

A RESPONSE TO NATHAN WITTOCK, MICHIEL DE KROM & LESLEY HUSTINX'

MAKING SENSE OF A MESSY OBJECT: HOW TO USE SOCIAL TOPOLOGY AS AN ANALYTIC TOOL FOR ETHNOGRAPHY OF OBJECTS

Wittock et al.'s paper explores how we might develop a highly theoretically informed approach to conducting an ethnography of an inherently messy object, in their case - blood. In particular, their use of the social topology framework (Law & Singleton, 2005; Law & Mol, 2001; Law & Mol, 1994) indicates the challenges faced by researchers to examine their object when it exists in multiple ways, in multiple settings. It is a challenge that every ethnographer of objects is sympathetic with - how to examine an inanimate informant that struggles to make its voice heard over the noise of humans who wish to speak for it?

THE CHALLENGE: ETHNOGRAPHERS DON'T THEORISE ENOUGH

In this theoretical-methodological paper, Wittock et al. take aim at qualitative, ethnographic researchers who 'shy away from heavy theorizing as a starting point for observation and analysis because it is believed that it limits the researcher's openness and inductive capacities.' As a qualitative, ethnographic researcher myself, I saw this as a helpful challenge and a starting point for this commentary. Within this commentary, I want to ask three questions - they may be rhetorical questions - but I do hope they start a discussion that is fruitful for the community of object ethnographers. The first question poses a Goldilocks-style question: How much theorising is enough theorising? If we do too little we end up being radically inductive. Too much, and it becomes radically deductive. How do we strike an abductive middle ground? In this question I want to explore the placement of theory in the object ethnography process.

My second question touches on practical matters: How to mobilise an approach such as a social topology framework? With this question I wish to explore what happens after heavy theorising and the possible fieldwork and analysis implications.

My third question is more of a serious one: How do frameworks such as the one Wittock et al. introduce us to serve to domesticate a messy object? With this question I wish to provoke the methodology and ask how the methodology itself impacts the object of study.

THE FIRST QUESTION: HOW TO STRIKE AN INDUCTIVE/DEDUCTIVE BALANCE?

Wittock et al.'s provocation about qualitative researchers and their leaning towards conducting inductive research describes heavy theorising as a way of countering openness. Without enough theoretical or methodological preparation, how can one pointedly interrogate an object? How does the researcher know what to ask of the object? We as researchers may have been guilty of leaping into our respective fields earlier than we would have liked; only realising this error in hindsight.

However, this provocation seems to play down the benefits of inductive research, or seek to render them inferior. It asserts that one cannot both theorise and maintain an inductive approach to research. It is important to challenge this notion because it's not necessarily accurate. A researcher can theorise to their heart's content (or their timeframe's content, or budgetary constraints) before embarking on the research, but what help does theory bring to an object if it results in a list of attributes to be proven or disproven? What help does a deductive approach bring to an ethnography?

But perhaps a middle ground must be found and struck with a more pragmatic, abductive approach (Brinkmann, 2014). As researchers going through the theorising and methodology stages of research, it is important to engage well with theories to develop well thought out research questions, hypotheses and research plans. But we must also engage fully and pointedly with theory and methodology and yet hold onto it loosely and prepare to listen to our object and be surprised when it behaves in ways we did not expect it to (Latour, 2000). We must prepare to have our theories and frameworks fail us from time to time and have the humility to let the object resist being shoehorned into quadrants.

THE SECOND QUESTION: HOW TO MOBILISE THE LABOR OF A SOCIAL TOPOLOGY FRAMEWORK?

With this question, I wish to ask an honest question about the transition from the mind work of theory and methodology to the handiwork of method and fieldwork, back to the mind work of analysing what you have just witnessed and recorded. How does the social topology framework relate to these points of transition? How is it mobilised within method, fieldwork, and analysis? The social topology framework seems to demand a lot of the researcher and the analyst after doing theoretical/methodological heavy-lifting (please don't misunderstand, I'm not advocating intellectual laziness here). But the researcher must do four times the fieldwork or analysis work under the social topology framework in order to take advantage of the four angles it provides.

It is a lot of work but perhaps that is precisely where the heavy theorising pays off. After that investment, the researcher-analyst is living and breathing the theory and methodology and able to identify and form these correlations between theory and the object observed. I am curious and excited to see how this labor is divided in Wittock et al.'s ensuing fieldwork with blood donation. Will they conduct research four

times, tailoring the methods to best suit each angle of blood donation? Or will the empirical data be analysed four times, each focusing on an individual angle. In any case, the social topology framework neatly divides the research and analytic work to be done, but it gives the researcher little room to move if for some reason it is not the best tool for the job. This drives forward the point that a social topology approach is helpful, but perhaps more so in the analysis phase rather than the research design phase. How can a researcher see more insightful angles to an object if her research framework is standing in the way?

When writing findings, how does a social topology framework provide a formula for the how the study is to be presented? Could there be a scenario where the findings of each angle interacts, acknowledging and reflecting the messy situations that the blood goes through within the donation process, or is each angle within the topology to be kept discrete from others?

THE THIRD QUESTION: HOW TO AVOID DOMESTICATING A MESSY OBJECT?

The social topology framework seems to encourage a form of purification of the object. Indeed, the framework becomes a laboratory of sorts through which to study the object. My fear of using a social topology framework is that it could lead to domesticating the object in an attempt to examine it and translate it to others. The cost of using frameworks to examine messy objects could be radical domestication whereby the object is simplified beyond recognition of the messy situation it came from.

On this point I have no comments that differ from those outlined above, other than the need to be reflexive of the research decisions that could cause the object to be domesticated and prepare to explicate and acknowledge those decisions and their impacts on analysis.

CONCLUSION

Wittock et al. provide a comprehensive and persuasive call to (re)introduce a focus on heavy theorisation when preparing and planning for an ethnography of an object, in their case, blood. This commentary sought to encourage them in this process and thank them for providing an outlook that stresses the importance of doing the necessary theoretical work to situate the object ethnography within a broader discussion. In this commentary I hope to have used some questions around balancing inductive and deductive approaches, mobilising the social topology framework and, domesticating a messy object in order that it can also be considered by ethnographers as they embark researching objects. I wish them the very best as they carry out their empirical work through a social topology framework.

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