

THEORY IN THE FIELD

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In the more than thirty years since we began our graduate training we have singly and jointly conducted fieldwork in the United States, India, Canada, and Sri Lanka. Our discussion here is about our work in Bedford, New York, although what we say applies to our other field sites as well. Bedford is our focus because it is the place we know best, personally and professionally. Nancy grew up there and still has family and friends in town, and we return three times a year. Jim first conducted fieldwork there in the summer of 1971, Nancy wrote her dissertation on the area in the 1980s, and at present we are completing a monograph about the town. Our essay is divided into three parts. We discuss why we believe interviewing is a crucial component of fieldwork in cultural geography. Choosing to conduct interviews, or not, invokes theoretical debates about structure and conscious action and raises ethical questions of reinterpreting informants' interpretations. A second section addresses the use of theories in fieldwork and our choice of various theoretical frameworks over the years. The final section discusses problems raised by our theoretical perspectives and the inevitable intimacy and obligations that arise when we work in a small place over many years.

ON INTERVIEWING AS A THEORETICAL DECISION

For some cultural geographers who study contemporary places, interviewing is integral to fieldwork; for many others it is not. There is a long tradition in cultural geography of visual and behavioral analysis, especially "reading the landscape" (Meinig 1979; Lewis 1983) and mapping observations (Foote, Hugill, and Mathewson 1994). The landscape-reading orientation has tended to steer researchers away from interviewing informants who have their own readings of the landscape and toward the cultural geographer's expert reading.¹ Such a choice often inadvertently, but perhaps not unexpectedly, dovetails with a degree of cultural reductionism, for the decision not to interview informants often reveals an unacknowledged belief in relatively homogeneous cultural reception.

Although we conceive of cultures as systems of meanings, values, and practices that individuals within particular cultural groups share in some degree, we prefer to steer clear of reductive cultural determinism. Various national groups can be distinguished by shared assumptions and practices, but analysis need not operate at such a gross level. Any study based on generalized meaning inevitably masks the complexity and fragmentation that exist within overarching structures. This includes differences that members of a national group use to distinguish themselves

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