the world came to naught. I felt like a silly good for nothing that would be summarily returned to the sender without any regrets.

The other thought that constantly troubled me was the realization there was no single method of doing ethnography: one had to constantly learn from the field to come up with a method. I had read the classical canon, learned about diverse cultures, written a research and grant proposal but never thought I would have had to prepare myself to hunt and gather too. One could learn how to observe but how, when, and where one might "participate" seems to me to be a far more important problem to ponder before entering the field.

The thought of being sent back and the unending trail made my pace slower and heavier. I was trailing far behind my companions who walked through the thickets with astounding agility. I kept asking Totanagey how far? Each time he would smilingly stop and hack away the branches that covered my way and gesture me to move on. Teelai, who was behind me, would say irritatingly "*lichuney!*" (a little further ahead!), pouting his lips and motioning forward by thrusting his face out. Frequently I would find myself stumbling as my feet got caught in the vines, undergrowth, and small heaps of decayed leaves along the way. Teelai would rush from the back and extend an arm to help me move on. But they wouldn't stop. It seemed they chose to be oblivious of my precarious situation and just kept insisting that I move along. It had been nearly three hours. While I was dragging myself, the Ongees still had a spring in their steps. As time went by I realized the reason they looked happier and spirited was because they were returning home. I on the other hand was overcome with exhaustion and gloom and pulled down with thoughts of futility.

I tried to cheer myself by remembering that this was no punishment but an ethnographic pilgrimage. This was the same landscape in which E.H. Man (1882), M.V. Portman (1899), and Radcliffe-Brown (1922) had learned about the Andamanese. Now, though, there was so much more to learn. Theory had changed a great deal since Radcliffe-Brown, and so had the Andamanese themselves, now displaced from their original homes in the open forest into a reserve. There were new questions to ask and I felt hopeful I would learn something completely new, but I knew I could learn nothing until I reached the settlement at Dugong Creek.

One thing I realized was that throughout this exercise of walking through the forest, my new Ongee guides and teachers were kidding me by telling me constantly that the final destination was nearby. Perhaps it was really not that nearby and they were merely goading me to keep me moving. I began to feel that all the maps were wrong and the government official who had probably never left his office had been having fun with me. I kept repeating all this, muttering and cursing all along. My new shoes were aggravating the pain I had begun to feel in my feet and the discomfort of walking through the forest without a break was compounded by tiny lice and fine needle-like leeches that began to stick on to my body, seemingly with glee.

Why was I the only one disturbed? The Ongees were attacked by the leeches too, but they seemed unperturbed. I couldn't even feel victimized. I kept trying to remind myself that I wasn't the only one who ever had to endure the discomfort of being drenched in sweat and blood in the hot humid forest, and that things would get better once I started doing the actual ethnographic fieldwork. After walking for about three hours, Teelai and Totanagey decided to stop and rest under the shade of a coconut grove close to the coastline now glowing in bright sunlight. Just beyond the grove was the deep green of the thick forest, out of which flowed a stream of water about a foot deep, gurgling and gushing into the calm stretch of the sea. Was this the stream we had been negotiating by canoe, or another? I had no clear understanding and was too tired to look at my maps and compass. Neither did I have sufficient command of the Ongee language to ask where we were and/or how far Dugong Creek was. By that time, I knew their answer would be "*lichuney*", or simply "it's just there". The dark blue hues of the water and the deep green foliage were soothing to the eyes, but my body was unbearably hot. Teelai took out an old dried crab claw from his cloth bag, cleaned it, stuffed it with local tobacco (*tukwegalako*, a form of wild mint), and went in search of a fire to light it. He disappeared into the foliage and returned after about twenty minutes with a small piece of smouldering wood. I yearned to light my own rolled cigarette, but unfortunately the tobacco in my shirt pocket was too damp to light and I had to content myself with some green coconut water.

My entrance into the field was less a rite of passage than one of pushing. I had to push relentlessly, just to keep walking. The Ongees kept on saying the camp was close by, and it felt more and more like they were playing a game, dangling a carrot. As we passed four hours with no camp in sight I kept muttering to myself that something was wrong. Either I was misinformed or my Ongee colleagues

were making a fool of me. Or perhaps the heat, exhaustion, and strangeness of the forest were making me hallucinate. I kept telling myself it was all new and I must learn to trust Totanagey and Teelai. I had come to learn from them, so it would not be right to show my frustration to them. I had walked for nearly five hours and there was no turning back.

According to the district administrator and my maps it should have taken me an "easy" walk of about two hours to reach Dugong Creek, but I had been walking for almost six hours through the day, excluding the thirty-minute break. In order to keep myself going I would stare at the dense canopy over my head, wondering how bits of sunlight struggled to filter through. The shade of the forest notwithstanding, the heat and humidity was intense. It was hard to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes as the forest teemed with life and every now and then I would hear insects and bird calls I had never heard before. I realized that cultural shock is one thing but sensorial overload was much more overwhelming. There were new smells, new sounds, and new colours of green and blue, and, last but not least, new sensations on the skin. I had to slap, itch, brush my arms or legs every moment since entering the forest, never knowing what exactly bit or crawled over me. It was a constant distraction that tore me away from the joys of discovering a new tree, a wild flower, or a bird. There would be moments when even before I could figure out the point from which a bird call wafted into the canopy over my head, all the other bits of noise in the forest would quickly meld into a fluttering that told me that the bird had flown. As an avid bird watcher, the inability to identify the bird would leave me terribly frustrated. I realized how a lush tropical forest that exuded tremendous visual appeal on a National Geographic TV show was in reality both treacherous and irritating.

On the pretext of looking and admiring as well as photographing the world I was entering, I would often try to sneak in a short break for myself. I would persuade Teelai and Totanagey to stop for a bit by pointing to my camera, then quickly try to change the lenses from wide to tele in the attempt to seek out the source of a strange and peculiar birdcall I had just heard. This would often prove to be a futile exercise but it was certainly the best way to buy a moment of respite from the drudgery of hauling my backpack and pushing my tired and sweaty body along what seemed to be a never-ending trail. I often made the mistake of looking up at the forest canopy and losing myself in admiration of the lace-like spread of vines or the varied patterns of leaves and forget that the ground I was walking on was full of decaying leaves that covered the bed of thick rattan. Little wonder that my feet would get trapped frequently and I would stumble. Every time I lapsed into this precarious state, however, Teelai would come back immediately and help me stabilize. These were pleasant interludes when even for a few minutes I had the leisure to admire the soaring chape-like architecture of the forest of Gurjan trees with shafts of evening light filtering through what were reminiscent of stained glass windows. But my repeated attempts to take photographs and then losing balance were evidently a source of irritation for both Teelai and Totanagey. They

would talk loudly among themselves in Ongee and perhaps curse me for tagging along with them for no reason. At times, they would break out into bursts of laughter mimicking my sorry state.

Soon darkness began to creep into the forest as the sun disappeared into the western horizon. I saw Teelai coming with a message from Totanagey he had to translate for me. I felt a bit worried, as I was beginning to lose my bearings in the darkness. But Teelai came to offer me advice that would prove valuable for all my time in the forest. Teelai told me with the utmost patience, I must know and learn to walk like an Ongee, and not like an Outsider. He said:

> If you walk with your head held high, like a tall tree looking up all the time – you are bound to stumble and fall! It is always all dark around you in the forest. We learn to walk looking down on the forest floor and to avoid the hollow buttress of the tall and weak trees. We look around us all the time as what we see tells us what is about to come or to be experienced. Every part and place in the forest is filled with something. Our forest is like a honeycomb found on the strong branches of the short trees. Going around from place to place in the forest space means you need to know like us what each part of the comb contains or is filled [*aloogey*] with – these could be wax, eggs, or honey all of which are valued by us in the forest. To be knowledgeable [*eneyobey*] is also to allow oneself to be like a honeycomb. Go around the forest in circles and get yourself filled with what is contained in each part. One should not aspire to be a tall tree [*talucheye*], as it stands arrogantly away from ground and could fall easily in the face of a storm. No honeycombs will ever be found on such trees! Always look down as you walk the ground for that's the right way to know the forest and become knowledgeable. By walking with your eyes on the tall trees you can only know what is above you and not what is around you. One becomes an *eneyobe* not by looking upwards in the forest, but by immersing oneself in it.

When Teelai told me all this in 1983 I did not realize it was indeed the first step in my learning from the field in the world of the Ongees. It took me over five months of compiling meanings of each and every Ongee word I heard to truly make sense of Teelai's lesson about the forest. What I thought at the time was a mere instruction on how to walk in the forest was an insight into the knowledge of the forest through the metaphor of honeycombs (*tanja*) – what Ongees regard as knowledge, what being knowledgeable means for them, and above all the process and practice of building knowledge that allows one to become an *eneyobe*, a knowledgeable person. I wondered about possibilities for exploring the Ongee processes of gathering and transforming information into knowledge – an ethnomethodology of Ongee knowledge-making practice. It seemed to me that knowledge for the Ongees had implications not only for everyday survival in the forest, but as articulations of structures in practice and practices of structure.

After receiving instructions from Teelai, translated by Totanagey for me, I made some quick notes listing words and phrases like walking, tall trees, honeycombs, knowledge by looking around, as prompts in my small pocket notebook for later transcription into full field notes.

Learning from the field

Shortly after another short walk of about 400 metres both Teelai and Totanagey started beating the buttresses of tall trees and shouting "*Enenene chera! Inketeu! Inketeu*" (Outsider coming! All go away! Go away!). I gathered we had finally reached our destination. On reaching the Dugong Creek settlement, I stood at the edge watching each one of about fifty Ongee men, women, and children come out of their "homes" to take their first look at me. Within a few minutes, I was stunned to see all of them slowly leave the campsite, leaving only a light trail of smoke from an abandoned fireplace. They had doused the fire just before they prepared to leave. For about twenty minutes I sat completely mesmerized as the Ongees appeared in front of my eyes with their bodies and faces smeared in paint, carrying bows and arrows, baskets slung around their shoulders, and children tied to their backs. It seemed as if I were swept back into 1908, seeing the same images Radcliffe-Brown had seen and reported in his account, *The Andaman Islanders* (1922). It seemed there was no change in the appearance of the Ongees even from the photographic archives dating back to Portman (1899). Anthropology had moved on, its disciplinary questions and methods evolved. India was no more a colony, and I was neither a colonial administrator nor a western anthropologist. But for the Ongees too, life had changed. They had been resettled in a tribal reserve and brought under the state's welfare programme. They received rations and primary healthcare. Many of them had regular interactions with welfare officials on a daily basis and had begun to speak broken Hindi and interacted with a fair degree of confidence with the outsider. In other words, they were no longer completely isolated, hostile, or wary of the outside world (Figure 1.1).

I had thought what I would see would be substantively different from the Ongee world portrayed in the historical accounts. But at that moment it seemed that somehow the Ongee still retained the classic image of the "primitive", "un-changed", and "isolated" hunter-gatherer! Was it because they chose to retain their traditional livelihoods despite the changes wrought in their lives by the state? Or was it because the remoteness of their camp from the settlement made it still difficult for the outsiders to access the region or impose their influences on them in any radical way? Dugong Creek was a lot further out from Ramakrishnapuram, the last main settlement on the fringes of the Reserve on Little Andaman than all the estimates I had made on the basis of information collected from maps and administrators.

As I watched the early ethnographic accounts of the Ongees come alive I could also feel the wary eyes of the Ongees looking upon me as an unwelcome outsider, resembling a bit perhaps the "*sahibs*" who had come to take their blood and hair samples many decades ago. I refer here to the Italian anthropologist Lidio Cipriani,

who did a study on the Ongees in the 1950s (Cipriani, 1966) and set up a camp in Dugong Creek. It perhaps seemed to them that yet another intruder from the outside world had suddenly come to them. Many children and some younger women had never seen an outsider. Some appeared to be fascinated by my "large presence" and the enormous backpack I carried. The children seemed to be more at ease and some among them took a closer look at the backpack, particularly fascinated by the velcro straps that held the pockets closed. They enjoyed the new experience of peeling off the strap and sticking it on all over again.

For others, the hair on my head and face were intriguing, as a physical trait Ongees rarely have body or facial hair. Some even ventured to run their fingers through it. I gave this "presentation of self" as a gesture of surrender in the hope it would convince the Ongee to receive this outsider in their midst. For them I was an "*Enen*", an outsider, much larger than them, lighter in skin tone, and long haired like their spirits. The word *enen* in fact has a double meaning, both "outsider" and "spirit".

The collected group surrounded me for inspection as Teelai and Totanagey gave a dramatic and prolonged account of my walk through the forest, mimicking how I dragged myself, breathing noisily, stumbling several times, and constantly asking them when we would reach Dugong Creek or how far there was to go. All the Ongees kept laughing and asked the old man Teelai to repeat the act again and again. I realized how my discomfiture turned out to be a source of unending mirth for the Ongees. Totanagey would later tell me that he along with Teelai had worked

FIGURE 1.1 October 1983, first day on reaching Dugong Creek.

a plan to make me walk around and around the forest in order to tire me out so that I would give up the idea of living with them for several days. He said that he believed then that I was like most officials from the Andaman and Nicobar administration, who would visit them very briefly, do their study or survey, ask them if they required any provisions, and then quickly move out of the forest. Rarely did anyone wish to come and spend a long period of time with them. It clearly suited them well. When they were told that this time they would be visited by someone who would spend weeks and months with them, they were completely taken aback. He told me that their concerns deepened when they observed my awkward walk through the forest and heard that I wouldn't be able to cut up a pig or dig up potatoes! Totanagey continued, "We wanted to know if you could really be with us and would learn our ways and not just see and go away."

I was touched by Totanagey's candour and, despite the humiliation of being the object of jokes in the camp on my very first day, I suddenly felt that I would be accepted within the community. I let go of any desire to express my irritation or even anger at being duped into an ordeal I could have avoided. My perseverance throughout the day's ordeal was rewarded. I now was able to look forward to fifteen months with the community during which I could learn from them not just about their "culture", but their basic modes of survival. I knew this was going to be difficult given the fact I had to learn to navigate the forest and participate in hunting gathering activities, challenges compounded by my inability to speak the language. I would have to rely on the methodological tools of field linguistics.

Teelai, a respected elder, instructed the community to treat me like a child, but an older one. I would be entrusted with responsibility. I was told that I would have to look after the young Ongees who couldn't accompany their parents on their daily hunting and gathering trips. I was not only surprised, but also deeply grateful. This baby-sitting role was not only an honour but, practically speaking, an excellent opportunity for participant observation among the Ongees (see Pandya, 1991).

After about six or seven months of becoming connected to the community through my interactions with the Ongee children, I gradually learned to cut up a hunted boar, locate edible tubers, and walk through the forest without tripping. Early in 1985, I left my field of learning to return to the university and transform the ethnographic scribbles I had made in my pocket notebook into fully fledged field notes, which I eventually compiled together in what would become my thesis and then a book (Pandya, 1993). By the time the book was published I received news that Teelai had passed away. I could never forget how he and Totanagey had taught me to be patient, to observe, and to learn. I would also come to realize the value of what one learns from the field does not diminish even after you've left it.

My thoughts turned back to Dugong Creek in January 2005 as the devastating impact of the earthquake and tsunami that hit the coasts of South and Southeast Asia came across the news. Massive destruction was reported for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, including significant geomorphological changes, large-scale

destruction of property, erosion of vast swathes of the coastline, and entire habitats and communities swept away. A friend of mine from the US called me while I was watching reports of the tsunami on BBC television and tried to prepare me for what looked like at that moment to be a real possibility. He warned me that I might have to be ready to "get re-trained as marine archaeologist or anthropologist as my 'field' may have disappeared into the seas!" I was, of course, furious at the suggestion and at the fact that a disaster such as this could generate humour. But I also felt a chill down my spine when I wondered if at all and how indeed a small group of ninety-eight Ongee men, women, and children could have survived. The bits of news that came from the Island were horrific. Several non-tribal settlers in Little Andaman had just been swept away by nearly twenty feet high waves that lashed on its coasts that morning.

After a week of little news from the Islands since the waves struck Dugong Creek in the wee hours of Boxing Day, I finally received some encouraging reports. The local administration indicated in all probability all the Ongees were safe. It was reported they had moved away from their camps at the shoreline and taken shelter on higher ground. I felt an enormous sense of relief.

Part anxiety and part affection for Totanagey and his community compelled me to visit Dugong Creek a couple of weeks later. I thought of the children and hoped and prayed they were with their parents. I recalled my times as baby-sitter in the forest and wonderful moments I spent with the children while their parents were away. In the course of a few weeks I had become their *eneyobey* (teacher), but they had also become mine.

I held on to these thoughts as I prepared for the journey back to Dugong Creek, now reportedly damaged and vulnerable. The tsunami had destroyed many of the creeks in the forest and brackish water rushed into the forest floors. Much of the humus on the forest floor had turned into sludge. On reaching the hilly area about seven kilometres away from the old Dugong Creek settlement I found the Ongees huddled together under a blue plastic covered camp waiting for relief supplies. Totanagey rushed out to greet me and I asked him if anybody was killed when "their land became water". Totanagey smiled wanly and reiterated what Teelai had told me on my first visit to the field, "walk with your eyes on the ground and you will know what your next step will yield. Don't be like a tree!"

Unlike the *enen* (outsiders), Totanagey and a few others had observed something unusual after the earthquake. While walking along the coast they saw that the water had suddenly receded way beyond the distance that marked the waterline at low tide a few minutes after the ground shook. He said they knew that the sea had gone that far only to return and with full fury take over the land that had shaken and pushed it away. They decided then to get together and move deeper into the forest to higher ground! He told me that was how they "all are safe and alive!" (see Pandya, 2005). The practice of walking and observing the tide and water levels every day had formed an observed knowledge baseline for the Ongees (Figure 1.2). They knew the pattern well and therefore how to interpret the anomaly.

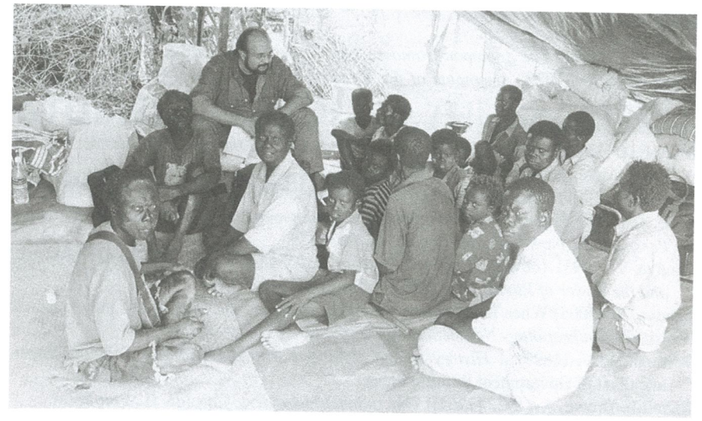

FIGURE 1.2 January 2005, Ongee camp set up after the tsunami of December 2004.

Concluding remarks

My brief conversation with Totanagey once again reminded me that my fieldwork among the Ongees that began with a long walk through the forest had never ended. Each time I revisited Dugong Creek I took with me the teachings from my first fieldwork. Fieldwork in that sense has no start and no end. I also realized there could be no "one" method for doing fieldwork, as each time one enters the field it throws new questions that demand new methods, much like each step an Ongee takes in the forest reveals a new turn and a new possibility. It is this capacity to endlessly reflect back on the field whether one is present or absent from it that imparts the excitement of doing anthropology. In the end, is not the method of doing ethnography that remains a secret, for we are open to share it with others, but the experiences of discovering that method that remain with us as "secrets" that are hard to express through words.

Questions for reflection

1 What would your "participation" be, and what would be "observed"?
2 How would you explain the fieldwork you're doing to those you are working with?

Note

1 Totanagey was connected with the government's medical department at Ramakrishnapuram (about twenty kilometres from Dugong Creek.) He would bring patients from the forest or take basic first aid supplies into the forest. This mediating role of his made him fairly knowledgeable about spoken Hindi at the outskirts of the forest.

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2

STUMBLING AROUND THE SACRED

Some personal observations

Benjamin Grant Purzycki

Introduction

One who studies religion must anticipate and learn to accept a few minor occupational hazards. For starters, you have to come to terms with the fact that everyone else is already an expert in what you do. Everyone has an opinion, some story, some experience, or some insight into the sacred. In the field, this remains true for just about everyone except for the laity whom you wish to understand a bit better. While interviewees regularly offer more shrugs than data, everyone else is an endless font of insight and wisdom. Moreover, if you study anything remotely resembling "shamanism" then you're signing yourself up for getting branded as an expert in it even if you deny that you study it. You also might get the distinct pleasure of bumping into people from Western countries who claim they are shamans. Finally, you might have to grapple with the pressure to show more respect to the sacred than most devout traditional religious people ever would. In what follows, I detail some examples of the aforementioned hazards in hopes of demonstrating that they make this bizarre line of work wonderful, fascinating, and often quite funny, at least in hindsight.

Why I might study religion

There's something about us – as a species – that seems to compel us to do all sorts of bizarre things in the hopes that some ethereal agent out there cares and does something about it. There are also innumerable debates and empirical projects seeking to unravel what it is about us that fosters commitment to gods (e.g. Bulbulia, 2008; Frey, 2010; Voland and Schiefenhövel, 2009; Watts and Turner, 2014). Neurological and cognitive approaches focus on the mental architecture making religious concepts possible but focus too little on content and behaviour.