**Thinking about what you did leads to doing what you need to do to get it done**

Gareth Hamilton

Since finishing my thesis people have asked me, on a significant number of occasions, how long it is, how many words it contains, or how many pages it runs to.  I know rough answers to those questions, but I can tell you to four significant figures, thanks to the Royal Mail's self-service machines, that the hard-bound version weighs 1.379 kg.  Unpackaged, it would cost £5.66 to post within the UK.  However, that is really only a distillation of a much larger mass; I had collected a great deal of qualitative data on which my thesis could have been based.  When it was time to return from my fieldsite in Germany, a very much documentary society, my collection of pamphlets, objects, old books, hard disks, the computer where my photographs and interviews were stored, and - of course - my 'notebooks' of fieldnotes cost a great deal more to send back 'home', even using the cheapest service.  Getting all this stuff down from the fifth floor of a building with no lift confirmed that there was going to be much to get through when I got back!  Well, there is now a thesis.  So I must have done it, as strange as that still sounds to me.  It was a very daunting prospect - extremely daunting.  I wonder what I really did to overcome the fear of approaching this great quantity of all so interesting but all so terrifyingly voluminous information.  Let us think about it together.  But there is a question that needs to be asked first: 'What did you learn on your fieldwork?'.  It is the question to I think all ethnographic researchers need to ask on their return too.

A socio-cultural anthropologist, or anyone doing ethnographic fieldwork, experiences a place, events, interacts with people and much more.  Imagine yourself saying to yourself : 'You went.  There was a point to that.  You were not merely a data collector.  You were a data experiencer.  What did you experience?  Tell me.'  And indeed, that really is the point.  It is the best place to start dealing with that mound of data, even if the question is asked a few weeks after adjusting to life back home.  The alternative approach, and one that I suspect leads to avoidance of the problem, is having the urge to 'code', and with that to 'code' everything, before doing anything else.  It seems like productivity, but is really procrastination.  What is the point of sending an intelligent, feeling human - with an analytical brain - somewhere to conduct ethnography if a robot with a microphone for ears and a camera or two for eyes is really all that is needed?  And that human who went somewhere (even if down the street), and who put in all that effort, has now a story to tell.  It may well be a story with references, theory, some figures, some contextual information, but telling what happened is the key.  Lo and behold, it is a type of narrative - but at the beginning a simple (if, quite understandably, possible cloudy and messy) one!  Think of the research questions posed before collecting data; what are the big things, the big topics, that you really need to talk about based on your experiences that deserve being dealt with in some detail.  Writing them down in some form, then adding a bit more detail, is the key to the answer.  Thinking of ways they are linked is also useful.  All this together is alternatively known as an thesis plan.  Do it first.  It is the key to all the writing.  It gets your mind working, it gets the sense of possible directions in gear, and it starts the process off with a relatively painless task.  It also uses your biggest asset: you.

The technique is really the key to all the chapters you write as well.  The question is once again that of what needs to be told in this chapter to deal with the topic, and what is the best order to place it in.  Of course, in general, when you code, transcribe interviews, re-read fieldnotes, re-examine photographs or documents, you may find that your memory is 'wrong' - but there is nothing 'wrong' in that.  Re-adapt in this iterative process.  However, your impression as a human participant is important.  Why did you think what you did?  Does it appear other people think it?  Why do they?  What does that reveal?  It is also the task at the end of the process, namely when the abstract is to be written and placed at the front of the thesis!  It came quite clear to me on another occasion, or occasions, when I went back to my fieldsite after initial submission.  Having to tell the people I had written about what I had written about them and the place they live really made me realise that it really is all about telling a story.  At times, they would interrupt and comment, and remind me of experiences together, and it made me feel better about approaching the viva.  And indeed, as far as I can remember 'what is your thesis about?' was the first question - either that, or I read that in a guide to vivas!  When I think about it, the answer to the question now is of course much more detailed and intricate that I could have offered when I came back from the field.  It developed through thought and time as those 1.379 kg were produced.  However, the answers at the two points are - in spirit - much the same.  It really is worthwhile asking yourself that question at the beginning, the end, and at strategic points in-between!

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