

A WEIRD anthropologist overinterpreting voting and phones in South India

Abstract:

The purpose of anthropology is to describe and comprehend social and cultural phenomena, such as traditions, rituals, beliefs, values, and social structures. Interpretation plays a crucial role in anthropological research, involving a creative process where the researcher organizes observed reality. This process is subjective, influenced by various personal and cultural factors. Minimizing this impact aims to ensure research reliability, yet it remains challenging for anthropologists whose goal is to uncover deeper meanings in the everyday lives of those studied. Sometimes, this pursuit leads to mis- or overinterpretation in terms of unnecessary symbolization or metaphorization, as exemplified in my two presented cases. In the first, I describe how I overinterpreted meanings related to voting given by individuals in Chennai, India, and understood their views on the value of voting as symbolic rather than literal. In the second, I overinterpreted—or needlessly metaphorized—the way people in a South Indian village talked about the perceived dangers of mobile phone conversations between boys and girls. I contemplate whether these instances of overinterpretation stem from the tendency of WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich & democratic) anthropologists to perceive more symbolic meaning or metaphors rather than taking a more literal interpretation of what the participants of the study say.

Keywords: anthropology, fieldwork, India, interpretation, metaphorization, symbolization, WEIRD, Western culture,

Introduction

The essence of anthropology is to describe and understand socio-cultural phenomena globally, including traditions, rituals, beliefs, values, and social structures. Anthropologists typically gather data through participant observation and interviews. Following – and often during – this, they engage in interpretation, a creative process aimed at making sense of and articulating statements about observed reality. This process relies on the anthropologist's immersion in the studied culture and the academic literature they have reviewed. Anthropological data collection and its analysis are inherently subjective, as the gathered information is filtered through the anthropologist's persona, including their conscious and unconscious beliefs, values, norms, cognitive capacity, and interests. Traditionally, efforts have been made to minimize this subjective influence on the process of understanding the object of research. Moreover, the anthropologist is encouraged to reflect on their process and the choices, enabling readers of the research reports to better understand their viewpoint and assess the reliability of their interpretations.

An anthropologist, essentially, is an academically educated professional who is methodologically and theoretically trained to explore deeper meanings behind seemingly mundane acts. However, such acts lack deeper significance, or it is not as profound as the anthropologist would like to perceive. Attributing deeper significance to acts that lack such meaning can be termed as overinterpretation. The two autobiographical cases I present here serve as examples of how constructing meaning and interpretations can occasionally mislead an anthropologist. Undoubtedly, any attempt to understand others can result in misinterpretations and misunderstandings, as comprehensively grasping another individual, let alone a group, is an impossible task. However, these examples highlight instances where I, as an anthropologist, perhaps due to my academic training in a Western or WEIRD (Western, educated, intellectual, rich, democratic) society (Henrich, 2020) have overinterpreted my data. Specifically, I have interpreted statements and utterances metaphorically when a more literal understanding should have been applied.

The first case pertains to my research on how the impoverished population in Chennai, a city in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, engages in the act of voting. For this research, I conducted interviews with residents of several slums in the Chennai area. The second case centers on my study of mobile telephones and gender in rural South India which also involved interviews of local people.

First case: voting makes one visible to the state

In early 2014, I undertook a brief exploratory ethnographic research period in Chennai to gather data on the lives of individuals living in slums. During this period, the primary objective of my data collection was fairly broad. I aimed to delve into people's everyday experiences, including their challenges, joys, and problems, seeking an emerging theme that could serve as the foundation for a more focused research project. Given that India is the largest democratic nation globally, and with the general parliamentary elections (so called *Lok Sabha* or "House of the People" elections) only a few months away, most of my interviewees were eager to discuss elections, politicians, and voting. I was aware that in India the poor constitute the largest voter demographic, unlike in, for example, Europe where wealthier individuals are typically the most active voters. However, I was somewhat taken aback by the extent of significance the elections held for the individuals I engaged with (e.g. Piliavsky, 2014).

After completing my fieldwork, I made the decision to return the following year with a sole focus on understanding people's perspectives on voting (I have written about my observations in [Anonymized citation]). Before my return, I extensively researched and learned about the symbolic power of voting for the poor in India (e.g. Banerjee, 2011, p. 82). Given the prevailing caste system and widespread structural inequality in India, I delved into various articles that described how voting held profound significance for impoverished individuals. It was depicted as one of the rare instances where the poor felt equal to the affluent and influential. The act of voting itself was portrayed as a symbol of equality, with every voter required to stand in the same line, regardless of whether they were a high-caste millionaire or an untouchable beggar. Each person had just one vote, emphasizing equal standing in this process, and for a moment, in the society.

Moreover, I encountered reports suggesting that voting was perceived as a means for the underprivileged to compel the state to acknowledge their existence as legitimate citizens. The articles left a lasting impression, notably one featuring a poignant quote by an interviewee: "If I don't vote, I'm dead to the state" (Ahuja and Chhibber, 2012). Drawing from diverse sources of data, the motivation of poor voters became apparent. For them, voting was not merely a duty as it might be perceived for the wealthy; instead, it was their right. They voted because they believed that otherwise, "no one would know of [their] existence" (Ibid., p. 394). Voting imbued a sense of dignity upon the poor as citizens (Ibid., p. 397). Hence, voting emerged as an act of citizenship symbolizing equality for the poor, reminiscent of its portrayal in narratives about the value of democracy in the West.

When I returned to Chennai to conduct interviews in the slums, I encountered similar statements from the residents: "Our presence should be asserted [by voting]," "It is the only way I could mark my presence in this country," "I have to vote to be somebody," "If I vote, the government has to recognize me," and "When I vote, I exist for the state." To me, these expressions resonated as powerful acts of dignity, self-worth, and reflections of fundamental democratic values. They echoed sentiments of equality. I sensed that even though the participants of my study may have been marginalized, voting granted them parity with the more privileged and influential individuals who possessed power and a voice. I found a connection with the interviewees not because I shared similar life experiences (quite the contrary), but because their perspectives seemed to align with the liberal democratic principles of equality I was taught in Western education: All individuals are

considered equal, and they possess intrinsic worth irrespective of their backgrounds. Each adult person holds one vote in a democracy, and when they vote, it is not merely an individual expressing their preference among options but almost a sacred symbol of empowerment, especially for marginalized or historically disenfranchised groups.

Initially content with my understanding of my interlocutors and ready to report it, I later heard my interviewees delve deeper into their narratives. The recurring phrase “if I don’t vote, I’m nothing to my state” did not seem as symbolic as I had thought but it prompted me to engage in further exploration through clarifying questions. Gradually, it became apparent that people believed, to a significant extent and with some valid reasons, that their existence as registered citizens of the state hinged on voting. Many revealed to me that they feared removal from civil registers if they didn’t vote, jeopardizing their ability to renew ration cards (providing food and essential supplies) or *Aadhaar* cards (for identification and access to social security benefits). According to their understanding, election officials would check the voter list and take action against non-voters. They firmly believed that voting was essential for their inclusion in government welfare schemes and entitlements. Thus, for them, voting was synonymous with existence within the state system of social benefits.

These beliefs were rooted in claims made by certain political candidates, representatives of local party organizations, and supporters, who attempted to persuade the poor to vote, preferably for their favored candidates. Candidates often organized transportation to polling stations, drawing from specific caste communities, and employed various incentives, compensation, subtle pressure, and at times, outright bribery, to encourage voting. Ultimately, I realized that “I have to vote to be recognized by the state” was not merely symbolic but quite a literal statement by many. They feared being disregarded as citizens by the government or elected officials. They believed that government aid and resources would only be allocated to those who voted. This starkly contrasted with my initial perception of the symbolic value of voting. Many interviewees even viewed voting as an irritating imposition by politicians and leaders of (caste) communities, a time-consuming bureaucratic act far removed from any symbolism of equality.

At this point I have to remind the reader that I do not imply that my revised understanding of voting is applicable outside of my fieldwork data. Undoubtedly, there might be both rich and poor individuals in Chennai who perceive voting as a strongly symbolic act of equality, akin to my initial interpretation. Additionally, I acknowledge that most voters see voting as an essential right, as evident in literature. However, the concept of “a right” can carry multiple implications. While it may signify abstract value and existential equality for some, it can also represent something very tangible: the right to access government-provided food rations, the right to collect unemployment benefits, the right to enjoy free educational resources, and the right to gain various other social security benefits. However, it is possible that my exposure to Western academic and societal perspectives, narrating voting as a symbol of a particular kind of equality, led me to overinterpret and almost misreport the views of my interviewees. When they expressed the need to vote to exist for the state, they meant it quite literally rather than symbolically.

Second case: dangerous phone use

Between 2010 and 2012 I spent several months in rural Tamil Nadu in South India to conduct ethnographic research on mobile phone use (see [Anonymized citation]). My main object was to find out how the cell phone had changed village life, especially in relation to gender. Hence, I tried to find out if men/boys and women/girls used or related to the phone differently, and if there were any gender specific norms in mobile telephony. I conducted participant observation which in this case meant living in particularly one village and visiting many others to chat with people, observe them

using their phones, ask them to show their phones to me, and conduct semi-structured interviews. In the interviews, I asked plethora of questions including very concrete topics such as the cost of their devices, how much time they spent on the phone, technological properties of the phones and their own skills to use the phone. Moreover, I asked about all kinds of norms related to phone use.

I also interviewed moms and dads, some of whom had teenage kids. I had observed that many youngsters had their own phones, and I knew teenagers sometimes used the phone to contact their love interests – in more or less secrecy (e.g., Doron 2012, p. 427). I also knew that Tamil Nadu and India in general was relatively conservative concerning views on teenagers and other unmarried people interacting with the opposite sex. Dating was usually out of the question, let alone any kind of physical intimacy. Particularly if you asked the parents. As the mobile phone was an essential device enabling contacts between people including boys and girls, I often asked my interviewees what they thought about the idea of their kids using the phone to contact their possible love interests. I was not surprised to hear that they did not like it. Some told me it was “dangerous”. It certainly made sense to me: mobile communication touched upon a moral taboo concerning premarital romantic relationships, and teenagers using the phone to contact their crushes risked them and their family becoming a target of gossip and even shame. The “danger”, I thought was the threat to the reputation of the families of the boy and the girl.

Although I was quite sure I was on the right track, I still wanted to draw a more accurate map of the moral code in the context of which the mobile phone represented such a threat or “danger”. I thought I should ask the next interviewee more about it. The interview proceeded as expected. The middle-aged man, a father of several teenage sons, told me typical things about the significance of mobile phones in the village, and when I presented him with my usual scenario of teenagers contacting the opposite sex, he retorted as I expected: it was, indeed, “dangerous”. I then asked him a follow-up question: “How *exactly* is it dangerous? What do you mean by it?” I awaited him to emphasize tradition, refer to the sanctity of marriage and the perils of premarital relations or, for example, religious norms. Maybe he would even share gossip about some exposed mobile relationship in the village. But to my surprise his elaboration of “dangerous” was something I had not thought of at all. He explained it was *physically* dangerous. I learned there would be a danger of violence and feud.

My interviewee would not talk about it more, but my research assistant, a local university student living in the village explained to me that if a lower caste boy were to call a higher caste girl, intercaste violence might ensue. I knew there was tension between caste communities (also called *jatis*, or just “communities”) in Tamil Nadu like in India in general, and sometimes it burst out in violent clashes. I also knew that the villages I was studying were inhabited by a “low” caste. Moreover, in India and, quite strongly in rural Tamil Nadu, caste restrictions meant that interaction between castes were (and still are) limited in many respects. Every anthropologist knew that marriages, among other things, between members of different castes were rare and considered improper. While romantic relations were frowned upon, and intercaste relations especially, sometimes a scandal might erupt when a boy of a lower caste eloped with a girl of a higher caste. Romantic or “love” marriages in India are still relatively rare as marriage is viewed as an institution build according to the strategic evaluations made by the families of the potential husband and the wife, not on what was considered whimsical romantic feelings of a boy and a girl. “Love marriage” might have been celebrated in Indian film, but in reality, it connoted irresponsibility, lack of respect to one’s elders, and selfishness from the side of the boy and the girl, because they overpassed the assessments of the parents and other older relatives.

I realized I should have connected the stunningly obvious dots and interpret “danger” more literally meaning physical danger, but for some reason I interpreted “danger” metaphorically. As arranged

marriages were the norm in India, teenage boys and girl calling each other on the phone might lead to love affairs, which might lead to love marriages, which meant the family as the decision-making body in marriage negotiations would be overridden. Romantic relationships became even more morally dubious if a lower caste boy had a love interest in a higher caste girl. In such case, there was an extra threat to the purity of the girl, her family and caste community, and a risk of shaming them all. As a relationship let alone marriage with a lower caste boy would be dishonorable to the girl and her kin, the risk of one forming was not taken lightly at all, but was met with at least equally threatening countermeasures, sometimes even violence. If a boy and a girl where chatting over the phone, the girl's father and brother(s) might come to the boy's village to protest, make a threatening scene, or they might even gather a physically threatening posse to make their point clear. Such confrontations might escalate particularly if the boy's family, friends, clan and/or fellow villagers arrived to defend him. Finally, such an altercation could escalate into a bloody feud between two villages or even larger caste communities.

Thus, a boy calling a girl in a South Indian village could indeed be dangerous. Not "dangerous" in the metaphorical sense I as a naïve anthropologist was ready to interpret it, but dangerous in the sense that lives could end violently. It does not get much more dangerous than that.

Lessons learned?

My two cases aim to emphasize the fundamental necessity for anthropologists or any scholars conducting open or semi-structured interviews to be vigilant in interpreting information and consistently seek elaboration even when there seems to be rapport and mutual understanding, especially when the topic involves abstract characterizations. The challenge lies in never being certain of having sufficient understanding (refer to the classic "Gavagai problem" presented by Quine, 2013, pp. 26–29). Interpretation, in a sense, resembles not just a hermeneutical circle but more of a hermeneutical fractal, revealing intricate details ad infinitum. Moreover, many empirically originated key concepts and terms unveiled by anthropologists in their research reports resemble what Anthony P. Cohen (1985, pp. 14–15) calls "hurrah words" (e.g., "democracy," "freedom," etc.). They possess formal explicitness, are impactful and easily comprehensible, and shared by many yet they might accommodate multiple interpretations to the extent that different people – including informants and anthropologists – might articulate them in a same way but understand them differently.

It is imperative to recognize that anthropologists often tend to discern symbolism where it might be absent. Hobart (2000, p. 156; also see Jarvie, 1976, p. 687) eloquently refers to this unearthing of hidden symbolism as "insufflation," likening its value in anthropology to that of God in Vatican. Hobart (2000, p. 157) also cites Dan Sperber, suggesting that a good observation is truthful, but "an interpretation is adequate when it's faithful." There is a predisposition among Western-educated, intellectual, rich, democratic individuals who are also professional writers to interpret statements in a manner that aligns with a Western system of meaning. Or perhaps, simply being an academic occasionally leads us astray. According to Henrich (2020, p. 21; also Geertz, 1974, p. 31), WEIRD individuals "tend to look for universal categories and rules with which to organize the world." Metaphorically, they might have extensive information on individual trees but sometimes miss the forest (Henrich, 2020, p.22; also see Jarvie, 1976, p. 687).

It is reasonable to assert that the two misunderstandings I presented should not be conflated with anthropology as a discipline or a WEIRD perspective on viewing the world. Undoubtedly, they are primarily reflective of my personal shortcomings as a researcher. I acknowledge that my limitations partly stemmed from my relatively brief exposure to the field. Despite spending over a year in total

in India for fieldwork, I was far from being an expert on the people and their thoughts. My lack of proficiency in the local language compelled me to rely on an interpreter when interviewing individuals who did not speak English. As a novice of the examined society, I endeavored to grasp at least some truthful reflections of the lived reality. With more experience, I might have been less prone to such misinterpretations, thereby potentially minimizing any inadvertent WEIRD or other bias on my interpretations.

Conversely, these cases might be construed as instances of successful anthropological fieldwork. I followed the prescribed methodology, delved deeper, and eventually arrived at the accurate interpretations. However, even if this holds true, I remain apprehensive about the proximity of potentially reporting something metaphorical rather than concrete, and I ponder how frequently I have unknowingly erred similarly in various other research endeavors. Regardless, these two near misses have prompted me to question how much of my (and others') anthropological analyses are more about WEIRD preconceptions leading to metaphorical interpretations that resonate mostly with WEIRD writers and audiences.

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