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Abstract

'Letting go is hard to do': ethnographic selves in the face of endings

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Traditionally, ethnographic literature concentrates on access to and conduct in the field whilst only marginal attention is paid to the challenges and lived experience of 'leaving' at the end of an ethnographic project (e.g. Loftland and Loftland 1995; Iversen 2009). This paper aims to redress the balance by focusing on different ways of leaving the field. Rather than characterising them as a distinct 'phase', here the latter are seen as a process of becoming taking on several distinctive forms of exit and disengagement as well as potential and actual re-engagement. Whilst related moments provide interesting insights per se, this paper argues that they cannot suffice in explaining an ethnographer's experience.

This paper argues that it is the on-going narration of this experience, both to oneself and others, that can shed light on the actual process of leaving beyond particular enacted actions or behaviours. It thus becomes possible to capture 'the end' as a process and explore the ways it may be 'left behind', lived fully, denied, avoided, or how it may linger on and become an ongoing conversation or an 'unfinished business'. This resonates with theory informing us that our past, present,

and future co-exist in narrative allowing us to make better sense of our personal experience (Kermode, 2000).

The presentation of three narratives in this paper stresses the varied nature of leaving and how researchers engage with it. Empirical findings show that what is at stake is none less than shifts of the 'ethnographic self' in undergoing an end as a lived experience. This emphasises the ethnographer's 'being' rather than his/her 'doing' as conventionally portrayed. In this sense, the first narrative espouses attempts at closure to lend coherence to one's identity and the sharp contours of an abrupt exit where pragmatism and rationalisation play centre stage. The second narrative shows endings as returns that do not 'close down', fundamentally questioning one's sense of belonging to main referent groups. The third narrative stresses the likelihood of re-engagement triggered by chance as much as memory and the ethical considerations of such renewed encounters. Unlike much literature portrays, this paper highlights the ambiguities and contradictions of the very notion and experience of 'dis-engaging' in and outside the field. It proposes that whilst in some cases we may exit quickly and without much further elaboration; in other cases we may neither leave nor disengage fully. This shifts attention to the potential role and open-ended impact of the aftermath on the researcher *and* person - long after the fieldwork and the story is supposedly 'finished'.