

Fieldwork Report

The aim of this fieldwork was to ‘understand the theoretical issues of ‘the classroom’ in the context of religion as it is experienced in the world’ (Prideaux, 2013, pp15). The first step I took when approaching this task was to identify the broader objectives of fieldwork as a research method. This allowed me to comprehend what constitutes successful fieldwork whilst being made aware of the challenges and difficulties I was likely to be faced with. I was then able to structure my own research accordingly to gain as much as I possibly could from the experience. This meant that when I conducted my fieldwork I entered with a clear objective of what I wanted to achieve. I will use this as the foundation of the evaluations I am now going to discuss. I will also look at fieldwork in its qualitative context to enable me to factor in the strengths and weaknesses that come with this typically interpretivist and subjectivist approach. I will then draw from my knowledge of phenomenology and assess how methodological issues that come with it will impact the validity of this report.

The term ‘fieldwork’ originates from ‘anthropological and sociological backgrounds that direct qualitative researchers to travel to unfamiliar research sites’ (Lindlof, 2011, pp134). For the purpose of this study I visited the Jamyang Buddhist and Meditation Centre in Leeds on the 28th of October at 18:30. It was founded in 1996 and is affiliated with the Foundation for Preservation of Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). I had to first consider how I was going to conduct my study which involved further research into qualitative methods. I consulted ‘The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project’. It explained the crucial importance of that engaging with ‘the level of research methodology’ to ‘provide us with legitimisation for knowledge production’ (O’Leary, 2010, pp89). I found that my goal coincided with that of ethnographers, who are generally concerned with ‘describing and interpreting the observable relationships between social practises and systems of meaning, based on first-hand experience’ (Lindlof, 2011, pp134). A valued feature of this genre of qualitative method is

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that it provides a holistic understanding of the cultural setting in question. I also found that successful ethnographic studies provide a ‘thick description’. This means that ‘the more empathetic detail that goes into an ethnographic description, the richer our understanding... [and] the more valuable our account will be’ (Lindlof, 2011, pp135). At this stage, I recognised that this would strongly link to the issue of phenomenology which questions whether value judgements can ever be suspended even when a researcher is empathetic. I decided that my research would be focused towards understanding if an ethnographic method would allow me to comprehend the challenges of phenomenology.

The assignment set involved attending a place of worship unfamiliar to oneself and engaging with the practise through participation and empathising with the religious group. This would mean that participant observation would be the best data collection method for my research. It is described as an attempt to ‘build cultural empathy and ‘live’ the reality of the other’ (O’Leary, 2010, pp118). I identified this as my main aim. I then had to consider how I would go about my visit in a professional way that was sensitive to the code of ethics that as a researcher I would be required to stick to. It seemed apparent that getting a true understanding of what it is to be a practising Buddhist at the Jamyang Centre would be restricted somewhat by these guidelines. For example it is instructed that the study be overt and that the organisation should be asked and made aware of the nature of the visit. I wondered if that meant I might be affected by an ‘Observers Paradox’, when the aim of research ‘must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation’ (Labov, 1972, pp209).

I chose to learn more about Buddhism as it was something that I had only previously touched on in Religious Studies. I joined a group with others with a similar interest and we began to contact local Buddhist Centres. The Jamyang Centre was the first to reply and the welcoming email we received in response made us eager to visit. It was another member of the group that

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had made contact with this particular Centre so I didn't know very much about it initially. I accessed their website to begin my research (<http://www.jamyangleeds.co.uk/>). I was able to find that it was a Tibetan Buddhism practise so directed my preparation towards learning about some of the teachings, traditions and the conventions of practise. We had been informed in the email that our visit would work best for them on a Monday where we would be partaking in a meditation session. I took a particular interest in finding out the significance of meditation in Buddhist Practise. I came to know that a Buddha 'is someone who has awakened from the sleep of ignorance in which others live, who has broken through the cognitive barriers that impede understanding' (Powers, 2007, pp81). It is through practising meditation, among other things, that the ultimate goal of 'buddhahood' can be achieved. I found that in most cases Buddhist meditators will 'contemplate the basic realities of cyclic existence- such as suffering, impermanence, and death' (Powers, 2007, pp82). I decided that with this foundation I had enough to know what to expect but not too much that I might develop too firm judgements or expectations. This I thought would help me to enter into the setting with a completely open mind and that being empathetic would come easier.

When we first arrived at the Centre the building was not what I had expected, its exterior was plain and resembled office block. We were aware of the fact that as a group of five we might come across as quite intrusive or intimidating, so to counteract we were consciously calm in our approach. When it was time to enter the Gompa I was unsure about whether or not it would be obstructive if I took in my notepad and pen. I decided against it and later was reassured it was the right decision. The meditation room was highly decorated with a large colourful shrine that dominated at the front. Each ornament, picture and statue that adorned the walls and tables all had small signs next to them to explain what they were. We were encouraged to take all the time we needed to take notes at the end. One of the things I took from the interior of the room was the large number of depictions that were female. I recorded

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descriptions of two tapestry's, one of the 'White Tara' which the sign explained as 'the mother of all Buddhas', and one of the 'Green Tara' who was said to be there to assist 'sentient beings on their path to buddhahood'. I conducted an internet research after my visit and found that the conclusions I had drawn about female representation were not actually correct. Both Tara's, are also depicted just as frequently as male. If I hadn't done so and then went on to make generalisations, I would have been wrong in doing so. Whilst we were there we participated in two half an hour meditation sessions. In the first we were to imagine a gold thread that travelled to the different parts of our bodies. The facilitator explained that being aware of one's body allowed for an awareness of the mind. In the second we were talked through examples of change in the world and we were told to try and embody it. I gained the most from conversing with the facilitator, at the end. He was middle aged, originally from Leeds and was dressed in a contemporary shirt and jeans. I have been referring to him as the 'facilitator' as he explained that it was his preferred title. He was very accommodating and encouraged questions. I asked about the typical make-up of the groups, he told me that most are students and older people, but that it is very diverse in terms of race and usually an equal mix of sex.

Producing phenomenological descriptions usually involves the use of interviewing and is concerned with establishing an accurate description free from researcher-bias. The interviews are 'most often constructed as a conversation' that allows one to obtain a 'narrative that is both descriptive and interpretive, and is often rich, poetic and full of metaphor' (O'Leary, 2010, pp121). This was demonstrated in my own research when the facilitator, used an analogy of "planting the seeds of positive action" to explain the concept of karma. The next stage of this type of research would be to synthesise what I had found and reduce it by comparing it to other such studies and texts. If I were to take this field work further that is something I would perhaps consider. A main strength of phenomenology is that, if successful,

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the end result is an understanding unlike any other. Demographics, statistics, experiments, patterns of behaviour – whilst being important means of quantitatively measuring they do not give a great insight into the subjects of the study and how they perceive things. Which in terms of studying religion, cannot completely satisfy all the questions that are frequently asked. However, it is not an easy task to completely objectively write an account. It has to be questioned ‘what’s included, what’s left out, whose point of view is represented’ (Lindlof, 2011, pp134). For some it takes more for findings to be of value, ‘It is not enough to tell me what you see. I want to know where you are standing as you see and speak, and also why you stand there’ (Flood, 1999, pp37).

For this reason I have had to assess my own standing and how that might affect what I recorded on my visit. My parents are both agnostic and have always spoken openly about not wanting to impose any religious or spiritual views on me, as they believed that as I matured I would find my own path. This as my foundation, I feel was beneficial to me in this study considering fieldwork researchers are to ‘deliberately abandon their certainty and expertise’ and have an ‘openness to the unexpected- a kind of epistemological vulnerability’ (Lindlof, 2011, pp134). I don’t believe I have a great deal of certainty to abandon and it is the being open that I so much enjoy. Although, I am aware that no one can claim to be completely judgement free. I also feel that perhaps my eagerness to engage when I visited the centre may have meant my recording were not accurate for someone who attends on a regular basis. If I were to conduct a completely ethnographical study I would be required to immerse myself in the organisation and its practises. This I know would greatly improve both the reliability and validity of my research. Then, because of the nature of it being phenomenological, also greatly improve my understanding.

From this experience I can say that I have identified the impact theoretical issues in practise. I realised that from what I observed I could not make any claims as to what it is like to attend

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the Jamyang centre for anyone but myself. I do not doubt that this could be possible if I continued visiting over a long period of time and do think it is important to gain such an understanding through this method. I can see that it is possibly easier to work with quantitative methods as I cannot produce any sound evidence as a result of the visit. The greatest thing I gained was a conception of why Buddhism is considered one of the fastest growing religions. I can see that the relaxed approach and the focus on oneself would be appealing in our post-modern ‘pick’n’mix’ society and feel I understand what it can provide for its adherents.

Word count: 2000

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