

«Most of all, it was a school for life»

Working with farmers in the field to experience daily life and hot summers, hanging out with youth in the Friday nightclub, interviewing milk producers about their choices and market conditions: Doing ethnographic fieldwork is about emerging oneself in other lifeworlds.



*First-hand experience:
Silvana Liniger worked
on a farm in the
Entlebuch region.*

■ PETER BILLE LARSEN, SILVANA LINIGER,
PASCALE STEIGER AND EVELINE VOETS

This summer, three students from the anthropology department undertook several weeks of fieldwork in the UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch. The Anthropology Department of the University of Lucerne has established an on-going research and training partnership with the Biosphere. This field excursion – preceded by an intensive period of methodology training and fieldwork preparations throughout the spring semester – sought to consolidate the area as a long-term field-site for the department and give the students first-hand experience. Compared to conventional field excursions, the emphasis of the Anthropology Department is to facilitate field immersion through homestays, allowing the participants to observe everyday life. In Entlebuch, we combined lodging at the Biosphere headquarters with homestays among

families. In the following, the three students talk about their research project and their experiences.

«Now I feel more prepared»

Silvana Liniger: My research focuses on the label «Echt Entlebuch», a label of the UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch, seen from the perspective of different producers and farmers. I stayed at the Biosphere headquarters in Schüpfheim, where I got a room, and afterwards I went to stay with a farmer family. First I struggled with the new situation, but each new contact and interview helped me to get more into my research topic. Generally, I made interviews with farmers, producers and people knowledgeable about the issue. They were very kind and cooperative. People showed me their factories, their shops or their farms. I got a look inside the realities of pasta production, bakeries, dairy production, and husbandry. In addition to the theoretical side of field research, actual fieldwork gave me important practical insights about the practice of ethnography.

The fieldwork excursion was a very good experience. To be in a new place and confront oneself with research questions, contacts and making interviews was a good opportunity to reflect upon what research is about. For me it was a chance to prepare myself and work in a small group accompanied by the lecturer from the university. It was a good opportunity to have a look inside how real fieldwork can be and to get some first-hand practical experience. After this course, I feel more prepared and certain about undertaking fieldwork and look forward to another interesting opportunity.

«Quite hard work!»

Pascale Steiger: My research focuses on images of women and how they manage the relationship between work and family using Judith Butler's idea of gender performance. I lived with a farming family near Schüpfheim helping out with work on the farm, in the garden and the house. Taking part in their lives helped me immensely to get accepted and for people to open up. I wrote a diary every day and took field notes, which I had with me in my farmer's pants. For my ethnography I wrote descriptions of people, places and their vocabulary and made little maps of the house and the village. I conducted several in-depth interviews with people from different generations, social backgrounds and roles in society.

It was quite hard work at first because you need to get to know the people and their way of life. It was also a bit difficult to get interview contacts at first. But towards the end that just began to flow. It's a beautiful village and the people are extremely nice and liked to help where they could. I missed sleeping a bit because I got up (every day) at 6.30 am to work in the stables! But

the family also gave me time for myself and helped me getting contacts. But most of all, it was a school of life here. You're happy with what you have and work hard every day. But even though it's a hard life, they're happier people than anyone I've known so far. It was a great experience and I learned a lot about life. But you shouldn't underestimate fieldwork. It's really hard work! But it gets better every day and you experience unique situations. If there's a possibility on a great topic or a great or interesting location, I'll consider it again.

«A unique insight»

Eveline Voets: My research focuses on the question of integration. The opportunity of going into the field was both very exciting and frightening at the same time. Exciting because of the chance to have [a small] taste of what it can mean to do ethnographic fieldwork, frightening because my theoretical and methodological baggage was still at a minimum. Luckily, our group worked together closely to prepare for the trip. Looking back at the experience, I can only say it was fantastic. One of the key elements in Anthropology is about living with and among people.

This gave the research so much more depth and meaning. People not only tell you their stories, you personally live and experience it with them. Living with this Swiss family, participating in their hard labor, in their leisure time, in their little struggles, in their moments of joy... gave me a unique insight into life in the countryside. I also had the opportunity to talk to different migrants, who were brave enough to share with me their unbelievable and horrifying stories about fleeing from their homelands and arriving in a new and unknown country. No doubt I'll do some more fieldwork in the future. I definitely felt my lack of theoretic and methodological experience. I have the feeling that with this experience I can make a more focused choice of courses that will prepare me for my next opportunity to go «into the field».

Peter Bille Larsen, PhD is lecturer at the Department of Anthropology. Silvana Liniger, Pascale Steiger and Eveline Voets study anthropology at the University of Lucerne.

The students talk about their experiences at the Anthropology colloquium, taking place on 17 September, 5.15 pm, University of Lucerne, room 3.B57.

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