Ethnographic Research as Social Work Practice: A problematised study of socio-cultural tensions and conflicts experienced by the Orang Asli communities of Tasik Chini, Malaysia

Prof Jonathan Parker and Prof Sara Ashencaen Crabtree  Bournemouth University, UK, and Visiting Professors, Tasik Chini Research Centre, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Introduction

- Background to the ethnography
- Findings
- How might we understand this?
- Linking this to social work, social justice and engaged ethnography
State of Pahang, West Malaysia

[Map showing the location of Tasik Chini within the State of Pahang, West Malaysia]
The beauty of Tasik Chini

Bio-diverse wetlands
Today at Tasik Chini
Destruction and desecration
Who are those responsible?
The kampungs and their people
The study

Ethnography: Condensed - Engaged - Family -

Ethnographic study of Orang Asli at Tasik Chini: – fieldtrips, interviews, focus groups, ethno-philosophy, critical observation & ‘children interviewing children’

Ethical approvals – complex and ‘situational’
A case for engaged ethnography

United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People

Discrimination -
(personal, social & structural)

Development as a means of control & oppression

Misunderstanding and ignorance

Invisibility

Denial of land rights/
lifestyle rights
Problematising the ethnography 1

- ‘outsider’ status and power relations
  - head man (Tok Batin)
  - ‘allowing’ voices
  - positionality

- Value based and ‘engaged’

- Immersion – ‘standing in their shoes’

- ‘Just another researcher’
Why Tasik Chini?

- Little work on Orang Asli of Tasik Chini
- Rebalancing scientific and human in research
Findings

- How the OA are perceived
- Malaysian Gov policies - assimilation
- Struggles for recognition and voice
- Dispossession and poverty traps
- Anger, loss and grief
- Grassroots social activism
- Betrayal and loss of trust
- Capitalism and commoditisation
- The rhetoric of ‘DEVELOPMENT’
- Fear of repercussions
- ‘Representivity’ and staying voiceless
Theorising so far (1)

- Clash of civilisations? (Huntington???)
- Binaries – ‘this or that’, ‘one or the other’ (Levi-Strauss)
  - Modernisation vs traditional
  - Power of size: big industry vs local
  - Voice of individual vs received power
- Globalisation, modernisation, anomie (learned helplessness)
- Liminality – being ‘in-between’ (Turner, van Gennep)
Problematising the ethnography 2

- Restricted time
- Positionality and power (again)
- Discourses of backwardness
  - (‘tell a lie often enough and it becomes the truth’ Lenin/Goebels???)

‘And after all they are just Aslis. Give them some curry puffs, tea and nasi goring and you can just silence them’
A FELDA sponsored ‘house’ for a family of six
Refrigerators as compensation after the floods
A model for just ethnographic social work practice
Theorising so far (2) - Things to resist: towards dialectics

- Illegitimised truths, conflict: Marxist perspectives

- Hegemony of isomorphic tendencies (DiMaggio & Powell)

- Dialectics – conflict to new ways of being

Conflict and homogenisation and alternative approaches to resolution can lead to change
Positionality and reflexivity

Mandate and permissions – start with the person
  Whose agenda?
  Parameters and timescales of the work

Dealing with the social and the structural

Situation ethics
Social justice/social work and engaged ethnography?

‘AESThETICS’

- Activism and social research
- Ethics and social research
- Social justice and post-post-colonial research
- Theorising for better practice
- Empowering communities
- Training and education
- Inclusion
- Criticality
- Support