The Use of Ethnography in Resettlement

By

Inga-Lill Aronsson[1]©

This paper explores how the method and theory of ethnography, contribute to an improved understanding of the complexity of resettlement projects, particularly over time, and thereby support a fairer and dignified rebuilding of the affected peoples´ life world and livelihood.

Ethnography: short history

In 1892, the Anthropological Institute in London published a booklet on "Notes and Queries of Anthropology" (Garson & Read). In this booklet, that was republished until the 1960s, anthropology was defined as the natural history of man that consisted of two pillars: anthropology and ethnography. The former was the study of man from an evolutionary point of view in line with *Naturwissenschaften* in search of universalities and regularities (e.g. early anthropologists Morgan 1877, Taylor 1871). The latter was the study of man as a social and cultural being in line with *Geisteswissenschafen* in search of *Verstehen,* as advocated by Wilhelm Dilthey (1883), rather than predictions and generalizations (Erickson 2018:38).

For the next 100 years, ethnography followed the path of "science of the spirit" and went from realist ethnography to cultural relativism and critical-interpretative social interactionism ethnography with occasionally a mix of all the elements in one and the same book.[2] Although some of these classic ethnographic works have been associated with colonialism, expansive geopolitics and flawed field work, the scientific aim was to as fully as possible describe and comprehend

---

[1] Senior Lecturer, Department of ALM, Uppsala University, Sweden. Email: inga-lill.aronsson@abm.uu.se.
[2] The classic ethnographies were written between the 1920s and the 1960s such as Malinowski´s (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Evans-Pritchard´s (1940) *The Nuer*, and Turner´s (1967) *The Forest of Symbols* and many more.

everyday life of a community. But it was an ethnography whose descriptions and interpretations were more etic than emic.

The holistic ambition sometimes resulted in a skewed picture with for example an underestimation of local cultural diversities, socio-political stratification and conflicting views, in favor of integration and harmony (e.g. Redfield 1930, Lewis 1951). This may have been a question of stereotyping and bias from the ethnographer´s side, but likewise it may have been a result of the ontological and epistemological difficulties of putting the pieces together in a high degree of consistency that distinguishes a traditional rich ethnography.[3]

Time and the others

Ethnography has been criticized due to its tendency to "freeze" a community in time and space. An ethnography is a kind of snap shot. Marcus & Fischer argue that "traditional ethnography turns out not to be that synchronic at all, or, rather, to be synchronic only in the sense of a timeless present" (1986:96). They argue, with reference to Fabian (1983), that it is a question of a distortion of the same present that is shared with the subjects. The ethnographer is distanced, because he belongs to another "time and place", and in addition he takes on the task to represent the subjects in writing. The subjects thereby are denied contemporaneity and their political context is devaluated. These arguments are seen as the main obstacles for the historic use of any ethnography.

In longitudinal research evaluation of resettlement, the difficulties how to use an ethnography situated in time and space become obvious when the past is compared with the present in order to say something about the outcome of the resettlement (Aronsson 2017). Nevertheless, from my field experiences, temporal and spatial orders are key analytical dimensions for the uses of ethnography in resettlement, as demonstrated by Colson´s (1971) on the Kariba dam, Zimbabwe and in my work on the Zimapán dam, Mexico (Aronsson 2002).

---

[3] In the case of Redfield and Lewis their respective theoretical frames probably influenced the interpretations. Redfield was functionalist, and Lewis was Marxist.

Fieldwork and Ethnography

Ethnography means "Writing about other people". Ethnography and fieldwork are inevitably linked together based on the premise of the intimate building of relations and participation in and observation of modes of life, in addition to the mapping of societal organizational principles such as culture, economy and politics. From this follows an interpretation of cultural values in a particular socio-political and economic setting in time. Time and place govern much of the outcome, as well as the fieldworker´s ability to immerse, make sense of and communicate an unfamiliar environment in a non-biased way, regardless of past colonial affiliations, or today´s political activism. Field work is dependent on technical and methodological skills, but perhaps even more important is the ethnographer´s human and social capacity to capture the reality of the subjects and make it intelligible. Field work has been called a piece of art. The written end product is ethnography, and there are numerous books and articles on how to write ethnographic fieldnotes and ethnography (Schatzman & Strauss [1973], Atkinson et al [2007]). In the 1980s, Marcus and Fischer (1986) initiated a discussion about ethnography as a cultural critique and questioned both field work and ethnography that had an impact on the discipline for decades. This crisis in ethnographic authority was useful, but it also incapacitated generations of ethnographers because of navel-gazing and misguided reflexivity. In the wake of post-modernity, ethnography was regarded as deeply flawed. However, since a few years back there is an "ethnographic turn" in social sciences and the humanities (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2015).

For example, evaluators who use large datasets observe that they need ethnography to further their analysis (Wang 2016). Furthermore, netnography, information and communication technology (ICT) and mobile phone ethnography are accepted methods in evaluation and research that certainly amount to new epistemic and ethical questions. One such question is for example the argument that "remoteness" to the informant could be an advantage because it would disturb less than a traditional face-to-face interaction (IRISS. n.d.).

Hence, field work and its written product ethnography are filled with ontological and epistemological difficulties that have to be thoroughly considered if to be used in resettlement. Traditional field methods are based on an engagement with the subjects and the ethnographer must possess a fine tune responsiveness to life´s nuances, and get time for fieldwork (usually a year). This generates a wealth of data. But the sensitivity and the long time spent in the field could lead the

ethnographer astray, and the ethnography could lose its trustworthiness. There is a morality of ethnography that becomes real when ethnography is used in resettlement. Understanding (Verstehen) is not enough, because *all* knowledge should be made operational in relation to policy and compensation schemes. This also includes murky local knowledge, as well as dubious management ditto, that may be difficult to process in a participatory resettlement project, which puts the ethnographer in an ambivalent position.

Involuntary resettlement

A standard definition of involuntary resettlement states that it consists of two distinct but related processes.[4] Displacement is a process by which development projects cause people to lose land or other assets, or access to resources. This may result in physical dislocation, loss of income, or other adverse impacts. Resettlement or rehabilitation is a process by which those adversely affected are assisted in their efforts to improve, or at least to restore, their incomes and living standards. Resettlement is also known as DFDR (Development-forced-displacement-resettlement). From an ethnographic view this is an almost laboratory environment for investigation – a before – during – and after. Worth noting is also the stress on "processes" in the above definition, which implies instability and fluidity in the local system, because of the impact from the external infrastructure project. Theoretically, this assumes a structural-functional view on society similar to resilience theories. The local society realigns.

Resettlement are still many times failed projects: poverty, social disintegration, violence, conflict and marginalization and human suffering. The rebuilding of livelihood goes slow and is imbued with unnecessary hardship. There are cost increases for sustainable water, energy and infrastructure. The slow improvements are explained with references to complexity and project's performance, despite all the knowledge available. Thus, one dimension eludes explanation and that "something" is of a qualitative kind that is difficult to make operational, or even visible.

---

[4] E.g. The World Bank

Resettlement ethnography

Ethnographic accounts of resettlement have been published since at least the 1950s in addition to countless articles, reports and edited volumes.[5] Rich ethnographic data is available as synchronic accounts, but there is still a lack of longitudinal studies that provide reliable information to support project proponents to respond accurately to upcoming problems and visualize the future.

The predominant theoretical resettlement models are since decades Cernea (1997), Scudder & Colson (1982), Downing & Downing Garcia (2009). Relevant for a resettlement ethnography as argued here, is in particular the category of "social disarticulation" (Cernea) and the PSC model (Downing & Downing Garcia) that assumes disruption, destabilizing of routine cultures and a "dissonant overload". The four-stage model (Scudder & Colson) assumes a linear development from coping to handing over. From my field experiences a society exposed to resettlement resonates with these models with a couple of clarifications: firstly, it "falls-apart-from-within" long before the actual move, and secondly, the identification of what-can-be related-to-what in the transformation of the society over time depends on the quality (details) of the ethnography. All of this has consequences for the rebuilding.

My argument is that a resettlement ethnography has a reasonable chance to visualize and make intelligible these complex socio-cultural data that are the building blocks of society and that largely determine the knowledge production and rebuilding of a resettled society. These building blocks are both tangible and intangible, often tacitly agreed upon, yet they are documented in numerous fine-tuned ethnographies on resettlement. The present evaluation and research methods in resettlement are systematic and comprehensive in regard of quantifying dimensions, and partly also in the interpretations of the "soft" data, but it is not enough. There is an awareness of the importance of these cultural dimensions, but at the end of the day, the boxes are checked, and still something is missing. Ethnography´s unique quality is its ability to document the unexpected moments, the serendipity of life that may function as game-changers in a complex resettlement project. This is remote ethnography's weakness.

---

[5] E.g. Villa Rojas (1955), Brokensha (1963), Colson (1971), McMahon (1989), Paranjpye (1990), Aronsson (2002), Kirchherr et al (2019), Scudder, T. (2019). See also Guggenheim (1994) annotated bibliography.

Pattern, Construction and Fragility

An ethnography of resettlement needs to address a range of concepts such as authenticity, intersubjectivity, memories, heritage, relations between as well as the blurriness of categories, timelessness and boundedness that all are related to livelihood reconstruction. A combination of a realist ethnography (you were there/witness), with a critical interpretative-symbolic ethnography (fine-tuned incongruity) is required. At the same time there must be an awareness of the crisis in ethnographic authority and the fallacies of autographical/participatory/collaborative action research that may ideologically blindfold the ethnographer. Furthermore, the pedagogic ambition to include the affected people must also be scrutinized for its possible manipulative aspects.

Furthermore, the potential fragile, violent and conflictive context of a resettlement is a real threat to the ethnographic undertaking. The ethnographer may not be able to establish trust and may even jeopardize his life. Likewise, any local assistant who collaborates with the ethnographer may be seen as a traitor. As the ethnographic data must be translated to policy documents and compensation schemes the paradoxical position of the ethnographer becomes obvious. The ethnographer gets an equivocal mediator role as a witness, and as a power player. Of course, excellent personal integrity and ethics are required, but that might be insufficient.

Theoretically, a resettlement ethnography would find its place in the middle-ground between pattern and construction; trust and distrust; symbols and materiality; power and empowerment with all its ontological and epistemological challenges. If, however the ethnographer manages to juggle these different aspects, the project would be enriched not only in regard of the contextualizing of the field data from the inside of the community, but foremost this kind of knowledge would enhance the *negotiations* about livelihood and restitution. Resettlement is undertheorized and its longitudinal consequences are still insufficiently researched.

References

ARONSSON, I-L. (2017). "The Imperfect Use of the Past in Resettlement". In: *Evaluation for Agenda 2030. Providing Evidence on Progress and Sustainability.* Eds. R.D. van den Berg & I. Naidoo & S. D. Tamondong. IDEAS, UNDP: Exeter. https://www.diva-portal.org/

Paper to IAIA21 conference proceedings. Panel: Smarter governance in resettlement II: Rights, risks, and responsibility. Organizer: Eddie Smyth. Paper ID 1277_Aronsson_the use of ethnography

ARONSSON, I-L. (2002). *Negotiating Involuntary Resettlement. A Study of Local Bargaining during the Construction of the Zimapán Dam*. Doctoral Thesis. Uppsala University. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology. Occasional Papers 17. Open Access. DIVA. https://www.diva-portal.org/

ATIKINSON, P. & Coffey, A. & Delamont, S. & LOFLAND, J. & LOFLAND, L. (2007). *Handbook of Ethnography.* SAGE: Los Angeles.

BROKENSHA, D. (1963). "Volta Resettlement and Anthropological Research". Human Organization, Vol 22(4):286-290.

CERNEA, M. (1997). "The risks and Reconstruction Model for Resettling Displaced Population". *World Development* 25(10):1569-1587.

COLSON, E. (1971). The Social Consequences of Resettlement: The Impact of the Kariba Resettlement Upon the Gwembe Tonga. Manchester University Press: Manchester.

DOWNING, T.E. & DOWNING-Garcia, C. (2009). "Routine and Dissonant Culture". In: Development & Dispossession. The Crisis of Forced Displacement and Resettlement. Ed. A. Oliver-Smith. School for Advanced Research Advanced Seminar Series. Santa Fe.

ERICKSON, F. (2018). "A History of Qualitative Inquiry in Social and educational Research". In: *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Eds. N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln. SAGE: Los Angeles.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1940) *The Nuer*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

FABIAN, J. (1983). *Time and the other. How anthropology makes its object*. Colombia University Press: New York.

GARSON, J. G & READ, C. H. (1892). Notes and Queries on Anthropology. Council of the Anthropological Institute. London.

GRIMSHAW, A. & RAVETZ, A. (2015). "The ethnographic turn – and after: a critical approach towards the realignment of art and anthropology". *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* (2015) 23, 4 418–434. © 2015 European Association of Social Anthropologists. doi:10.1111/1469-8676.12218

GUGGENHEIM, S. (1994). Involuntary resettlement: An Annotated Reference Bibliography of Development Research. The World Bank: Washington DC.

IRISS (nd). *Doing Ethnography Remotely*. Stanford. Center for Global Ethnography. Video series with the co-directors S. Thiranagama & S. Yanagisako. https://iriss.stanford.edu/doing-ethnography-remotely

Paper to IAIA21 conference proceedings. Panel: Smarter governance in resettlement II: Rights, risks, and responsibility. Organizer: Eddie Smyth. Paper ID 1277_Aronsson_the use of ethnography

KIRCHHERR, J. & AHRENSHOP, M-P. & CHARLES, K. (2019). "Resettlement lies: Suggestive evidence from 29 large dam projects". *World Development*, 114 (2019), 208-219.

LEWIS, O. (1951). *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlan Restudied.* The University of Illinois Press: Urbana.

McMAHON, D. (1989), [1971, 1973]. *Antropología de una presa. Los Mazateco y El Proyecto del Papaloapan.* Instituto Nacionl Indignista: Mexico DF.

MALINOWSKI, B. (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Routledge: London.

MARCUS. G. E. & FISCHER, M.M.J. (1986). *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. *An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences.* The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

REDFIELD, R. 2016 [1930]. *A Tepoztlan A Mexican Village*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

SCHATZMAN, L. & STRAUSS, A. L. (1973). *Field Research*. Prentice-Hall: London.

SCUDDER, T & COLSON, E. (2019) [1982]. "From Welfare to Development: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Dislocated People". In: *Involuntary Migration and Resettlement*. Eds. A. Hansen & A. Oliver-Smith. eBook. Published 19 July 2019. Routledge: New York. DOI
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429052293

SCUDDER, T. (2019). *Large Dams*. Springer Nature: Singapore.

TURNER, V. (1967) *The Forest of Symbols*. Cornell University Press: London.

PARANJPYE, V. (1990). *High Dams on the Narmada*. Studies in Ecology and Sustainable Development. Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage: New Delhi.

VILLA ROJAS, A. (1955). *Los Mazatecos y la cuenca del Paploapan*. Ediciones del INI, Mexico.

Wang, T. (2016 [2013]. "Why Big Data Needs Thick Data". Republished summary.
https://medium.com/ethnography-matters/why-big-data-needs-thick-data-b4b3e75e3d7