

Positionality / Situated Knowledge.

Ian Cook *et al*

Introduction.

For many, most, perhaps all researchers, one of the most difficult tasks is to turn the experience of research into respectable academic writing. Research can be a tricky, fascinating, awkward, tedious, annoying, hilarious, confusing, disturbing, mechanical, sociable, isolating, surprising, sweaty, messy, systematic, costly, draining, iterative, contradictory, open-ended process (Amit 2001; Bell *et al.* 1993; Moss 2001; Okely & Callaway 1992). But you wouldn't necessarily be able to tell that from the way that it often has to be written up in theses, book chapters, journal articles and other official outlets for academic work. Good arguments are rational, linear, ordered, dispassionate, confident, objective, universal. Aren't they? Well, not necessarily. That's the answer you might get from the reflexive anthropologists, sociologists of science, and feminist writers who, since the mid 1980s, have produced some key readings for geographers taking a cultural turn (e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Haraway 1988; Hartsock 1987). The main point they make is that academic and other knowledges are always *situated*, always produced by *positioned* actors working in/between all kinds of locations, working up/on/through all kinds of research relations(hips). All of these make a huge difference to what exactly gets done by whom, how and where it's done, how it's turned into a finished product, for whom. Thus, so the argument goes, writing about academic knowledge as a *relational process* rather than a straightforward thing might highlight the politics of knowledge in academic research, produce more modest, embodied, partial, locatable and convincing arguments and, in the process, make it possible for researchers (and their audiences) to see and make all kinds of, often unexpected, politically progressive connections.

Writing about these two key terms is a tricky business. They're often used interchangeably, but aren't the same. Advocates argue that they make sense in principle, can vividly be seen at work in studies of *other* people's academic practices, but cause confusion and discomfort when they're used nearer to home (Ashmore 1988; Cook 1998, 2001; Rose 1997). Critics might argue that writing in this area can, itself, be inadequately positioned and/or un-situated. And purists could argue that it's inappropriate to *step back* and offer an *overview* of an approach which criticises those who claim to be able to step back and offer an overview! But, I've been asked to write 2,000 words explaining these terms. They're important. And I'm going to try to do it. In five easy steps.

1. The results of research: two snapshots.

Figure 1 illustrates the latest writing to come from my PhD research. In the early 1990s, I tried to connect the sale of fresh papayas in British supermarkets to the work which went into producing them on two Jamaican farms. Recently, I was asked to draw upon this to write 1,000 words on *Trade* by the editors of a book very much like this one. I sent a draft in September 2001. It's December now. I'm waiting for comments. Some advice on revisions to make it better. Perhaps.

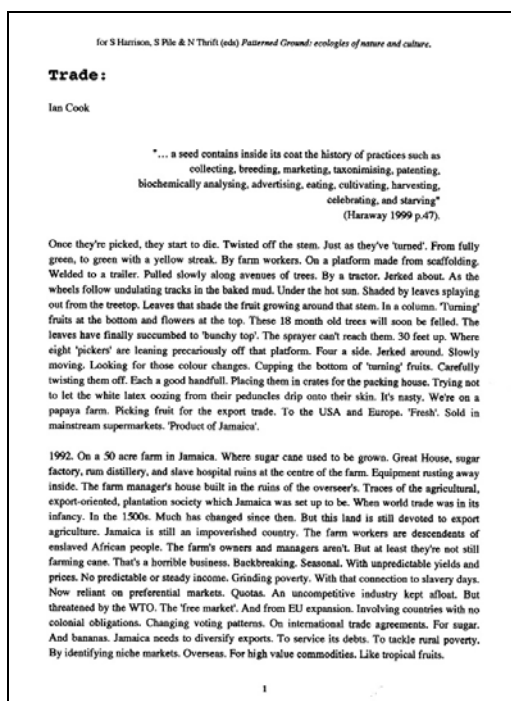


Figure 1: page 1 of a draft copy of Cook (forthcoming)

Figure 2 is a still from a TV documentary called *Lions - Spy in the Den*, made by John Downer Productions and first aired on the BBC in the Autumn of 2000. A more or less a standard wildlife documentary, it details how lions cubs grow into adult lions in the grasslands of East Africa. But they're not the only stars of the film. The 'Bouldercam' - a piece of remote-controlled audio-visual equipment specially developed to make it - is represented both behind and within the scenes. That's interesting.



Figure 2: a still from John Downer Productions (2001)¹

2. 'Texts' representing research?

Both of these are (extracts from) 'texts': texts which represent the results of research into the international papaya trade and the private lives of lions. This trade and these lives can be called Cook's and Downer's 'objects of study'. Here, we need to get into arguments about how such 'texts' (appear to) represent such 'objects of study'.

¹ Source: www.jdp.co.uk/images/programmes/lion.jpg (accessed 30/12/01).

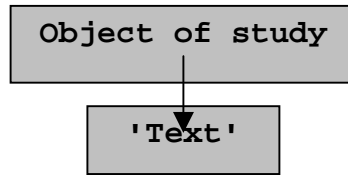


Figure 3: the view from nowhere and/or everywhere?

Figure 3 illustrates the 'God trick' (Haraway 1988) which many feel that they have to pull off to make those 'good' arguments we began with. It's a one-way relation in which the 'text' - a spreadsheet, a map, a journal article - simply re-presents the 'object of study'. That 'object' is out there. It's waiting to be discovered, collected, processed as 'data'. By researchers using established methods. In a systematic manner. You don't need to know anything about them. They're not people. Like you and me. They're operating as standardised conduits. Their 'texts' are matters of fact. There's no doubt about that (Barnes 2000a, Harley 1996; Rabinowitz 1993).

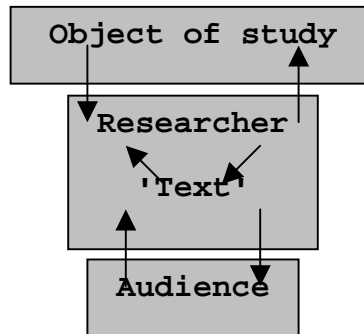


Figure 4: the view from somewhere
(source: Keith 1992)

Figure 4 illustrates critiques of this 'trick' which highlight the role of *positionality* and the *situated* nature of all (academic) knowledge. These complicate the picture: first, giving the 'researcher' and the 'audience' an active role in the relations between the 'text' and the 'object of study' and, second, making the relations more than one way traffic. 'Texts' are suspended in, and constructed out of, these relations. And the researcher is in the thick of this. A person. Like you or me. Working with the materials and technologies of their trade. Moving in/between contexts. Initiating relations(hips) and/or building upon established ones. Struggling to make things happen. To make sense of them. Fit them together. In some kind of order. That's acceptable. To them. To others. Working hard to separate things out. Because the 'object of study' can't simply be re-presented. The researcher's knowledge about it is negotiated. Made. His/her 'text' is far from a matter of fact. There's no doubt about that (Clifford 1997; Latour 1993, 1996; Katz 1992, 1994).

So, research is more of a relational process than many would admit. In print, at least. Debates about *positionality* and *situated knowledge* are debates about these relations. But one is more about social, and the other about material-semiotic, relations. This is where they differ. And this makes a difference. Now, let's go back to those snapshots. What went on behind the scenes?



Figure 5: Cook the researcher.

3. Social relations, papaya research.

1992. In the second year of my PhD. Spending 6 months in Jamaica doing interviews and participant observation research with women working in a papaya farm's packing house. Research which produced detailed insights into how this trade affected their lives. By a researcher who couldn't be sure what he'd understood. His first language Standard English. Theirs' Jamaican english (Cassidy & Le Page 1980). The Jamaican linguist who transcribed the tapes found the misunderstandings hilarious. Here's a researcher gaining a *feeling* that his understanding of this trade is gradually becoming clearer. But he couldn't *trust* that feeling. Research encounters were often ambiguous. What could be learned from them? What could be read into them? Who knows? The participant observation research should have provided another perspective. It did, but not one that made things much clearer. Research was being done on a farm where observation was central to the disciplining of labour. This was a place where a tall white middle-class English male researcher washing, wrapping and packing fruit alongside a largely black working class Jamaican female workforce could by no means go unnoticed. Every day, at least some of the farm workers saw that person talking with their boss. He wondered why someone would spend so much time talking to his employees. He knew that researcher had talked to his business rivals, as well as to people he shipped to in the UK. Many were curious about the way Ian (figure 5) asked the women, one by one, to leave the packing house to have a chat with me in the shade of a tree, out of earshot but in full view of her colleagues. He was tacking between people who might not want others to know what they were up to. So, what was he up to? Could he be trusted? Could fun be had at his expense? Where was his girlfriend? Was he looking for one? What were his politics? How did people in England dance? Comments. Questions. Answers. (Mis)Understandings. Watching. Being watched. Speculation Paranoia. Changing behaviour. But clinging to the research plan. Keeping his focus. Noting. Taping. Photographing. Getting data. To write a PhD which examiners would pass; and accounts which others would accept for publication. Maybe. Things he could put on a CV. Use in the classroom. Lecturing. His career. A lot of people have played a part in that (see Cook 1997, 1998, 2001).



Figure 6: the BoulderCam.²

Material-semiotic relations, spy in the den.

Wildlife documentary film-making is in crisis. It's hit the BBC's Natural History Unit hard. This public service broadcaster has been forced to be more commercial. Cutting costs. Chasing bigger audience figures. Entertaining more and informing less. Making films about animals which are the most charismatic. The big cats. Whales. Polar bears. For example. But there's not much more that can be filmed or said about them. Unless there's a new angle. From some new audio-visual equipment, perhaps. Like a camera disguised as a boulder (Figure 6). Lion-proof. Operated remotely. At a safe distance. Trundling into the midst of a pride of lions. Rotating through 360°. To see and hear things. In amazing intimacy. A cub's eye view. With cub's ears. Stereo microphones. Up close. Recording pictures and sound to complement conventional shots. From remote cameras with telephoto lenses. High quality film cameras and/or lightweight digital camcorders. On moving cranes. In moving vehicles. Operated by people used to working with both scientists and animals. A skilled film-maker tracks animals, knows when what s/he wants to film is about to happen, and knows her/his equipment. Intimately. To get shots from what might be once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Shots which will fit into the film's story-line. Written before the filming takes place. Largely. About how a lion cub grows into an adult lion. Perhaps. And East Africa makes for a great location. It's been used plenty of times before. Copious audio and film footage is already in the BBC archive. It has managed 'Natural' habitats. Local scientists and rangers who know what's happening where. Lions used to being filmed. By amateurs and professionals. Grasslands which are relatively flat, dry and free from the kind of vegetation animals in shot could disappear behind. Mid shot. Or which could throw dark shadows across the action. A place where vehicles won't get stuck in the mud. Where they won't shake so much on the move that camera vibration ruins the shots. Where it's not so wet that film stock and equipment could get damaged. Where you're not so remote that charging camera batteries would be a headache. Like in West Africa. Yes, East African grasslands make an excellent outside studio. A studio where Downer and crew could spend 3000 hours watching lions. 100 hours filming them. For a 1 hour film. Which may also include old footage from BBC archives. All quickly edited together, to support that story-line. Narrated by David Attenborough. Each shot no more than a few second long. Nearly half from the boulderCam. Made to look like a *real* cub's eye view. Clever editing (Anon nd a&b, 2001; Burgess & Unwin 1984; Clarke 2000a&b; G. Davies 1999, 2000a&b; G.H. Davies 2000; MacDougall 1992; Whatmore 1999).

Conclusions.

² Source: cover of John Downer Productions (2001).

So, researchers' identities and practices make a big difference. They can't hover above the nitty-gritty power relations of everyday life. Research can only emerge out of them. Tainted by them. Reproducing them. Perhaps. Wealth. 'Race'. Nationality. Class. Gender. Sexuality. Age. (Dis)ability. Attitudes to nature. More besides. Key questions. Who does research? Who/what is researched? Who decides what's important? How is research funded and why? Who's it for? Who gains from it? Relatively well off, white, western, middle-class, heterosexual, non-disabled men? Who are supposed to behave in cool, detached, objective, dispassionate, authoritative way, anyway? Maybe. That's got to be more than a coincidence. Be them or act like them, if you want to be a successful academic! And can. It's about the way that we think, too. Those of us entertaining Enlightenment thoughts. Categorising things. As this *or* that. As "self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilised/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man" (Haraway 1991 p.177)? But these categorisations "have all been systematic to the logics of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals – in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the (dominant) self" (*ibid.*). Do you really want to be help maintain such domination? If you believe the arguments? (Cloeke 1999; Crang 1992; Jackson 1993, 2000; Madge 1993; McDowell 1992; Oliver 1992; Parr 199?; Sidaway 1992; Women & Geography Study Group 1997).

There's politics and ethics to be considered here. So, why not be more reflexive? At least make a stab at explaining where you're coming from. Your *position* in all of this. Talk about your research as partial, in both senses of the word. It's not the whole story and it's impossible to be 'unbiased'. Give your reader something to think with. Include other voices. De-centre your own. No single, straightforward conclusions. No bullet-point lists. Please! But materials to think with and about. Materials full of ideas, energy, doubt, learning, life. Materials which might destabilise those oppositions. Make connections. Make a difference. Understand how difference works. Channel this in 'politically progressive' ways. Re-write the rules. Don't write as if you're one of those Cartesian individuals. Those "atomistic, presocial vessel(s) of abstract reason and will" (Whatmore 1997 p.38). Or the kind of individual who knows *exactly* who s/he is and how this makes a difference (Rose 1997). Please! You're a collective. Like 'Ian Cook *et al.*' Or 'John Downer Productions'. Other people help you to know. Not just your research subjects. But those you mention in acknowledgements, bibliographies, film credits. And more besides. In particular institutional contexts (Sidaway 1997). [*This is where debates about positionality and situated knowledge usually diverge. In the latter, research is not done only by 'people', but by socio-technical hybrids, cyborgs and actor networks. More than just people. Boulder cams. Tape-recorders. Passports. Paper. Other 'co-agents'. Collectively. More thoroughly entangling the lives of selves and countless others. In fleshy ways.*] Nobody and nothing is outside. Connections must be seen and made on/from the ground. New responsibilities recognised and tackled. Researchers and their audiences can imagine and do things differently. Working with/around/against those separations and binaries. Changing geographies (see Angus *et al* forthcoming; Barnes 2000b; Burgess 2000; Castree 1999; Cook 1998, 2000, 2001; Cook *et al* 2000; Haraway 1988, 1991, 2000; Henwood *et al* 2001; Kunzru 1997; Merrifield 1995; Willemsen 1992).

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