

A NEPALI ANTHROPOLOGIST IN AMERICA: REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK AMONG FRIENDS

Dilli R. Dahal

Introduction

Ill-defined as it may be, “fieldwork” is the hallmark of cultural anthropology. Within that discipline, nobody is regarded as having quite made the grade without some experience of fieldwork. The tradition is not new in anthropology, having begun with—or at least become institutionalized at the time of—British colonial expansions in Africa and Asia. One can even find important strains of it in the American work of Lewis Henry Morgan in the mid-19th century United States, though he is often regarded as a precursor who preferred to remain at home (White 1959; Trautmann 1987). Nevertheless, the tradition of long residence in the midst of the people of study, sharing their lives to varying extents but with methodological rigor and theoretical sophistication began only with the work of W. H.R. Rivers and others in the Torres Straits expedition of the Pacific around 1900. This tradition of fieldwork was followed and elaborated by the leading anthropologists of the 20th century, among them Bronislaw Malinowski with the Trobriand Islanders in the Pacific (1914-18), E.R. Radcliffe-Brown with the Onge of Andaman Island (1910-11), and Franz Boas with the Inuit of Baffin Island (1920-22).

From the beginning, many anthropologists have carried on a cottage industry of writing about their fieldwork experiences as a way of passing on accumulated “tricks of the trade” to the next generation of scholars (Becker 1998). Most of these writings, however, are focused on developing societies in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (for example, Chagnon 1968; Evans-Pritchard 1940). The situation is this: although there is an enormous amount of writing on the anthropological fieldwork experiences of westerners within developing countries, relatively little focuses on experience within developed

countries such as the United States of America. If one looks for accounts by non-westerners in such settings, the scarcity is especially striking.

There are many good reasons for this. They run from the history of anthropology itself, an imperial encounter in which non-westerners were always the studied rather than the studier. But there are also the cultural and institutional peculiarities of western societies and research environments that find themselves expressed in such issues as the notable preference for privacy among American families, the academic obstructions of university Internal Review Boards (IRB) carefully evaluating "human subject concerns," and the serious financial constraints to doing long term ethnographic research in some of the costliest places in the world.

In this essay, I want to provide an informal balance to this scarcity with brief reflections based on my own contrasting field experiences in the United States and Nepal. The American fieldwork experiences were gathered in connection with my involvement in a larger research project, "Work and Family Life in the Industrial Midwest," carried out through the Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life (CEEL), University of Michigan, during 2000 to 2001. The Nepali experiences, which I use mainly as a background to bring the American comments into relief, are recollected from my own fieldwork done in different parts of Nepal since 1973.

I want to describe my own cross-cultural experiences as a way of reflecting more generally on the issues that emerge and the problems encountered when a non-western anthropologist from a "developing country" conducts fieldwork in one of the most developed countries of the world. While doing ethnographic research in America, one must be prepared for problems that are both structural and cultural. At the same time, I have observed that even for Americans themselves, the difficulties of doing ethnographic research at home are increasing through the well-intentioned but crippling rigors of new human-subject research reviews and IRB requirements coupled with the changing values of American families over the last 40 years. It is interesting to contrast these institutional difficulties in American settings with the relative ease of conducting ethnographic work in developing countries such as Nepal and to speculate on how this imbalance resembles a continuation of the old imperial imbalances. Finally, I argue that a comparative perspective is ultimately the best way to understand social currents in any setting, especially where those issues have to do with household, family, and individual change.

Although I am mindful of making too grandiose a claim, I see my brief essay as a part of the lineage established by that early fieldworker in America, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, who travelled the country in the 1830s and whose reflections on the American character from that era still hold their truths for today. It's hard to find, for example, a pithier comment on the American character than that which appeared in his chapter entitled "Why the Americans Are So Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity":

In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest circumstances that the world affords; it seemed to me as if a cloud habitually hung on their brow, and I thought them serious and almost sad, even in their pleasures.... It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare, and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it.... A native of the United States clings to this world's goods as if he were certain to never die; and he is so hasty in grasping at all within his reach that one would suppose he was constantly afraid of not living long enough to enjoy them. He clutches everything, he holds nothing fast, but soon loosens his grasp to pursue fresh gratifications (de Tocqueville 2003).

My aims are less ambitious than de Tocqueville's, but I hope to provide the same informal mix of thoughtful comment and primary data. And I also hope to show that an outsider's point of view can open a new window onto the commonplace.

Ultimately, my aim is to begin a discussion of the cultural differences between the United States and Nepal as they impinge on the research process itself. But I don't intend this as an integrated and final analysis. Rather, I want to recreate the process of my own discovery of difference. This will mean dipping into some of the research material I gathered as a way of highlighting some of what I consider to be key and what I believe de Tocqueville considered vital over 150 years ago. These are differences in character, in the very notion of person, and the idealised relationship between individual and group—in short, an entire cultural orientation that is part and parcel of everyday life and the research process for studying that life.

Context of Research

A large and growing number of Nepali students, teachers, and researchers travel to the United States every year. According to USEF/N figures (2001), for example, over the past 40 years(1961-2001) some 540 students and teachers have visited the USA for numerous different academic and scholarly purposes. It's safe to say that additional hundreds of students and teachers visit the USA under the sponsorship of other programs, either related directly to universities or to other private organisations. The vast majority of these Nepali students and teachers do one of three things in the USA:

- a) go to their respective school or university, complete their degree requirements, and return home;
- b) become involved in collaborative research, often with back and forth visits, on Nepali subjects with American professors who have their own Nepal-related research programs;
- c) look for a job, whether legal or illegal, that will allow them to stay in America as long as possible and in a way that quite often cuts them off from a serious contribution to the well-being of Nepali society itself.

Much more rare are cases of a Nepali student or teacher becoming involved in the study of American culture itself. It is even less likely to see that involvement extend to ethnographic field research of the sort that promises the most intimate understanding of American families, society, and culture. This is that rare kind of knowledge that may be most relevant to Nepal's achieving full membership in the world community of countries that stands as an international version of the "civil society" each hopes to attain domestically. It certainly offers a more explicit possibility of self-understanding through a comparative lens as we "achieve" a middle-class identity (cf. Liechty 2003).

Again, the contrast with those Americans who come to Nepal is striking. A tidal wave of foreign students and teachers, mostly Americans, wash across our landscape every year, often sponsored by one of several programs (such as the Peace Corps or the Fulbright programmes). They come perhaps just slightly less often on their own resources, able to do so because of the vastly cheaper living circumstances they encounter here. Even those who come first with one programme, such as the Peace Corps, will often extend and deepen

their familiarity with our country by parlaying that initial encounter into anthropological research in Nepal. The western fascination with Nepal dates from the earliest encounters (Hamilton 1811; Buchanan 1819; Hodgson 1874) and robustly continues to the present. Charmed by its diverse culture and landscape, those who come to understand the Nepali language and society through one venue are often more highly motivated and better prepared than others to pursue anthropological research in our country.

My mention of those 19th century British historians and proto-ethnographers – Hamilton, Buchanan, and Hodgson – is intended to draw attention to the important fact that the western encounter with Nepal has always been fieldwork-based even though its formalisation in the sense of academic anthropology only began with the work of British anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf in the mid-1950s. This draws attention to the imperial roots of the fieldwork tradition and forces us to ask how those roots colour the contemporary imbalance in true fieldwork exchanges between Nepal and the west. Of course, it might be argued that the American tradition of anthropological fieldwork in Nepal, beginning as early as 1962 with John Hitchcock (see Hitchcock 1966) and expanding rapidly since then to include dozens of American anthropologists, originates from more benign sources. But whatever the histories, the process has resulted in a vast array of field data collection along with the publication of books and articles that lend their own momentum for yet more of the same.

For the anthropologist from a developing country like Nepal, on the other hand, it is indeed a far more difficult task to turn the tables by doing fieldwork in today's most developed country, the United States. There are, first, two clear-cut structural reasons in (a) the financial constraints which must afflict anyone hoping to go from an economically weaker setting to one vastly richer and (b) the difficulties of obtaining proper affiliation with respective universities, to say nothing of the more recent necessity of obtaining research clearance letters from the Internal Review Boards (IRB) of those universities. Second, there are a set of cultural difficulties. I will try to develop them throughout the essay, but will say here that they have to do with the sharp contrast between the Nepali approach to the person and an American individualism identified by Tocqueville and developed later by Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1996).

I should note that I find research clearance procedures to be a valuable tool in protecting anthropological informants from harm and it is true that these same boards must approve the research of those American-based scholars who

work in Nepal. At the same time, I want to draw attention to an inherent inequality. While American researchers are approved by American IRB committees to conduct fieldwork in Nepal, Nepali scholars must also be approved by American IRB committees to conduct fieldwork in the United States. There are many imbalances worth pointing out. Nepali institutions merely accept the American process. But there is no comparable acceptance of Nepali institutional procedures by Americans. And there is the added imbalance of Americans obtaining research approval in a cultural context that is entirely their own, while Nepalis seek approval in that same American context, foreign and potentially difficult to understand.

This notion of context is, of course, very important to any social science enterprise, both at the theoretical level where we know how context is key to interpreting any behaviour and also at the practical level of actually conducting research on the ground. For cultural anthropology this is especially important since few other disciplines require the total immersion in "context" that so pointedly defines fieldwork. Let me begin my story, then, by describing in personal terms how I became involved in ethnographic research on working families in the United States of America.

Considering the two structural difficulties for a developing country anthropologist in America, I was lucky enough in both areas. Not only did I receive a grant for doing ethnographic research but along with that grant came proper affiliation with the University of Michigan, itself one of the most prestigious universities in the USA. It would have been an ironclad impossibility for a Nepali anthropologist to do ethnographic research on American soil using his own resources. A full professor at Tribhuvan University earns the equivalent of about US \$200 per month. Nor could the financial support one might expect for "outside home country research" from the government of Nepal come close to funding a research venture in America.

Linked to finances is the other serious problem of obtaining an American visa with the aim of doing ethnographic research in the USA without a prior American university affiliation. Although it is easier to obtain an American visa in Nepal if a person is a student or teacher, the practice of a Nepali researcher going to America to study Americans is so rare that American consular officials in Kathmandu took more than the usual convincing about the truth of my own research plans. Fortunately, both of these hurdles could be overcome in my case because of my long collaboration with Dr. Tom Fricke, with whom I have worked in active collaboration over

the last two decades on issues related to social change, demography and kinship in a number of Nepali communities. We have focused mainly on the Tamang ethnic group and have published in both Nepali and American journals. This long and firm collegial relationship, begun in the 1980s, built a foundation of familiarity with American institutions and scholarly practice through our joint analyses of Nepali material and my frequent trips to the University of Michigan in that collaboration.

In 1998 because of his long interest in comparative research, Dr. Fricke received a large grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to establish a centre focusing on social and cultural change among American middle class working families. The programme is housed within the newly established Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life (CEEL), a part of the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. CEEL's mandate is to explore contemporary transformations in work and family life using the tools of anthropologists (Fricke 1998). Because of our long collaboration and mutual interests, Dr. Fricke invited me to join his American project, thinking that my perspective would add to his own understanding of American families just as his discussions with me in Nepal affected my own thinking about my home society. This new project has given me an opportunity to work as an anthropologist exploring in field research among Americans themes very similar to those I have addressed in my Nepali research.

Field Research in the United States of America

My American research gave me the opportunity to explore facets of everyday life in both rural and urban settings. The urban research work was part of a larger joint collaborative programme with a multi-investigator research team exploring the work and family lives of autoworkers from a single factory in Southeast Michigan. The rural fieldwork, on the other hand, was shared with Tom Fricke who invited me to accompany him to his field site in North Dakota, where I joined him in sharing the life and work of a single farm family. The fully ethnographic and fieldwork based nature of our work on farm families contrasted with the methods employed in the urban area. At the outset, let me confess that by general ethnographic standards my fieldwork, however intense, was limited. For the actual field study of these American families I spent about a month or so with the North Dakotan farm families and little more than three months with the urban families in Southeast Michigan. Of course, this is the period of actual field contact. My research

residence in the United States was much longer and I should point out, too, that even de Tocqueville's pioneering research in America was confined to a total of nine months with frequent travel and little in the way of long-term residence with single families (de Tocqueville 2003).

Research in the Urban Setting

I joined CEEL on October 1, 2000 to take up a one year position as Senior Research Fellow. The Director advised me to join a research team composed of six persons who were preparing with CEEL funding to carry out a research project on industrial autoworkers in Southeast Michigan. The initial goal of this large project was aimed at understanding basic questions about work, career, and satisfaction among autoworkers and their families. It also hoped to explore how autoworkers prepare their children, directly and indirectly, for careers both within and beyond the auto industry. However, from that initial set of issues, the nature of the project gradually expanded to include other questions.

Almost from the very start, my enthusiasm for jumping into data collection ran into frustration. Because the research project took a long time to obtain clearance from both the University of Michigan's Internal Review Board and also from the plant management and Union Local at the factory, a process that took almost six months, my initial dream of doing a detailed ethnographic study on urban American working families within my given time frame gradually dwindled. Throughout that period I was not sure whether my research time would be extended. Also, since I was living alone and without my family in the USA, I was a little homesick as well. In other words, I had come to Michigan prepared to return home after completing my intended one year project, a period that seemed adequate to the ethnographic work I had in mind.

Faced with the impossibility of going immediately into data collection, I had to use my allocated research time in the best way possible. Our research team began to organise meetings directed toward developing a rigorous research design for deciding appropriate data and methods for gathering it. I considered this a valuable opportunity for me to learn more about American research techniques and their "sensitivity" toward the goals of the research project as a whole. As a result, I continuously participated in these meetings: today, when I review my notes, I see that over a six month period I attended more than 30 of them and that they each lasted from one to three hours. Each meeting focused on the topic of how to conduct our fieldwork among the

working families of industrial autoworkers. Although interesting, I regarded our discussions as somewhat abstract because we never actually tested our thoughts with real people throughout this period.

Considering the increasingly limited time available for my own research, I decided to pursue some independent data collection within the framework of IRB approval for the overall project. After some discussion, one of my colleagues on the project and I decided to do some more open-ended interviews with a small sample of retired autoworkers from the same Southeast Michigan plant. This was both for the satisfaction of active field data collection and also to prepare us for the ongoing research project by gaining familiarity with our research population. My colleague and I thought that retirees would be exactly the right people to tell us something of the inside story of the plant and the changing nature of work within the auto industry. We also thought it would be interesting for its own sake to observe their work and family life after retirement. Finally, we believed that an understanding of the lives of retirees could serve as a way of opening us up to the success story of auto industry workers more generally, in particular how their story was a kind of symbol for the rise of an American "middle class" tradition through labour.

We began tape recording interviews in January 2001 and conducted the last interview for this sub-project on June 14, 2001. Most of the interviews took place in the office of the Union Local. A few interviews were carried out at the homes of retirees as well. Out of a total of 15 tape-recorded interviews conducted with the autoworkers, 12 focused on retired workers. All of these retirees worked in the same Southeast Michigan plant between 1959-2001.

Some Themes Emerging in Research Among Retired Autoworkers

Work, work ethics and family life. In America a visitor from Nepal gets the impression that people spend their whole days in the name of "work". Since ethnographic questions are always fundamentally questions of meaning and interpretation (Taylor 1985; Fricke 2004), it is worth asking how autoworkers (and by extension, any human being) find meaning and achieve an identity within the terms of an existence that leaves so little time for anything other than work. It turns out that retired autoworkers are not very different in their ideas about work from people in American society as a whole. Let me demonstrate with quotes from both taped interviews and reconstructions from my field notes.

I asked these questions regarding the nature of work to a white male retiree and former supervisor on the shop floor. He pointed out that "auto work is physical work, machinery work, and some work of a repetitive nature," and insisted that in the context of the plant, communal values pervaded his approach to the work ethic. As he put it, "helping other people at work, you become happy in your own job." Nevertheless, he also expected some kind of respect from those who worked under him. Overall, he had a feeling of accomplishment that came from going out to do something and achieving it. He pointed out, for example, that in the past, workers who were often the sons of immigrants or recent migrants to the city from rural areas worked very hard because they desired a new life and the betterment of their family. But with more recent changes in American society, he shared his sense of decline in these values:

Now, a lot of young folks really don't like to work. It is because parents have given them too much. In the past, a man had a job to do. Today, a son won't help his father voluntarily for any kind of work. In the old days, there was motivation for work. These days young people do not respect work.

This sense of change was repeated in conversations with other retired workers. For example, another white male retired autoworker commented:

The work ethics of young people are very much different today than they were in the past. People of my generation [at least 35 years ago] used to work hard in the plant. Workers used to show up to work on time. In my time workers adhered to a single job for their whole lives. But there is no work ethic like that for young workers today. These days young people change jobs frequently.

Because America is often seen as a racially divided society, it is interesting to see if these feelings of change are shared by members of other groups. I asked similar questions to black and white retirees and found great similarity in their feelings. One of my respondents, a black male retiree had much to say not only about the change in values across generations, but the reasons why such changes occurred:

There are a lot of changes in work ethics across generations and in methods of approach. In my time an employee was expected to be at work everyday and on time. But the job doesn't mean so much to the average young person these days. Today, because so many benefits are given by the government, young people started drinking. In the past people used to go to church every Sunday whether they liked it or not. These days the young people attend church at their choice. In the past parents used to take children to church along with them. The father used to take his son to baseball and football games. In my time we used to feel pride when the family had a good name; families weren't looking for material benefits so much. Parents used to teach social values to children and this was the greatest wealth for them. Parents used to teach them to treat all women like one's own sisters. Today, a lot of parents do not guide their children properly. For example, the issue of sex among youngsters is left to the school. Whatever you learn at home is better than what you learn from the school.

As these three statements indicate, there seems to be a real sense of change in the values that surround work in America. It is worth asking ourselves if a similar change may be in the offing for our own middle class in Nepal since many of the conditions of shared hardship and achievement in the older generation seem to be similar in the experience of these American retiree and our Nepali middle class. It is interesting, too, that the diagnosis for change presented by the last retiree is similar to the argument of the sociologist David Halle (1987). He notes that the American family has lost many of its material functions today. Where once the responsibility for educating the children lay mostly with parents, now it lies with school. Once the care of the very sick took place within the family, now it is the domain of the hospital and nursing home.

Although the diagnosis of American ills and changed work ethic are similar for my respondents, one finds more variety in the stories of family life among these retirees. As with many in Nepal, most of these retired autoworkers grew up in large families of 8-10 members. In some cases, conjugal relations would break down and lead to divorce and remarriage. Of the 12 retirees, 4 couples had divorced and their children grew up with one parent or the other in a single mother or father household. Many of the

reasons for marital stress and eventual breakdown had to do with the difficulty of balancing work and family obligations. In other words, the devotion of one spouse to work could be so absolute that the family would be forgotten.

Some of the complexity of family structure among these American workers is due to movement. One white male retiree, for example, was born and brought up in a 7 member family, but his own parents were from very different parts of the USA. His father was originally from Detroit and the mother was from Arkansas, and they moved to the Detroit area of Southeast Michigan in 1944–45 because of work opportunities.

Another retiree gave a more elaborate narrative for his family life. He married for the first time with his high school sweetheart when he was just 25 years old. He had twin sons, now 35 years old, from this wife. His first wife was a home-maker, and for short time she also worked as a part-time sheriff. But both sons had a learning disability that may have been caused by their premature birth; because they were underweight, they were placed in an incubator for 6-8 weeks. The couple divorced in 1979. The man remarried a woman who already had a daughter, now 26 years old, from her first husband. He does not have any children from his second wife, who has three M.A. degrees and teaches in the local school.

These two cases suggest not only a change in family size comparable to the Nepali demographic transition, but also the extreme mobility of American society in both geographic and social terms. Work takes a central role not only in bringing people together from widely separate parts of the country, but also in bringing people together from what appear to be different class backgrounds, as in the case of the divorced man who remarried a more highly educated spouse. To speak of family complexity in America is to speak of more than family structure itself. It also includes different traditions and backgrounds, regionally and in the class system. This makes the family not only a creator of stability in America, but also an engine of change. But underlying this is its interaction with work.

Many retired male workers also said that working in factories as in the auto industry demands physical strength. They would argue that the domain of work for females should be at home and not in the factory. But some retired women autoworkers challenged this traditional notion by proving themselves capable of doing any kind of work within the auto industry or elsewhere.

Life of Retirees and the Concept of the Good Life. Retired autoworkers lead their lives in various ways after the uniformity of work before retirement. Most of them spend their time either going to church regularly or meeting their own relatives, either within or outside the local area. Nevertheless, a few retirees are quite active after retirement; some give training to autoworkers and some run their own businesses. I noticed, however, that female retirees had more problems than their male counterparts. This is because they were either living alone or physically disabled and thus finding difficulties in adjusting to the new retiree situation.

Take the life of one female black retiree. Here is how she responded to my question about how she spent her time:

I go to the church everyday.... I pray a lot and read the Bible, travel where I can, and try to read a lot.

Because she lived alone, I wondered if she felt lonely after a long work life in the company of others:

No, I am not lonely. As I said before, I read the Bible and go to church and I trust in God for strength and help. But my body hurts me day and night as I have a lot of pain in my arm and shoulder [this is because of her hard work in the plant]. Sometimes ... it hurts so much I don't get sleep all night.

As the above statements suggest, she is living as a single person and retired because of her physical disabilities. But it was while visiting church that she found she could share her feelings about the joys and sufferings of everyday life with her fellows. In fact, church has become the common ground for retirees to spend their time, replacing daily workplace meetings.

For the generations of autoworkers who have spent their lives in this Southeast Michigan plant since 1932, the workplace itself is more than a place of livelihood. It is also the concrete symbol of their cultural identity as blue-collar workers. One might wonder if this symbol provides resources beyond the working years by underwriting security and the good life after retirement.

In the American cultural context, the pursuit of the good life is directly related to a person's job, both in terms of its type and in terms of the money earned through it. There is no doubt that autoworkers, even though classified

as “blue-collar” or working class, earn very good money through their hard work thanks to historically strong labour unions. Still, their savings often amount to little once they retire. After retirement, too, such benefits as government social security and worker pensions can amount to less than expected, making it hard to sustain a relatively good life even for two people after their children have left home. I noticed how some retirees had sold the big houses they once owned, moving into small houses as a way of saving money for their unpredictable future. Many retirees today are on the fringes of the economy and find very little financial contentment in their lives. Retirees seeking post-retirement jobs are few, yet most families face difficult survival today without two people pulling in wages. Their lock-step career paths offer little job security these days and even in the past most of the now retired autoworkers worked overtime for better money. This need for more fuelled a working ethos without leisure that could rebound in unpredictable ways on their personal lives, leading in some cases to the break-up of families through divorce.

In reality, money, morals, and manners are overlapping themes in American culture – as they must be for virtually any culture in the world today. Economic concerns are exacerbated by a perceived decline in family values which until recently included an expectation of care for the aged or the retiree within the family home. The process of socialisation for American children is such that they are taught how to leave home from the earliest years. The stress is on their autonomy and independence in their own lives. By leaving home, people not only leave their own families, but also their own communities, friends, churches, and so on. In other words, Americans are nearly programmed for departure. They depart from their families and the values of those families in their quest for self and the autonomous betterment of their individual lives. De Tocqueville (2003) already saw this at least 150 years ago when he labelled Americans as the “restless” people. And so it is that even today, in the name of autonomy and freedom, old retirees are debarred from the social and economic security that might be provided by their own family members. The only alternative forms of care available to them are in the culturally devalued programmes that come under the heading of “welfare”. Welfare is a notion that contradicts the motivations for pursuing money and the autonomous self of American culture. It implies dependence and few Americans want to live on “welfare”. But those retirees who have saved little in their life are faced with the eventuality of landing in such welfare programmes.

In brief, the idea of the “good life” in America, particularly in the context of blue-collar autoworkers, is a fascinatingly deceptive one. That is why Halle (1987: xii) notes the ambiguity of the claim that blue-collar workers are middle class or bourgeois. There is a perceived overlap between the lives and beliefs of blue-collar workers and those of the middle class, yet there are important differences in the structure of social resources and, perhaps more importantly, the personal and family histories by which claims to economic self-sufficiency and the good life may be made.

In Nepal the concept of a retiree is an important and emerging, but not yet crystallized, reality in urban areas. One finds it especially relevant for those who retire from jobs in the government, academia, and a few of the new corporations. In rural areas, on the other hand, where more than 85% of Nepal’s people live today, “retirement” can only be said to occur with an ageing process that links the notion to familial processes. Thus, the elderly hand their farms in equal distribution to their sons, choosing to live with one of these sons in a state that approaches the definition of retirement in a wage-labour focused society such as the United States. It is considered an ethical and moral requirement in Nepali culture that a son (or sons) look after parents who are old or otherwise unable to make an independent living, whether the setting is rural or urban. That requirement extends to having at least one son remaining with elderly parents to provide daily support for them during old age. Thus it is common for parents to live with at least one child until the parent’s death. These parents, of course, reciprocate with childcare and advice in the larger family interest. In other words, the ideology of family support for the elderly dominates in Nepal. Those who more formally retire after career-style employment receive an additional financial benefit in the form of a monthly pension, but this is not a replacement for familial support. Nepali retirees, or the elderly more generally, don’t suffer the loneliness of their American counterparts. They constantly interact with family members in various social and economic contexts. Indeed, one worships parents and ancestors all one’s life, a practice and culture of respect that binds the generations through time in Nepal.

If I were to make more general claims, I would make two. First, the basic difference between the two societies has to do with a difference between a continuing basis in kin, which stresses continuity, and a basis in the market, which celebrates discontinuity. Second, and this follows de Tocqueville again, there are fundamentally different notions of personhood at stake here. In America, commodities and cash become modes of objectifying personal

identity. The autonomous person is highlighted at the expense of kinship in personal identity in everyday life. In Nepal, personal identity finds its location within the web of kinship and family. It is imbibed daily and concretely as a family matter in everyday social order and relationships.

Research in a Rural Setting: The Farm Families of North Dakota

Because I was myself born and brought up in an agricultural family in Eastern Nepal, I thought that fieldwork among American farm families would be interesting beyond its purely scholarly potential. With my own personal experience, I could compare American and Nepali cultures of family and farming life. I was able to do exactly this kind of comparative study when Tom Fricke invited me to join him at his research site in North Dakota. In this section I provide a brief account of that fieldwork based on the field diary in which I made daily entries during the month or so I lived with an American farm family. Although incomplete in some respects, these notes provide a broad view of everyday life—landscape, work, and family—on the American farm as seen through the lens of North Dakota. Wherever possible, I have compared American farm life with the farm life of Nepali families.

Though American farmers currently produce 40 % of the world's corn, 45% of its soybeans and 10% of its wheat, they represent less than 2% of the total population of that country. The average American farm size was 432 acres in 2000. This is equivalent to 3,456 ropani in Nepal, yet the farming population as a whole is considered relatively poor in America. The mid-western states of America (including Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, and others) are considered the breadbasket of the world.

North Dakota, where I did my fieldwork, is thought of by the majority of Americans as one of the most remote and poor states within the mid-western region. In the American mind, it occupies a position similar to Humla district in Nepal. It is a part of America's region of prairies, fields, and meadows where annual precipitation averages just 15-20 inches per year. The whole area is basically a dry farming area with irrigation used very sparingly. This dry land farming is a system of producing crops in semi-arid regions, usually with less than 20 inches of annual rainfall without irrigation. Frequently, part of the land will lie fallow in alternate years to conserve moisture. Like the monsoon in Nepal, farmers here expect rain in certain months of the year. But

because of the uncertainties of farming in the face of drought and the like, the US government has introduced an act to provide security to American farmers. This act is known as the Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990 and includes the Food Security Act of 1985. This act pays farmers the production value of land in a given year in cases where the government tells the farmer not to cultivate his farm land because of an over-supply of certain crops in the market.

This part of America was considered to be a virtually barren land in the past. The American government encouraged its settlement by providing free land to those willing to live and work on the soil. Thus, the American Homestead Act of 1862 offered settlers to the Great Plains, which includes North Dakota, 160 acres of free land if they remained on it for five years. Still, life on these treeless plains was never easy and it remains one of the most thinly populated parts of the United States. Tom Fricke (2003: 58) wrote about it like this:

The Great Plains' difference comes from contrast, something not quite right to a person from further east. You try to contain the country by scaling it against what you already know. All those exits along the interstate with their no services signs. The gaps between towns. The gray boards of abandoned homesteads like so many tattered rags on a barbed-wire fence. At night you can drive for an hour and not see a light. In the morning you can search the whole horizon and not see a shack. The wind whips the grasses. The meadowlarks call. And you'll remember some article you read a long time ago about how the small towns are dying, the farmers moving on, and the prairie returning to its past.

Historically, a similar kind of underpopulation prevailed in the Nepal Tarai as well. Though the Nepal Tarai was highly fertile agriculturally, it was a deadly malarial area before 1960. To attract farmers for farming and resettlement, the Nepali government introduced an Act around 1932 saying that a farmer who cultivated land in this area would be entitled to receive two bighas of land (about 3.5 acres) at no cost. Today, the land of the Nepal Tarai is so valuable that nobody would even begin to think of parting with a square foot of that same land for free.

The average farm size in North Dakota was 1290 acres (10,320 ropani) in 1997. This is much higher than the national average, but the land is correspondingly less productive. More than XX [????] per cent of the people in this state depend on agriculture. The density of population was only 9 people per square mile in 2000 and the population size has been declining over the years. The population size, which was 680,845 in 1930, came down to 637,808 in 1998. The ethnic composition was 94.6% white, followed by 4.1% native American and smaller numbers of other groups. The white population is dominated by people whose ancestors migrated to the plains from Germany and Scandinavia and most of this wave of immigration occurred between 1880 and 1910.

Within North Dakota, our research focused on Stark County in the western and driest part of the state. The population of this county was also declining. There were 22,832 people in 1990 and 22,707 in 1998. Within Stark County a town was selected for detailed research. Its population had been more or less stable over the last 90 years with 647 people in 1910 and 652 in 2000. This town today is 118 years old and the original settlers of this area were German people whose ancestors left Germany first for Russia or Hungary and later migrated to the United States.

The decline in population, especially given the formerly large family sizes, suggests that very few people are interested in staying in farming or in the general area. People in the younger generations are especially likely to find little attraction to farming. They constantly move towards the bigger cities for jobs and education. Interestingly, most of these young people who move choose to live in the state of North Dakota (about 70%); the rest scatter to larger American cities such as Minneapolis.

Some Themes Emerging in Research Among Rural Farm Families

Culture and Work of Farming families. Much of the daily life of American farm families revolves around gardening, planting, weeding, cutting grasses for animals, storing grains in the bins and hauling grains in large grain trucks to the appropriate market centres for cash or payment. Life looks relatively hard as there is little free time except for occasional family gatherings and those cases of a death in the family or community. It is hard to calculate the working hours but normally a member of the farm family spends 12–14 hours a day at hard work during the planting and harvesting seasons. Most of what they eat does not come from their own farming; this is a highly

market oriented economy and all goods required for domestic consumption come directly from the market, much as is true for urban Americans.

The American style of settlement in farming areas differs from what one finds in many parts of the world. Rather than a clustered village of many separate houses, settlements are organised around a set of buildings, including family houses and utility buildings. Normally 4–6 buildings are grouped together by a farm family: a body shop for repairing heavy machinery, a cattle shed, bins for storing grains, and of course a separate residential house for members of the family.

The family is basically nuclear and includes a husband, wife and unmarried children below about 18 years old. At least one generation before now, a farming family used to have 4–6 children. These days, single men or women may be found running farms because of divorce or a person remaining unmarried. In American culture it is an accepted fact that a man and woman can live together for years without getting married—marriage is considered primarily a public and ritual event. A person in Nepal cannot begin to imagine this way of forming a conjugal unit without a public declaration of commitment. But this seems to be a logical outgrowth of the American emphasis on the individual as opposed to membership in larger groupings, such as the family.

As in Nepal, farming is largely a family enterprise in which the work is performed by members of one's own family. For example, in A's farm area where Tom Fricke and I stayed for about a month with the family members (in this family, there were four members but the 20-year-old daughter had recently married and stayed with her husband in the city area), more than 3000 acres is farmed by three members: the man (husband), woman (wife) and the son. But the son is already in the first year of college and helps his parents in farming activities only during his vacation period. Obviously, farming with this low labour force requires high investment in labour-saving machinery.

A grown-up son normally runs tractors for seeding and spraying herbicide on weeds during the summer. Herbicides are chosen to kill only weeds and not the planted crops. Two major seasons dominate the annual cycle of farming: winter and spring. For services in his parents' house during the summer and winter (when he is free to work) the son is paid a monthly salary. During the winter (November through March), he helps parents in the daily task of feeding cattle. The wife is the homemaker. She does all the domestic chores, cooking, cleaning the house and courtyard, washing clothes, kitchen gardening, taking care of young calves and cutting grass around the courtyard.

When the need arises, she picks up the van to help her husband on the farm as well. In addition, she does the work of bookkeeping (that is, keeping records of their income and expenditure). The man works on the farm, tilling, seeding, applying herbicide, harvesting, baling the hay and taking care of livestock. During the summer, the livestock (the family owns 100 cows with their calves and four bulls) are left in their own pasturage areas. The pasturage area is fenced by barbed wire to prevent animals from moving to another person's land. During the winter, the man feeds the cattle, transports grains to the market and checks his books to decide which crops to plant in the coming year.

Much like the family we lived with, a neighbouring couple also cultivated a large farm area by themselves. Their grown-up daughter who had just finished her high school that year used to help her parents at farm work, looking after cattle, and other chores. Occasionally, a farmer will employ labourers during the seeding and harvesting seasons if there is an emergency, if bad weather narrows the time in which the work must be finished, or if other work needs doing at the same time.

Normally, three types of crops are cultivated in this area: wheat, legumes and oil seeds, with the percentage of a single farmer's total production breaking down as follows:

- Wheat : 50 %
- Legumes : 25%
- Oil seeds : 25% (normally crambe, sunflower or canola)

Single cropping, or mono-cropping, on a single field or plot is the standard pattern of farming for the whole area. That is, one doesn't find multiple crops in the same fields. Normally cropping starts from April-May and most of the crops are harvested by August-September. The growing season in this area is among the shortest in the United States south of Canada and places severe constraints on the types of crops that can be grown.

As in Nepal, a successful American farmer is one who not only farms but also raises cattle at the same time. Cattle raised in this area are mostly females (normally one bull is raised for breeding purposes for each 25 cows). Cows are raised for their calves, which are sold in the market when they become about 9 months old. Farmers here say that a cow gives birth to 20-22 calves in her lifetime. A barren cow is generally quickly sold for meat in the market.

During the winter (December to March), when there is heavy snow and bitter cold, cattle are kept in sheds or corrals close to the farmstead and fed regularly by family members. Feed basically consists of grasses from the farm such as alfalfa and others. In addition, grains, legumes, and oil seeds are transported to market in large trucks. Machines are repaired or fixed during the wintertime as there is little farming done during this period. (It is not unusual in the winter months to have the temperature stay below zero degrees Fahrenheit for days at a time. Daytime temperatures stay below freezing for nearly the whole period. Appendix 1 provides more details for how farming is done in this part of America.

Culture of American farming. Weather and technology play a very important role in American farming. Because the whole area is a dry farming area, farmers take a great interest here in conserving moisture in the soil. Even tilling itself can lead to evaporation of moisture according to local farmers. Wind is another important factor in the local climate, where the landscape seems constantly to endure heavy winds because of its grassland character. As it blows, wind causes water to evaporate and thereby exacerbates the already arid conditions of the area. Nature and life go together in this part of North Dakota.

Cutting grasses and storing them in the form of hay bundles (as in Nepal) is another essential feature of American farming. Heavy machines and relatively dry days are required for cutting grass. At the same time, farmers do not bale the grass during overly hot and sunny days for fear that the grass will become dry and lose its protein content. So baling is done when the day is overcast but not damp. Weather conditions for baling are so specific that I have seen farmers bale hay after midnight if the moisture conditions are right. For spraying herbicides they need low wind speed (not more than ten miles per hour) or the herbicides could blow onto somebody else's farm and damage their crops. When the sunflower and wheat become tall enough to move in the wind, they need the seasonal rains at a rate of about one inch each week. Less than this runs the risk of heat destroying crops. In a very wet year, a second harvest of alfalfa may be possible, leading to plentiful hay.

In keeping with the overarching American concern with private property and the sanctity of the individual over the community, there are no common or community pastures in this region. Farmers must have their own pasturage for raising their animals. The only alternative is to make arrangements to pasture animals with another private landowner's herd, generally for payment.

In this semi-arid region, one animal requires in the range of 7-10 acres of pasture. Thus, if a farmer owns 100 heads of cattle, it is desirable that he should have about 700 acres of pasture.

All of these things are in contrast with the situation in Nepal. For example, the concern in Nepal is not to preserve moisture in the soil by reducing the tillage. In fact, here one finds that more and more tilling is required for cultivation because of the hardness of the soil. And it is generally only in a few areas of the Nepal Tarai where tractors can be used for tilling. Otherwise, all farming work is done manually. Also contrasting with the American situation are Nepali practices of pasturing animals. While the pasture area is also one's own farm, no special area is allocated for animals only as in America. In the highland mountain areas, there are still common lands for pasturage where shepherds bring their animals for a couple of months out of every year.

The other striking feature of farming in America is the capital-intensive use of machines for nearly every kind of activity. I was surprised to see that only two to three persons could cultivate nearly 3000 acres (24,000 ropanis) of land, something made possible solely by the heavy use of machinery. With their 3000 acres of land and 100 cows (plus four bulls and 100 calves), it was impossible not to notice the almost 16 different kinds of heavy machinery that were in use (see Appendix 2 for a list of the agricultural machinery owned and used by this particular family). In brief, modern American farming is highly dependent on technology. The larger and more sophisticated the machines are, the larger is the farm size of the farmer.

The other most important factor in American farming is the operating loans that nearly all farmers need to take out. Again, this seems to connect to the American culture of private ownership and extreme individualism. American farmers purchase most of their own machinery, seeds, herbicides, and fertiliser through loans. The farmer whose house I lived in had loans amounting to nearly \$500,000. Because of the heavy cost involved in farming, some farmers who would otherwise like to continue or take up this life are prevented from so doing simply because of the high capital start-up costs. One farmer told me that a farmer who wishes to cultivate 2000 acres of land must be prepared to spend about half million dollars beyond the price of the land itself.

Work and the Work Ethic. A and his family members think of work as no less than a necessary part of their life. Their work ethic is systematically

embedded within family values that emphasise hard work, both for the individual and for the good of the family. A's parents and grandparents were farmers. A himself has spent nearly all of his life in farming with short breaks in the local oil industry and as a railroad worker. His own son wants very much to spend his time in farming as well. If A and his son's generation are taken into account, then we have five generations in which this family has farmed this region of North Dakota. As an agricultural family, A grew up in a family of ten members. He has five brothers and three sisters along with his parents. A was the eldest son. But even this large American family represents a shrinking: A's mother told me that she grew up in a 15-member family. It was easy for me to see that the American farm family of the not too distant past must have looked very much like the Nepali farm family, at least in terms of size.

Narrating his family history, A's father told me that he was drafted in the army for two years and continued with the army for another six, before returning to North Dakota, where his parents and other relatives were still living as farmers. There, he and his brother started farming together for 27 years. They pooled their labour and machinery to farm two large sections of land that they owned separately. One was 1280 acres and the other 1300 acres. In those days, he said, they used to do everything by themselves and their agricultural machines were much smaller than they are now. They could produce enough to make a relatively good living.

In the past, the farmers of this area used to butcher their own animals to supply their own family meat. This domestic butchering parallels what is still found in Nepal. But these days young men do not like to do this kind of work and, moreover, the proper equipment for butchering if the meat is to be sold is expensive for the needs of a single family. Because of this, they invite a butcher from the town when they need to butcher an animal for their family needs. A butcher normally charges \$200 to butcher a 1100 lb. cow. A's father also mentioned that butchering is best done in this area during the winter or the cool season.

For pork and pork sausages, A's father would go to buy a pig from a farmer who raised them and then take it to the slaughterhouse for butchering. Normally, farmers of this area store meat of different animals in big refrigerators for periods of more than six months. I noticed that A's house had two such big freezers. They no longer raise pigs and chickens on their farm. In the past, they would also make their own cream, butter, ice cream and so on but they no longer make these things these days. The problem is both that

raising dairy cattle is very time-consuming and that these products are available very cheaply in the market.

Problems in Conducting Research in the United States of America and Nepal

It will seem to some that I have made a detour from my opening themes. In fact, I have in some sense done just that. But I have done so to hint at some differences between Nepal and the United States that prove to be important in the research process itself. Let me return now to the discussion I began this essay with.

Structural Problem: IRB in the American Universities

In the United States, any research—whether in the areas of natural science, social science or humanities—that concerns what are called “human subjects” must be passed through the Internal Review Board of the university with which the researcher is affiliated. In other words, before starting any kind of research a researcher or team must get a clearance paper. In 1974, the American Congress passed the National Research Act and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare designed the federal guidelines for human subject research. These regulations were updated in 1981 with the name of “45 CFR 46” rules (shorthand for Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46, Protection of Human Rights). Technically, research that is not federally funded is not subject to the 45 CFR 46 rules but most universities hold all research to the federal standard, reasoning that it makes no sense to have two moral yardsticks (Shea 2000: 28).

The IRB is a committee formed by the university to carefully check research involving human subjects. This board checks the research proposal, particularly the objectives and the methodology (how the human subjects are treated in the research, the types of questions asked of informants, how the privacy of an informant is maintained, and related matters). All researchers must conform to the rules of the IRB review or face serious consequences. In the strict sense, this means no questions other than those approved may be asked. Failure to conform can even lead to expulsion from one’s job.

There is no IRB, formally constituted as such, nor “human subject guidelines” for approving research in Nepal. There are no doubt rules from particular departments or institutes that researchers need to be familiar with in the conduct of their research and affiliation with a department or institute is a

formal requirement of foreigners for obtaining research visas in Nepal. The researcher has to fill out an application form (along with submitting the research proposal, a proof of student/teacher status from his or her institution, and a sufficient funds guarantee paper) through the Centre for International Relations of the university. The Centre forwards this application to the appropriate department or research centre at the university for evaluation. After getting a clearance paper from these bodies, a researcher is affiliated either with the research centre (such as CNAS) or department (such as the Department of Sociology-Anthropology) of the university.

A student or teacher who has the proper documentation described here has no problem at all with obtaining affiliation with the university. There is only the question of timing since unexpected delays, often without a specific reason, are normal in Nepal. For this reason a foreign student, teacher, or researcher is advised to apply at least one or two months in advance of the expected research start time in Nepal. Normally, research permission is given for the period of one year or the time specified by the researcher in the proposal itself. If the researcher is not able to finish the research in the stipulated time, permission can be extended in consideration of the progress of the researcher.

In Nepal, a foreign researcher is actually required to send a progress report to the concerned department every six months. The truth of the matter is that this rule is barely followed unless there is a request for time extension. Neither the department nor the Centre for International Relations at the university do much in the way of supervising and confirming the researcher's activities performed in the name of research. There is no check to discover whether they are doing research as specified in the proposal or something else. Similarly, nobody bothers about questions being asked of respondents. It is not uncommon at all to have foreign researchers return to their own countries without even reporting to the concerned department of the Nepal host university. Once they've gone, nobody knows where the student or researcher has published an article, report, or book, in what language it was published, and so on. Very few foreign researchers have shown their concern for "human subjects" in those publications. They publish their material as they wish and without follow-up or penalty. With such lack of restraint, it is hardly surprising that so many anthropological articles and books have been written from work in developing countries like Nepal over the last few decades.

The situation is so loose in Nepal, that many foreign scholars even come on a tourist visa, which can permit visits of up to five months, and carry out their short-term research programmes without affiliation to any university department whatsoever. There is no agency that checks into this kind of underground or shadow research, even though it is assuredly being carried out in our country. Of course, many of these foreign funded projects in Nepal follow the IRB rules from their respective countries, particularly the United States. The issue here is the lack of concern on the part of the Nepal government or the concerned university about the type of research, its specific conduct, how human subjects are treated and protected, and so on.

*Of Ethnography and Ethnographic Content:
My American Experience*

Structural and methodological problems in the urban area. Because the urban project I was involved with was sponsored by the Center for Ethnography of Everyday Life (CEEL) at the University of Michigan, I expected that the primary method for collecting data would be ethnographic in nature. When I say ethnography here, I mean that the focus should be on “what people are doing rather than what they say they are doing.” In other words, my expectation was that I would be watching and observing people while participating in their day-to-day lives. This proved to be impossible for me for a number of reasons. Some of these problems of doing field work in urban areas have already been narrated by other anthropologists who have worked in the United States and became applicable to my case as well. They include such things as concerns with the appropriateness of the sample size and the inability to draw a boundary of the field (Ortner 1993) and the danger that a lack of participant observation will cause an exclusive reliance on field-based interviews (Sanjek 2000).

Ethnographic research in an urban setting, like that of the Southeast Michigan auto plant, raises several problems of contextualisation in terms of the ability to come up with a manageable research unit in temporal and spatial terms. One can't follow enough people with a level of intensity that allows a knowledge of the whole community. Eventually, I ended up choosing a methodology that was less ethnographic and more on the order of detailed case studies of available retired autoworkers. The research became interview-based, not the best circumstance for an ethnographer, and the questions following IRB restrictions had to be based on the topic list designed

for the larger project. I am using the term “available” here because many retirees live quite far from the present plant or in states other than Michigan.

Neither of these strategies is a good thing for ethnographic representation. I feel strongly that ethnography as practice is not a technique that one learns in the classroom. It is practice through years of actual field contact that perfects the ethnographer. Most basic to the doing of ethnography is the need to live closely in contact with the people of study. Nevertheless, this opportunity was not to be for me in the urban setting because of the inbuilt structural problems that were part of the larger project design. One problem, for example, was that my interviews were confined to retired autoworkers and to places mutually agreed upon by both parties in advance. Because of this, there was little opportunity for me to talk with other family members, to have the experience of a first-hand look at their houses, or to develop a first-hand understanding of closely observed family life, and so on. In other words, the American cultural focus on the individual rather than the group was replicated in the very terms of my research process itself. My relations were always with single individuals, never in context, and usually apart from their group memberships.

Like most ethnographers in natural settings, I have the habit of asking questions in a straightforward manner and as they arise in conversation. Many times I wanted to know more closely about the family life of workers as a way of making comparisons among different families. I wanted to put more questions to the autoworkers outside of the pre-established set of interview questions, but I was restricted by the principal investigator of this urban project to an agreement not to ask a single question beyond those already approved by the IRB. This already seems to me to be a violation of the natural flow of ethnography where questions arise in the situation itself. Similarly, as a researcher I was not allowed to stay in the house of any autoworkers since that might jeopardise larger research goals. I began to feel that the project’s principal investigator was worried about me as a researcher, thinking that I might ask “nonsense” questions not relevant to the project and that these might jeopardise not only the research project but, it seemed to me, his job within the university. I felt that the research had lost its heart. Its whole intention appeared to be driven by the need to ask questions as they were approved by the IRB and strictly to maintain the privacy of individuals.

And yet, for me, fieldwork—especially what we call “participant observation”—is the heart of cultural anthropology. It is through that that I believe we are able more profoundly to understand the day-to-day life of even

these urban autoworkers. And it is that which should have been conducted, even among those retirees, in addition to formal interviews. I have always believed in relationships of reciprocity with people. It seems to me now that this is an approach to human research that grows out of my cultural identity as a Nepali rather than an American with his stress on the individual. I believed that fieldwork in its ethnographic sense would provide me with an immediate and uncensored sense of people in their factory surroundings and their everyday life. This fieldwork should have been central, but it became for me an ad-hoc and impulsive exercise without legitimacy in the eyes of the larger project. For me, earning research legitimacy also became a big issue because English is my second language. I felt a need to leave many anthropologically pertinent research questions unasked out of the simple fear that I must follow the rules of the Internal Review Board or face the unknown, but potentially serious, consequences of carrying out research outside their bounds (see Shea 2000; Vidich and Bensman 2000).

There were, of course other problems of a more practical sort. Trying to do participant observation with people who are scattered over large distances and constantly on the move is frustrating. One of my collaborators, however, was himself a retired autoworker living in Southeast Michigan. Thanks to his deep and personal knowledge of the day-to-day life of autoworkers, I was able to salvage some experience of participant observation in my research.. In that spirit I attended churches along with workers, observed local elections and union meetings, and attended the Labor Day parade in Detroit where a large number of retirees had gathered. I also had a few opportunities to participate in the potluck lunches of retirees. I nevertheless feel that the cost of creating an ethnography entirely from decontextualised narratives alone is the risk that their meaning is taken for granted so that questions vital for anthropological understanding are left unasked.

My experience in the United States refreshes my realisation that doing fieldwork is so easy and simple in Nepal. An anthropologist or researcher, native or foreigner, has easy access to anybody's house and can talk to anybody in the house (assuming adequate language ability) who is home to talk with. Local people are invariably happy to welcome an outsider, who always has the status of a guest in Nepali culture. If a householder does not treat a guest properly he could ruin the credit obtained for all the virtues he has earned in life. There is no Internal Review Board as such within the University system that checks on the activities of a researcher in the field. In other words, nobody bothers as to what a researcher is doing in the field in

Nepal. This may be an exaggeration of what is desirable, but it certainly reduces the strangling sense of fear that seems so much a part of the current situation of human research in the USA.

Cultural problems in the rural area. In many ways, but for somewhat different reasons, doing ethnography with farm families was also complex and difficult for me. Again, in this project site, individual families were very scattered; families might live 5–10 miles apart. It becomes virtually impossible to do a field study, even in a rural setting, without driving a car. As a contrast, in rural Nepal (mostly in the hill and mountain areas), many houses are clustered in a relatively small space. It's only in a small number of cases that a researcher needs to walk 1-2 hours to find a house after he's finished at another. Moreover, a researcher needs approval from a family before visiting the house to engage in conversation. This is because, first, they may have no time to talk for long periods when they are constantly busy at their own work. Secondly, Americans are very generally reluctant to share information about their families, their work, or their income with any outsider on short notice or acquaintance. This is a part of the culture of possession and privacy that is so important to Americans.

Since few American farmers have spare time for conversations in rural areas, an ethnographer must be prepared to do just about anything if he wants to talk with an informant. My own interests were in American family life in the rural areas, especially in husband and wife relations and their feelings about their grown-up children. I had to talk with A's wife for a significant period of time for this but she was free only while also painting woodwork in her house and courtyard. So I joined her in this work, doing some of the enamel painting myself, for nearly four hours. I had never done this kind of enamel painting in my life so the cost of my efforts was a ruined T-shirt as enamel spilled over the different parts of my body. Yet, the product of this small sacrifice was a deeper understanding of her and the values she held about her family life.

I noticed that even in the rural setting American farmers are like other Americans in that they are very sensitive about their property and the privacy of their way of life. Once I innocently put a very straightforward question to a farmer: "How much land (in acreage) do you own as a farmer"? This straightforward and direct way of asking made this a quite sensitive question. The farmer was a little embarrassed, uncomfortable, and reluctant in replying to my question. Tom Fricke told me this was not the right way of asking

such a question in this setting and I later realised that no farmer would answer if the query was put in this way since it violated the American sense of individual privacy and the sacredness of the relation between property and the self.

Tom Fricke also told me that it is not possible to get data on the landholdings of individual farmers from the county courthouse in Dickinson (where land records for this area are available). The records are organised by location rather than by individual or family. One could fairly easily get average landholding data for the area but an office, whether government or commercial, has no right to expose the individual's ownership of property rights. In other words, information about household economies may be inaccessible to researchers who do not first get to know the families themselves. This is again due to attitudes toward privacy coupled by the widespread fears of farmers about government intrusion into their lives. I was also told that the county recorder would not pass on this type of personal data to an outsider or a researcher. With every turn, I began to realise the sacredness of privacy throughout American life, whether rural or urban, and to see that these strictly cultural concerns are built into the very conduct and definition of legitimate research methods.

In Nepal, of course, ownership of land is systematically linked to the economic status of the family. The higher the amount of land owned by a family, the higher its socio-economic status. There is a natural tendency here, too, for a farmer to conceal this kind of information in the first conversation with an outsider (even to a Nepali researcher). Yet his motivation is not so much to maintain privacy *per se*, but to avoid showing himself to be either rich or poor in the local context. Nevertheless, family ownership of land can be easily verified, either by asking neighbours (who both know it and are happy to share it, in contrast to American farmers who may know it but be equally reluctant to share it) or from the District Land Record Revenue Office (Mal) where the land record of an individual farmer can be found.

Compared to Nepal, I found doing research in America to be difficult and time consuming for many reasons relating to a different sense of individual boundaries and to the sheer availability of information. In America, no informant will provide personal data on property, family relations, and other details without a high level of intimate familiarity because all of these things are symbolic of the self-contained individual. At the same time, no office (government or private) will provide data at an individual level, even in the name of research, because protection of individual privacy dominates

American culture and law. In cases like this, and unlike in Nepal, a simple letter of identification held by the researcher has little meaning to the subject of study.

If a researcher is engaged in study anywhere in Nepal, his or her office will write a letter to the concerned authority in the area (for example, the Chief District Officer, CDO, or the chairman of the Village Development Committee, VDC) asking them to help in the field site. The CDO even writes to the chairman of the concerned VDC to help the researcher in whatever way possible. At the district level, the Land Reform Office or Revenue Office will help an individual researcher by providing an individual landholding record, if asked.

Finally, I was also interested in identifying rich and poor farmers as they were perceived in the local context. My own host family (A), although they cultivated a little more than 3000 acres of land, would only say that they “are okay economically within the terms of the local setting”. It was indeed a difficult question to ask and I found it impossible to have anybody answer this question in a clear way. I spoke with my colleague, Tom Fricke, about ways of getting an answer to this problem. At one point he suggested that I go with a farmer who enjoyed company and was taking his very large freight truck to transport seed to the market in another area.

This farmer happened to be taking crambe seed to a place to the west known as Belfield where it would be transferred to large bins for storage. I was delighted to join him since this was the first time in my life that I had ridden in a truck of such size, much larger than the biggest trucks on our Nepali roads. I ended up joining him in the cab of his truck for the round-trip journey of some 7–8 hours, a very pleasant trip with an unusually talkative farmer.

This man considered himself a middle-class farmer. When I asked him my question on how to separate the rich and poor among American farmers, he told me that it is not only landownership that determines the farmer’s economic status. Added to this, one must know about the machinery and the number and quality of the pick-up trucks if one wants a good indicator of status in this western North Dakota farm country. The ownership of these together with farm size determines the farmer’s economic status in the eyes of his neighbours. A rich farmer will always use new and big machines compared to poorer farmers. Ownership of big machines suggests the presence of a large chunk of land to cultivate. And in order to give the impression of

economic status, a poor farmer is tempted to drive himself deeper into debt by the purchase of machinery he can't afford.

My travel companion also confessed to me that a farmer like him also plays golf, a game that he is willing to pay \$50 at a time to play in a private country club. Not every farmer of this area could afford this kind of luxury. True or not, and I must admit this farmer enjoyed a good joke, it was the long contact and the working together at a task—in other words, participant observation—that opened new lines of communication for me.

In brief, ownership of land and the size and design of the house are not the most important criteria for identifying rich and poor farmers in the area as they would be in Nepal. It is the size and condition of the machinery that are the most important criteria in identifying the rich and poor farmers in the area.

The truth of Ortner's point hit home for me. She writes that in American social and cultural life there is "personal embarrassment about talking about money—about personal income, family resources or both. It has been said that most Americans would sooner discuss their sex lives than their incomes" (2003: 10). And this seems clearly to relate to the connection between property and the inner self in American cultural meaning. And yet, as my farmer friend showed me, one can also look for signs and indexes that are external to a person and come up with an answer to these questions. The point is that they can only be discovered through the reciprocity of fieldwork itself.

In rural Nepal visitors are an attraction. Local people want to see them, talk to them, or invite them to their houses during their stay in the village area. Except for a very few restricted areas, an anthropologist can travel anywhere and work freely in the place they have proposed to do research. Not only in rural areas, but also in urban places like Kathmandu, researchers have easy access to the houses of their research site. The people welcome any foreigner to their homes, even an anthropologist. Depending on the economic condition of the family, the visitor is entertained with a cup of tea or some food. There is no problem in talking with people and, while talking, many researchers will find that they are not confined to what they have written in their research proposal. Nobody bothers as to what they have written or where they going to publish their report or article or book. The concern of the local people about researchers is in their relationship with them, the manner of their behaviour, and the reciprocity that they bring to their dealings with people.

Conclusion

As I mention above, doing ethnographic field research in the United States of America is difficult for the people of developing countries for reasons such as lack of research money, lack of proper affiliation with a university, and the problems of getting clearance from the IRB. These are structural or infrastructural. Added to these are the more cultural difficulties such as those relating to obtaining access to households and family members, obtaining answers to straightforward questions, and other matters that connect to the ethos of individualism and privacy that prevails in American society.

As a whole, although American society is largely governed by democratic values and egalitarian principles, Americans see these values as being carried at the level of individuals out of any context. The result is largely individualistic and self-motivated practice in a person's day-to-day life. Each person is very much concerned about his or her own work. Personal boundaries, whether of the person as a physical being or as symbolised by property, are nearly sacred so that privacy is strictly maintained. It is extremely hard to know what others are thinking and doing within or outside the family. This kind of uncertainty about the attitude and behaviour of others, it seems to me, emphasises an inward direction and distrust of others. Thus one finds difficult it to talk with people unless one stays in the area for a good period of time.

In spite of all the difficulties and frustrations, I discovered that this kind of cross-cultural study is quite relevant to me as both an anthropologist and a Nepali citizen. It is hard to be more than suggestive in explaining why, but I have a few thoughts.

First, a research-based understanding of middle-class cultural currents in the United States of America may be a useful way of providing new insights on transformations within the growing middle class in Nepal itself (see Liechty 2003). In effect, my studies of American middle class culture place me in a position to think in terms of new large scale-patterns of globalisation, some of which we may expect to become increasingly germane to our own futures.

Another area of personal intellectual development is in the area of expanding methodology. The ethnographic frameworks and techniques that I have used in my American research are largely those which I apply in my research in Nepal. I expect to be able to develop a greater understanding of these methods through their application to a quite different context by understanding what modifications become necessary and what continuities

might be considered as universal in social science research. These are important to my work in Nepal as our own society continues on its path of rapid social change. But they also raise the issue of how research methods are themselves structured by the culture in which they originate. It may well be that the "legitimacy" of particular approaches or methods has as much to do with the political dominance of the country of their origin as to universally valid standards. It is at least a question worth asking, how much the concern with the individual outside of context in some social science grows from the cultural stress on individuals and privacy in American culture itself.

In a sense, I have conducted fieldwork in America from a distinctly Nepali perspective. Many of the frustrations I encountered were a product of that perspective coming up against another that was foreign to it. I believe that understanding and making the Nepali perspective explicit is essential to our ability to make American studies work in our own context. It will also prepare our own students in their understanding of the United States of America and help to forge an empirically based critique of trends of that country.

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Appendix 1. Brief Notes on American Land Tenure System and Farming Practices

Land rent per acre:

It is both in cash and grains. Cash is normally \$23.0 and above per acre (depending upon the quality of land) and half to one third to the landowner from the total production of grains, according to my informant R. According to R, a landowner is better off if he leases his land for grains. However, most of the cultivated lands in this area are rented out for cash. According to A, the land rent in grain is only one third of the total production and this goes to the owner of land.

Crop rotation:

This is the basic feature of farming in this area. The ideal crop rotation has the same crop rotated into a given field every three years. But the crop rotation in this area usually follows a two-year cycle with the same crop rotated in each second year.

Crop cycle:

Single crop or mono-cropping pattern in the whole area. Normally cropping starts from April- May and most of the crops are harvested by August- September.

Typical Percentage of Total Crops Cultivated in the Area:

50 percent wheat

25 percent legumes

25 percent oil seeds (Normally, crambe, sunflower and canola are grown in this area as oil seeds. Soybeans are not grown in this area.)

Tilling:

The tractor is exclusively used for tilling and fertilizing the land. A good-sized tractor can till the land for seeding at the rate of up to 200 acres per day. Average tilling by a tractor is 170 acres a day. Thus, a farmer who owns 2000 acres of land needs at least 10 to 15 days of tilling, depending upon his size of the tractor.

Labor in Farm:

Sometimes, a farmer has to employ a laborer during the seeding and harvesting seasons of peak labor demand. At that time, a farmer pays up to \$10.0 an hour for the laborer. A laborer works up to 10 hours a day. Nevertheless, the farming is usually done exclusively by one's own family members. For example, A's farm, which is more than 3000 acres, is farmed by three family members: man, wife, son. They hire laborers only in an emergency. Likewise, the farm of B (the farm size is not known) is worked by both husband and wife. Their grown-up daughter who has finished her high school this year used to help in all work but has now gone away to college.

Division of Labor:

A grown-up son of the farmer A (the son is now in the first year of a nearby college) runs tractors for seeding and herbicide spraying on weeds. During the winter (November through March), he helps parents to feed cattle everyday. The woman is the home-maker. She does all the domestic chores including cooking, cleaning the house and courtyard, washing clothes, and kitchen-gardening. She also takes care of young calves (feeding them with bottled milk two times a day; there were three such calves who needed milk) and cutting grasses around the courtyard. When the need arises, she picks up a van to help her husband in the farm as well. In addition, she does the work of book-keeping, (keeping the record of everything of their income and expenses). The father works on the farm: tilling, seeding, applying herbicide, harvesting, baling the hay, and taking care of animals. During the summer, animals (the family has 100 cows with calves and four bulls) are left in their own pasturage areas. In one pasturage area, cattle are left about two weeks and then they are taken again to another pasturage area. During the winter, he feeds animals, hauls grain to the marketplaces and keeps up on book-keeping. The book-keeping gives the farmer an idea of which crops make or lose money. Normally, a farmer does not grow a crop in the following year if he has lost money on it.

Feeding the cattle during the summer:

Cattle are left in the pasturage area without any kind of shelter. A pond is dug out for drinking water if necessary. Otherwise, small ditches around the pasturage area keep enough water to feed the cattle. One bag of

minerals is left in a container in the middle of the pasturage area with a big cone of hard salt (it looks brown in color; I believe the salt is mixed with iron and iodine minerals). According to farmer A, the bag of minerals and the cone of salt last for 15 days for 100 head of cattle. The whole pasture area is fenced with a barbed wire to control the movement of cattle. In some areas, the wire is charged with electricity so that animals do not touch the wire so that fence is protected.

Feeding the cattle during the winter:

All the livestock are fed with hay during the winter (November through March). So a farmer needs a lot of hay to feed their animals during the winter.

Number of bulls in the ranch area

According to farmer A, a person can easily find out the number of cows owned by a farmer family if he asks how many bulls he owns. Normally, one bull is kept for 25 cows. The main purpose of keeping the bull is for mating the cow. No doubt, a young bull could mate 30-32 cows a year but the average is only 25.

Cropping

According to farmer A, cropping (seeding) started a little late this year; it started during the last week of April because of snow, rain and cool temperatures up to the first three weeks of April. Top-soils need adequate moisture for seeding.

Crops:

Only two types of wheat are grown in this area: spring wheat and winter wheat. Durum wheat is not grown in this area. Other crops grown are: Sorghum, barley, oats and corn. However, corn is little grown in this area. In addition to cereal crops farmers grow legumes, oil seeds, vegetables and alfalfa grass. The alfalfa grass is grown for feeding the cattle. According to A, it contains a good amount of protein (about 14%), which is considered good for cattle.

Market of grains

The ND farmers quote the grain market from three big cities of the Midwest: Chicago, Minneapolis and Kansas City. The everyday market price of grains of these big cities is hooked into their computer and they check the price of grains everyday.

Appendix 2: Machinery and other Items owned and used by a farm family

- i) Tractors
- ii) Skid steer and loaders
- iii) Harvest equipment
- iv) Row crop equipment
- v) Tillage equipment (Planters, Plows)
- vi) Sprayers
- vii) Trucks
- viii) Trailers
- ix) Balers (New Holland Model 688 Roll Belt-for uniform bales weighing up to 2200 lbs)
- x) Rakers
- xi) Vehicles
- xii) Grain handling equipment
- xiii) Elevator and bin equipment
- xiv) Livestock and hay equipment(including the manure spreaders).
- xv) Mower (Grass Cutters)
- xvi) Scathes

Machinery is considered the real wealth of American farm families. The newer and the larger in size they are, the economically better off a farmer is considered over other farmers.

Other Possessions owned by the Family

Total land (in acre) : 3198
Owned (see below) : 127
Rented : 3071

Pasture land(out of the total land) : about 700 acres from the rented land.

Livestock

Cows : 100
Calves : 100
Bulls : 4
Television : Two
Computer : 1
Other (computer cum radar) : 1(for checking weather and market).

Vehicles

Car	: 1
Pick-up van	: 3

All other agricultural machineries as mentioned above are kept by the family (size and how old they are is not known).

House (for Residence)

Basement with bathroom and toilet

First floor with bathroom, toilet, drawing room, bedroom and kitchen

Second floor with two bedrooms and toilet

The floor of the house is carpeted.

Two refrigerators

Two fridges

Woven, microwave

Washers and Dryers

In addition, the family has many barns, bodyshop (for repairing machineries), and grain bins located at various places of the farm.