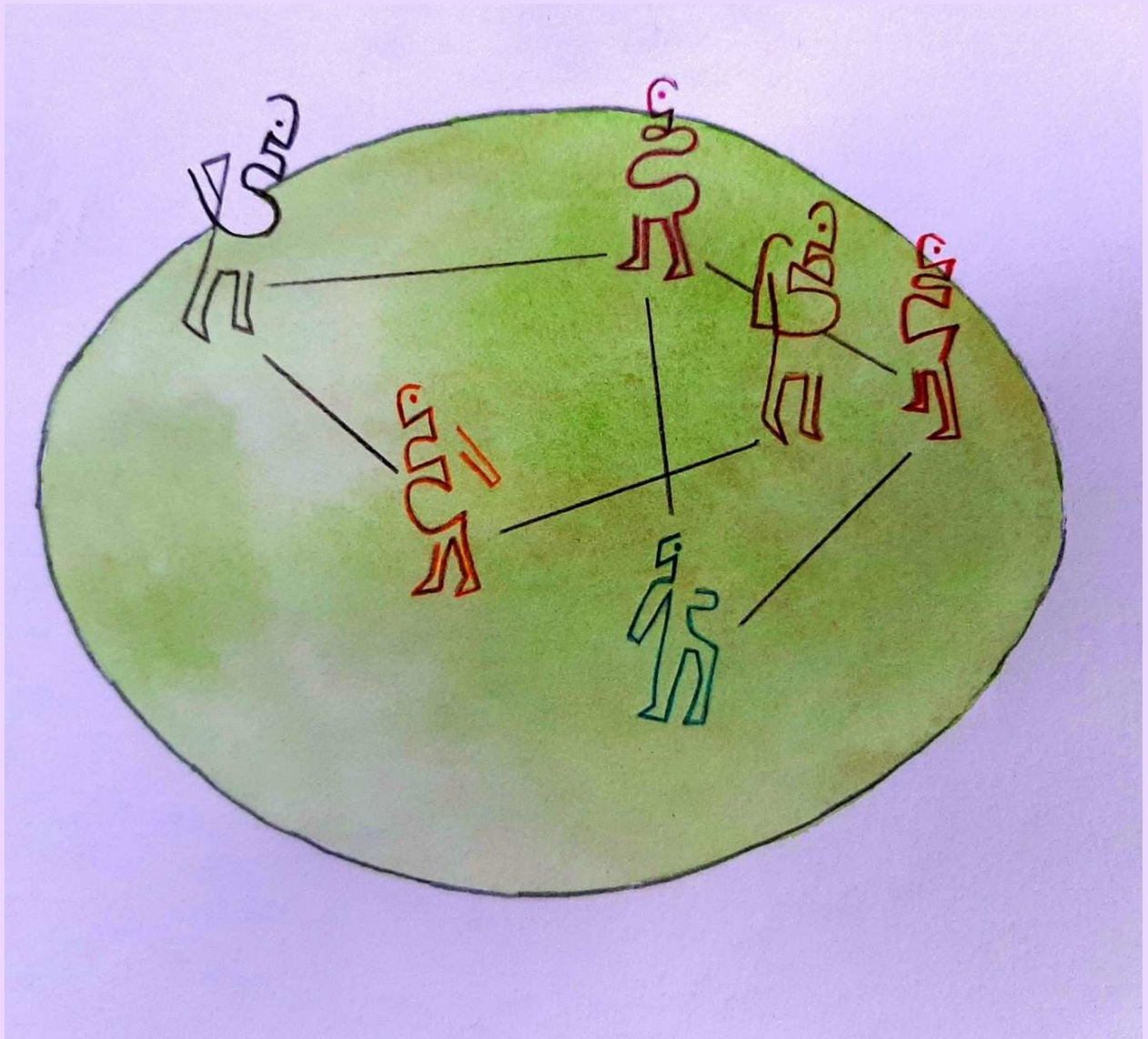# Tractatus Methodologico-Ethnographicus: A Short Introduction to the Anthropological Study of Worlds.

Bob Simpson

Tractatus methodologico-ethnographicus:
A short introduction to the anthropological study of worlds

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Preamble

The work of social anthropology is an attempt to make sense of societies and cultures other than one's own. Sense is made following some degree of participation in, and observation of, the worlds in which other people live. These worlds could just as easily be at the end of the street as in a far-off country. The essential expression of this experience of other worlds is to be found in ethnography – the description, narration and analysis of those worlds in written form. At its simplest ethnography captures and communicates difference by means of an ensemble of propositions about other people's lived realities. These propositions typically come in the form of text, and are often supplemented by image, diagram and, sometimes, film. The broad aim of an ethnographic enquiry is to apprehend and communicate the human condition as it is found, that is, as one which is plural and subject to change. At first sight this is a straightforward endeavour. Yet, the enormity of it can be quite difficult to grasp when first encountered. It is at once the simplest of human encounters [getting to know people and their situations and circumstances by 'being there', 'befriending' and 'hanging out' with them] but also one of the most methodologically and existentially complex operations undertaken within the study of anthropology. Understanding the complexity of ethnographic research and, moreover, producing a systematic and analytical exposition of another world is a major hurdle to negotiate for someone coming to the work of social anthropology for the first time. This short introduction is an attempt to help those in this position to negotiate this hurdle more easily and effectively.

First, however, a word about my rather pompous title. It is a borrowing from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico- Philosophicus*. Published in German in

1921, his *Tractatus* [meaning a treatise, tract or declarative statement] was a bold attempt to state, definitively as he saw it, the relationship between language, thought and reality. The work was short (526 numbered statements), puzzling (there was no argument *per se*) and, above all, controversial (his claims provoked a significant backlash from contemporary philosophers and he himself later critiqued his own claims).

In one sense what I am offering could not be more different from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. In no way am I making a definitive statement about what ethnography is or how it should be carried out. Other visions and versions abound. What is intended here are some points of orientation for when you are first directed to undertake an ethnographic study for yourself. Nor is what I am attempting a philosophical work - although the relationship between language, thought and reality is a conundrum that is never far from the surface when thinking about ethnographic work.

So, why invoke the *Tractatus* at all? One reason is stylistic. The *Tractatus* is written as a series of propositions (numbered 1-7) which are then elaborated at lower levels (e.g., 1, 1.1, 1.111, etc). The statements are presented as self-evident and there are no attempts to connect them to a genealogy of work by others and engage in the referencing that this entails. The effect of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is thus short, direct and deeply thought-provoking. This is the effect I hope to emulate here. The statements that I present are propositions both in the sense of being expressions of opinion as well as plans or schema that you might draw upon when contemplating doing research that has a piece of ethnographic writing as its product. Note at this point that I am treating ethnography as the written synthesis that emerges from fieldwork which will have been made up of multiple methods. In other words, ethnography is not a method *per se* but where an ensemble of methods takes you. A second reason for the title is that Wittgenstein developed a position that was in many respects pre-philosophical. The *Tractatus* was a prelude to thinking about possible worlds and how they are built rather than a philosophical dismantling of selected operations therein (eg language, logic, meaning etc). Similarly, my pitch here is in a sense pre-anthropological.   It points towards the blending of experience and imagination in the lived world rather than the theories

or arguments in which we might seek to contain it. What I am advocating is therefore a headlong plunge into direct engagement with others. This is a necessary prelude to the production of ethnography as a distinctive form of anthropological knowledge making. We therefore begin with people's actual lives and circumstances (which I characterise as worlds) and a desire to understand what shapes them and what it is like to live under this or that set of conditions. Here the work of the imagination is paramount because this is how we travel into other worlds and thereby develop a better understanding of human being and, more importantly, of the open-ended project of human becoming.

The kind of travelling I have in mind is captured by the philosopher Hannah Arendt in a distinction she makes between learning and education (Arendt, 1961, p. 196)*. Her distinction hinges on the idea of education as an active and outward facing engagement with the world rather than an inward and passive reflection upon it. The objective of education for her is fundamentally a political one. It is intimately bound up with questions of moral judgement, political worth and the ability to fashion a public sphere in which tolerance and justice are mutually reinforcing. Arendt's vision of the role of education in society took shape as a bulwark against totalitarianism (the effects of which she had experienced in the 1930s as a Jewish woman in Germany). To embrace this vision of education in full is to get to know the world as it is, as it might be and to inculcate an understanding of one's capacity to act within it; to be prepared for the task of 'renewing a common world' (ibid). An important facet of such an education is the process of travelling in the mind to places we have never been, to meet people we would not normally meet and who are living in circumstances that we ourselves might never encounter first-hand. Through the written accounts of other people's worlds and what it is like to live in them it is possible to gain insights, albeit fleeting ones, into other ways of life and thereby engender the critical and reflexive enrichment of one's own. To date you have probably done a lot of travelling using the medium of other people's ethnographies. In undertaking a preliminary ethnographic project, you are about to do your own travelling. Your task is to convert primary experiences of some fragment of social and cultural territory into a map that others may read. A successful ethnography will enable them to travel into that world and, just as important, the voices of those who live in that world to travel out.
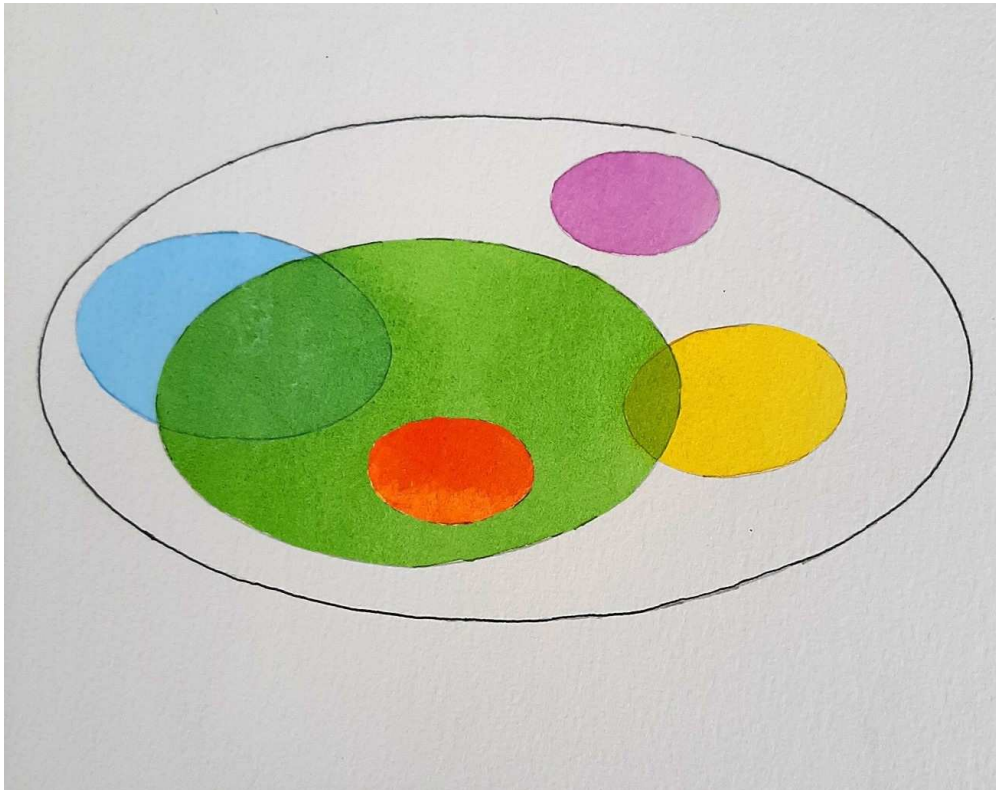
*Arendt, Hannah. 1961. **Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought**. The Viking Press, New York.

The world is full of worlds ……..

1. The world is full of worlds …….

1.1. The notion of a world is a much-used metaphor. It conveys the idea of a bounded space which is a container of things. In the English language the world metaphor is made to operate at multiple scales

1.11. A world can be anything from the half of a one room bedsit that I might happen to live in, to the image of the earth as seen from outer space.

1.12. It crops up in personal idioms that indicate a context and its limits; as in 'welcome to my world' or 'we are worlds apart' or 'you are my world' or 'it was a different world then'.

1.13. The notion of worlds operates as an accessible boundary marker of the existence of communities of meaning and their possible limits.

1.14. Sometimes these limits stake out distinction and alienation [as in the so-called 'culture wars'] and at other times inclusion and the shared nature of experience [as in discourses about the global impact of climate change] .

1.2. The worlds that anthropologists are interested to learn more about are social and cultural in character. Studying worlds at some scale or other is what social anthropologists set out to do. To study a world anthropologically is to explore sites of dense connectivity, shared meaning, exchange, reproduction, creativity, and mutuality – whether these happen to be on one's doorstep or in a faraway place. In classical social science the study of a world presumes a degree of durability,

coherence, and, for those who live in it, a feeling that it is it is in a sense given and grounded in common sense assumptions – that is, things that everybody knows. This sense of given-ness is often taken to indicate that a foundational human capacity for sociality is in play. Here are some examples:

1.211. Collective consciousness: Durkheim defined collective consciousness in terms of social facts – the shared beliefs values and understanding of social norms which add up to a specific reality with the power to coerce people into particular ways of behaving.

1.212. Lifeworlds: This concept was first put forward by the philosopher Edmund Husserl who took it to mean the pre-existing world of objects into which every human is born, in which they come to live together with others, and which are taken as self-evident. The idea was carried into the social sciences by Alfred Schutz, who was instrumental in developing the school of phenomenological sociology. Schutz saw common sense thinking as being derived from a shared system of ideas, knowledge, symbols and meanings which feature in human interactions.

1.213. Forms of life: Ludwig Wittgenstein offered the notion of 'forms of life' in his second major philosophical work *Philosophical Investigations*. He was concerned with the ways in which communities are constituted out of the mutual intelligibility of the languages they habitually use. Crucially, this activity includes non-linguistic dimensions of language use such as style, setting and performance which are also shared and self-evident to the communities in which they circulate.

1.214. Habitus: Pierre Bourdieu added the notion of habitus to the lexicon. The term is etymologically linked to the idea of habit and carries the sense of things that for any particular group "go without saying". The notion of habitus aims to capture the totality of influences that shape the way an individual reads the world in relation to others (for example, language, ritual, space, posture and so forth). As a set of ingrained and embodied practices, Bourdieu uses the idea of habitus as the main building block of larger constructions such as class, religion, ethnicity and culture.

1.22. With differences of emphasis, these approaches are all variations on a theme. They are examples of how in theoretical terms we might characterise the everyday and the ordinary as a backdrop of common-sense assumptions against which individual human actions unfold.

1.23. It is also important to be aware, however, of the limitations of these notions of a world. Worlds also contain contradiction and rupture as when people experience oppression, displacement, conflict, and violence. Under these circumstances assumptions about shared meanings become problematic. World-making is no longer about passive cultural conformity but moves into active modes [eg. resistance, challenge, coping with suffering] and which require different kinds of theorisation from those identified in 1.2. Worlds are, in other words, places of creativity and transformation in which people strive to make them better, which, typically, means more habitable and sustainable.

1.3. In studying worlds it is important to be clear how we find, recognize and define them?

1.31. The scalability of worlds is betrayed by the ease with which we slip from singular to plural – from <u>a</u> world to <u>many</u> worlds and back again. Indeed, worlds are rather like fractals in that it seems we can pass into ever more specific involutions in the patterns we encounter. The world is full of worlds.

1.32. For anthropologists, describing the way that these fractals relate to one another is a necessary task in the production of ethnography. Paying careful attention to how and when there are shifts in scale gives insight into questions of power, morality and identity and provides important clues as to how worlds are made to hang together [or not] in practice.

1.321. For example, the way people talk about their family and close relations may resonate with the way that other people in that society think about community and collective identity. This in turn may be replicated at the level of the state in policy [eg welfare, law, citizenship] and in ideas of nationalist ideology.

1.4. Making worlds appear by way of ethnographic elucidation is not just a matter of presenting the description of an object but, crucially, it also involves situating the ethnographer as a subject; as an 'I' finding itself in a 'we'.

1.41 It is a truism that we all find ourselves born into a world that was there before we arrived; that we are likely to acquire, among other things, language, social competencies, and orientations as to how to live in that world over time, measured as a life. Worlds will also continue after our demise. The important point here is that you too will have acquired a distinct position in a world, and therefore making sense of the worlds in which others live is inevitably mediated by your own experience of having been brought up in a particular world. The basic fact of human subjectivity in the making of anthropological knowledge is handled in different ways:

1.411. It is rendered invisible through the presumption that universalistic objectivity is possible through empirical enquiry

1.412. It is presumed to be a kind lens through which all other worlds are viewed. The lens enables us to translate and interpret cultures in the same way one might translate and interpret a language.

1.413. A third possibility places your own subjectivity as central to the making of anthropological knowledge. As subjects we are all marked by age, gender, appearance etc , as well as biography, beliefs and culture more generally. These are read and acted on by others just as much as you might wish to read and act upon such markers in the worlds you are trying to understand. The process of getting to know others in their own world is thus marked by dialogue and reflexivity.

1.5. The above propositions might be summarized in an equation of sorts:

(experience+capture)imagination=ethnography

In which the symbols have the following meanings:

1.511. *( )* is the bringing together of experience and its capture to make a single entity. *Experience* is shorthand for engagement, encounter, acquaintance, participation, involvement and all the other ways in which you might experience 'being there'. *Capture* refers to the ways in which experience might become reflexively fixed as memory – for example by means of notes/ photography/ film/ diaries/ descriptions/ documents etc. [which is the subject section 3]

1.512. *Imagination* is the operation of creative sense-making in unfamiliar worlds. It entails reflection upon yourself as a subject in that world and upon your relationship with the objects [people, spaces, things] that make it up.

1.513. = brings in the idea of a product arising from the completion of operations to the left of the equation. Note that this is a temporal process – without experience there cannot be capture and without experience and capture there is nothing for the imagination to work on and without all of these there can be no ethnography.

1.514. *Ethnography* then is the product: an account of a world [people, situations, events, norms, values, belief, conflicts etc]. This account will always be limited and highly selective in relation to the mass of possibilities that even a limited immersion in a world generates – the world is full of worlds. An ethnographic piece of

writing should work as a bridge across which a reader can travel into an unfamiliar world which they might then begin to appreciate as a possible world in which actual people live and strive.   We might say that good ethnography conveys something essential about the world it describes.

The world of another can be known, but never completely ……
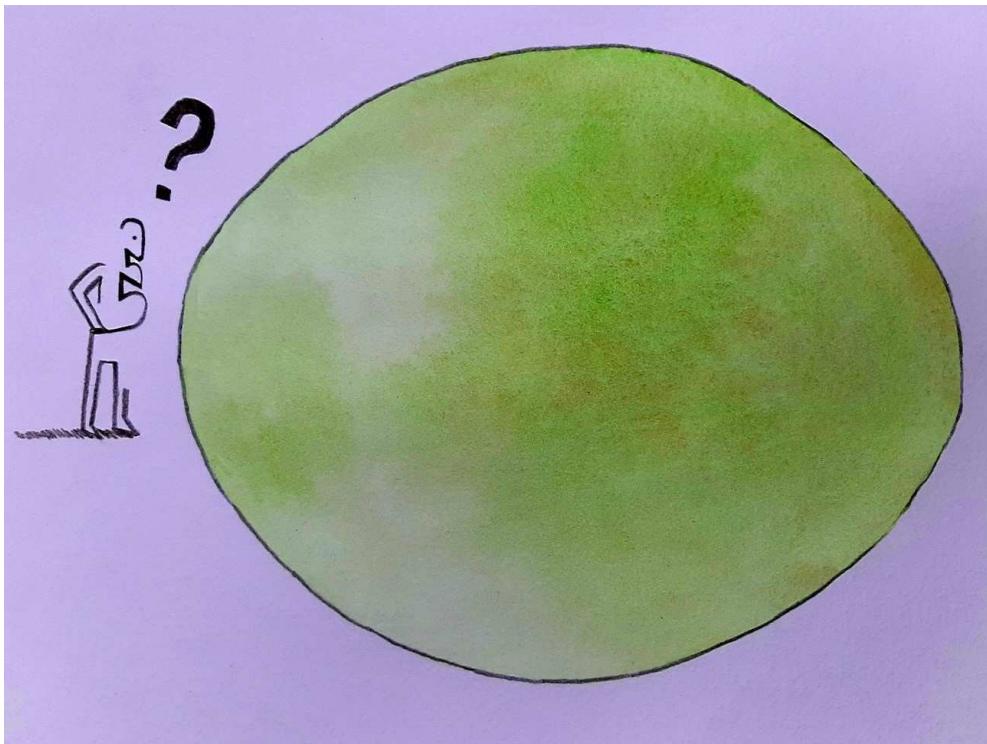
2. The world of another can be known, but never completely ……

2.1. A primary assumption when embarking on an ethnographic enquiry is that the ability to participate in others' worlds is grounded in shared human capacities. You can recognize another's world even though you may not understand it and, moreover, that world is cognitively, linguistically, semantically and to some degree experientially accessible once you enter it. The possibility of meaningful connection between worlds is grounded in the sharing of experience and a traffic of words, images, sensations and actions which flow in both directions.

2.2. The sense-making and translation you attempt may be doomed to partiality and imperfection, but it is nonetheless a profoundly humanistic endeavor in which the objective, as an outsider, is to refine your understanding of what it feels like be an insider in another world. Without this presupposition there could be no ethnography.

2.3. Engagement with another world is often conceived spatially as a field. This notion conveys a sense of being 'out there' whilst at the same time being in a bounded area in which relations might be discretely located. Hence the idea of fieldwork - a field in which you set about working.

2.31. The field metaphor is useful in that it highlights the all-important act of moving into a site [spatial or virtual] of relations, assumptions, values and practices with which one is unfamiliar [and, even if there is a presumption of familiarity, it is likely to be misplaced].

2.32. Although an elementary metaphor, the idea of a field as the site

of work is limited. Worlds are inter-connected and inter-penetrating. The workings of capital and commerce squeeze them in and out of one another. Globalisation juxtaposes and blends them. Climate change disrupts and transforms them. Information technologies connect and accelerate communication within and between them. In describing a world it is crucial to specify the scales and parameters within which you are working.

2.321. For example: The move to another country, where a very different culture is evident, and a different language is spoken is a challenge; it takes a long time to achieve even the most basic competences. On the way however, it is relatively easy to notice differences, presences and absences in relation to your own common-sense assumptions. Impressions of how that world hangs together flow thick and fast. By contrast, carrying out ethnographic work at 'home' where you might be familiar with language, cultural mores and how to act and present yourself to others can render access deceptively easy but observation surprisingly difficult.

2.33. Whether the world you are trying to enter is reckoned as being close to 'home' or is in some sense distant from it, there is an ongoing interplay between the strange and the familiar; between orientation and disorientation; between closeness to, and distance from, the people and situations you hope to get to know.

2.34. The fundamentally irrecoverable nature of others' experiences is met with one's efforts to render them, by way of the imagination,

into understandings and meanings that are accessible to those who will eventually read your work.   With such imaginings comes the realisation that there are infinite possibilities for how you might be situated within a world made up of others who share, and perhaps struggle to maintain, an ongoing sense of mutuality and belonging.

2.4. A critical moment in the movement into a world is the first encounter.

2.41. What is being sought – often glossed as 'access' - are relationships. It is through relationships that you might glimpse an interior which was previously exterior and opaque.

2.42. The relationships that you might hope to form entail trust, collaboration, co-operation and acceptance [albeit with varying degrees of conditionality],

2.43. Crucially, relationships are processual; they are made over time. Depth of relationship and the insights this affords is directly proportional to the time that you are actively in that relationship.

 2.431. If I carry out a one-off interview about, say, living in a high-rise block in an impoverished neighbourhood, I might get some useful insights into what my interlocutor thinks about the world in which they live, that is, how they make sense of it and are able to communicate it to others. The interview entails a relationship [an inter-view] but it is a rather thin one. If I interview that person multiple times I might get a better sense of who they are and,

indeed, they might get more of a sense of who I am as a person who comes to them from somewhere for some purpose. If I were to live in the block for a week, and discuss events as they happened with my interlocutor and her/his neighbours, the insights would be deeper still. If I was there for a month, I would experience more, and my appreciation of that world would be deeper. A year in the block, deeper still … and so forth. Engagement over time takes us way beyond the flat rendition of a world in an interview. Through participation the high-rise block as a world is progressively animated as a set of lived possibilities and contraints which are negotiated between real people on a daily basis. What people say they do may be quite different from what they actually do. Ethnography tries to make sense of this kind of complexity and make it available to others.

2.5. You should infer from the above that time is a primary variable for an ethnographer to manage [how long is sufficient to meet my aims?] but it is also one that is of much importance to your interlocutors.

2.51. People whose existence was ongoing before you presented yourself [and will continue after you depart] are likely to have questions [which they may or may not voice]. For example, who are you? why are you here? what do you want? how do you fit into my life? do you pose any kind of threat? can you be of any kind of benefit? How much time can I spare to help this person?

2.52. The way your interlocutors weigh up and answer these questions is likely to be instructively discomfiting and invites reflection

on what it means to enter other people's worlds. Your presence initially involves others spending time to figure out what you want. Depending on what it is that you appear to want they may be prepared to spend a lot of time, a little or none at all.

2.521. a positive and facilitative response is likely if you present a realistic and reasoned narrative of why you are there and what it is that you want to learn more about and what it is that your interlocutors can do to help.

2.522. It is important that your explanations, narratives and questions are oriented towards your interlocutor's world and not the academic world from which you come. Whilst you will be interested in their expertise, they will probably not be so interested in yours.

2.523. A negative or obstructive response is likely if you are trying to approach matters that touch directly on the mainsprings of existence, identity and even just how a world works in practice. These are the aspects of life that might be characterised as sensitive, sacred, inchoate, private, secret and so forth. The list is long and what it covers cannot be easily assumed or predicted in advance. What might appear to be mundane might in fact be acutely sensitive and therefore insulated from enquiry, however well-meaning your curiosity might be. Moreover, you won't get far if you approach these matters in timeframes that are not commensurate with their importance to your interlocutors. In other words, to be able to share things in any depth you need to get to know your interlocutors and they need to know you, and this takes time. Put another way, it is important for the moth to learn to fly

round the lightbulb and not directly into it.

2.524. The temporal move into a world is not linear in terms of the access it allows. Apparent acceptance may be followed by blocking and obstruction [such as when you begin to know more than your interlocutors are comfortable with]. Conversely, a difficult beginning may be followed by acceptance [such as when you demonstrate certain competences in another's world or pass some kind of test that is set for you].

2.6. In summary: one's foothold in other people's worlds is precarious; it is made up of relationships that exists by virtue of others' generosity and hospitality and, in view of this, patience, humility and gratitude are necessary responses.

Entering a world is to activate it.
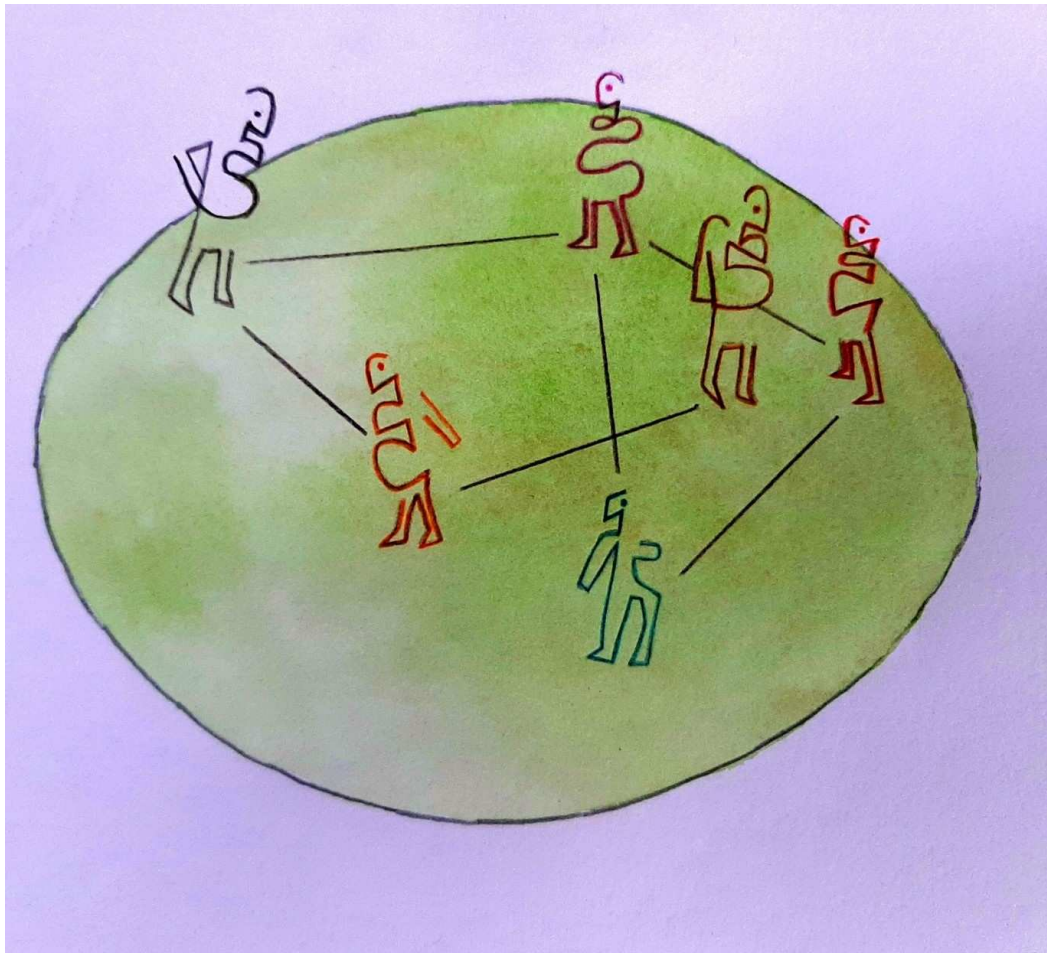
3. Entering a world is to activate it.

3.1. To suggest that you don't have any preconceived notions of the world you are about to enter would be a nonsense. You will have read a lot of introductory anthropology texts, studied ethnographies describing cognate worlds and taken in much else. You will have a sense of an endpoint where you might come up with answers to the questions – perhaps general, perhaps specific - that you formulated at the beginning of the study. You will also have gone through an ethical review procedure which requires you to anticipate in various ways the kinds of encounters you will have and the topics you will cover [we will meet ethics again in sections 3.6 and 5.7]. But, the extent to which you might assume that you have ethnographic research figured in advance should never be over-estimated.

3.11. Your enquiries should be kept as open as possible for as long as possible within the time that is available to carry out the research. The approach to be taken is thus more about falling into their world rather than falling back on your own. Ethnographic research is improvisatory and a good ethnographer is able to operate comfortably in responsive mode.

3.12. The ideal disposition to aim for is that of someone who wishes to be educated by people who are *prima facie* experts in their own world. You will therefore willingly submit to roles such as the novice who has to be taught; the child who has to be corrected or perhaps the idiot who simply doesn't know how to act in the world. From this disposition you will begin to capture the evidence with which you can begin the process of sense-making.

3.2. Entering a world is to **experience** what might be thought of as a series of activations. Sometimes these occur intentionally and systematically but at other times unintentionally and randomly. When entering a world the points of activation might include some or all of the following:

3.21. Interactions with people who converse with you, answer your questions, tell you stories and give you descriptions of how they see the world.

3.211. What they tell you might be based on experiences they have had or be their formulations [that is, opinions, ideas, analysis etc] of the way their world is, how people act in it and why.

3.212 These insights might be shared in a single meeting or over lots of meetings.

3.213. The exchange might take the form of a structured interview or a casual conversation

3.214. The people you engage with initially are likely to shape all subsequent interactions – they are your gatekeepers, key informants and the people who others in that world will identify you with as you make your way in it

3.215. People might share with you their memories of the past and how they came to be who they are.

3.216. They may share their hopes for, and visions of, the future.

3.22. A meeting or encounter with several people in which you observe the relationships they have with one another in terms of what they do and how they do it.

3.221. Here you might glimpse social life as it emerges in the communications that pass back and forth like light refracted through a series of human lenses. The light might reveal practices relating to hierarchy, gender, role, values, rules and social organisation in general.

3.222. You will need be alert to how they speak to you. What you are included in or excluded from. What people say to you will contain clues as to where you fit into their schema of things.

3.23. The content of linguistic communication is clearly of fundamental importance, but it is not the only way in which a world might be revealed to you.

3.231. You might record, not just what is said, but how it is said, that is, the performative aspects of language and communication. This would also include people's manner, how they dress, and the place and circumstances of your meeting.

3.232. what people do, rather than what they say they do, is important because it will give clues as to the things that people cannot say - some things are inchoate and cannot be put into words [eg suffering or painful memory] or they are unacceptable [eg

blasphemy] or they are firmly buried in the unconscious [eg matters concerning close relationships, sex and intimacy]

3.233. it is important, wherever possible, to undertake activities and actions that your interlocutors engage in. By doing this you will get insights into embodiment and affect as well as develop relationships with those who teach, instruct and guide you as to how to do things properly in their world.

3.234. you may witness those collective and carefully orchestrated events in which people act on themselves or one another to achieve certain outcomes. These events generally come under the heading of ritual. Whether religious or secular, rituals are likely to be a major point of activation in your fieldwork. Capturing such events will tell you something about people in relation to their past [because it has elements that are received, ordered, repetitive, and it is replete with actions and objects that are laden with meaning], their present social relations [because it requires practical organisation by more than one person] and about the future [it can contain elements that are creative, challenging and which betoken worlds which are yet to be].

3.235. Your work may be facilitated using images. Photographs might be shared by your interlocutors as key visual statements of people and events that are important [eg kin, homes, people who have departed, events such as weddings and community celebrations]. These images can provide crucial trigger points for memory and explanation. You might yourself collect images of the things that you think are going to be important to remember. But also, be alert to the fact that your interlocutors are likely to direct you to capture things that they think are important [which may not always coincide with the way you frame and evaluate significance].

3.236. Whilst you will have paid close attention to the social dimensions of a world, it is worth remembering that worlds are also physical spaces [and this is so even if your interlocutors are on the internet]. Noting the material settings in which social interaction takes place can reveal important aspects of what it is to live in, and indeed, create a world. Spaces and how people make and maintain them will give insights into habits, categories, classifications, and boundaries. It is in such spaces that people are likely to be most at ease demonstrating their worldly expertise.

3.24. This enumeration of the ways in which you might activate a world is in no way exhaustive but is already far too ambitious an agenda for a preliminary ethnographic foray into another world. Managing even a small subset of the above activations will provide you with enough material to begin explicating a world.

3.3. Participant-observation is the methodological strategy under which all of the above activations are generally subsumed. This rather problematic term has endured as a descriptor of what is involved in creating the raw materials of ethnographic writing. One reason for this is perhaps that the term encompasses the contradictions inherent in the ethnographic project itself. One cannot observe and participate at the same time just as one cannot stand in a river whilst at the same time observing it from its banks. In short, the term is oxymoronic –.

3.311. The notion of participation elides the difficulties one faces in entering and being in a world.

3.312. The notion of observation takes one too far away from the realities one is trying to apprehend.   One cannot be in a world and simply observe it as it is thought that a fly on the wall might.

3.213. Participant observation might be better thought of as transgressive activation given that there is neither the smooth assimilation into a world that 'participation' implies, as one's very presence means interruptions to what was there before. Indeed, it is through transgression that a world begins to be activated in ways that can be recorded rather than through passive acts of 'observation'.

3.4. A major difficulty in carrying out participant-observation is the question of relevance. All situations contain ethnographic potential and therefore everything is potentially of relevance in any later attempts at sense-making. Given that you cannot record every possible activation, how do you then decide what to record? The notion of hypervigilance might be relevant at this point.

3.41. Hypervigilance might seem an odd concept to evoke in this context. It refers to a pathology in which an individual develops an enhanced state of sensory sensitivity. The condition is believed to be a mechanism that helps protect people [and especially children] from perceived threats and dangers. It is brought on by traumatic events that have been experienced without protection or resolution. Symptoms include heightened anxiety, high levels of response to stimuli and constant scanning of the immediate environment. In the context of ethnography, I use it to capture two kinds of attention that

immersion in other people's worlds brings into play

3.411. 'Natural' hypervigilance - if you enter a world in which you are encountering people who, whilst they may become interlocutors, informants, friends etc, start off as strangers and you don't know the rules about how to be and all is strange then it is not surprising that you develop a heightened sense of what is going on around you or what I have characterised as a kind of hypervigilance. There is anxiety, the possibility of existential or indeed physical threat and the exhaustion that comes from experiential overload. This response is in many respects 'natural'.

3.412. Cultivated hypervigilance - as an anthropologist your training to date will have alerted you to the enormous breadth of ways in which people might simply enact, actively demonstrate or positively assert their version of what it is to live in a world other than your own. Indeed, if your basic disposition towards other people's lived experience is not one of curiosity, then the kind of ethnography described here is not likely to make a great deal of sense to you.

3.413. Unlike the idea of pathological hypervigilance used by a therapist, the hypervigilance of the ethnographer is 'natural' but also a skill to be honed. You cannot know what to look for in advance, but your interlocutors will guide you if you let them.   The skill lies in recognising that they are doing this and allowing them to do it. Taking this stance gives ethnographic research its distinctive character. The process might be variously described as exploratory, interactive, grounded, iterative, recursive, inductive and reflexive [as distinct from being data-driven, hypothesis testing, deductive and objective].

3.42. As you will have gathered, stepping into another world is not as easy as it might have first appeared. The conundrum of how to be and to do at the same time is a difficult thing to accomplish but it is the essence of ethnographic research.

3.5. One of the ways in which this challenge manifests is in the guise of ethics. We touched on the ethical reflection that happens before research takes place in 3.1 but at this point in the research process ethics appears in an entirely different register.

3.51. Participant-observation is an ongoing relational encounter in which it is impossible to know what is going to happen next. The kinds of things I have in mind here are:

3.511. Disclosure of illegal activity or direct witnessing of it [eg, drug use or trafficking, violence, pilfering, theft and a host of other activities which are classed as crimes in the world of your interlocutors].

3.512. The perpetration of oppression and abuse

3.513. The experience of oppression and abuse

3.514. Sharing of information by interlocutors which causes them distress and, perhaps, distresses you as the researcher.

3.515. Defamatory statements in which one person insults or incriminates another.

3.516. The expression of views that are discriminatory and signal what is for you a problematic world view.

3.517. People telling you things which could have consequences for them were you, intentionally or accidentally, to pass them onto others in that world

3.52. The list is by no means exhaustive it merely flags up the kinds of problematic activations that you might experience when you step into other people's worlds. In other words:

3.521. ethical consternation is always a possibility in fieldwork

3.522. it is likely to be a part of an activation that you have created and is therefore not outside of the ethnographic encounter but integral to your efforts to learn about a world and what happens when you step into it

3.533. an ethical challenge that arises for you might be reflected on long after the event but it has to be managed on the spot which can bring anxiety and reinforce a sense of not knowing how to find one's way about in another's world.

3.524. The humanistic and relational ethic upon which engagement with another's world is based raises other quandaries which require evaluation and judgement. The interior of some worlds are not simply of anthropological interest but invite the curiosity of those with less benign intentions [for example, government agencies, the police, security services, commercial organisations etc)

3.53. At this point you might be feeling rather troubled by the idea of carrying out ethnographic research. However, it is important to remember that

> **3.531.** you are at an early stage in the development of a distinct set of research skills and the sensibilities that go with them. It is unlikely that you will dive in too deeply at first go – a gentle immersion is a necessary prelude to wild water swimming.
>
> **3.532.** You will have a supervisor with whom you should work closely. They will be able to guide, advise, and support you as you move through the various stages of the research.

Activations need to be captured.......

4.   Activations need to be captured.

4.1.   In the diagram opposite I have represented activations simply as crosses. There is perhaps a temptation to see these as 'data' which are 'collected' like so many discrete pieces of fruit picked from a tree.   When trying to understand what ethnographic work is, seeing it in this way can be an unhelpful place to start. The crosses should not be thought of as data points as they represent the wide range of experiences and interactions that might be captured when you step into a world. As such they are not reductive, discrete and amenable to simple quantification, which is typically the character of 'data'. Rather, they are experiences that are expansive and pregnant with connection to other elements in the world you have entered.

4.2.   As you learn about a world it is vital that you turn your hypervigilance into capture. The half-life of short-term memory is very short, and much is lost if it is not recorded.

4.3.   For the ethnographer the prosthetics of memory might include the following:

4.31.   Having a notebook to hand at all times is imperative. Fieldnotes are the scribblings, sketches and scratches that fill your notebooks. These are rarely systematic and are typically a hybrid of the variety of things that you notice and select to capture. They are also the things that your interlocutors direct you to as being of importance and worthy of note. Nowadays a mobile phone is used by many as a digital equivalent of the notebook. Fieldnotes, in whatever form, will later serve to provoke memory.

4.32.   At some point soon after they are collected, flesh can be

added to the bare bones of fieldnotes by writing or typing them up. At this point you should write extensively to supplement your notes with details of context, character, feeling and any tentative connection to other activations already captured. You might also wish to write for an imagined audience - perhaps your supervisor. This makes for an important discipline because you are forced to render your notes into a form that is, albeit in a preliminary way, coherent. The most important audience however will be you yourself reading them at a later point when you have left the field. Reading your fieldnotes later will enable you to see yourself as the medium through which certain kinds of experience, capture and imagining were created.

4.33. Diaries play an important role in enabling you to re-locate yourself in the immediacy of fieldwork. A journal in which events, intuitions, and emotions are recorded will provide an important reminder of the trajectory you followed in entering a world and the people and situations you encountered.

4.34. Meetings in which you engage in a formalised conversation or interview are likely to feature in your work.   These maybe recorded as notes on paper or using a recording device of some kind which enables you to produce a transcript of precisely what was said. You may even be able to video a conversation or an interaction such that you capture not just what was said but how it was said. Transcripts are useful for capturing the detail of people's responses to your questions. Later analysis of transcripts can give access to the expressions, metaphors, narratives and factual statements that reveal the understanding and expertise that your interlocutors have in their world. Revisiting these statements is an important source of evidence for what you will go on to produce. Use of quotations is a way in which you might give your interlocutors voice in what you go on to write.

4.35. The ease with which images can now be captured makes photography a significant adjunct to strategies of capture. Photographs are powerful memory joggers but can also be analysed as evidence in their own right. However, the accumulation of images does not obviate the need to keep looking, seeing and making sense.

4.4. The above suggestions for how to capture what happens when you enter a world run headlong into questions of data protection. The issues have become particularly acute for ethnographers following the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR) which brought in a series of regulations on data protection and privacy within the European Union and upon which UK legislation is modelled. It is aimed at the protection of citizens in response to abuses and manipulation of personal data. Different interpretations of what is and is not data between researchers, administrators and lawyers means that capturing the activations that are generated by the participatory, holistic and experiential encounters required to produce ethnography can be rendered highly problematic. The difficulty comes down to the following:

4.411. The GDPR is premised on the presumption of a particular relationship between a researcher and what is researched. This is essentially a vertical power relationship in which data is extracted in formalised transactions from private, autonomous individuals for whom the legislation offers protection and routes to redress where violation occurs.

4.412. The route to ethnographic description, however, is premised on a rather different reading of what is entailed when a research

relationship is formed. The basis is collaboration and mutual creation of anthropological knowledge rather than any simple extraction of 'data'. This relationship is built out of the recognisable presence of the ethnographer and is built on trust. It does not have the character of a series of discrete and verifiable transactions onto which ethical and legal evaluations might be easily applied.

4.42. As the presence of the ethnographer is the necessary ingredient in the creation of ethnography it is vital that this is not obscured in the drive towards data protection compliance. Regulation of the relationship as a kind of transaction can work to erase the complexities that go into making it in the first place. Yet, these complexities are the stuff of ethnography and not incidental to it and it is essential to maintain an awareness of how participant-observation and hence the production of ethnography operates in the midst of the constraints of compliance.

Making sense of a world is to understand the relation between things ……..
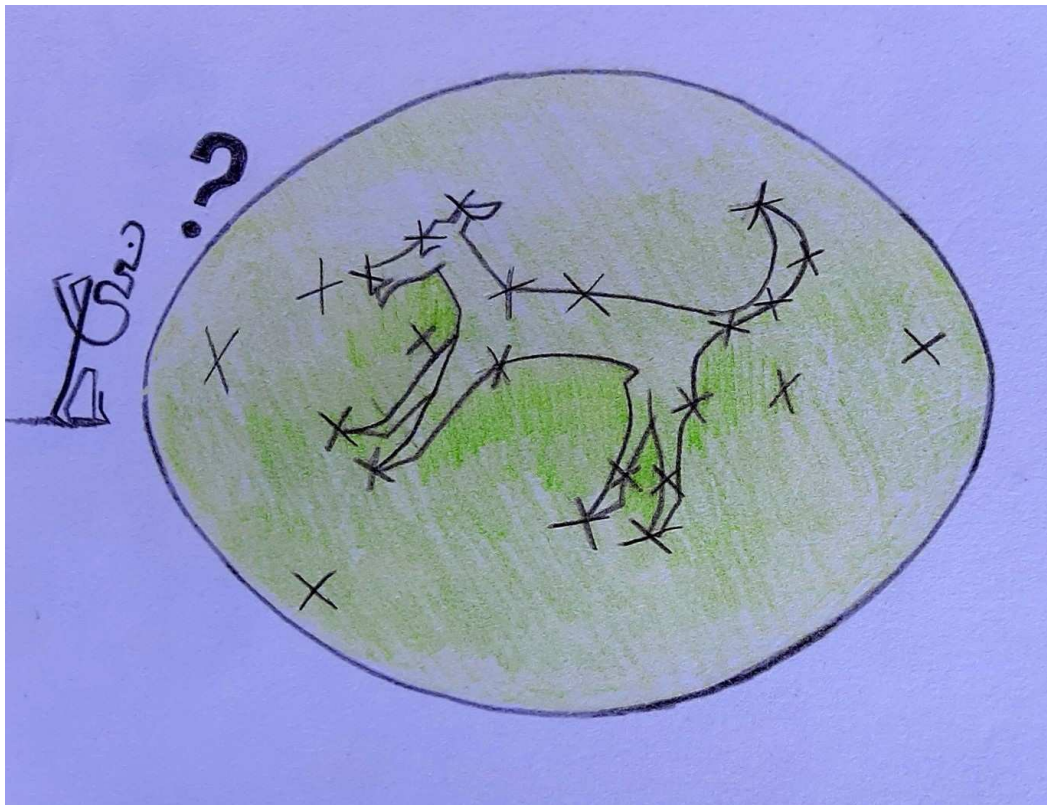
5.   Making sense of a world is to understand the relation between things ……..

5.1.   During the course of your fieldwork you will accumulate an abundance of material in lots of different shapes and forms. When you leave the field [whether it be physically, virtually or temporally] you will have a lot of crosses to make sense of. The work that comes now is a combination of systematic reflection and imaginative ordering

5.11.   By systematic I mean the work of reviewing your material to refresh your memory and get a sense of what it is that you are working with. In doing this you will begin to order and classify so that you know where to find things.

5.12.   By imaginative I mean the work of beginning to see the connections between different elements of your field material. These are the patterns, themes, structures, trajectories, oppositions and recurrences immanent in the material you have accumulated.

5.2.   In making sense of a world you are trying to understand relations between the activations you have experienced. However, it would be impossible to consider all relations between all things and there is inevitably an element of selection

5.3.   The way I have represented this selectivity in the diagram above is as a kind of dot-to-dot exercise in which a shape is extracted from the material to hand. Imposing an order on what may at first sight seem like a rather messy and random reality is the essential challenge when it comes

to writing ethnography. Your objective, remember, is to produce a descriptive exposition of a world. Such an account needs to be true to that world and the people in it but also needs to be organised in a way that makes it available to others.

5.4. There are lots of ways in which things may take shape as you begin to work through your field materials. Some of the relationships which might help you recognise shape and pattern as follows:

5.41. Cause and effect: identification of situations in which one thing causes another to happen. This may be explicit as when people told you about specific instances of how, when and why things happen in their world or implicit in that you yourself see things linked in this way even though your interlocutors didn't.

5.42. Temporality and narrative: a more discursive form of cause and effect can be found in the stories that people told you. Stories are logical and ordered and can reveal much about the way that a world works – how things are thought to be connected, the values that prevail, what happens when these are violated or over-ridden etc. The narratives that appear in your field notes might also provide clues as to how you might structure your ethnographic writing. Narrative is one route to a coherent evocation of a world [as distinct from its analytical fragmentation].

5.43. Resonance and repetition: you should not be surprised to find that in your field material the same things appear again and again. What you are identifying are what I described in 1.3 in terms of 'dense connectivity, shared meaning and mutuality', or what is often cast as a 'world view' of a group of people. A quantitative researcher

might want to count the frequency of a particular recurrence to establish scientific validity. The operation we are more interested in here is one in which recurrence is captured by way of descriptions of typical and exemplary occurrences - you don't have to eat a whole fruit cake in order to ascertain what is in each slice.

5.44. Conflict and dispute: nor should you be surprised if the normative patterns identified in 5.43, are contested and challenged. Social life is not all harmony and consensus but is also marked by conflict and disagreement. This may be anything from the minor irritations and frictions of day to interaction through to life-changing feuds and disputes.   For many people, social harmony and stability is not a given but is precarious and has to be worked at if it is to be maintained. It is not so much that culture prevails and disputes break out but that conflict is ever-present and normative relations require effort if they are to be maintained and reproduced. In other words, the points at which the accounts of your interlocutors contradicted one another or there was disagreement is instructive; these are the points at which people are likely to reflect upon and make explicit what is important to them in their own world.

5.5.   In beginning to order your material you are taking the first steps towards theorisation. For many undergraduates [and indeed beyond] the word theory is associated with complexity and abstraction and consequently is often a source of anxiety. For our purposes here, theory is not used to structure fieldwork in advance nor is it to be used to structure fieldwork after the event. Rather it is integral to the making of ethnography. In other words, anxieties about the use of theory - how one theorises and what theories to use - can be dissipated by recognising that theory is basically an exercise in pattern recognition at different scales.

5.51. The patterns you identify by way of themes and connections may correspond with ones that other researchers have identified previously. These patterns may be helpful in enabling you to communicate some aspect of the world you are trying to describe – you may see parallels that are helpful in situating your material in a broader field of scholarship. It is important however, that you do not try to validate your own material by simply making it fit with others' theoretical pattern making.   Your material is unique, and others' work should be used to reinforce that uniqueness rather than detract from it.

5.52. In connecting your material with wider patterns, it might be useful to think of ethnography as ascending and descending a series of scales. At its most intense levels of magnification ethnography deals with the fine detail of people's lived realities – this might be the ordinary, and the everyday aspects of their lives as well as the extra-ordinary ones. At its broadest, however, ethnographic work articulates with theoretical models that speak to the human predicament in its widest sense. The move that is made in the writing of ethnography is essentially one from explanations that are internal to a world to ones that are external to it.

5.6.   In the diagram above there are a number of crosses that are not part of the pattern that is identified. One reason for this is that given the constraints you are working under you simply may not be able to include every item of information and insight you have gathered. Some things, although interesting and important, may not fit with the objectives you have set yourself. But there is another reason that crosses may fall outside the pattern and this relates to the ethics of writing [a challenge that everyone faces but few actually make explicit].   During any fieldwork

based on naturalistic participation you do not have control over what you see or hear. The corollary of this is that if you hear or see things that are problematic you can't then unknow them.   The fact that they are there however, does not mean that they must appear in your work and judgement has to be exercised regarding items that might be inflammatory, libellous, expose people to recrimination or danger etc etc. The judgement concerns what needs to be included to convey a good enough sense of a world without causing problems for your interlocutors or yourself.

there are multiple ways in which we might narrate a world …….
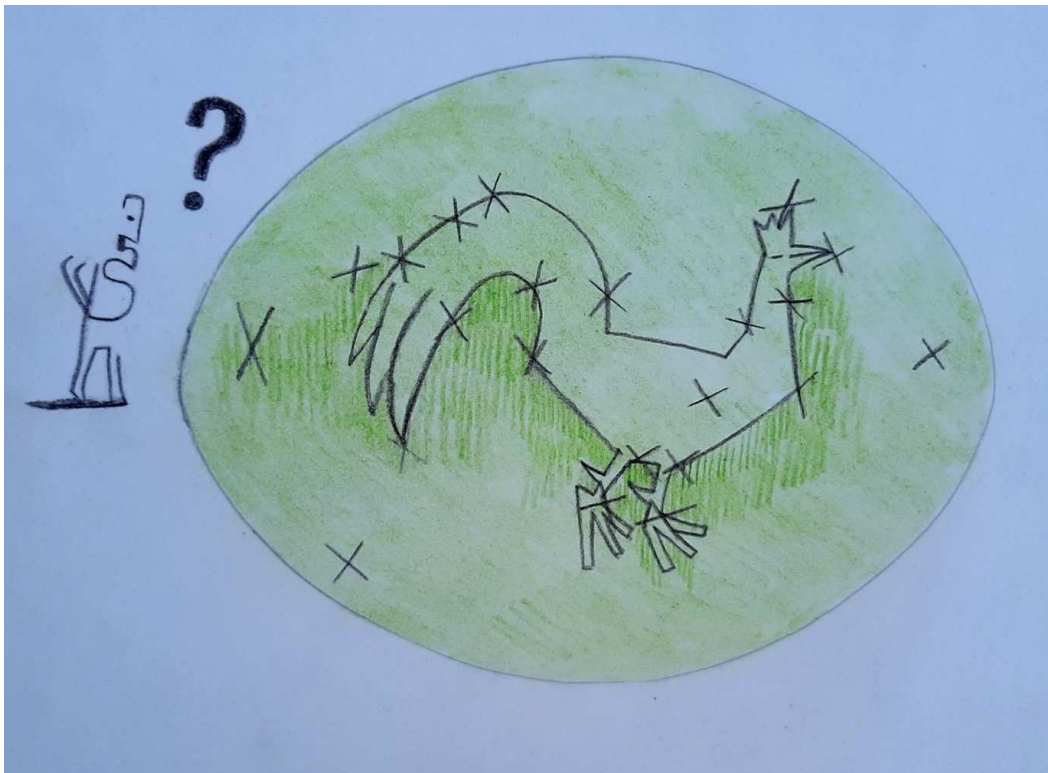
6.   there are multiple ways in which we might narrate a world …….

 6.1.   In section five the image that was identified in the world being studied was that of a dog. However, in the diagram above the same activations are used to identify a chicken – which, obviously, is something quite different from a dog. How can this be? Is the possibility of two different kinds of representation because of arbitrary selection? The question of just how you arrive at particular patterns and structures in your ethnographic writing takes us into a set of concerns to do with epistemology in the social sciences. Epistemology is the area of philosophy that deals with knowledge production. It covers the methods and procedures whereby we can arrive at representations of other people's worlds and, moreover, the ways in which we might establish validity and authority for ethnographic writing.

6.2.   Let me begin with a simple analogy to help understand what is happening when, as researchers, we endeavour to produce valid knowledge about the worlds in which we all live. Imagine social reality as a kind of squiggle. It is irregular, dynamic, immensely complex and, what is more, changes over time. In the diagram below, the grid represents our attempts to understand and explain the squiggle - it could be a dog, a chicken or it could be otherwise. You might think of the grid as the patterns, that is, the methods and theories that are used within anthropology and the social sciences more generally to represent, in an accessible and systematic way, other people's worlds. Another way to think of this is that the grid represents what we can know about other ways of human being whereas the squiggle represents the ongoing process of human becoming which it is the aim of ethnography to document and describe.
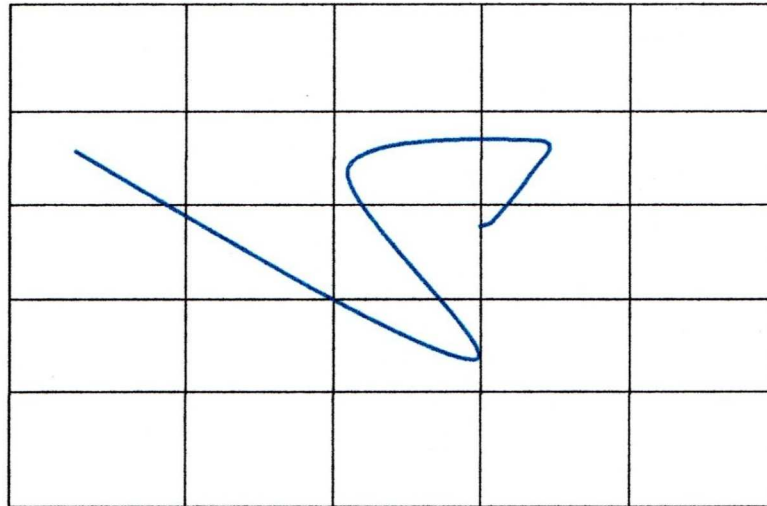
6.3. Just how the relationship between the grid and the squiggle is presented in ethnography is an important thing to think about. The problem was neatly captured when I first showed the diagram in section six to one of my students. She looked puzzled and after some time asked 'but is there a dog'? The question is an astute one because it immediately highlights two very different ways of thinking about what you are doing when you carry out analysis of field material. In the first it is assumed that relations between the various things that you experienced and recorded in the field [that is, your activations] are there to be discovered. This kind of thinking can be subsumed under the heading empiricism, that is, a view that takes reality as something that is out there to be revealed to us through the senses. In the second, it is assumed that the relations are an invention or construction that is the creation of the ethnographer. This is a kind of thinking that can be subsumed under the heading of idealism, that is, a view that sees reality as ultimately being dependent on the activity of the mind.

6.31.   The empiricist's version of ethnography is closely aligned with that of the natural scientist. Activations are things that are there to be discovered. In other words, the answer to my student's question from an empiricist is that there is a dog and it was there all the time and ethnography is simply the business of bringing it to the surface through investigation and describing it. This approach gives rise to a view of ethnography as providing the raw material to which theories are applied. We might think of this approach as grid heavy and squiggle light.

6.32.   The idealist's version of ethnography is one which critically interrogates the very act of knowing – what we can know, how we come to know it and how we might represent that knowledge to others. Here the answer to the student's question is altogether more complex as the dog only becomes apparent through the ethnographer's participation in, and engagement with, another world. This approach gives rise to a view in which theory is not separate from ethnography but integral to it. It is an essential element in any attempt to make sense of others' worlds in all their dynamism, and creativity and, as such, important to document and to fold into any ethnographic account. It is out of this kind of engagement that critical concepts and new knowledge might emerge. Moreover, in formulating novel ways of describing worlds we are able to reflect more perceptively on our own worlds, that is, why things are the way they are and how they could be different. We might think of this approach as squiggle heavy and grid light.

6.4.   The approach I have advocated in this text leans strongly in the direction of the latter approach to ethnography. Participant-observation is not simply a data-gathering method but a means to evoke other

people's worlds through dedicated acts of collaboration, communication and imagination and the ethnographies that you will produce are the literary and visual means whereby others might travel into those worlds.

(experience+capture)imagination=ethnography

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