

A sixth kind of legitimate fieldwork in social anthropology: cross-disciplinary

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Abstract. I present the concept of cross-disciplinary legitimacy: the fieldwork which an anthropologist has done is considered legitimate fieldwork in another discipline as well. Also, I present a puzzle regarding how the anthropologist untrained in another discipline can do such fieldwork and a response.

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In the arena I got a bloodied tooth

Thus I called from the phone booth

In a handout, I identified five kinds of legitimate fieldwork in social anthropology (Edward 2022). For each kind there is a concept of that kind. But is there a sixth kind and a corresponding sixth concept? It seems that there can be a sixth kind, which I call “cross-disciplinary legitimacy.” The anthropologist who does fieldwork amongst a tribe inevitably deals with topics from other disciplines, such as economics, religion, and even psychoanalysis. Cross-disciplinary legitimacy is when the fieldwork is legitimate not just by the internal standards of anthropologists, of that discipline, but also by the standards of another discipline. (The obvious standards to apply are ethical and epistemic.)

But the concept of cross-disciplinary legitimacy, leaving aside cases of relevant training in another discipline, brings with it a puzzle composed of these propositions:

- (a) The anthropologist must address topics which belong to other disciplines.
- (b) They can only do legitimate fieldwork in another discipline if they have been trained in that discipline.

(c) They have not been trained in another discipline.

As a concrete illustration of the puzzle, what does one make of Bronislaw Malinowski's 1927 response to psychoanalysis: that the alternative social structure amongst the Trobriand Islanders gives rise to an alternative complex to the Oedipal complex? ("Yes, yes, I know, I'm suffering from it"?)

A response to the puzzle is to make an analogy with someone experiencing an itch. Suddenly they examine the portion of skin which is itching more carefully, with their eyes too, and they make an assessment of it: an insect bite, say! Analogously, the anthropologist draws the attention of the academic system to something that merits further attention and then other specialists examine what is there. But this response by itself does not tell us which proposition from the puzzle, if any, to give up.

References

Edward, T.R. 2022. On the meaning of "legitimate fieldwork". Available at:

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Malinowski, B. 1927. *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Company.