

## How much was known about Bacup beforehand?

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*Abstract.* This paper considers Jeanette Edwards' claim that she knew little about the town of Bacup beforehand, in response to the question of why she did fieldwork there. I draw attention to dissatisfaction with this answer as avoiding the question. Also, there is an argument that she and you and I all know a lot about Bacup, compared to various groups studied by social anthropologists.

*Draft version:* Version 3 (1st December 2022, quotation correction)

*“When you should be making a pitiful Donkey Kong,  
Writing this paper is wrong!”*

In her book *Born and Bred*, Jeanette Edwards reports that she is often asked, “Why Bacup?” More fully, why did she do fieldwork in the English town known as Bacup? She writes:

...it seems to me that the question, ‘Why Bacup?’ requires an answer which identifies a claim to special status. I usually point to the accidental and adventitious when describing how I came to work in Bacup and emphasize that I knew little about the town before living there. (2000: 8)

There is a paragraph break before “I usually,” by the way, which I have removed. I want to raise two worries about what Jeanette Edwards says, both lesser worries perhaps.

**Worry 1: question not answered.** Here is a fictional dialogue, featuring Edwards and a character I call “N.”

*N:* Why Bacup?

*Jeanette Edwards*: I knew little about the town before living there.

*N*: Yes, okay, but I know little about komodo dragons. I cannot put that on a funding application for studying them. Presumably, there is some reason for why it is thought you would add to the collective knowledge of anthropology as a discipline by doing fieldwork there. What's the reason?

Dialogue over. The "What's the reason?" is a clarification of "Why Bacup?" A worry I have is that the answer Jeanette Edwards gives is really a veiled way of signalling, "I don't explain to someone like you, N, what the 'official' reasons are or what I think good official reasons would be, or how my personal lack of knowledge about Bacup beforehand relates to contributing to collective knowledge. Not what you would call an explanation anyway."

I think it is a good idea to address someone like N, or address them more directly if there is an answer buried somewhere in the text. Hers is not an especially strange standpoint and it is just part of having a more open and democratic discipline, even if it leads to more tears. Perhaps there are questions for which it makes sense not to take up this direct approach, but it seems reasonable regarding this one. However, I fear I will be regarded as clueless in, or on, this matter. And I fear the kind of anthropology offered will be different if this is the explanatory demand. ("If you want explanations like this, then cognitive science. For my kind, you have to pay a price there.")

**Worry 2: she knows a lot.** I wish to raise another worry about Edwards' usual reply to the question, or my trimmed version of it. I have never been to Bacup but before reading Edwards I would probably count myself as knowing that there are people there who are aware that London is the capital of England, that Manchester has football clubs, that Paul Scholes scored goals,<sup>1</sup> that televisions exist, etc. I know a lot more about people in Bacup than I know about Hageners, say. It is difficult to explain how I know these things, since I

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<sup>1</sup> That Scholes scores goals was sung to me while on a train, but I cannot remember the lyrics details.

have never been to Bacup, but I would count myself as knowing these things in ordinary conversations. Perhaps it is legitimate to generalize based on experiences elsewhere in England.

This worry connects to the proposal that Edwards should be doing fieldwork elsewhere, where less is known. I do not wish to endorse the proposal though.

### **Appendix**

Regarding my claim that “Hers is not an especially strange standpoint,” I anticipate a highly sophisticated defence. “No one engages in this dialogue with Jeanette Edwards, or anything like it, but they might engage in such a dialogue with you. And we have other explanations for why that is, such as they want to know when you will give up explaining stuff to someone of their level and treat them as a person to be herded along. We think the standpoint is strange actually.” Well, um, maybe strangeness and familiarity are not to be defined in terms of how many people publicly take it up. I need to really think about that defence more carefully!

### **Reference**

Edwards, J. 2000. *Born and Bred*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.