

Chapter 2

Intercultural Misunderstandings: An Indian-Dutch Research Project in the Early 1970s



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This reflection on disparities in an Indian-Dutch research team more than fifty years ago is a co-authored production by a deceased ‘non-Western sociologist’ (Van der Veen) and a retired anthropologist (Van der Geest). Around 1980, they became colleagues in the medical anthropology section at the University of Amsterdam. Van der Veen wrote a number of articles (one unpublished) about the abovementioned research in South Gujarat, India, focusing on cultural miscommunication, which the second author believes to be some of the first (and rare) reflections on culturally torn relations between fieldworkers. Van der Veen died in 2016 and could not join in writing this article as co-author in the normal sense of the term, but there is abundant evidence that he would have joined wholeheartedly, since the topics of this reflection constituted a permanent *Leitmotiv* throughout his academic (and personal) life. His wife formally gave permission to bring her husband ‘back to life’ as co-author of this chapter.

Reflexivity, Positionality, Decolonisation

Ethnographers have always been reflexive in the sense that they provided information on how they carried out their research and who helped them approach people and gather their data. They related stories about individuals they met in the field, quoted

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from conversations and reflected on what they learnt from their conversations with research participants. Malinowski, Boas, Evans-Pritchard, Firth, and Richards, to name but a few early mastodons in ethnography, are good examples. I would not know any other discipline where researchers allow the reader such insight into what happens behind the academic scenes. And from the 1980s onward, Western ethnographers in foreign societies have become increasingly explicit in this tradition of reflexivity.

Authors like Geertz, Marcus, and Clifford were some of the inspirations in a wave of reflections on the personal identity and positionality of researchers and how this impacts the outcome of ethnographic work. They raised questions like how do we ‘...harvest cultural knowledge in the abstract field which is equally a real place? By what means do we then transform gathered knowledge into textual knowledge? For whose benefits? And to what ends?’ (Gold et al., 2014: 332). Ethnographers disclosed not only their gender, skin colour, biographical background, and colonialist upbringing but also emotional experiences, political views, and personal relations in the field, including friendships and sexual engagements. But, as Gold and co-authors remarked, ‘They seem[ed] notably less forthcoming about entanglements with hired helpers’ (ibid.).

Research Assistants, Translators, Co-authors

Research assistants have been the most undervalued and exploited participants in the anthropological field, and they rarely received the recognition they deserved. Ethnographers tended to consider the notes and reflections of assistants simply as their own property. ‘Ownership’ of data was taken in the purely economic sense of the term: the servant working for the master. Plagiarism, a fatal crime in academic life, was not thought to apply to the theft of assistants’ work by chief investigators. Sanjek (1993: 13), writing about ethnographers and their assistants, speaks of ‘intellectual colonialism’, and continues:

For more than a hundred years, members of the communities and cultures studied by anthropologists have been major providers of information, translation, fieldnotes, and fieldwork. While professional ethnographers—usually white, mostly male—have normally assumed full authorship for their ethnographic products, the remarkable contribution of these assistants—mainly persons of colour—is not widely enough appreciated or understood.

He concludes his ‘complaint’ with a suggestion: ‘Ethnographers and assistants together made anthropology. We need to revise our textbooks [...]’ (p. 16).

One classic example of an assistant who contributed hugely to ethnography is a man called George Hunt. Berman (1994) calculated that Hunt, who was Franz Boas’ assistant and key informant, wrote up to 3000 of the about 5000 pages of Boas’ volumes on the Kwakiutl. In only two of them was Hunt listed as co-author, but one could just as well argue that Boas should rather have been the co-author of most of the volumes. Berman (1994: 483) describes Hunt’s contribution as follows:

Hunt made large, documented museum collections for Boas; he performed ethnobotanical, ethnozoological, and ethnogeographical research; and he served as a linguistic consultant and researcher. What he will perhaps be best remembered for, however, are the tens of thousands of pages he composed in the Kwak'wala language on ethnographic and folkloric subjects. These materials make up all but a small portion of the eleven volumes of Kwak'wala text and translation published by Boas.

In another example, Ralph Linton (1893–1953), one of the founding fathers of American anthropology and author of the famous classics *The Study of Man* and *The Tree of Culture*, published five papers on the Pawnee Indians, an ethnic group he had never worked among. The papers were based on fieldnotes by James Murie, a Pawnee researcher who died one year before Linton wrote the papers. Linton did not even mention Murie's name (Sanjek, 1993: 14).

A striking example of the master-servant relationship between ethnographer and assistant is provided by Margaret Mead in a letter that her Balinese assistant wrote to her in 1938: 'Do you think I can write a short article about the cockfight? But ... if you think this action will be a bit bad for your book, I won't do it. I don't want to make profit of any of the stuff we have collected. *It belongs all to you*' (Mead, quoted in Sanjek, 1993: 14; italics added).

Today (i.e. the past two or three decades), recognising and highlighting the contributions of assistants—sometimes called co-researchers—has become more common practice. Two additional developments have contributed to changing the character of these fieldwork relations. First, as mentioned before, the gradual (but incomplete) 'decolonisation' of anthropological fieldwork has created a less hierarchical work climate. Secondly, with email and mobile telephony, researchers do not disappear out of the eyes of assistants, as often used to be the case in the pre-digital era. Relationships and reciprocity continue and researchers may be continuously reminded of the needs and problems of their former assistants and their families in the field (Gupta, 2014; Kaiser-Grolimund et al., 2016; Middleton & Cons, 2014; Parry, 2015; Turner, 2010). Lasting relationships may become friendships that include financial help, prayers, and symbolic gifts that continue to be exchanged.

Limiting ourselves to nearby colleagues, we could mention several examples. Robert Pool (1994) showed in detail the role of his assistants Lawrence and Pius and their influence on the direction of the research, and how his interpretations were co-produced with his assistants. Mommersteeg (1999) focused on his friend and co-researcher Boubakar Kouroumanse and calls his own limited fluency in speaking Bambara a blessing in disguise, because it forced him to work together with his friend, who proved indispensable beyond the mere translation of words. Kusters (2011) and Blommaert (2014) also introduce their assistants to the reader. Finally, Verheijen (2013) devoted extensive biographical and methodological attention to her assistant and described in detail who Gertrude Finyiza was, how she became her assistant, and how they divided the work of writing fieldnotes and transforming the fieldnotes into an ethnography. Verheijen encouraged and helped Gertrude to follow further training in anthropology at university level.

The Indian-Dutch Research Project

In this brief overview of tensions and torn relations between ethnographic researchers over more than a century of anthropological fieldwork, one type of research cooperation has not yet been discussed which will be the centrepiece of this chapter. We look back to 1970–1971, when a Dutch team of ‘non-Western sociologists’, as they called themselves, which included the first author, and a group of Indian sociologists (per definition ‘non-Western’) set up a joint research project about aspects of change in the middle-sized regional town of Bulsar in South Gujarat, northern India. The interesting difference in this cooperation, compared to the examples mentioned earlier, was that the members of this international team were relatively (but not really) equal in terms of academic rank and experience. They referred to one another as ‘counterparts’. All team members, Indian as well as Dutch, had the opportunity to choose their own subject within the general framework.

Here, we will concentrate primarily on the human side of counterpart cooperation. Apart from the members’ shared interest in processes of change in an urban Indian context, they also became participant observers of the inter-cultural communication and cooperation within the team. Personal idiosyncratic differences notwithstanding, both the Indian and Dutch researchers were representatives of their respective socio-cultural milieus. Their experiences reveal the great extent to which culturally based disparities influenced the relationships between the team members and thus the work of the team as a whole. Communication and lack thereof will be the main issue discussed in this chapter, as we call attention to certain incidents and discords rooted in culturally based differences. In general, the Dutch task orientation and corresponding preference for retreat as a mechanism for controlling human relationships conflicted with the Indian preference for explicitly diffuse and mutually obligating relationships in which reference to status was the major control mechanism.

Four flats in an expensive high caste quarter formed the base from which the Dutch researchers entered the field. They formed a foreign element in the street, not least because they demonstrated an un-Indian need for privacy. In one sense, the Dutch lived jointly: they shared a common kitchen as well as the services of a cook plus some assistants. They dined together, but because they were not strictly vegetarian, it was not easy for the Indian team members to join them. The Dutch team members knew each other before coming to India, while the Indian team members did not know each other beforehand. Another difference was that the Indians did not live together.

Primordial Attachments

In Indian society, great importance is given to primordial attachments. That one belongs to a group is the first determinant of individual behaviour, and most of an individual’s actions are measured as well as determined by his or her (generally

ascribed) status in a group—usually a kin group but, in India, certainly also one's community (caste). Reciprocity, a strong sense of mutual obligation, and status are key concepts for the maintenance of primordial relationships. There is a strong appreciation that one depends on and must preserve relations with others. This leads to an easy acceptance of the idea that one can 'use' a relationship for personal gain.

An example here illustrates this strong awareness of notions of reciprocity and obligation. Indians have hardly adequate expressions of gratitude for small gifts or favours granted. To them it is self-evident that by accepting a gift or favour, one is obliged to return it at one time or another. It is impossible to evade future repayment by saying thanks in a dozen different ways. The importance of status in the effectuation of claims and counterclaims will be obvious for those involved. In the Indian setting, status almost always has hierarchical implications; someone considered to be 'higher' can take an initiative more easily and present claims more openly. An example illustrating this hierarchical setting came from an Indian colleague, who said: 'I always could drop in at my professor's room at the university. At any time of the day I can come in and ask questions, but I had to make sure to address him as "Professor-Sahib". Should I omit the honorific supplement, I could be sure that he would not notice my presence in the room'.

At the same time, it is important that the reciprocal relationship should be diffuse. This means that no clear differentiation of the several aspects that comprise the relationship should be openly specified. This does not mean, however, that people are unaware of the different aspects that contribute to the relationship as a whole (affection, intellectual fascination, economic interest, to name a few).

Diffuse and Multi-stranded

Diffuseness is closely related to the multi-strandedness of a relationship. This means that a relationship is built up through the interweaving of many ties. The interlocking of all sorts of activities and interests makes the relationship multi-stranded and contributes to diffuseness by making it difficult to specify the reason a relationship is maintained. Diffuseness also makes it easier to postpone counterclaims. Like multi-strandedness, it ensures that both partners will always have a claim on each other. An even and explicitly stated balance between claims and counterclaims would rob the relationship of its usefulness. Indeed, it is a fully accepted notion that a relationship may be 'used'. In this sense, relationships are goal-oriented: it is taken for granted that they should offer each partner a chance to exert claims on the other.

For the Dutch, however, interpersonal relationships had a different meaning. For them, ascriptive status and group identification were much less conspicuous, and single-stranded relationships were of overwhelming importance. A single-stranded relationship is characterised by the predominance of a pertinent single interest that does not commit the participants to involvement with one another in other life situations.

Retreat Versus Status

Retreat is an essential aspect of the Western interpretation of human relationships. One may retreat before a connection evolves into multi-strandedness. It is also possible to retreat later, when, for instance, expectations about the content of a relationship do not materialise. The accepted possibility of retreat differs fundamentally from the Indian situation in which retreat from a socially sanctioned relationship (ascribed or achieved) is discouraged.

In order to understand this, it is necessary to point out the importance of the Indian interpretation of status as a control mechanism in human relationships. Indian society is hierarchical and status differentiation is constantly stressed. The hierarchical principle works, however, within a context of preference for diffuse multi-stranded relationships. Hierarchy is of crucial importance because it creates an opportunity to control formalised multi-stranded relationships.

For the Dutch, the possibility for control lies in retreat, while for the Indians, reference to the hierarchical map is essential for 'handling' a relationship or curbing excessive demands. Stress on equality is a logic of the Western interpretation of human interactions. Since one can retreat, status difference is no longer needed as a mechanism to control human relationships. Thus, egalitarian principles are inherent to the Western perception of human relationships, while hierarchy is essential to the Indian view.

Within the team, these differences had notable consequences. For the Dutch, working in a team meant having a task-oriented relationship with the other team members, including their Indian colleagues. For the Indians, being co-workers in a team meant having a formal and socially sanctioned relationship (ideally multi-stranded), in which the hierarchical map was essential.

Egalitarian Versus Hierarchical

The project was initiated by the Dutch, and for that reason, the total set-up was based on Western egalitarian ideals. Though there was one coordinator, all decisions about the research should ideally have been taken by mutual consent and after discussion among all those working in the team. One morning a week they all came together and discussed the programme for that week, as well as the contributions of individual researchers. The Dutch put great stress on the idea that no member of the team should have precedence on the basis of his formal position, academic status, etc.

Such a non-hierarchical perception of teamwork was totally out of focus for the Indian team members. This was not only due to their training, general life circumstances, and way of interpreting human relationships, but also because of the organisation of the team and the living conditions of the Dutch team members, which obviously barred a truly egalitarian situation. The project was, furthermore, financed

by a Dutch organisation, and so the Indians felt themselves to be employed by the Dutch.

The coordinator had been chosen by the Dutch because he had shown himself able to act in an impartial, task-oriented way. According to Dutch views, these qualities made him the most suitable to act as coordinator; but to the Indian team members, these qualities had strong hierarchical implications. From the beginning, the organisational aspects made it impossible for the Indians to accept the ideal egalitarian pattern of communication; all the more so because in actual position, there was a marked difference between the Indian team members and even the junior Dutch members. The salaries of the Dutch team members were set according to the Dutch scales of income, and those of the Indian team members were based on the much lower Indian standards. The (by Indian criteria) luxurious housing arrangements of the Dutch were only one aspect of a glaring difference in standard of living. There was also a formal difference in the academic status of the three senior Dutch and the three Indian MAs. In all respects, therefore, equality did not really exist.

The Dutch addressed each other by their first names, as was increasingly customary in the Netherlands at that time. The juniors thus also addressed the seniors by their first names, without adding any reference to their academic title. In contrast, the Indians added the somewhat honorific 'bhai' to the first names of the Dutch team members, and for the senior Dutch members, they generally used their academic title as a term of address. The most senior Indian team member meticulously stuck to this procedure throughout the year, despite the fact that (in an Indian as well as a Dutch sense) his relationship with the Dutch evolved and was definitely both multi-stranded and 'personal'. From an Indian point of view, however, the hierarchical map was the only safety valve in their relationships with the Dutch. From the beginning, they felt themselves to be employees of the Dutch. In the Indian setting, employment does not at all exclude multi-stranded relationships, but the hierarchical position of the partners is decisive for its content. Being in an 'inferior' position, it was only normal for the Indians to keep expressing their adherence to the rules in order to give the relationship a chance to develop into a really multi-stranded one.

For all Indian team members, the Dutch neglect of hierarchy posed a problem when they had to deal with the other Indians in the project. The Indian researchers felt that their position was not made clear, and the Indian co-workers referred only to the evident aspect of hierarchy: the Dutch as employers. Therefore, when the Indian researchers wanted the driver and the interpreters to do something, the latter were nevertheless likely to give precedence to the work assigned to them by the Dutch team members. This strengthened the Indian researchers' conviction that they were in an inferior position, which sometimes led to disturbances in their work.

A Car for Common Use

The following incident with the car fits in this pattern. A car with a driver was available to all members of the team. During the weekly sessions, all team members

could specify when and how long they wanted to use the car. From the Dutch point of view, everyone could at that moment 'fight for his right'. For the Indians, however, this was impossible. Referring to the hierarchical map, they simply could not ask for the car, because their employers should have precedence. For juniors, this was only normal; but for the senior Indian team member a difficulty arose. He could claim the car, but he felt his position was slightly inferior. Only after one of the Dutch explicitly asked him to come along on a tour of one of the research villages and urged him to use the car for his own research as well as the right to use the car made sufficiently clear to him. Let us now relate a few misunderstandings that arose as a result of differences in appreciation of multi-strandedness and task orientation.

Misunderstandings

The different appreciation of relationships was the most pressing issue in the team; it was also in this respect that the Indian team members became disappointed with the real value of the democratic and egalitarian principles of the Dutch. The non-hierarchical behaviour created a certain amount of uncertainty among the Indian team members, but it also aroused expectations about optimal multi-stranded relationships in an Indian sense. The task-orientedness and the specificity (lack of diffuseness) of the Dutch behaviour was misleading, not only for the Indian researchers but also for the interpreters.

For the Dutch, it was absolutely normal, for instance, to conclude a day's work with an interpreter by making an appointment for the next day and offering a cordial 'Bye, see you tomorrow'. Similarly, it was quite normal to fix a specific hour with one of the Indian colleagues who wanted to discuss something in relation to the research. To the Indians, such task-orientedness deprived the relation of an essential element. To demonstrate that (or to test if) a relationship was really approved of, it would be necessary for the Indians to make it as multi-stranded as possible. This implies diffuseness and a deliberate interweaving of many ties. Not only should cooperation in a shared enterprise have a part in it, but also 'just sitting and chatting together'. A strong sense of mutual obligation and the feeling that one has a right to the other finds expression in an intentional accentuation of diffuseness. Therefore, to the Indians, it was significant that they were 'not allowed' to simply come by at any decent hour. Fixing the time for an appointment robbed the meeting of its multi-stranded demonstration value. One is asked to come and finish a special job. That one has claims on the other, as such, was thus denied.

This type of occurrence was not uncommon and sometimes caused deeply felt disappointments. On the whole, however, it belongs to the broad category of actions commented upon by the Indians when they talked about Western ways, and vice versa, because the difficulty of making fixed appointments was an ever-recurring nuisance for the Westerners working in India. The next case is more revealing, because neither the Dutch nor the Indians were fully aware of the essential differences in their understanding of the event.

The Mount Wilson Trip

At Christmas time 1970, when the senior Dutch team members and their families had been in India for about four months, they planned a little trip to a nearby mountain. For them, the trip was a sort of holiday and family occasion that had nothing to do with the research or the team. One of the Indian interpreters, a young man who stayed regularly at one of the houses of the Dutch, was invited to come along. He lived near the housing project and circumstances at his home made it such that he liked to stay away from his own home. In accordance with Indian traditions, he made his relationship with the Dutch as multi-stranded as possible and, consequently, spent most of the day with the Dutch family. Additionally, he knew the road and spoke the language.

It was the first trip the Dutch had made since their arrival, and they enjoyed the opportunity to go out together on a sort of 'private tour' after the many social obligations they had engaged in over the past months. The Mount Wilson trip was thus a form of retreat, though this was definitely not its main purpose. The Indian researchers, however, interpreted the trip in exactly this way. To them, it was a demonstration of their great distance on the hierarchical map. If the Indians had gone along, they could have used the trip to demonstrate that the relationships between all of the co-workers had grown into truly multi-stranded ones. This opportunity was missed. The Dutch failed to include the Indians, whom they otherwise treated as equals.

This was all the more painful because one of the interpreters had been invited. From the perspective of the Dutch, they had taken the young man along as hired help. For the Indians, however, with reference to the hierarchical map, this was absurd. The disappointment was so great among the Indians that they planned to make a tour of their own, though the Dutch would not have felt this to be a demonstration of anything in particular; to them it would have been quite normal that the Indians, who by that time knew each other well, should like to take a trip together.

This example shows how differently the content of relationships can be evaluated. Neither the Indians nor the Dutch were at that moment aware of a difference in their appreciation of, and the deeper purpose of, the tour.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter explored various ways in which relationships within ethnographic research can be fraught with difficulties, exploitation, and misunderstanding. We opened with a brief overview of discrimination, racism, colonialism, and plagiarism in fieldwork cooperation, in particular between researchers and local 'assistants'. We then focused on a—as far as we know—rarely discussed form of team fieldwork by more equal researchers with different cultural backgrounds.

The case we selected dates back to 1970–1971 and describes some painful and sometimes hilarious misunderstandings between the Dutch and Indian researchers. The purpose of the project was first of all for a mixed Indian–Dutch research team to study processes of change in an urban Indian setting. At the same time, it was also an experiment in doing international counterpart research, long before this became a common practice. Our chapter focused on this latter objective and did not examine how this experiment affected the outcome of the research.

We analysed how, in spite of good intentions, contrasting Indian and Dutch cultural values caused misunderstandings and confusion within and between the Dutch and Indian researchers. These contrasting values were rooted in opposing views regarding human relationships (single-stranded versus multi-stranded; egalitarian versus hierarchical) and how to manage these relationships.

We realise that the presentation of these conflicting cultural rules and expectations reflects ideas of half a century ago and may not exactly apply to the present time, although similar misunderstandings are still present in the contemporary research world. With regard to egalitarianism in Western society, we believe that this claim could be contested as well. Finally, we want to argue that new opposing cultural convictions are likely to challenge promises of fruitful cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary research endeavours and will perpetuate the torn ways in which we conduct our explorations in today's world.

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