



PANDEMICS AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S DILEMMA

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ABSTRACT

Pandemics are real-time catastrophe that necessitates a rapid reaction, reducing reliance on culturalist interpretations of illness and health that impede traditional anthropological investigations. Ethnographers' responsibilities shift from raising awareness of indigenous beliefs about health and sickness to addressing problematic customary rules of practice and enhancing patient-physician trust. The roles have also been expanded to incorporate the cultural appropriateness of disease containment strategies and explain the local beliefs about pandemic events. In this vein, while conventional ethnography has become a semi-illegal practice with the institutionalization of the 'New Normal', ethnographers are negotiating this particularly entangled scenario with strategies to create a critical space to interrogate the varied nature of social impacts of outbreak response particularly different forms of social exclusion in different cultures.

KEYWORDS : Multispecies Ethnography, Viral Ethnography, Pandemic

Premise Of Multispecies Ethnography

Ethnographers have always been a crucial component of research on epidemics and pandemics, especially when it comes to segregation, relocation, quarantine, and population surveillance programmes. When ethnography was still growing in 1918 during the Spanish Flu, a relationship was established. The native and subaltern communities played a crucial role in the development of this new area of study; indigenous customs, rituals, ways of life, and household settings served as pathogen reservoirs and scientific sources for tropical medicine. A real-time large scale disaster that demands an immediate reaction, pandemics are episodic and extraordinary in character. As a result, they lessen reliance on culturalist conceptions of illness or health.

In general, classical anthropological analyses of epidemics are typically hampered by the need for quick containment. According to Paul and Bagchi (2022) it is a scientific field with a humanist slant. Its responsibilities shift to increasing patient-physician trust, addressing problematic traditional rules of practise, and sensitising public health teams to indigenous sickness beliefs. In order to provide a crucial space for exploring the various social impacts of outbreak response and the forms of social exclusion, blame, and panic these interventions surface, the roles have also been expanded to include improving the cultural appropriateness of disease containment strategies and elucidating local explanations and experiences of epidemic events. To comprehend epidemics—"cycles of shame and blame, stigmatising discourses, and isolation of the sick" (Herring & Swedlund, 2010)—fieldwork is done both online and offline considering the current paradigm shift.

The notion that people, animals, and microbes co-evolve in constrained habitats is relevant to ethnography and zoonotic pathogens in evolutionary biology. Local arrangements of these interactions and the effects of spillover occurrences cross what appear to be ecological limits on a global scale. Modern medicine has coined the term "zoonosis," which generally refers to human infection by animal-borne diseases. The theory holds that viruses that were previously only transmitted by non-human animals are now capable of evolving and "spilling over" to people, posing a serious threat to populations that have never been exposed to them before. Since the term was first used to describe rabies, ethnographers' interest in zoonosis has grown, especially in relation to HIV/AIDS.

Since people kill apex predators for their body parts, such as rhino horns, elephant tusks, and tigers' fur, over the years, humans have attempted to establish a predator-free species. Rats, bats, and primates—species that co-evolved with these viruses in the wild and now dominate the planet—are the only generalised species left. They multiply, become closer to people, and we hunt them to sell in wet marketplaces with domestic meat, fowl, chicken, and other animals. The result is that these viruses, which actually co-evolved in the wild and weren't intended for human exposure, jump to people and cause a pandemic that spreads around the world. SIV/HIV, EBOLA, SARS, and COVID-19 all occurred in this manner.

The Curious Case Of Reverse Zoonosis

The transmission of tuberculosis from humans to elephants in Southeast Asia following the development of ecotourism, the transmission of MERS-CoV from camels to humans in the Arab Peninsula without the presence of a bat reservoir following the emergence of international camel racing, and the Salmonella bacteria from humans affecting Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic marine birds and animals are just a few examples of the reverse zoonosis.

In this vein, when Donna Haraway's book "When Species Meet" was published in 2008, ethnography underwent a Species Turn. Ethnographers began to acknowledge that animals are not just "good to think" (as Lévi-Strauss put it) or, more practically, "good to eat" (as Marvin Harris argued), but are also entities and agents that are "to live with." There are many ways to do that "living with," of course. According to Haraway (2003) and Rose & van Dooren (2017), it could even be a "unloved other" or a companion species. It might be like the primates that ethnoprimateologists study, which have parallel and intertwined histories. By examining the relationships between primates and humans and other species, it provides justification for the "reconciliation of biological and cultural anthropology" (Riley, 2006). The word "ethno" indicates that anthropogenic factors, such as social, economic, and political histories and contexts, are important to consider when doing primatological research. Recently, Haraway (2010) has experimented with a different prefix arrangement, referring to the new animal anthropology as "zooethnography." Ethno-zoonosis is yet another phrase.

The representational issues with this shift in ethnographic research are: How can, should, or do anthropologists talk with and for nonhuman others? Speaking 'for' and 'speaking to' are

problems of voice, whereas speaking 'from' and 'of' are problems of place. (1988, Appadurai). Biologists who advocate for nonhumans are compared to politicians who speak for other people (Latour, 2004). Comparisons to "Can the Non-Human Speak?" were eagerly after. (See Spivak, 1988; Mitchell, 2002) Star (2008) uses the phrase "Non-human is like non-white," which alludes to a lack.

The fieldworkers' detailed examination of human skin, guts, and genomes as a result of the new microbiological facts of life revealed that people are a consortium of sorts, a hodgepodge of microbial becomings (Haraway, 2008). Viruses and other microorganisms distribute genetic material laterally among living things by transferring genes across species boundaries as well as higher level taxonomic groupings like families or even phyla (Helmreich, 2003). It contends that evolutionary schemas will no longer follow models of arborescent descent flowing from the least to the most differentiated, but rather a rhizome, challenging Darwinian orthodoxies regarding linear descent with microbial interconnectedness. Our viruses cause us to establish a rhizome with other creatures, not the other way around.

Thus, this new style of ethnography is characterised by a paradigm shift away from the old practises of listening and observing towards a multisensory approach that wrestles with foreign sensoriums, with various kinds of touch, smell, taste, and vision. Recent ethnographies brought to the forefront creatures that had previously been marginalized—as symbols, as food for humans, or as parts of the landscape. Previously restricted in anthropological narratives to the category of zoe or "bare life"—that which is killable—animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms have begun to coexist with humans in the category of bios, with clearly biographical and political lives (Agamben, 1998).

In the areas where the boundaries between nature and culture have blurred and where interactions between *Homo sapiens* and other species result in mutual ecologies and coproduced niches, new ethnographers are now undertaking fieldwork. Ethnography becomes a semi-illegal activity with the institutionalisation of the "New Normal," and ethnographers have attempted to navigate this particularly complex scenario. By taking into account how zoonosis is used to develop or guide global health policy, as well as the public fascination with and spectacle around it as a source of existential risk.

Leaving The Darwinian Orthodoxies

Humans, animals, and microorganisms co-evolve in confined ecosystems, and ethnography and zoonotic pathogens are linked by co-evolution. Infections that have previously been exclusively borne by non-human animals can evolve and 'spill over' to people—a fact called "zoonosis"—causing massive death in populations that have never been exposed to them. Initially focused on rabies, ethnographers' interest in zoonosis has grown recently, particularly in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the years, humans have established a predator-free species by murdering apex predators for their body parts such as tiger fur, rhino horns, elephant tusks, and so on. There are now just a few generalist species, such as rats, bats, and primates, that do not have any predators co-evolved with some viruses in the wild. They multiply, become closer to people, and we hunt these animals down and sell them in wet marketplaces alongside poultry meat. What occurs is that these viruses, which co-evolved in the wild and were never supposed to be exposed to humans, jump to humans and cause a global epidemic. SIV/HIV, EBOLA, SARS, and Covid-19 all happened in this manner.

Ethnographers now have to acknowledge that animals are

more than just objects. They were not just "good to think" (as Lévi-Strauss put it) or "good to eat" (as Marvin Harris argued), but they were also entities and agents "to live with." Of course, "living with" might take many different shapes. It could be "unloved others" or a companion species (Haraway, 2003). Thus, the ethnographers are now inspired by the new microbiological realities of life to take a closer look at human skins, guts, and genomes, which revealed that humans are a jumble of microbial beings. Darwinian orthodoxies of linear ascent flowing from the least to the most differentiated have been challenged. On the contrary, human beings are seen as developing as a rhizome with other living creatures and viruses.

Animal-to-human Infection Studies

The study has focused on the social dynamics and characteristics of animal-to-human infection, including the impact of zoonosis as a scientific theory and a common urban legend. Ethnography has achieved success in two ways:

- It alludes to a fresh perspective on non-human creatures that isn't bound up in cultural symbolism but instead emphasises connections and entanglements between coevolving species. Animals are viewed as participants in brittle and precarious networks of coexistence rather than as passive carriers of long-lasting human symbols.
- The assertions made by tribes that assign behaviours to animals have begun to be taken seriously by anthropologists, who have begun to discuss them alongside other claims regarding animal agency.

Zoonotic infection from animals alongside a 'included' versus 'rogue' binary, for example, rats as the main source of bubonic plague in colonial India (Evans, 2018), Pasteurian emphasis on bacterial attenuation and recrudescence (Lynteris, 2017), rogue status of Ebola epidemic in West Africa shifted according to the context from the virus, to the bat, to bushmeat hunters, to the sick themselves (Fairhead, 2018). "Rogues connote not only the new emergent unknowability of power but also the age-old threat that the excluded pose to it."

One location among many where this swarm landed was a series of panels, round tables, and events in art galleries held at the American Anthropological Association's Annual Meetings (in 2006, 2008, and 2010) under the banner of "Multispecies Salon." The salon evolved into a paraethnographic field site known as a "para-site" (Marcus, 2000), where anthropologists and their interlocutors gathered to talk about issues of mutual interest. Thinking through and against nature-culture dichotomies required the use of art as a companion and catalyst. As the face of the Multispecies Salon, Australian artist Patricia Piccinini's "Bodyguard for the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater" is a colourful silicone creation. The golden helmeted honeyeater, a little, colourful bird found in Victoria, Australia, with only 15 breeding pairs, is a true organism that inspired the creation of this fantastical monster. The creature is "genetically engineered," according to Piccinini (2004), and has enormous teeth that serve two purposes: "He will protect [the honeyeater] from exotic predators, and he has powerful jaws that allow him to bite into trees, providing the birds with sap" (Ibid). These teeth serve as a further reminder that although animals are wonderful companions and playmates, they also have the potential to bite. This potentially hazardous humanoid being exemplifies the dangerous outcomes, and the high risks involved when species collide.

Thus, Social distancing (more of Physical distancing), Contact Tracing Hot Spots, Containment Zones, Quarantines, Viral Chatter, Viral Peak, and N95 are just a few examples of the spatial and temporal variables that have become a part of this new normal. Ethnographers began examining the viral space, or the sensations and perceptions of illness in relation to the material routines and proximity of daily life that led to

infection. In this new normal, the Hotspot is viewed as a tool to combine analysis of the two VHF infection pathways—from animal reservoirs to humans and between humans. By expanding the circumstances through which viruses, humans, objects, and animals come into touch, human-animal interactions with an anthropological interest in the social construction of space offer chances for ethnographic conceptualizations of viral travel. The hotspot opens up a frontier site for theoretical and critical advancement in ethnomedical anthropology as well as for potential future partnerships in VHF management and control when consideration is given to the material proximity between the things, people, and animals that make up the hotspot.

The Paradigm Shift

This new style of ethnography is characterized by a paradigm shift—from traditional practices of listening and observing to a multisensory approach that grapples with unexpected human sensorium—with diverse kinds of touch, smell, taste as well as vision. In conventional ethnographies, creatures that had previously appeared on the periphery—as part of the landscape, as sustenance for humans, or as symbols—have come to the fore. Animals, plants, fungi, and microbes, which were traditionally relegated to the landscape or good to think/eat, have begun to appear alongside people with comprehensible biographical and political identities. New ethnographers are currently working in the contact zones, where the boundaries between nature and society have blurred, and human beings and other beings encounter mutual ecologies and coproduced niches. This form of ethnography has developed two strategies:

- a) adopting a new way of looking at non-human species, one that is not caught up in symbolism but instead focuses on the interconnections and entanglements of co-evolving species. Non-humans, particularly animals, are no longer seen as passive carriers of long-term human symbols but as active participants in insecure and vulnerable coexistence networks; and
- b) prioritizing the claims by communities that ascribe acts to animals, bringing them into dialogue with other convictions to the animal agency.

Towards a Viral Ethnography?

Social distance, Contact Tracing, Hotspots, Containment Zone, Quarantine, Viral Chatter, and Viral Peak are examples of spatial and temporal contingencies that have become part of this new normal. Ethnographers began to examine this viral space or the relationship between sickness experiences and understanding and the material practices and proximity of everyday life that led to infection. In this new normal, the Hotspot is considered a way of combining studies of the two infection routes—from animal reservoirs to humans and between humans. By elaborating the situations in which viruses, humans, objects, and animals come into contact, human-animal entanglements with an ethnographic interest in the social construction of space provide chances for ethnographic conceptualizations of viral mobility.

On the one hand, the aim of anthropology is 'to capture nuance and complexity, rendering visible these dimensions of social life to those who read their work'. On the other hand, public health, especially when disease control is concerned, 'often centres on activities that aim to simplify complexity'. Hannah Brown proposes a dialogical model according to which ethnographer's attention to the ways in which responses to epidemics unfold on the ground, and the way in which ethnography is attuned to unexpected dimensions of responses to epidemics constitute important sites at which ethnographers work can contribute within outbreak response and public health interventions more widely.

The collapse of normal is imminent as to die from infectious disease is in many ways to meet an unspeakable end. In the

Western imaginary is metonymically associated, at least since Thucydides' narrative of the 'plague' of Athens, with societal collapse. Epidemics dissolve social ties, lead to individualistic behaviour, and ultimately end up in a generalised state of anomy, forms part of distinctly naturalist definitions of human sociality: as a precarious state of 'culture' constantly threatened by instantaneous collapse into 'nature'. Ethnographers are called to critique and demonstrate its impact on the ground.

Ethnography of epidemics faces the challenge of two extremes: uncritical engagement and collaboration in the name of human lives, and critical distancing and self-guarded isolation in the name of knowledge. For those who tread the middle path of a critical engagement or engaged critique face the offended biologists. Space for critical epidemiology with targeted aims, programme, and principles. Surveillance is one such area of concern during the epidemics as in the name of contact tracing a conjoined narrative of care and surveillance has been put forward where a thin line exists between the allowance towards cultural practices vs becoming good citizens. Ethnographers' dilemma becomes intense in these cases as God is still quiet on Corona.

The Collapse

The collapse of normal is imminent, as dying from an infectious disease is, in many ways, an unspeakable end of human life. Epidemics sever social links, lead to individualistic behaviour, and eventually result in a generalized condition of anomy: a precarious state of 'culture' continually threatened by rapid collapse into 'nature.' Ethnographers are needed to analyse it and show how it affects people on the ground.

Dilemma Continues

In the name of human lives, epidemic ethnography faces two extremes: naive participation and collaboration and critical detachment and self-guarded isolation in the name of knowledge. Individuals who choose a medium ground between critical engagement and engaged critique when dealing with upset biologists. Surveillance is one such area of worry during epidemics, as a conjoined narrative of care and surveillance has been put forward in the name of contact tracing, where a delicate line exists between allowing cultural practices vs being good citizens. In these circumstances, the dilemma of ethnographers becomes even more acute, as God remains silent on Corona.

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