

**Title:** Hovering on the threshold: challenges and opportunities for critical and reflexive ethnographic research in support of international aid practice

**Citation:** Eyben, R. (2009) Hovering on the threshold: challenges and opportunities for critical and reflexive ethnographic research in support of international aid practice. In Widmark, C. & Hagberg, S. (eds.) *Ethnographic Practice and Public Aid: Methods and Meanings in Development Cooperation*. (Studies in Cultural Anthropology 45.) Uppsala: University of Uppsala, pp. 71-98.

**Official URL:**

**More details/abstract:** This is my principal methodological paper about the challenges of researching aid donors, one that positions the anthropologist as a reflexive auto-ethnographer, retaining empathy for the insider's position while sufficiently distanced to cultivate a critical faculty.

**Version:** Accepted version.

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Rosalind Eyben

## 4. Hovering on the threshold

Challenges and opportunities for critical and reflexive ethnographic research in support of international aid practice

### Introduction

When I sat down to write this paper, and not knowing how to start, I glanced in idle distraction into my email in-box. The following had arrived:

*I left a message on your phone. It's about the terms of reference attached. Not all of them are up your street, and I did read a few weeks ago your bulletin article on RBM September 05 so I think we know what to expect! You might like to do theme 1 on leadership and accountability and theme 4 on mutual accountability for instance.*

I was being invited by a former colleague in the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to contribute some think pieces for a forthcoming international aid conference on Managing for Development Results. That, as the accompanying terms of reference made clear, is understood as an integral component of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

My first reaction was to refuse. Why get involved? What would happen if they didn't like what I wrote and wanted me to change it? Wasn't it just more fun (and easier) to write critical essays in academic journals, like the one on Results-Based Management to which my correspondent was referring in his email (Eyben 2005)? Yet, on re-reading the message, it seemed I was being encouraged to be critical, that there was a readiness to engage

with the ideas that I had been exploring since leaving full-time employment with DFID some years previously. It was important to check and reflect on my location. Was I still on the threshold and did I still want to be there? What did these questions mean to me and what had I learnt in answering these questions that was worth sharing with others?

I am writing this paper for those anthropologists, and others from sister disciplines, who want not only to interpret the world but also to change it. I am proposing a method of constructive yet critical engagement with development co-operation agencies such as Sida and DFID. It is a method based on a state of mind that I call 'hovering on the threshold' – or, in anthropological terms, 'a condition of permanent liminality'.

I believe that without learning to critically engage with and respond reflexively to the dilemmas of power and knowledge that shape the aid system, international aid organisations cannot be effective in achieving their goals of poverty reduction and greater social justice. As organisations they must be able to acknowledge and respond to the centrality of ambiguity and paradox in what they seek to do. To help generate this response, the critically constructive anthropologist is best positioned as neither insider nor outsider, retaining the empathy for the insider's position while sufficiently distant to cultivate a critical faculty. Sustained liminality and the accompanying identity confusion make life complicated and full of quandaries. It also offers surprises, intellectual excitement and the possibility of discovering unexpected pathways of personal and organisational change, discoveries that can help aid organisations such as Sida and DFID achieve their aspirations.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section I briefly discuss the history of relations between anthropology and international aid as a context to exploring some of the current dilemmas in the relationship. I use Mosse's experience of publishing *Cultivating Development* as a case study (2005). In the following section I propose an approach to researching aid – a reflexive practice for organisational learning that can address some of these dilemmas. I consider the epistemology and methods associated with reflexive practice and identify some of the challenges and opportunities for both researcher and development co-operation organisation when the anthropologist hovers on the threshold. This includes the scope and limitations in shaping the organisational conditions for reflexive practice. In conclusion, I suggest that the wider spread of a sense of permanent liminality within aid agencies would enable them to lose that invidi-

ous feeling of being in control of the world that is so injurious to their efforts to make it a better world.<sup>1</sup>

## Anthropology and international aid

### *Insiders and outsiders*

Anthropology and international aid go back a long way. Colonial regimes did 'development' with the help of anthropologists who advised them on native cultures and beliefs. I started studying anthropology in the 1960s, the decade when colonies were achieving independence. Progressive schools of anthropology, such as Manchester where I became a post-graduate student, believed the discipline could make a practical and useful contribution to supporting social change in the newly independent countries. However, the potential utility of this contribution was less obvious to those drawing up development plans for the countries concerned. Anthropology became an insignificant discipline for those giving and receiving development aid. Their interest was in technical assistance for building bridges and power stations and in modernising farming practice. It was only when these interventions were failing that an anthropologist might be commissioned to find out what was wrong, not with the intervention but with the 'target population'. This is how I first became involved in working for international aid organisations.

By the 1980s anthropologists were also being hired to evaluate the impact of large infrastructure projects, particularly dams, when forced resettlement and loss of livelihoods was causing considerable suffering in the name of development. It was then that there developed a movement to put people at the centre of development (Cernea 1991). Anthropologists working for aid agencies sought to have projects designed to fit people, rather than the other way round. As, towards the end of the 1980s, aid

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<sup>1</sup> Some elements of this paper were included in a presentation I gave at a workshop, 'Ethnographies of aid and development', organised by the University of Helsinki and held in Du-brovnik 25-29 April 2005. I am grateful to participants for their comments at that time, particularly to Jeremy Gould for challenging my position that action research with staff of aid organisations is a feasible and worthwhile venture. I am also grateful for comments received from participants at the conference in Uppsala in 2006 at which an earlier version of the present paper was given. Thanks also to Sten Hagberg and Charlotta Widmark for helpful feedback; and especially to David Mosse for his reflective commentary on my interpretation of the Cultivating Development case and for raising some broader issues about organisational learning and the learning organisation.

agencies' attention switched to the social costs of structural adjustment, some anthropologists also shifted their sights in the 1990s from project design to policy matters. This led to an interest in how policy is constructed and to researching the relationship between macroeconomic decisions and the effect on people's lives (Booth 1993; Moser 1996).

Throughout that period I saw my task, working as 'expert', short-term consultant or long-term employee of aid agencies, as that of social analysis in relation to the design, implementation and evaluation of projects and programmes funded by these agencies. My focus was on what the organisation could and should do in its external interventions. It was neither expected nor desired that I and other contracted anthropologists turn our analytical eye inwards to make the connection between organisational history, politics and culture on the one hand and its effect on those it was seeking to help on the other hand. Of course, we anthropologists working inside the agency might have quietly studied the organisation employing us so as to better influence its agenda, but normally any such analysis would not have been written down, let alone published. Only during my last years at DFID have I come to realise that until we confronted how aid organisations behaved, there would be no guarantee that our efforts to make projects and programmes have a positive social impact would bear any fruit.

Meanwhile, insider status brought clear benefits. Weber noted that every bureaucracy will conceal its knowledge and operation unless it is forced to disclose them, invoking 'hostile interests' if need be to justify the secrecy (Bendix 1959: 452). In the case of aid organisations, those alleged threats are the potential cuts to their budget, purportedly putting at risk the lives of the many hundreds of millions of people still living in poverty and who are claimed to be dependent on support from taxpayers in rich countries. Thus, aid agencies can protect themselves by morally blackmailing those wishing to research them. They can also guard their secrecy because the taxpayers who fund them do not receive their services and so cannot judge their quality, as they do with the health and education services they receive from the public sector. Taxpayers have little choice but to believe what they are told by those with a partisan interest in the matter – government and non-government aid agencies, including development studies institutes like the one I work for.

Because there are few external incentives for transformative learning, aid organisations rarely welcome outsider efforts to study them with that objective in mind. Thus in these organisations the inside researcher has a significant advantage, not only with regard to prior knowledge of the organisation (although this may also make one biased), but also in terms

of access. Compared with studying other public sector organisations, access may be especially important in aid organisations because typically they are multi-sited with offices all over the world.

The difficulty of access has largely caused those looking to study such organisations to provide fundamental critiques from outside. Over the last twenty years or so international aid has been the subject of post-structural critical analysis. This is sometimes based on consultancy assignments, but more often on the deconstruction of published texts. Many researchers have had very little choice but to study policy documents because of lack of access.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, many with an anthropology background working inside aid organisations – particularly those who undertook their studies before the 1990s – may have little knowledge of this body of research, nor of its major propositions, for example ‘development’ as a hegemonic construct, or foreign aid as a Foucauldian discipline. Ferguson’s *Anti-Politics Machine* (1994) was a discovery for me when I first joined the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in 2002. Thus these critical researchers and those who are practitioners within aid organisations follow different trajectories. Encounters are relatively rare and may be of little benefit.<sup>3</sup>

Thus emerged the distinction between ‘development anthropology’ – what anthropologists working for aid agencies practised – and the ‘anthropology of development’ (Crewe and Harrison 1998, citing Grillo and Rew 1985). During the 1990s both streams of anthropology flourished. Development anthropology achieved a more authoritative and established voice within agencies, including DFID and the World Bank, while

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<sup>2</sup> See Verlot’s review of Shore’s study of the European Commission, which he criticises for looking too much at the policies and not sufficiently at the daily practices of the policy makers. Verlot argues that there is no substitute for participant observation.

<sup>3</sup> One such encounter I experienced was with David Lewis and Katy Gardner when I reviewed for DFID’s social development advisers’ newsletter their book on post-modernism and the anthropology of development (Lewis and Gardner 1996). I agreed with their proposition that those working within development and those studying development discourse may have a lot to say to each other, but commented in my review that all the people in their book – fishermen, farmers, and others caught up in development projects – were treated as ethnographic subjects with agency, except for people working inside aid organisations. In response, they warmly invited me to contribute my point of view to a special issue of *Critique of Anthropology* (Eyben 2000). However, this revealed for me further problems of communication when, too late, I realised I was expected to write an academic article, although as a hard-pressed bureaucrat, I lacked the time and context to do so. As I wrote to the editor of the special issue: ‘I now realise that I did not sufficiently emphasise [in my draft article] that I was writing a brief paper because I was genuinely concerned and interested in a dialogue between practice and the academy. I do feel it is not a genuine dialogue if I am corralled into producing a paper “fit” for publication in an academic journal. I also feel very strongly that should the paper be revised in the way you suggest, it would lose its ethnographic authenticity. At best it would be a sad derivative piece and a second-rate academic article. Rather, think of my paper as a piece of “naive art”.

through discourse analysis and post-colonial studies the anthropology of development became increasingly rich and illuminating.

### *Ethnographies of aid and development*

Mosse describes the distinction between development anthropology and the (discourse analysis) anthropology of development as that between instrumental and critical views of aid. He proposes that a third approach is now establishing itself, a 'more insightful ethnography of development capable of opening up the implementation black box so as to address the relationship between policy and practice' (Mosse 2005: 5). Ethnographies of aid – increasingly referred to as 'aidnographies' (Gould and Marcussen 2004) – create the possibility for multi-positioned fieldwork, researching and writing from inside as well as outside the aid agency, turning a self-critical lens onto the anthropologist who, in his own case, became 'more interested in locating pragmatic rules of project behaviour than arguing over normative ones' (Mosse 2005: 13).

Writing from inside and outside at the same time is what Mosse tried to do in his own book, *Cultivating Development*. The product of that process became the subject not only of a detailed analysis by the author himself but also led to a lively debate in *Anthropology Today* about the ethics and politics of this multi-positionality (Sridhar 2005; Stirrat 2005; Mosse 2005a). For nine years Mosse had worked as part of a team implementing a rural development project in India; he then did independent research on the project to eventually analyse the whole from an academic perspective, an analysis endorsed by some of his former colleagues but challenged by others who objected to it and insisted on seeing him totally as an insider, albeit one who had betrayed them. When he sent them the draft book they sought to block its publication (Mosse 2006b).

In the early 1990s, as a DFID social development adviser, I had been instrumental in the identification and appraisal of that project and consequently was known to all parties in the dispute. Thus I agreed to moderate a meeting that took place in London in April 2004. The next section draws on notes I took at the time.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There are of course ethical issues in my publishing this account because the notes I took at the time were in my capacity as 'moderator', not 'researcher'. However, the matter is already in the public domain and I have drawn on my notes primarily to explore sympathetically the perspective of those challenging the publication; David Mosse has seen this account and has confirmed he has no objections. The present paper is itself therefore an example of the dilemmas of insider/outsider research. See also the discussion on the website of the Association of Social Anthropologists <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.htm>.

### *The challenge of an insider moving to the threshold*

When working for DFID, I have often heard the phrase that ‘everyone should be in the same boat and pulling in the same direction’. That this could only happen if there were a consensus view on the direction was the crux of the position of those objecting to Mosse’s book.

Ironically, his erstwhile colleagues’ objections confirmed one of the key arguments of the book, namely that the construction of a consensus view – of truth – is a political process. The objectors had a different perspective on the purpose of the text. They had the right to propose textual changes because they saw the book in the same light as the project reports which they were all accustomed to write, namely a consensus document. They felt it particularly important to ensure the book represented the truth as they understood it, because it was describing the whole experience of the project. They believed readers would understand the book in the same way they did, as a document that would establish once and for all what the project was about. They regarded the book as an evaluation document that defined the truth.

Development projects and programmes are conventionally evaluated by persons selected for their independence from and lack of prior involvement with the project. Project staff often experience an evaluation as a very stressful process. The higher their commitment to the project’s goals and the greater the effort they have made, the more they feel affected and the more likely they are to resist an evaluation’s conclusions when these do not coincide with their own view of the project. Thus the evaluation process normally includes some kind of effort at conflict resolution between evaluator and project staff (Taut and Brauns 2004). This is what the objectors had supposed would happen in the case of *Cultivating Development*. When it did not, they became angry. The text did not portray the project as the success that they had understood it to be:

*‘Twelve years of the prime of my life I gave to this. It’s passion that speaks... When people read the book, they will say “Oh this project! What a shame”.’<sup>5</sup>*

A heated point in the discussion concerned the author’s sources. The objectors were unhappy that he was drawing on information provided to him by other project staff who, they said, gave negative views because they were malcontents, or marginal to the project, or because ‘when people talk informally things they say will be confusing and improper’. These informants had been speaking on a personal basis and thus each would

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<sup>5</sup> A project manager speaking at the meeting.



have had a separate opinion. These opinions were not ‘the corporate view’ and the author should have acknowledged that. The author responded that while those objecting to the book had said it was not telling the truth, others who had worked in the project had read the manuscript and sent him messages saying that it had captured their experience.

When organisation-researchers want to publish, they confront the challenge of negotiating their text with people who are highly experienced in this art as an integral part of their bureaucratic practice. The researcher’s own code of ethics can be used as an instrument against him by an experienced negotiator to change the text or suppress publication. Colleagues can view the text as betrayal of friendships, particularly if they think the writer is making unnecessarily negative comments on a well-intentioned project. People have feelings and do not like to see their work disparaged. They are aggrieved when they perceive the researcher as being ‘clever’ about something very difficult and challenging to which they have devoted considerable effort and commitment. The academic’s commitment to publication can be seen as an act of selfishness related to her own career advancement.

At this particular meeting, the objectors always referred to the author by his first name and criticised him, rather than the text. ‘It’s like a family talking here’, commented one observer. A sense of betrayal was made explicit in people’s comments at the meeting: ‘[The author] is a friend. I hope he still is.’ ‘It’s [the author]. I know him. We’ve had a few beers together.’ Objectors spoke of their faith in the author and their affection for him. He would still be forgiven and brought back into the family should he only agree he had been mistaken.

Thus, in writing about this experience, Mosse suggests that while outsiders face problems of entry, insiders face problems of exit at the moment they write for publication:

Of course, those reading about themselves may be intrigued, amused or pleased; but turning relationships into data and placing interpretations in public can also disturb, and break relationships of fieldwork. It may be ‘anti-social’. Those interlocutors — neighbours, friends, colleagues or co-professionals — who directly experience ethnographic objectifications now surround the anthropologist at her desk; they raise objections, make new demands to negotiate public and published interpretations. (Mosse 2006b: 937)

By refusing to negotiate his text, the author manages finally to make his exit. Mosse notes that this process of exit was an outcome of a long period when he was working for the organisation as a positivist within a means-end managerial rationality, yet increasingly trying to wrest his thinking

free from this paradigm to achieve critical insight (Mosse 2005). In the end, it appeared, his former colleagues could not cope with the ambiguity of him being simultaneously instrumental and critical, and he was moved firmly to the outside. The controversy meant he could not linger on the threshold, at least in this particular element of the wider organisation.

### *Another way?*

Some inside DFID did not disagree with Mosse's findings; they were stimulated and constructively challenged by his conclusions. Thus, in reflecting on this case, I asked myself how one could optimally engage with those insiders who want their organisations to learn to change. What does this case tell us about the purpose of evaluation and impact studies in terms of learning and accountability? How could anthropological research help strengthen the weak accountability of international aid organisations to citizens at both ends of the aid chain? Finally, what are the risks in publication? Can it be counter-productive to learning?

These questions were personally important to me. Some anthropologists became insiders through force of circumstances, pushed into the world of public policy and practice (including aid organisations) because of the funding squeeze in the 1980s that limited the availability of academic jobs (Mosse 2006b). I was of an earlier generation. I had studied anthropology with no academic ambitions at that time. I saw it as a useful and interesting discipline for development. Correspondingly, even as my critical perspective developed, my long-term career choice had made exit less of an option. Later, even had I wished it by the time I was a DFID staff member, it was too late to start an academic career in an anthropology department. I was thus motivated to find another way. Locating myself in a policy research institute made this possible. I brought inside knowledge of the organisations that the institute seeks to influence and on which it is largely dependent for financing, and I was given the intellectual support and encouragement to teach, research and publish.

I saw the challenge as managing the dilemma of continuing to be involved in the work of international aid and to support its goals while developing an increasing theoretical capability and interest to interrogate many of my hitherto-unquestioned assumptions. It led to an interest in cultivating a personal and organisational capacity for reflexive practice through action research; I found a group of colleagues at IDS already engaged in such an approach and willing to help me. It has meant that I remain indefinitely on the organisational threshold, neither inside nor outside and looking both ways. I arrived at my present position more by

good luck than planning. Nevertheless, it has led me to enquire whether my threshold location is a potentially interesting and useful one for other anthropologists to deliberately seek, should they want to influence the world of public policy and practice. In the next section I argue that one element in accomplishing this is to consciously cultivate a reflexive practice.

## Reflexive practice: An alternative approach for anthropologists

### *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity in anthropological research is now a well-established tradition. Compared with when I was a graduate doctoral student, it is rare these days for anthropologists not to acknowledge their own positionality, ‘paying heed to the whys and wherefores of its production’ (Whitaker 1996: 472). Constructivist or interpretative epistemology, in the mainstream of current anthropology, understands knowledge as being constructed by social actors, rather than being some objective fact ‘out there’, detached from the person or institution undertaking the research. It is an approach that recognises there are different ways of understanding and knowing the social world and that these are contingent on one’s position in that world. This approach, when married to a desire not only to interpret the world but also to change it, alerts one to power and deepens an understanding of one’s personal, professional and organisational identity in relation to what one is trying to achieve.

Ethnographic research is also ‘relational’: what I learn, and what I am unable or choose not to learn, is shaped and informed not only by who I am but also by those whose lives I am researching. In her discussion of anthropological knowledge as ‘relational’, Hastrup makes the distinction between ‘knowing’ and ‘sensing’ and comments that in the field you think and live at the same time (2004). There is a school of reflexive research outside anthropology that takes this distinction further, proposing the existence of four different ways of knowing. These are propositional (what Hastrup calls ‘thinking’); experiential – knowing through empathy and face-to-face iteration (what Hastrup might mean by ‘sensing’); presentational – that is, grounded in experiential knowing and represented through art, poetry, drama and so on; and finally practical – that is, know-

ing how to do something, as a skill or a competence. This last one is the sum of the three other forms of knowing (Heron and Reason 1997).

This last form of knowing implies action; it becomes reflexive action when we seek to be aware of the origins of these different ways of knowing and can consider their influences on our action. Reflexivity in relation to these different ways of knowing helps us become alert to the possibly different epistemologies of those we are studying or working with. It helps to engage with them in a dialogic construction of a shared understanding of truth. From this perspective, reflexivity is not just how the researcher goes about and represents her work; it is also about encouraging a similar learning process among those being researched, converting them into co-learners or co-researchers.

One of the complaints made against Mosse was that he had critiqued certain practices that he himself had been involved in developing and that the book itself does not explicitly mention this involvement. In fact, in his introduction he stresses that when employed as a consultant, one of the author's subject positions was that of optimistic positivist, performing the classic role of the social analyst in a development project. Thereafter, in several places the book draws attention to his own biases. Nevertheless, he does not make his reflexive self central to the narrative. One reason for not doing so is because he wished to avoid describing actions and views of any particular individual, including himself. In the meeting with his objectors he stressed how he wished to avoid 'personalising' the analysis, looking rather at institutions, structures and incentives. He had done this deliberately because of his concern for the sensitivities of those he was writing about. Indeed, I have found from my own experience that it is very difficult to turn a critical reflexive eye on one's own actions without referring to the personal and particular relationships that shaped the context of these actions.

Does this make it impossible to be a reflexive practitioner? I think not. However, if we wish to engage those we are studying, as well as oneself, in this exercise, we may have to remind them at fairly frequent intervals of what we are about. In other words, the reflexive 'I' must be present throughout the text from the beginning to the end, while avoiding casting a critical eye on those others. Critical ethnographic research of the kind represented by Mosse may be understood as a 'precondition for learning and insight' (Mosse 2005: xiii). It is possible that such learning can happen through propositional knowledge without any further trigger. However, the more the author is present in the text through the privileging of experiential knowledge, the more chance there may be of triggering a process of similar critical reflection among the other actors involved in the

narrative – either through dialogue at the moment of enquiry, or afterwards while reading the text. It is an approach that may also encourage other readers who may have been in comparable situations to review their own experience afresh. Yet, as has been pointed out, whether this happens may depend on whether the anthropologist can help create a supportive organisational environment as part of the reflexive practice methodology.

While I am most certainly not suggesting that all critical research should be of this kind, I do argue that there is an intellectually interesting and practically useful space for what I am describing as the learning approach, one that very explicitly seeks to combine the criticality of the ethnographic approach with the instrumentality of those wanting to improve organisational and/or system-wide practice.

### *The learning approach*

The particularity of the learning approach is that it draws on the organisational learning literature and an action research paradigm that emphasises reflexive practice, a participatory world view and a shared construction of meaning (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 1). Based on the pioneering work of Robert Chambers, the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies has been exploring international aid from this perspective (Groves and Hinton 2004; Eyben 2006). While an ethnographic study might include recommendations for the organisation concerned, only when it is combined with a learning organisation approach does the ethnographer directly engage with people in the organisation as co-learners – as distinct from doing the research and only then seeking feedback.

Thus to the three approaches noted by Mosse (2005: 13) I propose to add a fourth as illustrated in the figure below, in which the dotted lines of the two most recent approaches show how they inter-connect with the two longer-established and quite separate perspectives:

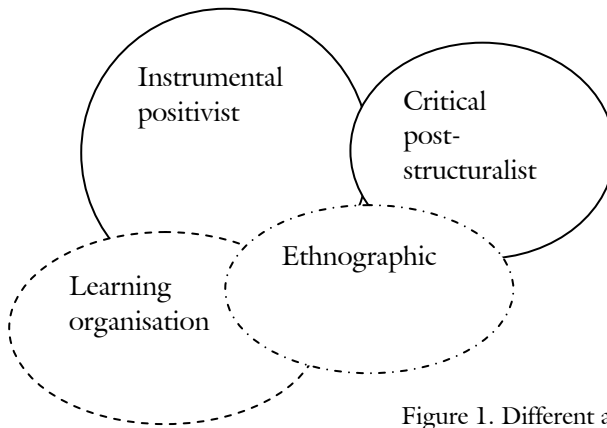


Figure 1. Different approaches to the study of aid organisations

I suggest it is possible to be constructively critical through double-loop as distinct from single-loop questioning (Argyris and Schon 1978). Typical instrumentalist research generates single-loop learning questions in relation to more immediately observable processes and structures – e.g. within the framework of the Paris Declaration on Effective Aid, how can greater country ownership be generated – whilst holding as constant the organisational values and knowledge frameworks that shape the landscape of power within the aid system? Single-loop research of this kind can contribute to system adaptation, but only within the existing organisational framework for action. In contrast, double-loop questioning requires practitioners to interrogate the framing and learning systems which underlie the international aid system’s actual goals, attitudes and ways of knowing the world, without putting at risk their commitment to using that learning for improving their practice.

This is far from easy. There is a horrible temptation for anthropologists to show off their cleverness. Recently a former colleague of mine still working in DFID commented on a paper I had written that she found it very stimulating but ‘depressing’. It left her with the feeling that things were pretty hopeless for aid agencies. Although in the paper in question I had tried to propose some practical ways forward, with hindsight I realise that the better-written and livelier parts of the paper – and therefore those

the reader remembers – were where I was having fun with what I saw as donors' bad behaviour.

Reflexive practice requires respect for and empathy with others. It includes cultivating the art of 'negative capability', the ability to hold two or more contradictory ideas in one's head at the same time and value both of them. It means understanding that the ideas one might have as a representative of a donor organisation may be quite different from those of a representative of a recipient Ministry of Finance or a local NGO. And that all these ideas are valid and relevant to the problem.

In short, while the reflexive approach has much in common with critical ethnographic research of aid, an important difference lies in engaging with international aid staff and encouraging them to scrutinise constructively their ways of knowing and acting. In the next section I shall describe methods of co-operative enquiry. However, also worth emphasising is the potential role of the anthropologist in supporting critical reflection and learning through activities designated as 'learning' but that are equally spaces for action research.

### *Learning activities: Reading weeks and workshops*

Reading weeks are designed to encourage co-learning in which current anthropological and sociological texts relevant to international aid practice are individually studied and collectively discussed through a structured and facilitated process. Participants are encouraged to make use of these readings to explore their current professional and organisational practice in relation to issues such as power, gender relations, inequality, civil society, exclusion and poverty. In a recent week organised for Sida staff, participants' reflections included recognising for the first time issues of power and knowledge in their organisational practice and relations, as well as what one participant called 'thinking about thinking'. At a reading week for DFID staff I gained consent, on the basis of anonymity, to include some of their critical comments and reflections in my own research concerning the practice of aid.

As distinct from a reading week for no more than ten people, a learning workshop can accommodate fifty or more, such as one I was asked to facilitate in 2006 to explore with recipient and government staff from four countries in the region how gender equality was being integrated into the implementation of the Paris Declaration on Effective Aid. Prior to the workshop four country studies were commissioned, in which I supported regional consultants to develop case studies of an aid-funded initiative, chosen by the donors, in each of the countries concerned. They and the

steering committee were persuaded that these case studies should not be researched and presented as ‘best practice’. Rather, local stakeholders were interviewed for their possibly diverse views on the successes and challenges of each initiative. The consultants were asked not to synthesise these views nor produce any recommendations, as these would have framed what was permissible to discuss at the workshop itself. Instead, they were asked to write brief reports presenting the variety of stakeholder perspectives as the basis for subsequent discussion among workshop participants.

Just as the case studies sought to capture and articulate different perspectives without providing any ready-made solutions, so the workshop itself was designed to ensure an inclusive yet challenging process. The design explicitly addressed issues of power in the room with the aim of all participants equally voicing their experience and ideas as well as benefiting personally from the critical learning taking place. The process sought to demonstrate how aid relations could be done differently. One workshop participant remarked that if government-donor consultation meetings they attended were designed in the manner of this workshop, there would be much greater potential for gender equality issues to be understood and addressed in policy dialogue.

This kind of methodology, combining anthropological theory and knowledge with a supportive learning environment, requires constantly observing and critiquing one’s own behaviour. This is easier by deliberately locating oneself on the threshold. There as many dilemmas and challenges as opportunities, as I now discuss.

## On the threshold: Challenges and opportunities

What do I mean by being on the threshold and how does the world of aid appear from that location? I start by exploring what it means to be liminal.

### *A permanent state of liminality*

Associated with rites of passage when one moves from one state in life to another, a quintessential element of liminality is ambiguity since one is neither one kind of person nor another. In classic anthropology liminal situations and roles are associated with magico-religious powers that can make the person on the threshold polluting and dangerous (Turner



1969). It is not a comfortable place to be because everyone, including oneself, may be confused as to who one is.

Turner saw liminality as a necessary disruption that helped sustain structure. From that perspective, being on the threshold is little different from the joker at the royal court whose foolishness serves only to reinforce the status quo. On the other hand, these same magico-religious qualities can be also empowering, not only for people on the threshold but also for those involved as witnesses, potentially enabling them to perceive their world in a new light and to challenge the unquestioned and unvocalised way of how things are done.

Turner's structural-functionalist understanding of the ambiguity of liminality is related to it being a temporary state. I, on the other hand, understand being on the threshold as a location for double-loop learning and reflexive practice, embracing ambiguity and negative capability as a constant state, a life-long project. In studying international aid, it means hovering on the threshold of aid agencies, neither inside nor outside. I now turn to explore some of the dilemmas and opportunities arising from liminality. These relate to locating the threshold, time frames for change, identity confusion, subversion, opportunism, methods for different ways of knowing and what to do about publishing.

### *What is 'inside'?*

Aid organisations are not homogeneous entities and critical ethnography such as Cultivating Development, while threatening to some in the organisation, may be useful to others seeking to change how things are done (Stirrat 2006). The heterogeneity reveals the organisation as a social construct; those who are officially its members may find it relatively insignificant as a shaper of values, knowledge and agency. An alternative view of organisations as partially bounded networks makes the concept of threshold fuzzier. In relation to Sida, for example, Arora-Jonsson and Cornwall describe the interaction between intra-organisational formal 'blue' and informal 'red' networks. They explore the potential of the latter, if encouraged, to engage in reflective practice for changing the former (2006).

'Inside' is also problematised when inter-organisational coalitions and networks of relationships may be more significant for agency than are the formal organisations to which these actors belong (Hewitt and Robinson 2000). In such circumstances, hovering on the threshold requires considerable agility to work out who and what is on the inside and the outside in any particular time and context. This is a contrary perspective to the old

Sunday school song my father used to sing that has been playing in my mind while writing this paper:

*'There's one door and only one  
I'm on the inside, which side are you?'*

Imagining shifting thresholds can straightaway help identify more opportunities for supporting double-loop learning and reflective practice, extending to research within the international aid system as a whole and beyond it to networks engaging in other themes and issues. My colleague John Gaventa, for example, is currently working with a network of practitioners in two government departments, DFID and the Department of Local Government and Communities, to explore how elected representatives can support direct citizen engagement in decision making.

### *Researching for long-term change or immediate action?*

IDS has for many years now been exploring approaches to participatory action research in development (Gaventa and Cornwall 2006). Participatory action research is research that 'challenges the claims of a positivistic view of knowledge and unjust and democratic economic, social and political systems and practices' (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003: 11). One such exploration relates to co-enquiry where the subjects of the research are researching themselves, involving mutual questioning and investigation leading to reflection and changed behaviour by those participating (Heron and Reason 2001). As such, it differs from 'third-person inquiry' where the researcher is solely in control of the investigation, reporting back to others once the research has been completed. In reality, the border between second- and third-person inquiry can be fuzzy, depending on the extent to which the researcher is engaging with and responding to the concerns of those being studied.

Co-operative inquiry is the most developed form of co-inquiry and is designed to encourage a process that allows participants to recognise that change is possible (Heron and Reason 2001). Participants inquire into taken-for-granted practices and investigate their implications in relation to their values and organisational goals. This method was used with a group of Sida staff (Arora-Jonsson and Cornwall 2006). Two colleagues and I attempted to introduce it in a more ambitious multi-country and multi-agency study (Eyben et al. 2007). Since then it has been used with varying success by students on IDS's MA in Participation, Power and Social Change. In one case, a country office of a large international NGO in

which the student was working made significant changes to the way it worked with local communities as well as influenced policy and practice in the organisation's head office.

A cycle of action research – with an expectation of transformative learning leading to change which can itself then be further studied – requires a hospitable organisational environment. In its absence, the anthropologist's effort to encourage others to be equally reflexive as she may discourage the whole process of discovery, as in the case of the reflexive insider researcher-practitioner whose email I quote below:

'I also felt that I would have been more relaxed if I perceived myself as just a researcher and not a change agent. It is further complicated and difficult when I think of myself as an employee at the center and part of the system and have to deliver the assignment as I am asked to and the way my managers want..... I never thought that my situation is going to be easy but I also did not imagine the tremendous change in the place when people working there were replaced by others. Sometimes I think if I give up my perception of myself as a change agent it would be easier, but I would be left with my other frustrating position as an employed researcher at the center doing things I see against my values - or putting it less dramatically - against what I have learnt as to how research should be done.' Email to author from an insider reflexive researcher 24 September 2006.

In this case, the discoveries she was making about the responses of recipient government officials to the demands of the Paris Declaration were so illuminating and exciting that they led the researcher to conclude that abandoning co-enquiry and practising more conventional ethnography was justified because of the potential contribution the research findings could make in the longer term to changing aspects of the international aid system. However, she is continuing her own reflexive first-person inquiry. The font in her field journal is in three colours (presentational knowledge): black for observation (propositional knowledge), red for her feelings about the observation (experiential knowledge) and blue for inquiring into the historical, political and cultural origins of her feelings. It is this rigorous first-person inquiry that allows her to hover on the threshold.

### *Confused identity*

Recently I was invited to a small dinner party hosted by a senior official in an international aid organisation, to which were invited guests from two other such organisations. I had known most of the other guests from the

time when I myself had been a senior official in an aid organisation. Although they all knew that I was now an academic researcher, I saw that they soon forgot it and began to exchange inside news and gossip of the kind that they would not have done in the presence of an outsider. For a participant observer this was a splendid opportunity, but as the evening wore on, I felt perplexed about my own status. A conversation about a forthcoming World Bank seminar allowed me to make a double-loop learning comment that sought to encourage reflection about power and the nature of evidence. However, this seemed to make little impact and I noticed my fellow guests were more comfortable with who I used to be – harking back to former shared exploits – rather than with who I now was.

On another occasion, at a workshop for a group of international aid practitioners to which I had been given observer status on the basis of my former insider position, I felt severely tempted to intervene with ideas for improving a strategic approach that I felt was running into difficulties. However, being the ethnographer, I stayed silent. My emotions at this time were anxiety, grief and frustration about the ineffectiveness of my position, combined with the researcher's amazement, curiosity and excitement about what I was privileged to witness.

That same confusion was allowing me to both observe and participate in a way that neither an insider nor an outsider could. In both instances just described, my confused identity appeared to be more challenging for me than for those I was with. Yet I have also experienced the contrary. Soon after joining IDS I undertook some research in a DFID office in Asia, to develop further questions that I had been working on while still a staff member in Bolivia. I used some initial findings from my time in that country to start a series of reflective workshops on how DFID staff relate with recipient organisations. While the opportunity was apparently much appreciated by those participating in the workshops, head office was much less enthusiastic about this process. While I remained an insider colleague to those in country offices, to my head office contacts I had become an unhelpfully critical researcher.

There are ethical (or rather moral) issues related to the possibility of wearing two hats, that of a critical anthropologist and that of a paid consultant or commissioned researcher. On the one hand, the consultancy may be undertaken in bad faith, simply as a means of access to ethnographic data without any commitment to the employer. On the other hand, if the anthropologist undertakes the commission in good faith, seriously seeking to improve the organisation's practice, then her academic peers may judge the ethnographic analysis as constrained by the researcher's instrumental engagement. As doctoral students at IDS have

discovered, even participant observers working as unpaid volunteers or interns are likely to be confronted with these same dilemmas. If they try to be useful they may get sucked into the world view of those they are researching, leading to subsequent difficulties when disengaging and resuming a critical stance. One might call this the 'Patty Hearst syndrome' of participant observation, in which the ethnographer as hostage develops a solidarity with her captors that can sometimes become a real complicity, with the hostage actually helping the captors to do things which previously she might have found objectionable. A constant watch, through journaling and feedback from academic colleagues, can help reduce the risk of co-optation. Yet successful liminality runs into its own problems.

### *Loss of credibility*

When working years ago in Sudan, I travelled round the country with male members of our project team. We were often invited to supper in the locality we had been visiting. My colleagues would sit at the front of the house chatting with their host and his neighbours; the hostess and women visitors stayed in the kitchen at the back of the house stirring the cooking pots and conversing merrily. Because I was a European, I decided I was free to move to and fro between the two genders – some time with the women and then back to the men. I saw myself as very privileged, the only person there who knew the topics of conversations in the two groups. Until one evening, with mocking laughter, the women sprinkled me with the perfume a wife traditionally uses when she wants her husband to sleep with her. 'Now go and join the men,' they said. Back on the front porch, I found myself the butt of sexual jokes and retreated, humiliated.

I had been insensitive to local customs. My transgression had been an irritant and I was taught a lesson. Neither side wanted me. A frank discussion of these identity confusions with people in both groups, in academia and the aid bureaucracies, can help secure their support – it may be useful to have someone to carry messages between the two groups – and can be a useful entry to their own reflexive inquiry about the often-ambiguous role of development co-operation. This brings me to the topic of subversion.

### *Subversive learning*

As already noted, liminality can be dangerous and polluting – it is thus potentially subversive. I am developing the notion of subversive participatory action research. This would mean engaging with some insiders who are seeking radical changes to better achieve the organisation's stated goals and then seeing how far a research project can go before it is stopped.

By analysing why and how it gets stopped, the anthropologist and her insider co-researchers gain an understanding of the organisation's controlling processes and disciplinary mechanisms. It also throws light on the positional and personal characteristics of those who want the research to take place and on those of the objectors who manage to stop or disrupt the research. It is sociological discovery through observing anticipated objection (Latour 2000). A recent study commissioned by an innovative element of DFID on the conditions in which high impact could be achieved at low financial cost, and that sought to engage the interest of some other bilateral aid agencies so as to strengthen a heterodox and minority view, was prevented from moving to its second phase because of declared 'other priorities' by the various agencies concerned. I had already anticipated the likelihood of objection once the news of the project reached higher echelons, because of the countervailing nature of the research in an environment where spending more money is an intrinsically good thing.

The most interesting discovery from this aborted research was how much the views of one agency affected those of another. When senior management stopped the project in one organisation, its champions in the other organisations immediately got cold feet. It illustrates the challenges to the international aid system in cultivating alternative ways of thinking and doing in response to the complex problems the system's actors are seeking to tackle. Yet, over a longer period of time, without any further intervention on my part, it appears that the ideas – if not the possibility of the research – are trickling into conversations within the aid system. So, I am learning something about subversive pathways of change.

### *Opportunism*

A location on the threshold looks in several directions at the same time and thus enables an opportunistic approach to research. Methods in support of such opportunism include being responsive as well as pro-active, for example by accepting invitations to mentor busy practitioners and to organise reading weeks where staff are explicitly encouraged to relate what

they read to their own practice. As already mentioned, other methods include organising or participating in practitioner conferences and workshops where issues of power and relationships are placed on the agenda, discussion encouraged and reflections recorded.

Similarly, rather than designing large participatory action research programmes with the specific purpose of critical reflection, as I had attempted on first joining IDS, opportunities can be found through including such a perspective in a research that ostensibly has another objective. For example, the Institute of Development Studies has recently won a tender from DFID to explore issues of women's empowerment. Through engaging staff in international aid organisations from the start in the design of case studies of women's empowerment – and in some instances actually involving them as co-researchers – the research design encourages policy actors' reflective learning.

These methods may be more accessible and appropriate for someone who has been a former senior insider. My erstwhile status makes me an attractive ally to insider practitioners looking for change. But there are also disadvantages. My seniority makes me potentially more of a threat to those wishing to keep aid practice secret, making it very difficult to gain full re-entry wearing a researcher's hat. Younger researchers who are not known to the organisation may find entry easier, although some prior acquaintance would probably be useful.

### *Exploring different ways of knowing*

The different ways of knowing, discussed earlier, offer exciting possibilities for anthropologists to explore ambiguity and shifting identities with those they are studying. Arora-Jonsson and Cornwall provide a fascinating insight into the process and effect of presentational knowing in their account of the occasion in the Sida office when the staff involved in the participatory learning group (*lagom*) decided to go public. They note that what appear to be chaotic forms of learning can catalyse change (2006).

In work with various organisations, I have used the medium of drawings to draw out staff and to let colleagues share their understandings and aspirations about their organisation. A workshop on rights and power for an international aid agency staff explored feelings and experiences of power through drama and mime (Wheeler et al. 2005). At a workshop with Oxfam Great Britain on theories of change, participants were asked to bring their own pictures and poems to illuminate their concepts of change. In China, when discussing with government officials their thoughts and feelings about DFID as an aid partner, I asked them to look

at the traditional pictures associated with the twelve Chinese year characters – monkey, rat, pig, etc. – and identify which character most closely represented their views on DFID.

For reasons not entirely clear to me, these alternative methods appear easier to use in processes of collective second-person inquiry when I am feeling very ignorant of what is happening and unclear as to how I should position myself. Nor do they always work. At a recent informal workshop for Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs, where I asked participants to draw pictures of a day in their life as Minister, one of them angrily informed me that she was not intending to waste her day by pretending to be back at kindergarten.

### *When and whether to publish?*

While the promise not to publish may make powerful organisations more prepared to let anthropologists play a critically constructive role, the cost is very high. It could be argued that one of the constraints to organisational change is the secrecy in which powerful organisations enshroud themselves. With respect to the practice of development organisations, a common complaint of citizens in the South is aid organisations' inaccessibility and lack of transparency. How could we justify research that would not only fail to contribute to the democratisation of knowledge but, precisely because its findings were not made public, might not even achieve its desired aim of organisational change?

In either case, the researchers may be more or less transparent as to their intentions. Certain ethical dilemmas come in the wake of transparency or lack thereof. Can the 'greater public good' be used to justify lack of complete honesty as to one's methods and purpose in circumstances where a powerful organisation may seek to limit access or constrain publication?

Research into large hierarchical organisations poses challenges, associated with how people in the organisation understand the role and purpose of 'knowledge' and the organisational politics that block learning by senior management and make research evidence controversial. An experience of trying to publish a paper based on my action research on aid relationships has led me to enquire whether learning is easier at lower echelons, where senior staff is less interested in the substance of the research and its implications for change.

In considering Weber's comments on secretive bureaucracies, discussed earlier, development organisations may be particularly competent at exercising the privileges of power (as compared, for example, with the private



sector) because of their quasi-religious function whereby power is legitimated by reference to ‘the poor’ for whose sake the organisation exists. Staff commitment to this supreme objective of reducing poverty – the equivalent of ‘saving souls’ – can be used to suppress the efforts of those within the organisation to support research that inquires into failure as well as success.

If there has been a prior process of dialogic inquiry the matter of publication should be easier, particularly if within the organisation the researcher is supported by a strong champion. However, championship and engagement from one part of the organisation may be counterbalanced by resistance from elsewhere, as in the case of the relationships study mentioned earlier. There is clearly no easy solution to the publishing dilemma, even leaving on one side all the other pressures on the liminal academic to publish or perish.

## Conclusion: On the threshold

Because of their politically driven agendas, high moral goals and weak lines of accountability, it is extraordinarily difficult for aid organisations to achieve individual and organisational self-knowledge and the capacity to learn and change. ‘New Public Management’ approaches only help to reinforce a sense of being in control. The exercise of power constrains investing in relationships that would privilege different perspectives and provide new answers to managing the turbulent global political and social environment of which donors are part and which they contribute to creating.

Contributing to global poverty reduction is probably the most challenging task any organisation can set itself. There will never be any ready-made solutions. Aid practitioners are collectively engaged in something never done before in human history. They cannot know the way because they have never travelled it before. This means that asking questions and challenging assumptions is more necessary than finding quick-fix solutions. Encouraging the questioning of certainty and fostering among development researchers and aid practitioners a movement towards greater innovation and exploration is vital. Learning to be comfortable with ambiguity and paradox is an important part of such a process.

The origins of my liminal status lie in my personal history. My current employment in a policy research institute provides the locus to maintain that status. The whole institute hovers on the threshold between academia and the world of development co-operation. It is worth encouraging aca-

demia and governments to recognise the advantages of such institutional arrangements.

It is a moot question whether cultivated and sustained liminality is feasible for anthropologists working on the one hand in a mainstream university environment or on the other as employees of an aid agency. While some of the attributes and actions I have been describing may be out of reach from such locations, much of this paper has dealt with states of mind that with practice can be developed irrespective of local context.

That ‘change happens at the edges’ is an increasingly popular wisdom in support of the advantages of staying on the threshold, in other words developing the critical capacity of an outsider while maintaining an insider’s empathy. Through ethnographic participant observation and principles of co-enquiry with those in the organisation who are seeking to change it, even those who start their research as outsiders should be able to develop a threshold status and perspective, while those who started as insiders can opt not to exit. In so doing, the liminal researcher can play a role in supporting critical learning and reflection by aid agency staff, helping them also to be inside and outside at the same time.

Being on the threshold provides opportunities for seeing the world differently, thus expanding horizons to imagine and possibly act upon new possibilities. A book I used to read with my daughter when she was small concerned the adventures of a small bear that has an unexpected ride in a box on a truck and returns home to tell his mother of all that he has discovered:

*Mama, mama, I've been to town,  
Inside, outside, upside down.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> From Stan and Jan Baranstein, *Inside, Outside, Upside Down*, Bright and Easy Board Books.

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