

Fieldwork places: legitimate, illegitimate, obviously legitimate, better, worse

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Abstract. Jeanette Edwards observes a pattern of questions of the form “Why do anthropology fieldwork in location X?” - she only hears the question posed of some places - and she explains this pattern by saying that some places are taken to be obviously legitimate for anthropology fieldwork whereas others are not. I draw distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate, obviously legitimate and not obviously legitimate, and better and worse. The distinctions lead to a different explanation.

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If I may, Professor Jeanette,

This is going to please you endlessly I bet!

In sentences that have absorbed my attention for a few days, the anthropologist Jeanette Edwards writes:

I am often asked, ‘Why Bacup?’ A question which requires me, I always think, to identify some significant or special feature that makes it a suitable focus for anthropological interest... perhaps the question, ‘Why Papua New Guinea?’ is asked but it seems peculiarly irrelevant to anthropologists. Non-Western localities are deemed axiomatically of anthropological interest and legitimate arenas of study. (2000: 8)

I presume the natural reading of her words is that she has simply not heard the question “Why Papua New Guinea?” or any equivalent in meaning, though perhaps someone somewhere asks it, rather than that she has heard a question which was ambiguous and could be

interpreted as equivalent, or some other receptivity problem. And that she explains the pattern of questions she observes in terms of non-Western societies being thought obviously legitimate for anthropology fieldwork (and obviously of interest).

I think it is worth distinguishing between the following contrasts: legitimate versus illegitimate, obviously legitimate versus not obviously legitimate, and better versus worse for anthropology. Here is a textbook-like table:

Contrast term 1	Contrast term 2
Legitimate (e.g. counts as anthropology)	Illegitimate (e.g. does not count as anthropology)
Obviously legitimate (no argument for legitimacy required, beyond reasonable doubt as legitimate)	Not obviously legitimate (e.g. illegitimate, legitimate but argument for legitimacy required)
Better for anthropology (brings large gains for the discipline)	Worse (illegitimate or legitimate but small gains for the discipline)

Given these contrasts, there is a different explanation for the pattern of questions Edwards observes. Someone might take fieldwork in Western locations to be obviously legitimate and even of interest, but worse in that the gains for the discipline are smaller. “They are within the rules, but what is better for anthropology is fieldwork elsewhere,” or so a severe critic might think.

Reference

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