ABSTRACT

Participation entails bodily engagement. The term participant observation, first formulated by the Chicago School of Sociology, has been integral as method to social anthropological fieldwork. Although cross cultural ideas of the body have been theoretically elaborated in social anthropology, the bodily experience of the fieldworker, through participant observation, has been under scrutinised. The Western Descartian mind/body dichotomy has privileged the cerebral in the understanding of fieldwork practice.

This paper draws on extensive dialogues with leading anthropologists about their fieldwork. Examples are selected from Africa, Afghanistan, India, Malaysia, Tropical Forest South America and Northern and Southern Europe. The anthropologists’ conscious and hitherto unarticulated bodily adaptations are disentangled. Research is lived as gesture, physical labour, refinement, absorption, movement, malady, dexterity or ungainliness. The fieldworker is to be perceived as sexed and racialised body.

The anthropologists’ narratives reveal the transformations of experience through bodily participation. This is integral to the acquisition of knowledge and to the analysis of culture and contexts. The body becomes an instrument in the production of written texts.