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# Ethnographic Monitoring and the study of complexity

by

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# **Ethnographic Monitoring and the study of complexity**

Jef Van der Aa & Jan Blommaert

## **1. The context: Increased Complexity**

In this chapter we explore the value of long-term fieldwork in the context of ever-increasing complexity in social life. These issues of complexity are immediately related to the phenomenon of ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007), which suggests that the effects of globalization are visible in the contact between languages and cultures, which has spawned a range of new language-cultural phenomena and suggests that the concepts of language and culture themselves, as separate, bounded entities, have become highly problematic and now invite new methodological approaches (Blommaert & Rampton 2011). Linguistic and cultural change is the rule and not the exception (see also Rampton, Roberts and Maybin, this book).

Dealing with this diversification of diversity, and concretely with extremely complex migration patterns and the birth of the ‘network society’ (Castells 1996), in which individuals’ and groups’ networks have become immensely intense and diverse, is a real challenge for both civil and civic society in key areas such as healthcare, social work, education, union work and so on. It calls for new frames, concepts, and actions through which it should become possible to deal with the very diverse needs of increasing numbers of people who fell outside the mainstream: newcomers from non-European Union countries, newcomers from other EU countries but also many EU natives that have become victims of the ever tightening economy and job market.

In this sense, the particular social conditions of superdiversity also demand a change in our own academic approaches, including our theoretical apparatus as well as our fieldwork. For instance, a homogenous or unified program to deal with e.g. ‘problematic youth’ cannot exist anymore because it starts from a specific group of people who are prone to develop particular behavior, and completely ignores the superdiverse background, including very complex (migration) trajectories which people have experienced before coming into contact with a particular institutional context, e.g. the federal job control agency. Academically superdiversity also signals the end of certainty with regards to questions like “Who is the other?” and “Who am I?”. Many disciplines, including much of linguistic ethnography, are

still struggling with the remnants of structuralism concerning their research objects, methods and knowledge frames. These are inadequate to address society's rapid and permanent change, its instability, unpredictability and complexity. We do not only need more interdisciplinarity, but also a change in the concept of 'science' itself: from an ontology grounded in synchronic and observable units to a science that has 'change' its object of analysis, and 'dynamic details' as its units of study.

To achieve this purpose, we propose an investment in longer-term fieldwork projects that allow for a development of a more social action-oriented linguistic ethnography in which feedback, valorization, 'theory from below' and 'slow science' are key concepts. We first explain Hymes' concept of 'ethnographic monitoring' (1980, 1981); we then illustrate this approach by presenting an example from an ongoing project in Antwerp with children and adolescents in 'family care'; and finally we reflect on the implications of this methodology for 'theory', illustrating the quasi-inseparability in (linguistic) ethnography between theory and method. Finally we argue that it is only possible to achieve a turnover in which complex issues are not reduced, if we massively ground our research in the social fields that need it most. If we realize an in-depth cooperation with and within those social fields, we will be subject to their 'ethnographic inspection' of our proposed analysis.

## **2. Ethnographic monitoring**

In *Reinventing Anthropology* (1972) Dell Hymes argued for anthropological studies that aim at a theoretical and methodological 'reintegration within complex units' of phenomena indexing change (1972: 32-33). To achieve this reintegration of rapid social changes, we need to study these changes appropriately, and in order to do so we need to rely heavily on the social actors we work with. The role of the ethnographer has since then changed from being a mere 'observer' who describes what he or she sees, to an 'active participant' who makes explicit the changes for which there is no vocabulary yet. In this spirit, Hymes subsequently developed a research program called 'ethnographic monitoring'.

When Hymes passed away in 2009, his work (after a long period of relative silence) started to attract the attention of a new generation of scholars (see e.g. Rampton 2007, 2009 for a survey of the recent impact of Hymes' work). One of the lesser-used concepts of his work is

referred to as ‘ethnographic monitoring’, which Hymes advocated as follows:

“[t]he greatest value of cooperative ethnographic monitoring is that the participants in [a] programme will have the firmest grasp possible of the working of the programme, of its successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, in relation to their hopes for it. They will not be in the position of being confronted by an outside evaluator’s charts and tables, and told a rating for their programme, with nothing to say, or nothing, at least, that such an evaluator feels required to heed. The participants will not have been bystanders. They will... be able to address the processes that have produced whatever statistics and graphs a formal evaluation process may yield” (1980:115).

Some, like Jørgensen, have organized projects very similar to ethnographic monitoring, having been involved in the same school for decades (see e.g. Jørgensen 2009 and see Madsen, Karrebæk & Møller 2013 for a detailed description of this particular project). Let us now take a look at what this program contains (see Van der Aa & Blommaert 2011 for a more detailed discussion). Hymes proposes the following steps as being part of ‘ethnographic monitoring’ (Hymes 1980, Hymes 1981 et. al.). Between italics you will find our interpretation of these different steps, which we return to later on.

(1) First, ethnographers consult social actors to identify what issues concern them most (the ‘other’'s position).

(2) A second step is to observe behavior relevant to that issue in a series of contexts in and out of the centre (contrasted with observer’s position).

(3) The third step is to share back our findings with the centre personnel, and the clients in as far as possible (instant feedback and uptake).

(4) Taking stock (evaluating ‘effect’).

We believe, with Hymes, that by following these steps, there is a guarantee that research plans and programs are developed organically, and in close consultation with all social actors involved. In other words: static solutions are being replaced by complex dynamics, because understanding the world involves changing it. Therefore when deploying ethnographic monitoring, one can speak of ‘epistemic solidarity’ (Van der Aa 2012) and ‘the ethnographer as pupil’ (Velghe 2011): build shareable knowledge together during a long-term commitment to the field where researchers together with social actors introduce and operationalize particular academic concepts relevant to them. We now attempt to make this process more tangible by introducing the idea of the ‘researcher in residence’ hereby emphasizing the importance of ‘long-term relationships’ within the field.

## Researcher in residence

Increasingly, academic institutions are asked to co-operate with social actors in areas such as education and social work (see also Rampton, Roberts and Maybin, this book). From an academic point of view, it can be very useful to see how particular academic concepts, deemed relevant by social actors and are operationalized. Such a commitment needs to be long-term and qualitative: long-term because there should be enough time to develop particular networks and strategies and to get used to one another coming from entirely different environments; and qualitative in order to counterbalance the need for educational and social institutions to report evidence-based material by offering a very practical alternative.

The ‘researcher in residence’ can make changing dynamics (which are, of course, responses to these new realities) within institutions visible, explicit and reportable. He or she helps to bring attention to useful dynamics, ideas and routines, strengthens them and makes them work better. The researcher in residence is a long-term academic consultant, who can offer help with e.g. academic ventures of institutional personnel, qualitative reporting, tapping into a wide network of academic colleagues to discuss particular issues, and so on. In some cases, it is also possible for MA or PhD students to work together with the researchers in residence. In our case study in a family care centre Antwerp (see below) particular issues arose with regards to the in-take procedure, and an MA student has conducted a project observing and transcribing these procedures in one of the centre’s branches (Mensaert 2013).

## Social institutions as ‘academic workshops’

Concretely, we are working within two field sites that each have a ‘researcher in residence’. In Berchem (Antwerp) Jef Van der Aa has developed several lines of research within the organizational structure of a non-profit organization consisting of three branches: a ‘home supervision’ counseling service for families who have problems with one or more children; several day centres catering to the free time and homework needs of young people aged 6-18 of a very diverse background; and finally a service catering to adolescents aged 16-21 who want to live on their own because of problems at home, or not having a home at all.

In all three branches there is an intake procedure, a waiting list, and an ‘action plan’ drawn up after six-eight weeks. After that, families or children are usually between one and two years under supervision of the centre’s counselors. In West Flanders we have started a research project with an asylum centre in which Massimiliano Spotti is researcher-in-residence (Spotti 2013).

In both places there are research-and-participation activities within the centres such as participant observation; collecting documents; interviews with care providers/counseling personnel as well as clients; the organization of discussion sessions, both in group and one on one; educational sessions; helping out in general, e.g. moving a couch; etc. Most productive has proven the organization of an ‘office hour’, in which particular issues or problems can be brought to the attention of the academic consultant.

One of the other important issues in both cases is the importance and the links of the centre with and within the neighbourhood. In the case of Antwerp the centre is located in an historical neighbourhood which bears traces of more than fifty years of migration; and the centre in West Flanders is located very close to the French border. In both places there is a (strong) interaction with the local environment, which shows in its infrastructure: telephone and internet shops, shops offering food and products from all over the world etc.

To come to an accurate descriptive analysis of the place of the centres in their social environment we have made use of some ‘ethnographic linguistic landscaping’ “in an attempt to arrive at a detailed and accurate synchronic description of the neighborhood, oriented towards questions of demographic and social presence in the area” (Blommaert 2013:60). Centres also work together with other organizations, sometimes offering additional loci for research. Currently there are exploratory talks planned in Antwerp with a low-profile organization offering job guidance to people dealing with structural issues in their lives preventing them from doing ‘regular work’. In all, we propose a longitudinal mix of research-and-participation in institutions.

### **3. The emerging research program**

In order to address the complexity of these issues, it is no longer possible to engage with this kind of research from a pre-defined research plan, predicted outcomes and clear-cut pre-

defined means of method and analysis. Following the different phases of ethnographic monitoring as described above, one quickly discovers the shortcomings of these plans (also described in Blommaert & Dong 2010). Through contrast between observers' and others' positions, one almost naturally becomes a 'participant', working through different knowledge trajectories in which only slowly and incrementally an emerging research program takes shape. Many times, instant and long-term feedback changes the course of events, and amends particular issues and problems to the emerging plan. Examples of research questions developed in such a way have to do with processes of 'digital citizenship', and questions concerning framing, epistemology and narrativity in Berchem.

In the Antwerp centre e.g., the topics of intake procedures are entirely unpredictable, as the causes for seeking assistance often result from instability in a family system – an escalating category in a context of superdiversity. Therefore it is not possible to develop plans that would be targeted at particular populations, say, the Roma or say, non-native Belgians, or even say, 'problematic' youth. The enormous mobility of people that stay for shorter or longer periods of time in Belgium, in Antwerp, in care, varies greatly. Rather one finds oneself defining research interests and programs along generically formulated core issues such as learning problems, issues of domestic violence, poverty, housing and so on. In any particular case, one never observes just one problem, but rather always a complex combinations of issues. Working through many months of intense participation in the centre, it became possible to formulate a 'research question' that was grounded in and supported by the care providers, the coaches and the direction of the centre:

“What do people know about poverty, which other issues does it involve, how can they talk about it, and what are they allowed to say under which conditions? And subsequently, what can we do to improve those conditions?”

The formulation of this research question was the result of an interplay of ethnographic actions: during the 'consultation hour' we organized in the centre important issues came to the table, as well as during participation in intra-centre working groups on 'intercultural management', 'superdiversity' and so on. Specific case studies were selected for us to participate in over the course of several months, which were then fed back into the working groups. After thorough discussion on different levels within the centre (clients, care providers, coaches and management) the research question was slowly shaped and refined.



One could not have arrived at this point with the old tool of participant observation alone, in which the tension between ‘knowledge from below’ or ‘theory from below’ never really merges. On the one hand there is a fear of ‘not being objective’, on the other hand a fear of ‘not getting close enough’. We will return to this below. For now it suffices to say that to obtain a fully developed and meaningful research question which is supported by social actors, one needs to engage in what we call ‘full participation’ and which included in the Antwerp case, among other things: hanging around, cooking, arts & crafts with youngsters, professional activities, recording, analysis, bringing back, developing training (feedback, workshops, offering social actors access to training facilities in University), and so on. We now illustrate this way of working with a concrete case study from the Antwerp project.

#### **4. Complexity and the ‘total social fact’: Nabijah’s case**

Nabijah (“Brave”) is a 37-year old Belgian-Iraqi woman living in Antwerp North. She lives with four children in a very small apartment where irregular heating and electricity depend on the values left on the budget meter (a sort of prepaid gas/electricity system). One of the children is heavily mentally disabled and the oldest child is not hers, but the child of her sister in Germany. Having recently gone through a very rough divorce from her Iraqi husband, Nabijah has a lot on her plate.

Nabijah and her children were monitored by Lucy, one of the care providers at the centre. She had weekly meetings with Nabijah in her home, often together with various people, such as social workers, lawyers (to take care of the debt that remained after the divorce), teachers, the care provider(s) of her mentally handicapped son (who lived in a residential centre during the week) and translators.

During recent fieldwork at the centre we came across Nabijah’s case and were invited by Lucy to come along, in order to make more sense of the entire situation, her being accompanied by a pair of anthropological eyes. Nabijah’s story, in the professional vision of the social worker, had been pre-configured and only particular elements that fit the professional scheme were accepted as meaningful. Inevitably, there is also a reduction of complexity because of this pre-configuration (which is reinforced of course by pre-configured forms that need to be filled out). For the ethnographer, everything is potentially meaningful. Latent objects can become manifest at the blink of an eye. In Nabijah’s case, her

brother in Iraq often listened in and participated in the conversation through Skype. The co-presence of on- and off-line interaction went together with a complex linguistic and generic diversity as well as other overt and covert influences, sometimes manifestly present, sometimes latently lurking. An example of this is Nabijah's head scarf, which suddenly became relevant in a conversation between Lucy and Nabijah regarding her inability to find work. With the best intentions, Lucy said "that in Belgium, you'll have to put it [the head scarf] off when the employer wants it", explaining to me later in the car that she [Lucy] "had to say that for Nabijah's own best interested. I am personally also against the head scarf ban<sup>1</sup> you know. It's ridiculous".

We will now illustrate the complexity of the interaction situation by means of two vignettes. Both vignettes were taken from home visits to Nabijah's apartment with Lucy. The first vignette shows an interaction between several social care providers, including Lucy and Nabijah herself, all trying to get hold of the conversation in order to prioritize particular needs. The second vignette shows what is going on beyond the conversations, reaching outward to networks abroad, in this case Nabijah's brother in Iraq. All conversations were tape-recorded and conducted in Dutch, often mediated by an Iraqi Arabic translator. We complemented the audio recordings with the intensive taking of field notes.

#### Vignette 1

During one of the visits to Nabijah's house, Lucy was looking at Nabijah while explaining an interactive leaflet which indicated the daily routine for each of the four children. Also present were a translator and two other social workers, who were responsible for the institutionalized and mentally disabled Abdul, Nabijah's oldest son. They had just explained how important it is that the 12-year old Abdul took his medication on time. Every other weekend Abdul went home to Nabijah's house. The intention of the leaflet would be that for each part of the day Nabijah would engage with Abdul and her two oldest children and together decide whether they would fill out a happy or a sad face on the leaflet. A happy face meant that things went well during breakfast e.g., a sad face meant that it wasn't going as planned for one reason or the other. Lucy then subsequently asked to be translated. Nabijah replied by nodding but did not wait to be translated. She suddenly broke into another topic and asked the social workers not to let Abdul's dad visit the child in the institution, addressing them directly in Dutch by

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<sup>1</sup> In 2007, the City of Antwerp banned religious symbols for city staff.

saying: “Nee, die man niet bij Abdul, slechte man” (“No, not that man with Abdul, bad man”). The social workers replied by saying they have no power in doing so. Nabijah subsequently turned to the translator, saying in Arabic: “I don’t want him anywhere near my children. He’s bad.”

## Vignette 2

Another time, Lucy, the translator and I were at Nabijah’s apartment for the weekly visit. The translator was from Iraqi descent this time, translating in spoken Iraqi Arabic vernacular. We were discussing issues of paperwork and explaining procedures for obtaining a travel passport, something which had been a problem getting for Nabijah because of her former husband’s legal trouble. The translator carefully explained all the steps to Nabijah, using the form Lucy had brought. Suddenly a voice shouted something from the computer behind Nabijah. Lucy and I (Jef van der Aa) were both surprised, and the translator replied to the voice on the computer, telling us that it is Nabijah’s brother, listening in on Skype. Nabijah confirmed this and explained that he was reacting to the information with regards to the travel passport. There had been a request from the brother to formally adopt his son, Nabijah’s nephew. Nabijah then showed us the brother, we waved at him, and he disappeared from Skype as swiftly as he came once the conversation took another direction. Lucy then continued talking about other issues, such as the vacation plans for the family. After a few sentences Nabijah intervened saying, directly in Dutch “reispas” (“travel passport”), followed by a ‘kiss teeth’ sound, implying that this is something she wanted to urgently talk about. She did this a couple of times. Later on in the conversation she did something similar (bypassing the translator and addressing Lucy and I directly in Dutch), saying “Ja, ik wil verhuizen. IK wil het!” (“Yes, I want to move house. I want it!”) and “Budget meter, NOG nie goe eh!” (“Budget meter, NOT yet okay eh!”). The first intervention aimed at convincing Lucy to help Nabijah find a better house for her and her children, the second one at helping her out with a very urgent issue with the budget meter, a sort of pre-paid electricity system which had failed her mid-Winter. Nabijah repeated both phrases again several times. All three short interventions were part of a patterned prioritization of Nabijah’s urgent needs: mobility (travel passport), housing and electricity.

Let us now return to the complexity of the situation. The problem here was that Lucy, Nabijah and their respective ‘choirs’ (the brother in Nabijah’s case, and the social workers in Lucy’s case) had different purposes. Where Lucy and the social workers were following a rather strict protocol in order to execute what needed to be done professionally (medication of the disabled son, translating official documents etc.) within a fixed case frame, Nabijah brought a whole range of other, rather urgent key problems to the table. In fact, in one particular case, all other problems and issues were absolutely subordinate to solving the electricity problem in the middle of the Winter season. This difference was partly articulated in a range of language and addressee shifts as well as narrative patterns, something we could consider to be ‘frame breaks’. Some of those issues were seen as ‘noise’ by Lucy and the other social workers, both in the thematic as well as the communicational sense. It was also literally very ‘noisy’ in the apartment, with children playing around and people intervening through phones and computers.

What we observed here was an extremely complex interactional situation which cannot be analyzed synchronically. We observed something like a ‘total social fact’ in which on- and off-line events merged, latent objects suddenly became manifest, and a complex interaction of linguistic, generic, cultural and religious resources took place. Drawing on Silverstein’s (1985) concept of the ‘total linguistic fact’, we can easily see how this notion can be expanded to the analysis of superdiverse settings:

“The total linguistic fact, the datum for a science of language is irreducibly dialectic in nature. It is an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualised to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” (Silverstein 1985:220).

The kind of synchronic analysis so typically of structuralism, can no longer be valid in these kinds of contexts in which each item is potentially meaningful and stretching outwards to people’s complex trajectories.

To recap: important issues for Nabijah were expressed to Lucy and the researcher in Dutch, hereby bypassing the translator: poverty (budget meter), a new life (house change, divorce), and mobility (issues concerning a lost travel passport). Issues important to the care providers, such as the medication for the disabled son, his weekend care, and other practical issues, such as a leaflet indicating the day structure of the children, were discussed in Arabic through the translator’s mediation. In the spirit of ‘ethnographic monitoring’, in which knowledge and

analysis is brought back to the field, we discussed with Lucy the fact that Nabijah addressed us directly in Dutch when speaking about important issues to her, and that when she spoke about her ex-husband, she changed deictic footing from ‘he’ to ‘that man’. Taking this in account, Lucy decided to go there next time without the translator, and focusing on issues identified by me as important to Nabijah. Thus, by bringing back analysis to the field right away, both ethnographic research and care practice took new directions. Let us now take a look at the kind of knowledge that can be produced through such practices, and for doing that we need to address the concept of ‘theory’ itself.

## **5. The status of ‘theory’**

One of the desired results of ethnographic monitoring has been achieved here: the refusal to take things for granted. Lucy mentioned in one of the after-visit feedback sessions which we had with her over lunch: “You know, this is just such a solitary job you know. Yes, there’s a translator there, and many people, but no one to really talk to afterwards. And you saw things that I could not. And now I see those things too. I notice them”.

Another small illustration of this happened when we organized a walk through the superdiverse shopping street adjacent to the centre in which we asked social workers of the Antwerp centre to pay attention to actual signs, inscriptions, products on sale and so on. Most people’s reactions were of the same nature of Lucy’s remark. Afterwards Linda, one of the social workers at the centre, told us, “I have been walking through this street for two years, and I never really noticed any of those things”.

So what happens then when ethnographers make things explicit? What sort of knowledge do we see emerging? To us, this is a question of rethinking the concept of ‘theory’.

In this context, we would like to argue that ‘theory’ here is the ‘sens pratique’ of Bourdieu (1980), or ‘good practice’ of the social workers put into the bigger ethnographic context that can be made explicit by the ethnographer. Social workers can understand this ‘sens pratique’ as ‘routine’ and habituated professional practice: “we’ve always done it like this”. On encountering the ethnographer who is able to reveal and reflect on such habituated practice, so social workers or other professionals may become more conscious of the way/s in which they work. It is from this consciousness that it becomes possible to understand particular problems, to (together) formulate relevant research questions about them, and to set up

programs of investigation to explore, understand and potentially challenge or change such practices.

In this way, we moved with social workers from experience to expertise and from belief to knowledge. The ethnographic presence turned people's ideas, routines and beliefs about 'good practice' into an epistemic tool that generates 'theory'. Knowledge was shaped by finding and co-constructing a logic for knowledge that was already there. One can think of social actors as 'organic intellectuals' (in the Gramscian sense) whom the ethnographer can assist in formulating counterhegemonic knowledges aimed at achieving lasting social change, a change which the ethnographer is entirely part of.

Moving through the signaling of Nabijah's case during an informally held 'office hour' at the centre, through observing, interacting, recording and note taking to finally analyzing, a threefold feedback became possible: (1) the immediate feedback which allows for social actors to intervene urgently, in Nabijah's case the distracting role of the translator in certain ways; (2) the intermediate feedback which allows the broader group of colleagues of the participants to understand, rethink and co-analyze a particular case, in this case Nabijah's issues were discussed and analyzed under our supervision in a 'superdiversity' working group at the centre; (3) a long-term feedback which aims at institutional changes, in this case an expert group was set up at managerial level in order to investigate translation practices in the centre, also in the light of a tightening budget for translation services at city level. These three types of feedback have meaningfully intervened and changed particular practices in the centre: there will be more 'duo work' among social workers, analogous of the anthropologist accompanying the social worker; a 'superdiversity' working group was set-up and will be continued using case work as its basis; and, as outlined above, an expert group was set up to look at translation practices.

## **6. Toward a program for studying social change**

Finally, we would like to distill from the above a few points of attention for doing ethnographic monitoring in superdiverse, complex and rapidly changing societal institutions.

1. We have suggested that we move from participant observation to participation, a process in which ethnographers become an entire part of the fieldwork situations in which they find themselves. The program of Hymesian monitoring gives us an excellent starting point for doing research that is interesting for our co-operators in the field and that allows us to

achieve social change. Good ethnography is ‘making explicit’ of what we do anyway: we change situations we observe. Unmediated data do not exist.

2. The effects of our presence in the field can be turned into an epistemic tool: researchers co-create the historical processes they document. In fact, this epistemic grounding can be turned into an advantage for all: ‘epistemic solidarity’. This concept allows researchers to intervene in institutional settings through immediate feedback in which superdiversity can be operationalized, can be ‘lived’. Creation of knowledge always takes place through a communicative process, and this knowledge is much needed in the fields dealing with superdiversity. Therefore we need to work in our respective fields with both immediate and long-term feedback. The knowledge trajectory then becomes entirely transparent through constant feedback/valorization, and this brings knowledge under ‘democratic control’ (Hymes 1980). In this way, we do not ‘keep away’ theory from the field, but create epistemological circles of activity.
3. There is a false distinction between researcher and object, induced by ideas of replicability in experimental science. There are few things more artificial and subjective than experiments. We have to overcome our fear of “losing” our habitus by grounding it epistemologically in the field, knowing that even though habitus is never static, it is durable and constitutive of the knowledge we co-create (Blommaert 2005:222). Ethnographic monitoring proceeds through bringing together two situated knowledges and carves out a space for bringing both of those in during analysis, followed by intensive multi-levelled feedback and evaluation.
4. Linguistic ethnography enables us to become aware of the importance of language in societal institutions, often putting linguistic regimes into place that are demanding subjects to talk, write and behave in ways alien to them. One thing linguistic ethnography is well-equipped to do is precisely to bring to the surface those voices otherwise obscured by these regimes. To ‘make those voices heard’ is part of the program of social change that is encapsulated by ethnographic monitoring: proposing, doing and reporting analysis on participants’ own terms. Some of those voices are subdued and can be extremely precarious, which raises several ethical concerns, with regards to privacy, documented status of refugees, gender issues, and so on. However, long-term relations create precisely the kind of confidence and emancipatory growth which is needed in order to give precarious participants ‘voice’, a voice only particular people in particular circumstances can ‘give’. We like to think that ethnographers are among those.

In 'Reinventing anthropology', Hymes reveals the ultimate purpose of anthropological work, in which ethnographic monitoring is firmly grounded: "The analysis of anthropology is radical at least in this, that it accepts the contingency of anthropology and can envision a world in which it has no separate identity" (1972:54). What Hymes means here is that the possible consequence of anthropological work would be to achieve such a profound change in society that all of the above can be taken as a given in ethnography.

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