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Getting it right

Knowledge and evidence in anthropology

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Abstract
In this article the nature of anthropological knowledge is discussed with a view to a reassessment of the call for evidence. It will be argued that the traditional view of evidence as being somehow outside a particular argument is untenable, given the way in which anthropology accesses knowledge by engaging a particular field. This may be seen to lead to an uneasy question of authority in anthropology, yet at closer inspection, it is possible to establish new grounds for anthropological authority and to arrive at a new sense of ‘getting it right’. The general discussion is substantiated by reference to the author’s work on Icelandic history as well as her fieldwork in Iceland.

Key Words
authority • causality • epistemology • ethics • experience • explanation • knowledge

The question of evidence is acute if anthropology shall aspire to anything but reporting quaint stories from strange places. In a post-positivist era, however, I shall argue that it is not possible to adhere to old notions of ‘evidence’ as external to the context of the situation. In that vein, the ambition of this article is to contribute to a new awareness of the anthropological mode of knowing about the world and of ‘getting it right’. I shall start by briefly identifying what we may mean by knowledge in this day and age, as a precursor to a discussion of the traditional positivity of evidence in the pursuit of explanation. To substantiate these general discussions, I shall investigate, first, the nature of historical explanation – or the identification of causes in history – with particular reference to my own work on Icelandic history. Next, I shall inquire into the making of connections in the field – or the explanation of social phenomena; again it will be briefly linked up to my own work in Iceland. I terminate by some general remarks on how to get it ‘right’, and how this implicates us deeply in a narrative ethics upon which the anthropological authority rests.

KNOWLEDGE AND THE MODE OF KNOWING
If we concede to the proposition that anthropology is a distinct field of knowledge, it is worth looking closer at the notion of knowledge itself. What seems clear is that
knowledge must be organized information; in the case of anthropology it concerns the organized information about ways of living in the world and modes of attending to the world. The organization implies that knowledge is both reductive and selective (Schmidt, 1991: 17). It is reductive because it renders empirical complexity and messiness in clear, but therefore also more limited, propositions about the world. It is selective, because for it to be knowledge it has to disregard some information. To investigate a particular idea of knowledge, we must, therefore, not only look at the object of interest but also the mode of that interest, that is the particular way of attending to the object and of organizing the information as knowledge. If anthropologists are interested in cultures (or societies), they are so in a particularly anthropological way – learnt explicitly through training and more implicitly by way of exemplars. If we make no claim to such distinction, we cannot claim to have a particular field of scholarship. This implies that knowing is a matter of perspective; there is no knowledge without someone who knows in a particular way. Knowledge, therefore, is a social phenomenon rather than simply a substance. To maintain scholarly authority one must be able to account for the particular mode of interest that gives direction and shape to knowledge.

In anthropology the mode of knowing is intimately connected to the tradition of fieldwork; a lot has been said about this, and I just want to emphasize that through the effort at getting into ‘another’ world (defined as ‘other’ for the purpose of analysis), the anthropologist learns something new about it; effort is the operative word here. I shall return to this. Here it suffices to say that because of its particular method, anthropological knowledge is defined as much by an epistemology as by the purported ontology of its object of interest. This leads us further into the discussion of what we should mean by knowledge in the first place.

In the modernist era, anthropological knowledge was presented as knowledge about other cultures; it consisted in largely ontological propositions about the organization of (other) social systems and thoughts. The result was an encyclopaedic knowledge that posited itself as an object-knowledge – in the triple sense of attaching itself to objects, working by way of objectification, and itself becoming an object to be possessed and recycled. Gradually, this view outlived itself, because it was realized that most of what had passed for ontology in anthropology was in fact located in our experience of it, and in the way in which it was registered – or silenced. In consequence, knowledge has become – and must be – acknowledged (implicitly, at least) as relational, both in the sense that it attaches itself to relations between people or between people and objects and in the sense that it emerges within a dialogical field. If relational knowledge is more implicit and ephemeral than object-knowledge, it may nevertheless transform into the latter with time, partly through the general process of objectification that goes along with classification and articulation (also known as ‘ontological dumping’), partly through institutional endorsement.

We arrive at a point where we may see how anthropological knowledge not only reflects a particular mode of knowing (an epistemology) but incorporates it in a very direct way. If in fieldwork the anthropologist gains knowledge by way of social relations, this relational aspect has a general bearing on the processes by which facts are established as (relevant) facts in the first place. The relation between the ‘knower’ and the ‘object’ of necessity bends back into the perception of the object itself and is cemented in writing. As Tim Jenkins has it: ‘the accounts build in the relation of outside observer to object,
as if it were a property of the object itself’ (Jenkins, 1994: 443). Knowledge, then, depends intimately on the modes of knowing and of interpreting – both of which are disciplined. As Malcolm Crick once said: ‘Knowledge is a social achievement: it consists of meanings that have “made it”’ (Crick, 1982: 28). Not only have they made it through the registration filter of the ethnographer in the field, they have also made it through the institutional filters of the academic discipline. Knowledge, therefore, is no simple ‘object’, because it bears all the marks of its institution, including a particular ‘style of reasoning’ that by itself becomes a standard of objectivity (Hacking, 1992: 13).

Anthropologists have always been interested in the question of knowledge, and have contributed to cross-disciplinary investigations into the relativity of knowledge and rationality (Wilson, 1974; Hollis and Lukes, 1982). While instigated by ethnographic analyses such as Evans-Pritchard’s of Zande witchcraft (1936), the theoretical discussion of ‘knowledge’ also had important precursors, for instance in Durkheim’s extensive discussion of the relationship between science and belief (Durkheim, 1915) and in Lévi-Strauss’ work, marking the pinnacle of French rationalism in anthropology and comprising a discussion of the contrastive qualities of science and magic (Lévi-Strauss, 1962).

The common subtext of these discussions is the relationship between ‘our’ and ‘their’ knowledge that at first sight seems obsolete today, but they also point to a still valid recognition of the fact that in human life, there is always both something that we know and something that we simply sense or feel.

Recently, Fredrik Barth has launched ‘an anthropology of knowledge’ in which he suggests that knowledge is what a person uses to interpret and to act in the world (2002: 1). Knowledge in this sense is purely instrumental, and is hardly distinguishable from culture, even though Barth suggests that while knowledge gives material for reflection and premises for action, culture also embraces the results of reflection and action. Another way of distinguishing between knowledge and culture, according to Barth, is that while culture is equally distributed in a society, knowledge is differentiated among people, partly because they have different experiences. While one can easily see how knowledge is differentiated, it is more difficult (in my view) to accept that ‘culture’ is the same for everyone. It certainly presupposes a rather anachronistic concept of culture as an essence that is installed in individuals in equal measure by birth and belonging. Be that as it may, Barth’s main message is that knowledge can be studied empirically, and in spite of Barth’s ambition to break away from the encyclopaedic concept of knowledge, he largely confirms it as far as ‘other people’s’ knowledge is concerned. Knowledge is empirical matter that can be identified as particular ‘knowledge traditions’ by the observant ethnographer.

The focus of what people know not only blurs the question of how they know it, but also tends to overlook the issue of what can be known under particular historical circumstances. When Barth speaks about (empirically) differentiated knowledge as a corollary to different experiences, he fails to acknowledge the deeper processes by which differentiation of knowledge takes place in all social worlds. Pierre Bourdieu gives a clue:

The process of differentiation of the social world which leads to the existence of autonomous fields concerns both being and knowledge. In differentiating itself, the social world produces differentiation of the modes of knowledge of the world. To each of these fields there corresponds a fundamental point of view on the world which
creates its own object and finds in itself the principle of understanding and explanation appropriate to that object. (Bourdieu, 2000: 99)

While, superficially, there may seem to be an accord between Barth’s traditions of knowledge and Bourdieu’s differentiated fields of knowledge, the latter are distinguished by the implicit epistemological awareness about the differentiated fields creating their own objects of knowledge. In consequence of this, the empirical notion of (object) knowledge must subside to a more theoretical notion of knowledge as primarily a social phenomenon and only by derivation a corpus, or – in the terms used earlier – a relation first and only then (possibly) an object.

This vital shift in the view of knowledge has important implications for the generalizations that we may claim to be ‘right’. Instead of the ‘horizontal’ generalization about culture (from wall-to-wall, so to say), anthropologists increasingly move towards ‘vertical’ generalizations about the processes by which meanings and practices become temporarily objectified in social practice, as knowledge or another kind of certainty. This implies that the anthropological object is emergent. The object has no fixed ontological status, be it as a culture, society, community – or, indeed, knowledge. Evidently, when it comes to analysis and writing, a sense of closure must be attained; the network must be ‘cut’, so to say (Strathern, 1996), in my terms implying a temporary objectification of relational knowledge, from which others may then proceed – provided they are satisfied about the soundness of the argument. This takes us to the question of evidence.

THE POSITIVITY OF EVIDENCE
Most anthropologists would agree that anthropological knowledge is based in empirical realities; anthropology is about the real world. Were we to think about this proposition for just an instant, uncertainties multiply; what do we mean by ‘based in’ empirical reality, and ‘about’ the world. These prepositional terms indicate particular relationships that are neither self-evident nor neutral, given the suggestion mentioned earlier that the relation to the object bends back into the object itself.

Let us take the simple statement a bit further, however. If anthropology is about the world, a long tradition of anthropological scholarship has now taught us that this world is fragmented, fluctuating and endlessly shifting, partly due to individual actions and unprecedented events, partly due to englobing processes of which agents are only dimly aware – if at all. If the world is shifting, this applies – by definition – also to any science ‘about’ it, and the (postmodernist) view of anthropological knowledge as partial and positioned seems further sustained. Knowledge cannot, therefore, be ‘objective’ in the traditional sense of that word. The two claims – about the world and about anthropological knowledge – make it increasingly uncertain what we should mean by the proposition that anthropology is based in empirical realities and that knowledge must be backed by evidence. While we have discussed the inherent partiality and subjectivity of anthropology over the past two decades, little effort has been made so far to understand the process by which anthropologists (individually and collectively) become convinced of ‘being right’, or to be in the know. This is what must now be addressed for a renewal of anthropological authority.

The concept of evidence in general connotes a strong sense of positivity, not unlike ‘context’ as discussed by Johannes Fabian (1999). Anthropologists have appealed to
context for an accurate understanding of social events and institutions, and the claim to positivity is related to the need to establish a stable referent outside the proposed understanding of a particular social phenomenon. This exteriority is clearly operative in the claim that social facts must be understood ‘in context’, as if the context were independent of the scope of the actual investigation (Dilley, 1999). A similar problem holds for the appeal to ‘evidence’ for the establishment of a particular truth claim, implying that a specific understanding of a phenomenon is confirmed by positive instances, accessible to direct observation; these instances are then the evidence of the validity of the general claim. Already at this point the latent circularity destabilizes the acclaimed positive status of evidence, as something outside of and independent of the generalization made. This is not a new insight; R.G. Collingwood (1978[1946]), for instance, noted that question and evidence are correlative in the sense that facts only are evidence in relation to a particular question (Collingwood, 1978[1946]: 178ff.; see also Chandler et al., 1994: 1). Reflecting back on the previous discussion of knowledge, we might say that whatever evidence we appeal to for the explanation of a social fact, it is simultaneously evidence of a particular field of interest, and of a particular relationship to the object.

To suggest that evidence is evidence only in relation to a particular frame of investigation, by itself does not necessarily question the factual nature of the evidence invoked, however. We must therefore take the question of evidence a bit further and query its relationship to ‘facts’. Along with an inherently positivist attitude to evidence came a commonplace that ‘facts are evidence in potentia’ (Daston, 1994: 243). This implies that facts and evidence are crucially distinct categories:

On their own, facts are notoriously inert – ‘angular’, ‘stubborn’ or even ‘nasty’ in their resistance to interpretation and inference. They are robust in their existence and opaque in their meaning. Only when enlisted in the service of a claim or a conjecture do they become evidence, or facts with significance. (Daston, 1994)

In this view, evidence incorporates the solidity and neutrality of facts that are simply put to use in a particular argument. Contrary to this view, one could argue (with Putnam, 1991) that there are no facts without value because the very identification of ‘facts’ implies a particular charging of the selected phenomena, and facts cannot, therefore, be value neutral. The fact–evidence configuration must be revisited in its particular historical moment (Chandler et al., 1994: 2). At present, it seems impossible to even speak of ‘stubborn facts’ without implying a particular scheme of understanding to which they do not easily lend themselves as evidence. Social facts are doubly ‘schemed’, so to speak, locally and anthropologically. They are instances of social life that are identified as meaningful, and about which the anthropologist aims at organizing some general knowledge.

In anthropology, the instances to be generalized about consist in once-occurring acts (including speech-acts), emergent meanings, and unique events (in contrast to earlier positivist claims about empirically identifiable structures), and it is difficult to see how social facts of this kind can be transformed into positive evidence. The actions and events are real enough, of course, but as ‘instances’ they simply do not add up to evidence for the anthropological understanding of their implications – past, present and future. ‘Adding up’ does not explain how or why particular acts were undertaken, let alone why
they possibly made sense both to the agent and to his or her surroundings. In the words of Ian Hacking, truth is not explanatory – even if the style of reasoning does imply a set of self-stabilizing techniques (Hacking, 1992: 14–15).

Reasoning, however, always implies a certain amount of inference; so also for anthropological reasoning, which must be explicit of why particular instances are (perceived to be) connected in a certain way – and thereby explained. This displaces the problem of evidence from the ontological to the epistemological domain of knowledge. The world is what we must know but not simply as it knows itself; so while the actualities of the world (or the field) give substance to our thoughts, it cannot at the same time be external evidence for the connections we make. The positivity of evidence is shattered; there is simply not enough distance between facts and evidence for the latter to prove the former. To get it right we have to shift our attention from the collapsed relationship between knowledge and evidence to the processes by which we know, that is how we make connections in a fragmented world, and how these are imbued with particular styles of reasoning. (This is not a constructionist point; even if truth claims are linked up with particular modes of knowing, to claim that the world is constructed is still but a truth claim that begs the question of why it is constructed in a particular way. It is my view that certainly not all constructions are possible.)

In anthropology, the mode of knowing is deeply imbued with the tradition of fieldwork, steeping the anthropologist in a network of social relations (Hastrup, 2004b). This complicates matters of evidence further, because the once-occurring events and unique acts that the anthropologists register in the field at least in part are circumstantial responses to their own presence and inquiry. This challenges another implicit quality of evidence, namely that it must be free of human intention:

Facts fabricated as evidence, that is, to make a particular point, are therefore disqualified as evidence. Nature’s facts are above suspicion, because presumed free of any intention, but many man-made facts also qualify: the blood-stained weapon found at the scene of a murder counts as evidence as long as it was not planted there with the intention of incriminating; the unaffected simplicity of the witness adds weight to testimony as long as it was not feigned with the intention of persuading. (Daston, 1994: 244)

In science a welter of methodological precautions have been taken to thwart the (unconscious) intention to confirm a particular hypothesis, such as the double-blind clinical trial, and the fixing of statistical levels before the experiment (Daston, 1994). With regard to the latter it is interesting to note how statistics itself has evolved in the borderland between being science and servicing science, allegedly limiting itself to the recording of facts (Poovey, 1994). This self-imposed limitation makes claim to a transparent relation to the objects represented, while masking the meanings that are thereby put into play. Largely though not exclusively an effect of the categories by which statistical representation organizes materials, these meanings are being constructed before the statistics are compiled; they then radiate from the starkest tables. It is partly because of such statistical representation – even if it is nowhere acknowledged – that theory and legislation can be generated from numbers’ (Poovey, 1994: 420). While this may not come as a surprise to category-conscious anthropologists the implications are profound,
because they touch upon the problem of intention and evidence that has just been raised. Statistics not only depends on the unfigured, because its general estimates are inferred from more limited counts (Poovey, 1994), it also importantly derives its significance from the unconfigured, in other words that which lies outside the scope of the intended generalization – beyond the categories that count.

There is no way for statistics to epistemologically acknowledge its ‘excess’ meaning; in anthropology, by contrast, the phenomenological bent always contributed to an awareness of the historical surplus of any moment, any event. By engaging with the world under study in fieldwork, anthropologists perceive and realize the surplus of experience that qualifies social life. Not all experience is reducible to knowledge (Jackson, 1996: 3); phrased otherwise, anthropological fieldwork discloses the fact that there is always a historical surplus of events, actions and thoughts that may linger without necessarily contributing to the larger order as perceived, but providing possible sites of resistance or sources for new historical turns. While statistical evidence thus easily becomes a normative argument, this is not so for anthropology, where evidence cannot easily be ‘added up’, as I suggested earlier. The (implicit) intentionalities of the two disciplines are simply very different – as are their relative authority in present-day western society, generally attributing more ‘reality’ to numbers than to countless experiences.

It will be clear by now that the question of evidence is far more complex than the claim to positivity suggests, because it is enfolded within the relational nature of anthropological knowledge that – epistemologically – precludes the use of evidence as an independent measure of validity. Another complication is found in the fact that so much evidence in anthropology is circumstantial or inferential, and relates to sensations, silences, deceptions, and moods. These sensations are not external to categories but inform them deeply; as Jon Mitchell has shown, for instance, feelings are all-important in the analysis of belief (1997). Space does not permit me to discuss particular cases, so I shall just invite readers to speculate on the nature of ‘evidence’ and its relation to such social phenomena as values, jokes, lies, and taboos – not to mention roots, identities, and democracies. We do not hesitate using such notions and attributing reality to them, but we have failed to ask how (or if) they link up with facts outside the situation in which they are perceived as true by the anthropologist – as opposed to simply being sign-posted as such by the joker, the liar or the prime minister. The question still is how we may acknowledge the ‘rightness’ of what cannot be empirical knowledge in conventional positivist terms. In order to come closer to a temporary answer, I shall introduce a historical example.

**HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: IDENTIFYING CAUSES**

In the humanities, the historical disciplines have probably been more explicitly concerned about evidence than most. I already referred to Collingwood’s early piece on ‘Historical Evidence’ (incorporated in *The Idea of History*, 1978[1946]), which alerted historians to the mutuality of question and evidence. Since (and before) then, historians have been engaged in a more or less enlightened discussion of ‘historical sources’ and their reliability. Carlo Ginzburg (1994) has suggested that the discussion of evidence in history is closely linked to a notion of proof that draws on an implicit parallel between the historian and the judge. While their objectives are vastly different, they both have to look for clues, leads, distortions, and discrepancies in the material collected to support their case.
If justice is the concern of the judge, accurate reconstruction of past events is the ambition of the historian, or so it was held. What easily slips by the historian’s notion of reconstruction is the impossibility to ever depict an event in its totality of implications; it is precisely the limitation of ‘evidence’ that makes the illusion of wholeness possible. Thus once again we are faced with a situation where the mode of knowing (through transmitted sources) greatly influences what can become knowledge. Indeed, the notion of ‘history’ itself imposes a particular view of what should be known. As discussed elsewhere (Hastrup, 1992a), scholars (including anthropologists) have largely been victims of a Eurocentric view of history as linear and continuous. Consequently, our sense of history has been defined as a particular mode of consciousness, which assumes social change to be homogeneously progressive (Lévi-Strauss, 1962); in anthropology ‘the others’ seem to have been excluded from ‘our’ history and placed in a different, non-progressive time (Fabian, 1983).

The narration of history makes the linear mode of historical consciousness manifest; the plot is constructed as a succession of instances, bound together by a logic of causation, sometimes in the form of a teleology. Indeed, the entire construction of narrative is bound to and dependent upon the construction of time and sequence and both depend on experience for their construction: ‘time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence’ (Ricoeur, 1984: 52). Narrative emplotment brings together agents and circumstance and connects means and ends in unexpected ways (Ricoeur, 1984: 65).

The linear narration of history is linked to an idea of ‘temporal causation’ that has dominated the historical discipline, identifying the cause of an event in the most recent and most extraordinary precedent. This notion is not sustainable, because it leaves out what seems ‘ordinary’ and absolutely necessary at the time for the thing to happen (Bloch, 1979: 191). Furthermore, it does not question ‘time’ itself. It remains an open question how much time one can allow between cause and effect and still speak of a causal process. Somehow, for the idea of temporal causation to be convincing, the time between cause and effect must be ‘filled out’, so to speak, by the causal process. In human history it is simply not possible to provide positive evidence for this proposition. To link events we must resort to a sense of duration that can only be established imaginatively – and proposed narratively. Causation is therefore embedded in duration.

My thoughts on this matter derive from my study of Icelandic history (Hastrup, 1985, 1990, 1998a) from which I shall give a condensed example. In the briefest possible terms, the period from 1400–1800 in Iceland was a time of recurrent crises – social, economical, demographic, environmental, climatic, you name it. In each of these domains there was a remarkable backsliding in comparison to the earlier period of the settlements and the high Middle Ages, from whence the famous Icelandic sagas survive as a testimony to an original ‘free’ society, astute statesmanship and legal sophistication – not to mention the literary achievement itself. By this standard the devolution was remarkable; for each of the domains just mentioned we might name a cause – by pointing to what was the most spectacular incident in the course of events. I am thinking of events like the Black Death, volcanic eruptions, the introduction of a Danish trade monopoly and so forth. In naming such causes – all of which will be familiar to historians as the traditional explanations of the decline – we have not answered the
question of causation however. We may have identified significant parts of the empirical reality, but we have explained very little beyond immediate local experience. We have been trapped in the circularity of positive evidence and in a narrative logic of causation that both relate only to the succession of events but cannot account for the links between them. Truth does not equal explanation; truth is not a predicate and adds nothing to the subject (Hacking, 1992: 14).

Such links require an attention to the ordinary, the durable, including (in this case) the sense of Icelandicness that prevailed and which prompted particular responses to the events. One such response in Iceland was to concentrate labour in farming at the expense of fishing whenever crisis struck, which made the economy even more vulnerable and precipitated a negative spiral. We cannot ask contemporary Icelanders about their reasons for responding to circumstance as they did, gradually cutting themselves off from potential sources of supplementary income, and relegating more and more people to the category of non-humans (for their poverty, lack of permanent dwelling and so on). What we can do is to infer from a wide range of sources that Icelandicness itself was associated with a settled farming life, and to protect that definition, the structurally dominant Icelandic farmers drew an ever-diminishing circle around the ‘Icelanders’ proper.

The details are many and the material is very rich, but space only allows me to say that alongside the sequential historical narrative of a particular succession of events, there was a strong sense of duration – a duration that filled out the entire temporal process of the decline. We are allowed, therefore, to suggest that while the combination of unhappy factors certainly hit the North Atlantic community hard, they neither individually nor in combination caused the crises on their own. To explain the course of history and not simply point out the obvious, the enduring model of a society inhabited by free and equal farmers must be taken into account. This model is inferred from a variety of events and acts, and as such it is a theoretical construct. The point is, that at least part of the explanation for the historical development must be found outside the positive events in a proposed connection between them that relates to a durable sense of Icelandicness. This sense implied particular responses to events – urging the Icelanders to recurrently recast themselves in terms of past values and ideas. I have suggested the notion of Uchronia for this implicit appeal to ‘a history out of time’ (Hastrup, 1990, 1992b). The evidence for an Icelandic Uchronia is circumstantial rather than empirical, and is linked up with a particular question of causation, but it is none the less real for that.

The general point is that a sense of duration always embraces whatever notion we might have of sequence, because events only register as such within a frame that outlasts them. ‘Evidence’ in the inherited, positive, sense of the word attaches itself to events rather that duration; duration has to be inferred from certain regularities in the social about which individual people caught up in a struggle for survival cannot themselves theorize. From the point of view of the acting individual, it is impossible to be inside and outside of a particular history at the same time. One cannot be absorbed in one time, in one vision of history, and act in another.

To reiterate, causes cannot be identified empirically or ontologically, but they may suggest themselves in relation to particular schemes of understanding, or particular epistemologies; this applies equally to local (or lay) views of causation and to historians’ (or other scientists’) views. The identification of causes beyond the most simple pointing out of particular events (being truths rather than explanations) can therefore not be
backed by objective, measurable evidence; the total historical development itself is a symptom of something more complex – and it becomes evidence only by virtue of its giving rise to a particular theoretical understanding of the relationship between action and history.

This point in some ways echoes the conclusion reached by Hume in the mid-18th century, when he discussed causality as a construction upon past experience and claimed that an idea of causation cannot be drawn directly from the external world, but must pass by the ruling perceptions of that world. What is more, Hume identified imagination as the principle which ‘makes us reason from causes to effects and it is the same principle which convinces us of the continued existence of external objects’ (Hume, 1976: 266). This leaves us with the classical ‘problem of induction’ and takes us further into the discussion of the distinctly anthropological grounding of knowledge.

FIELD EXPERIENCE: MAKING CONNECTIONS
Since the pioneering work of Émile Durkheim, anthropologists have been preoccupied with the tension between the whole and the parts, or between society and individuals. The analytical focus has shifted and either the whole or the part has been deemed logically prior, but the tension itself never goes away. Recently, it has been suggested that ‘culture’ simply provides a set of shared images, values and modes of speech to which individuals may attach their individual understandings (Cohen, 1994). Within any social field both the shared images and the diversity of individual understandings present themselves as facts. The question is how we can establish the connection between the individual act and the larger scheme of things without falling into a determinist trap.

Given the particular anthropological mode of knowing, the initial answer to the question is that we generalize from our own experience in the field, not from some abstract ideas that are then backed by evidence. The distinctly performative mode of knowing implied in fieldwork – as opposed to the informative and observational (Fabian, 1990: 3ff.) – immediately links understanding to participation, and evidence to experience. In the field, anthropologists engage in social relationships in order to feel their nature and directive force. To understand is to acknowledge one’s own participation, and to allow oneself to be ‘caught up in the series of events that constitute social life, where there is no objective truth, but simply potentially exclusive versions of the truth that together constitute the event’ (Jenkins, 1994: 443). This urges us to take a closer look upon the notion of experience and its implications of authenticity and conclusiveness.

Part of my own fieldwork in Iceland was among farmers, and on the farm where I lived, I was given the role of milkmaid – among others (see Hastrup, 1998a). For a couple of months I helped milking and tending 30 cows – not very skilfully at first. Taking the cattle to the pasture was my major problem in this rugged and unbounded landscape. I had to keep the herd together across large and open stretches of more or less rocky ground before arriving at the grazing slot for the day, bounded by a mobile electric fence. Once, the whole herd went madly astray, and it took a couple of men several hours on horseback to collect them again. I was embarrassed, of course, but by way of consolation one of the farmers smilingly told me that ‘cows are stupid’. The point is not to exhibit my remarkable lack of skill, but to point to its source. It is not simply that I had been working at a desk for most of my life. More importantly, I could not act...
adequately, when I still saw the cows as a herd, even a category (a view that was perceived by the farmer, and expressed in his consoling words to me), and myself as an anthropologist performing as milkmaid. I could only succeed when I truly began living the character. That is, when I began to see the cows as named individuals with distinct behavioural dispositions, and when I gave up my resistance to yelling at them on my way to the pasture, in what at first seemed to be an almost obscenely loud and distorted tone of voice, and to use my stick.

In so far as fieldwork implies actual presence in the social world, the experience is related to living our part (Hastrup, forthcoming a). This ‘part’ is very much a part allotted to us by the others (Hastrup, 1987); not all parts are available. From the authoritative subject position of the researcher, the ethnographer is intermittently transferred into an object position in the world of the subjects studied. The anthropologist in the field engages the world as a ‘double agent’, being both a trained researcher and a character in the local drama (Hastrup, 1998b). It is from this position that the anthropologist begins to experience the complexities of an unfamiliar everyday life; knowledge becomes incorporated (Hastrup, 1994). The position entails a new question about the subject of experience. It is not simply the anthropologist in the First Person, nor is it a (putatively ‘native’) Third Person, playing an allotted part in an exotic drama. It is a peculiar character embodying both, and emerging in the context of the situation, thereby reminding us that even subjects must be historicized. Therefore, experience cannot be external evidence of a particular situation, because experience cannot be attributed to an individual who stands outside of the situation that the experience is evidence of.

Another example will take us further into this. Like other anthropologists I was keenly interested in oral tradition, and not least in the ‘hidden people’ (huldufólk) – an elf-like people that lived invisibly in a parallel world to the world of humans. I asked about them, and got the inevitable answer that they were something that people of the past believed in. Together we rehearsed some well-known legends and folktales. Only later did I realize that both the belief and the old days were still very much present. I kept hearing half-joking references to the ‘hidden people’ stealing the tools and misplacing the utensils they had borrowed, and the landscape was heavily marked by their presence in place-names. It took a particular experience for me to realize that the jokes very literally were directed at me, not out of spite at all but out of respect for my limited knowledge. Participating in a venture into the mountains after stray sheep I was once left on a mountain ledge in care of a ewe that had been recovered. Instinctively, I wound the rope tightly around my hand, but was warned not to do so, because it was essential also to be able to let go, should the animal choose to jump over the cliff. This was an important piece of information, and it certainly contributed to a sense of foreboding as I sat there, left to myself and to the wide-eyed animal, and – moreover – soon became swallowed up in one of the unpredictable mists that swept the coastland mountains. In the mist, my fear of being lost was further enforced by the intense feeling of nebulous figures emerging out of it, and ‘reminding’ me of countless stories of shepherdesses being swept off their feet by huldufókn (men of the ‘hidden people’), apparently asserting their presence even now.

Whatever one would make of this experience, it made me pose a different sort of question next time the issue of the hidden people came up in conversation. I simply asked when they had last seen the hidden people in the vicinity of the farm, and after
some internal debate on relative chronologies and various sightings a date some years
back was suggested. The point is, that the new framing of the question had produced a
qualitatively different answer; I was no longer asking for information about a category,
but enquiring about significant experience. My phrasing implied an acknowledgement
of another way of looking at things, and henceforth the farmers could talk to me about
their vision of the world in terms that went beyond mere information. To establish a
true relationship the parties must be present in the same space; in fieldwork this has to
be theirs – if there is any point to participation. The general point is that living a particu-
lar social field implies a merging of action and awareness (Hastrup, 2004a). This merging
is the basis for the self-evidence of incorporated ‘local’ knowledge – also in everyday life
– and a prerequisite of any skill or practical competence, including the skill at posing
meaningful questions. The point is to get away from the dualism of thought and action
in recognition of the fact that knowledge is practical, and that theoretical or abstract
knowledge is a special case of this (Jenkins, 1994: 442). This is a correlate to claiming
that there is no opposition between practical (material) experience and its theoretical
(linguistic) rendering; they are deeply implicated in one another.

This is where we begin to see that the qualitative nature of anthropology reflects the
quality of social life itself; the situation of the fieldworker is characteristic of the
conditions being studied (Jenkins, 1994: 442). This is the reason why fieldwork is a valid
way of gaining knowledge about other people, even if it cannot be backed by positive
evidence in the old sense of the term. I cannot point to a huldumarr and claim his
presence as evidence of anything outside of the experiential situation; conversely, the
experience is not evidence of the factuality of huldumenn. ‘Experience’ cannot be foun-
dational; firstly, because one is naturally implicated in the situation in which the experi-
ence occurs, and secondly, the experience is imbued with interpretation – according to
available schemes of understanding and categories. As these schemes shift so do experi-
ences; as indicated earlier so, even, do subjectivities.

By acknowledging that our own participation in the world under study is a distinct
(anthropological) avenue towards understanding, the search for independent or external
evidence breaks down. The connections we make are inferred from our being implicated
in them. This, again, locates ‘rightness’ in an epistemological awareness rather than in
ontological certainty. It also shifts the objective of generalization from being (primarily)
an identification of shared systems of meaning to the processes by which meanings are
established, challenged and altered; that is the shift from horizontal to vertical general-
ization proposed earlier. In other words, stampeding cows and nebulous figures in misty
mountains may not have taught me a lot about Icelandic ‘culture’ as such, but they did
teach me about the trap inherent in thinking in categories, rather than situations, and
by implication I learnt something about a particular perception of the environment that
contributed to a demarcation of Iceland as a place apart (Hastrup, 1998a).

We have come a long way from the anthropologist portrayed by Carlo Ginzburg
(1989) as akin to the inquisitor. He discusses how the rich evidence for the thoughts of
ordinary people brought about by the inquisition is of necessity distorted by the presence
and pressure of the trial itself; the inquisitor’s urge for truth made the defendants more
or less spontaneously reproduce the stereotypes of the inquisition itself. And Ginzburg
goes on: ‘Similarly, the comparison between inquisitorial trials and anthropological field
notes could have, from the historian’s point of view, a negative implication: the pressure
of those long-ago anthropologists would be so obtrusive as to prevent us from knowing
the beliefs and thoughts of the unhappy natives brought before them’ (Ginzburg, 1989:
158–9). He here attributes anthropology with the ambition to find the truth about other
cultures (as did anthropologists of yesteryear) – and sees both unhappy natives and un-
reliable anthropologists as the result.

Anthropology is never better than the individuals who practice it, as Geertz has
observed. If thinking is a profoundly ‘moral’ act, in the field you have to think and live
at the same time (Geertz, 2000: 21ff.). You live from moment to moment, seeking to
understand it, all the while being trapped in the eventness of being. The irony is that all
the while you are engaging the local social order (of whatever scale, and wherever) and
living your part, you come to embody a whole (a plot) that you can only partly under-
stand, and certainly only describe through inference. Through our actions we stand out
as particular ‘characters’ (Hastrup, forthcoming a, forthcoming b). For any social agent,
the connection between the ‘plot’ (whether tending some cows or ruling a state) and the
individual act is embodied; conversely, the wholeness of the plot is present in the indi-
vidual action.

As Jean-Pierre Vernant has said about the world of Aristotle’s dramas, the individual
who commits a deed is also its victim:

The action does not emanate from the agent as from its source; rather it envelops
him and carries him away, swallowing him up in a power that must perforce be
beyond him since it extends, both spatially and temporally, far beyond his own
person. The agent is caught in the action. He is not its author; he remains included
within it. (Vernant, 1992: 44)

Again, while we may be able to establish the facticity of particular events and actions
(by observation), they are not direct evidence for the larger plot that we may infer from
them. Inferring (and imagining) is an integral part of thinking in general, and for the
anthropologist the challenge is to infer alternative schemes of inference – or alternative
principles of imagination, in Hume’s terms, as briefly mentioned earlier.

To summarize the argument of this section: Just like historical ‘sources’ can never be
located outside of their own context of production and use, and like historical events
cannot be by themselves evidence of a history that connects them, so experience cannot
be taken as a foundational concept, explaining social relationships and providing external
evidence for connections made. Experiences must themselves be explained because in a
sense they are already imbued with interpretation; they are neither neutral nor predis-
cursive (Scott, 1994: 387). The anthropological experience in the field, therefore, is not
direct evidence of a particular ‘culture’, but of the ways in which particular modes of
action come to present themselves as ‘ordinary’ and how they are liable to individual
contestation. The ordinariness points not to a stable and essential culture, but to a
moving framework of action, a plot that gradually shifts while people are playing their
part.

The connections that the anthropologist makes are not so much backed by an experi-
ence of culture as by an experience of the contingency of frames within which every-
body plays his or her part. This cannot simply be observed in the everyday, because
people and frames move simultaneously in ordinary life; similarly, change cannot be
measured while it happens. It takes the effort of a deliberate exposure to ‘other frames’,
as implied in the tradition of fieldwork and in the particular anthropological attention
to be able to sort it out (Hastrup, 2004b). Lest I be misunderstood, I want to stress that
this is no disclaimer of an anthropology in one’s own society; I am speaking of a deliber-
ate alienation from the world under study in order to understand it as it cannot under-
stand itself. This is where we can substantiate the anthropological ‘effort’ at
understanding (signposted in the initial discussion of knowledge earlier in this article),
and where we can make new claims to the necessity of fieldwork even though we cannot
claim experience to be foundational.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: GETTING IT RIGHT
With the acknowledgement of knowledge as relational, both historical events and social
experience have lost their immediate status as positive evidence of the connections
between events, actions and experiences. Such connections are inferred by historians and
anthropologists aiming at a kind of explanation beyond the truth of the events them-
selves. Anthropological knowledge, then, is not simply knowledge about particular
events, practices and ideas, but about the processes by which these come to appear
meaningful, perhaps inevitable or mandatory, possibly contestable or even mad. These
processes can be seen as contributions to the over-all process of objectifying the social
in so many ways. To get at these the anthropologist must engage the world under study,
but must also at the same time realize that the anthropological object is emergent.
Because knowledge is gradually incorporated, the object has no fixed ontological status,
be it as a culture, a society or a community. It emerges in consequence of a particular
intervention and analytical scope. Conversely, the anthropological subject does not stand
outside of the situation under study, and at both levels we can see how the particular
relation to the object of necessity bends back into the object itself. This demands a
particular sensitivity to the epistemology of anthropology, if its authority shall be
asserted.

Anthropological authority is not to be found by appeal to external, factual evidence
– as indicated in my initial discussion of the positivity of evidence. If, as I claim for
anthropology, our relation to the object is already installed as part of the object when
we begin to understand it, ‘evidence’ cannot be disengaged from the objective of the
investigation. It is tempting, perhaps, to conclude that the absence of positive evidence
for a particular anthropological interpretation makes it impossible to assess its ‘right-
ness’. There seems to be no standard for validating or questioning a particular point.
This was very much implied by the radical post-modernist stand, disclaiming any notion
of truth and therefore in principle making all ‘stories’ equal.

This is unwarranted. Not only does it entail a narrative irresponsibility (that ought to
be foreign to scholarship), it also entails a falling back into positivist thinking from which
post-modernism – if anything – ought to have freed anthropology. The point of anthro-
pology is not to tell the world as it is (which would be practically impossible) but to
interpret it and to suggest possible (theoretical) connections within it as perceived and
inferred from being in touch with a world that cannot be taken for granted – unlike the
home world. By definition, the ‘home world’ is where frames and events are seamlessly
and imperceptibly fused.

While we may have endorsed the demise of the grand narratives and their implied
truth claims, we are still in need of narrative imagination (Kearney, 1998: 241ff.). The objective of the anthropological narrative (of whatever scale) is to provide a mode of imagining how individual actions and collective illusions are interlinked, and how they are framed by an implicit sense of a common good. To explain how the world works is not to explain it away but to make new connections between social ‘facts’ that may provide unprecedented insight into the workings of social worlds in general. One such insight concerns the excess of social experience – the historical surplus – at any point of time, that is experience which is not captured by current categories, and which points to alternative ways of seeing things and acting upon them – and hence to possible sites of social resistance or creativity, as the case might be. In their field practice, anthropologists experience both the contingency of the given, and its efficiency.

The absence of positive evidence for the durability and connectedness of social facts does not entail a narrative irresponsibility. Quite the contrary, the profoundly performative and relational mode of knowing in anthropology implicates us deeply in a narrative ethics that is the source of anthropological authority, and gives force to the argument that connects the ‘true’ in new ways (see Hastrup, 1995: 162ff.). Not all stories make sense, because the social ‘facts’ – such as they are – do not connect in any number of ways; anthropology is ‘realist’ in the sense of having to take perceived realities seriously. Because anthropological knowledge is relational rather than objective, the latent positivity of evidence should be revised and recast with a view to epistemological considerations – also on the process by which cognitive economizing compels us to dump our temporary understanding as objective knowledge.

To speak of a narrative ethics, however, is not simply to acknowledge that connections between social facts and larger frames cannot be ‘constructed’ at random; it is also to acknowledge that the identification of facts is imbued with value (Putnam, 1991). While Hume’s law – that one cannot infer an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’, or that ethics is not about ‘matters of fact’ – is still held to be generally valid, the fact/value dichotomy is untenable when it comes to knowledge, because (as the pragmatists have it) knowledge of facts is knowledge of values (see Putnam, 2002: passim). Practising anthropology implies a ‘using’ of other people’s understanding to further an anthropological understanding that is narratively mediated. In writing, anthropologists make connections and sort out hierarchies of significance that cannot bypass local social knowledge even while transcending it. The ethical demand is to ‘get it right’, not in any ontological sense, but in being true to the world under study and to the epistemological premises of anthropology. Rightness itself is a value, an ethical imperative imposed upon the narrative imagination of social and historical relations – including causal relations. The narrative ethics that I am propounding is an ‘ethics without ontology’ (Putnam, 2004), but certainly not without reality or power. In discussing ‘the narrative imperative’, Michael Jackson suggests that ‘storytelling is a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances’ (2002: 15). I would want to take this a bit further and suggest that the narrative imperative in anthropology is to alert the world to the force of the everyday, to show the historical surplus of the moment, and point to sites of resistance in the given.

‘Getting it right’ is backed by anthropologists being in touch with reality – not by standing outside it looking for evidence – and it is further sustained by a narrative imagination that figures out how parts and wholes are constructed and how individual
acts and communal images are both mutual preconditions and challenges. ‘Figuring it out’ is to configure what at base is defiant of configuration and to do so respectfully is to acknowledge the mutual implication of epistemology and ethics.

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References


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