Of Photographs and Papaya

Researching Wellbeing and Motifs of Gift Exchange

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Research in a social setting

- Community - their place, their lives...
- Research - entering their lives...
  - Conscious of context, language, traditions

- Takes place within relationships
  - Through local organisations, colleagues and team members
  - Opening up space to talk, listening
Professional relationships

• Relationships with team
  • Training and leading fieldwork
  • But also social aspects including asking them about ‘this place’

• Relationship with people
  • Premised on my professional training
  • Co-researchers in social relationships with people whom I interview- relatives, friends, same community
  • Team’s strong connections help to talk with people and include me in social aspect
  • Most important- opening up space to talk to people
Relationships: power

• My position (privilege)
  • No expectations
  • Seeking their permission, giving them control
  • Listening to their views

• Do people I interview have power?
  • People refusing to speak with me?
  • By speaking to me making their voice heard?

• But
  • “Who am I to tell you anything? You are the educated person!”
  • Seeking help from me, expectations from the conversation

• Responses
  • ‘Obvious’ questions- I lack knowledge; not assuming I know
  • Asking repeatedly for their view, I cannot answer in their stead
In the social

• Constantly aware of the social- maintaining distinction between social and professional
• Keeping ‘myself’ outside the interview setting

• For them no distinction
  • Relationships running seamlessly into one another... all social
  • I am an intruder, asking too many questions
  • Sometimes a ‘friend’ listening to them
Gifts

• Photographs to thank them
  • Social events, posing, people lining up at makeshift studio
  • Waiting for... families to collect, people to wear their good clothes
  • Assuring them no charge

• But!
  • Gifts in exchange for having taken photographs- waited patiently, brought prints
  • Whatever they have- fruits, vegetables, sometimes freshly brewed alcohol!
Gifts

- My dilemma
  - Refusal?
    - They are badly off
    - I did not expect anything, in fact stressing that this was something to compensate them for their time

- Reciprocating for what they see as something inherently social; photographs and the events around them... inherently social
Gift

• Gift in the relationship itself
  • My being a ‘friend’
    • Ask questions about my life
    • Ask for things- advice, lifts, my sandals!
    • Place for speaking
    • Making them reflect on their lives- a fresh way of looking at things

• Asking about me- challenging my boundary
  • Do I reveal?
  • What do I reveal? How much?

• Especially towards end when leaving... their last (and only) chance to ask me the questions that I have asked them over and over
Reflections

• Refusal
  • Emphasising my not being from there?
  • Reinforcing the power dynamic in the face of their attempts to reduce it by socialising what I view as a professional relationship?
  • Accepting some gifts may have reduced that... especially when already formed relationships with people