

## WE CAN'T GENERALISE – OR CAN WE?

Social anthropologists do not like to generalise. The diversity that we see in our research means that it is almost always possible to challenge a generalisation with the point that other people do things differently. Moreover, anthropology has found few answers to the ‘crisis of representation’, which showed us the pitfalls in seeking to represent, much less generalise about, other people’s lives. That made our work more reflexive, but it also made us sceptical of our ability to create wide-ranging insights. At the same time, without general statements we could not develop theory or even communicate among ourselves.

Our unease with generalisation becomes most evident when we present our research to audiences from other disciplines, who often challenge the data we present as being ‘anecdotal’ or simply ‘not representative’. Usually, these critiques do not question the validity of our data or interpretations, but the applicability of what we say to wider a field. In this, they challenge us to acknowledge the general nature of our theorising and to make explicit the means by which we come to theoretical conclusions.

The tension between a reluctance to generalise and the impossibility of avoiding it is particularly problematic for economic anthropologists. For one thing, our field observations are minute compared to the vast and complex relations and structures of the global economy. Moreover, we often present our views as an alternative to that of neoclassical economists, who tend to arrive at confident general statements based on axioms (e.g. everyone tries to maximise utility) as well as on the philosophies and methods of

statistics.

Recent attempts to deal with this problem include multi-sited fieldwork and following objects and ideas as part of studying their ‘social lives’. These enable us to focus on economic totalities, whether they are place-bound or spread across the globe. They also allow us to observe the misunderstandings and cultural re-appropriations that occur in extended value chains. However, rather than solving the problem of generalisation, these approaches have shifted it from one kind of entity to another. We still lack an explicit theory of knowledge and method, which we need if we want to see what our field work tells us about value chains, companies or corporate forms.

We may therefore want to ask ourselves a series of questions regarding the nature and general applicability of anthropological knowledge. What are the epistemic affordances and limitations of qualitative data based on field work? Could it in fact be more widely applicable than quantitative surveys? After all, immersion in a field site floods researchers with unforeseen information that may challenge our assumptions. Should our choice of field site relate to wider economic trends? If so, should we study groups that reflect these trends or should we look at assumed ‘outsiders’, which may unveil hidden social dynamics? And if we agree with Durkheim that our individual lives are profoundly social in nature, should we teach our students how to compile and interpret quantitative data, as well as some philosophy of statistics? Confronting these questions promises to make economic anthropology more relevant and more interesting.

Felix Stein

University of Edinburgh and University of Cambridge

Fs343@cam.ac.uk