Understanding Social Roles in a Continuum: An Experience From Two Cultural Groups in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Based on an ethnographic fieldwork experience among two culturally different ethnic groups in Ethiopia, this article proposes an understanding of social roles in the field in a continuum. The two groups are known as Gumuz and Agaw. In my fieldwork with the Gumuz, I was an “outsider” and the Gumuz social boundary did not allow me to socialize unless through a certain institution known as mijim. In my fieldwork with the Agaw, I was an insider because I was born and grew up among this community. The Agaw social boundary was so open and, contrary to the Gumuz, I had to resist social roles. I propose that arguments that are advocated by scholars on extreme sides of taking or refusing social roles based on perceived advantages or disadvantages are untenable. Social roles are complex because social and cultural contexts do vary and are also complex. I argue that blanket suggestions of either acceptance or refusal of social roles cannot yield successful fieldwork. A social role is a continuum and fieldworkers fall on the line the fieldwork contexts require, and the use of them depends on personal skills of a researcher.

Keywords

social roles, social structure, fieldwork, Agaw, Gumuz, Ethiopia

Introduction

Any society whether “complex” or “simple,” no matter how “dynamic” or “static” has social structures. The structures are made up of statuses and roles. People occupy statuses but play roles (Macionis, 2017). Thus, status is a position in a social structure, but a role involves thought and action. And people differ in how well they play the roles that go with various statuses they occupy (see Bennett & Sani, 2004; Geldenhuys & Bosch, 2019; Lopez & Scott, 2000). Women who hold the social or cultural status of “mother” are expected to act or not act in particular ways—play a role—in line with expectations of motherhood from a given society or culture, unlike women who are not mothers. To be a teacher, a doctor, a religious or ritual leader is to occupy social or cultural status so named, and there are particular ways of behaving—playing a role—for each according to their status. There has been a growing interest among scholars in the topic of social roles (Bell, 2019; Hanson & Richards, 2017; Johnson et al., 2006; Kloß, 2017; Snow et al., 1986; Tinney, 2008). However, as discussed in the next section of this article, whether and to what extent ethnographers should accept a social role during their fieldwork still remains debatable. Some advocate that ethnographers can benefit from role flexibility, whereas others warn that ethnographers should maintain a clear boundary between social and scientific roles.

In this article, I aim to contribute to the discussion of social roles in the ethnographic fieldwork based on my experience of research among the Gumuz and Agaw ethnic groups in northwest Ethiopia. Gumuz and Agaw are ethnic groups that represent a radically different level of cultural familiarity and belongingness to me. I believe that the two fieldwork contexts are comparable in importance to contribute to our discussion on social roles. First, I will review some anthropologists’ works to summarize the debate on appreciation or disapproval of taking social roles based on perceived advantages or disadvantages. I argue that blanket suggestions of either acceptance or refusal of social roles cannot yield successful fieldwork. A social role is a continuum and fieldworkers fall on the line the fieldwork contexts require, and the use of them depends on personal skills of a researcher.

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Before I close this introductory section, I want to make a couple of remarks. The first one is with regard to concepts relating to “social” and “cultural” roles. What is “cultural” and what is “social”? For the purpose of this article, for example, “motherhood” in a traditional community can be cultural status, and acting in accordance with expectations from such a mother is a cultural role. On the contrary, a “doctor” in a modern hospital can be an example of social status, and the way he or she acts accordingly can be a social role. However, there is no strict boundary. From here on, I take “social roles” and “social status” to be broader concepts which also include a cultural status and cultural roles, respectively.

Another point is about the place of “social roles” in relation to other research concepts, particularly participant observation. When I talk about social roles, I am talking about participant observation. In a particular sense, I am talking about a particular mode of participant observation, an in-depth participant observation that requires assuming a social role of culture for the benefit of one’s ethnographic research. How a researcher can make participant observation has been debatable in the literature, and the idea of social roles is a piece of advice to a mode of participant observation where an ethnographer should involve himself or herself in participation, in a structural rather than incidental way. Adler and Adler (1987, p. 8) said, “Critical to these roles, which differentiate them from mere observational forms of field research, is their insider affiliation, that researchers take on a membership status” (emphasis in original).

**Formally or Socially Prescribed Roles?**

Many scholars argue taking social roles as an ethnographer is a disadvantage for fieldwork. An old theory against social roles for researchers is an argument that states assuming social roles leads an ethnographer to overfamiliarity with the roles, and this, in turn, will lead to oversight and losing important data and eventually to reliance on certain participants (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Gold, 1958). A similar long-held theory is that social role responsibility will lead to subjectivity and bias. This line of the argument states that the potential bias can arise from too close an affiliation with research subjects. The more a researcher is assimilated to research subjects, the more the risk of subjectivity and bias, characteristics which are inherent to any person (Allen, 2004; Borbasi et al., 2005). What is more, dual role as natives and their role as researchers may create difficulties (Gold, 1958; Mulhall, 2003). Indeed, a researcher cannot assume the two roles equally without one compromising another. Hence, it is argued that one cannot be a complete participant as the virtue of being a researcher limits complete participation and vice versa (Cudmore & Sondermeyer, 2007; Mulhall, 2003). Finally, scholars argue that assuming a role may not be always and fully possible or valued in some research environments like working with elite workers (Pope, 2005).

Based on this argument, scholars who are against assuming social roles advise researchers to keep clear boundaries or face the problem of mixing up even what are and are not data because the interaction with the world under study may be a mix of personal and professional (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). For example, Pawluch et al. (2005) warn that “It’s okay to be a helper, but don’t adopt the role of a worker” (p. 95; emphasis in original). According to Pawluch et al., researchers should resist assimilation to social roles, for instance, by “giving repeated verbal reminders” to their host community.

On the contrary, many scholars argue that taking social roles in the field is an important strategy for successful fieldwork. Shuttleworth (2004), from his own research experience among disabled people, advocates that “role flexibility both enriched my understanding of the sexual situation of disabled men and led me to question the conceptual assumption of both disability studies and anthropology” (p. 46). Wade (1984) conducted research on Black students whose academic and social conditions differ from those of the White ones. Wade’s experience focused on shifting roles (i.e., “switching hats”) in the field relationships with her study subjects. Wade went to study the sociocultural and academic experiences of Black students at the University of Pennsylvania. Students who knew her as a university official posed her different expectations beyond her preplanned role as a researcher. Moreover, as a Black staff of the university, the Black students among whom she was doing the research posed some expectations based on the same racial allegiance. In dilemmatic choices between her original role as a researcher and new roles as per expectations from the students, she was “switching hats” from her role as a researcher to that of an official, a teacher, an informant, and an administrator. Many researchers (e.g., Briggs, 1970; Freedman, 1970; Lydall, 1998) have also written on the advantages of taking social roles based on their experiences.

Ethnographers who are in favor of taking social roles criticize that existing knowledge emphasizes formally defined role choices (Wade, 1984). The literature tries to equip researchers with a defined set of formal roles they are recommended to follow. However, the formal approach may not be necessarily fruitful. Researchers can get defined roles for them by a host community, and thus one-way definition may not always be effective. To be able to be equipped with scientific, formal procedures of researcher roles alone may not always be adequate for successful fieldwork. Researchers need to also prepare themselves for the roles that would be assigned by the subjects and should follow flexible approaches. The social role may not be always defined in a way researchers in the fieldwork choose what it must be, but it would also be what the subjects choose it should be.
From *shuwa* to *mijim*: My Experience Among the Gumuz

From 2008 to 2010, I did ethnographic fieldwork in northwest Ethiopia to study the dynamics of an interethnic relation between the Gumuz and the Agaw (otherwise known as Awi), two ethnic groups who share contiguous and mixed settlement in this region. It was the research intended to investigate a changing pattern of interethnic relations between the two groups, particularly in the context of changing political structure in Ethiopia since 1995. The Ethiopian ethnic federalism enshrined in the 1995 Constitution entitles a certain ethnic group a fixed territory as well as all respective political, cultural, and economic rights while largely excluding other groups living in the same territory officially designated to those specific ethnic groups (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995, p. 12). This has affected the mode of interethnic relation of groups that had lived before 1995 when rights and entitlements had not been based on ethnic identification.

The Gumuz and Agaw have different cultures in every sense of the term. The Gumuz speak a Nilo-Saharan language, whereas the Agaw speak a Cushitic one. The Gumuz religion is traditionally based on a belief system where there are multiple spirits for various natural objects and concrences such as rivers, trees, rain, and sun. Under all spirits, there is a supreme god known as *rebba*, otherwise called *mussa* (Amsalu, 2015). On the contrary, the Agaw follow the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Gumuz dietary choice is very wide whereas the Agaw have restricted food habits guided by Judaico-Christian religion. The Gumuz have darker complexion whereas the Agaw are browner. The Gumuz are traditionally shifting cultivators whereas the Agaw are settled agriculturalists. The two groups have a mixed history of hostility and friendly relations. The ethnic federalism since 1995 has designated the Gumuz and Agaw different but contiguous territorial administrative units so that each group has a measure of autonomy and rights only in the respective territory designated to each of them. This means that new Gumuz minorities were created in the territory officially designated to Agaw and vice versa, each newly created minority having not the same right as the group to which the territory is officially designated. This situation has exacerbated conflict between the two groups who had already a very wide cultural difference and associated conflicts traditionally occurring due to cultural differences (Amsalu, 2016).

To collect data for this research, I had to socialize myself with both Agaw and Gumuz ethnic groups having strikingly different cultures and languages as indicated in the above paragraph. Although it was easy for me to socialize with the Agaw because I am an Ethiopian who grew up among this group, it was not so with the Gumuz. I will discuss my fieldwork experience with the Agaw in the section next to this one as this section is dedicated to my experience with the Gumuz.

During my childhood, I was told that the Gumuz were “aggressive,” and this notion, at least to some extent, was also in my mind when I went for the fieldwork. Traditionally, the Gumuz practice honor killings where a male member of the Gumuz has to kill a male person from another clan or another ethnic group. The more they kill, the more honor would they accumulate. Moreover, there were cultures of payback killing. In this culture, usually, death or injury committed by family members against other family members is revenged. Payback has survived until my fieldwork and is still practiced, which led to conflicts between the Gumuz family and clan members or between the Gumuz and other non-Gumuz ethnic groups called *shuwa*. This culture seemed to be very unfavorable to my fieldwork in 2010 and had expected challenges that could even stop me from doing the fieldwork.

However, this Gumuz culture is only one aspect. No matter how hostile they may seem especially for outsiders, they also had a very profound and reliable social structure of befriending and accommodating outsiders. Indeed, different societies have different ways of handling acquaintances and relationships with people “outside” their culture. As cross-cultural contact is inevitable, it is also inevitable to find implicit or explicit rules of a culture governing the relationship between its people and that of “outsiders.” Such social relationship rules may range from mere rejection to an inclusion (Tsega, 2006; Amsalu, 2016, pp. 40–41; Wondim, 2018). The fear I had when I went to the fieldwork among the Gumuz also gradually dissipated because of a social structure the Gumuz had to accommodate me by means of assigning some set of role expectations.

To begin with, among the Gumuz, any outsider is at first contact glossed into a category of people called *shuwa*. The Gumuz classify human beings into two categories. The first is *shuwa* and the second *biga*. *Shuwa* refers to the category of people who have a relatively fairer complexion. *Biga*, on the contrary, refers to the Gumuz who have relatively dark skins. So the category is apparently guided by color difference. It is the label used to dichotomize between the Gumuz, *biga* who are “black” and *shuwa* who are the so-called “red,” including the Amhara, Agaw, Oromo, and Shinasha ethnic groups which live somehow mixed with or contiguous to the Gumuz. The dichotomy is, however, more profound than its mere suggestion to the color. Historically, the category *shuwa* is associated with domination. There is a widespread narrative in the Ethiopian history about the Gumuz and other peoples having been dominated by Amhara, Agaw, and Oromo who directly or indirectly spearheaded the Ethiopian state formation in the northwest and incorporation of the Gumuz into the Ethiopian state (Abdussamad, 1995; Pankhurst, 1997; Taddesse, 1988). This domination is believed to have been culminated in 1995 when a new government led by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced “radical” ethnic federalism (Turton, 2006, p. 1). *Shuwa* and *biga*
thus suggest historical inequality. Yet, the dichotomy also suggests, though rapidly changing since 1995, a social and cultural hierarchy between the two groups of people. There is a belief that the biga belong to a “less civilized” group, whereas the shuwa are “superior” (Amsalu, 2016).

When I arrived in the field on September 2010, I entered into the social structure where there is no category for a role as a researcher. At first contact, I could not help but be just identified with the shuwa, the term loaded with such political and social meanings discussed above. The fact that one is labeled shuwa means, traditionally, the Gumuz would at best ignore him or her, or at worst, they are good spearmen and would kill one. The level of hostility depends on some temporary aggravating circumstances. The hostility against shuwa may sometimes be worsened during or after a recent conflict between the two communities. I entered into the fieldwork in 2010 a few months after a certain conflict between the two groups had occurred, but the effect of such conflicts was observable even during my fieldwork. For me, it was frustrating not to get access to informants I wanted to interview or not to get elaborate answers even when I was successful to meet some informants. A reference to shuwa appeared in formal or informal conversations of the Gumuz with my translator who was striving to establish a rapport with proposed interviewees.

The good news is there were cross-cultural institutions that were working even in those situations of misunderstanding. These institutions existed on both the Agaw and the Gumuz sides. The Agaw used the term wodaj to approach the Gumuz. Wodaj is an Amharic word that refers to a person having an “acquaintance” with another. In the usage by the Agaw, it refers to a person’s relationship with the Gumuz group members, just at the level of acquaintance. Individuals, one of whom is a Gumuz and another a shuwa, may come to know each other in an occasion such as in a marketplace and subsequently meet repeatedly. In the form of a salutation, these persons would just call each other “wodaj” (Tsega, 2006; Amsalu, 2016, p. 41; Wondim, 2018). It is a slight and none or less institutionalized acquaintance between a Gumuz and an outsider. In market days and walking through villages guided by my research assistant, I started to exercise using the term wodaj, which helped me open the door for the first level of creating a harmonious relationship with my informants. Yet, at this stage of the integration, a “stranger” would enjoy only casual greetings, receive an approach in a familiar spirit, and could have avoided any danger of having been attacked. However, there is not yet a heartfelt and institutionalized friendship created, and hence not much trusted is the affiliation. The importance of this stage of relationship for anthropological fieldwork by an “outsider” may be the fact that one can collect data from mere occasional and informal conversations with one’s Gumuz wodaj.

There is still more good news, however. There is another most intimate relationship one can create with the Gumuz, called mijim. Mijim is an institution from the Gumuz. It is a friendship between two individuals or families, one of which is a shuwa and another a Gumuz. It is the stage where the Gumuz turns to “outsiders” rather than turning on them. Mijim refers to a kind of intense and trusted relationship between a shuwa and a Gumuz, both at the level of individual friends and their respective family. Although the wodaj relationship may be temporary, mijim is established on the basis of the conviction that it would last forever. A relationship that would begin as a casual acquaintance may grow to a mijim relationship. These mechanisms of friendship are, though in most cases briefly, featured in several studies (Amsalu, 2016; Tsega, 2002, 2006; Wondim, 2018).

Any interested “outsider” may take any opportunity to introduce him or her with a Gumuz and establish a mijim relationship. After an expression of interest by the former has been accepted by the latter, a date is fixed to organize a ceremonial event symbolizing the formation of a mijim relationship. On this day, five elders from both sides are nominated to witness the ceremony. Both sides contribute materials for a feast of the event. The “outsider” who requested the relationship may present to the event anything he can (it is the male members who form this relationship), usually a goat or chicken to slaughter. On the other side, the Gumuz usually present bordy (a traditional Gumuz drink), foods, and other local items. In the event, the chicken or goat (whichever the initiator can offer) is slaughtered. As the blood from an animal flows, both parties join their thumb, plunge them into the blood, and then shake each other. This symbolizes the fact that the two persons are tied by blood and no situation that may break the survival of their relationship be accepted. They both take an oath each pledging to maintain the bond with the other. From this day on, the mijim relationship is expected to remain securely fixed and passed down to the generations of both families.

There is a strong social role expectation of mutual support among the persons in mijim relationship. A general trend is that an “outsider” would present the Gumuz cloths, salt, and any other items which are not found in the Gumuz culture or market to the Gumuz mijim counterpart. This is how the highland “modern” culture and social activities, such as those mentioned just above, spread to the Gumuz lowlanders. On the contrary, the Gumuz mijim would usually give land to his mijim. Following ethnic federalism in 1995, one of the contestations by the Gumuz against the shuwa, in general, and the Agaw, in particular, is that the latter has possessed the Gumuz land by taking advantage of the mijim relationship. This does not mean that the mijim relationship was just founded on economic interests. In the case of war and insecurity, the Agaw and the Gumuz mijims had to protect each other. For example, an informant to Amsalu (2016) stated,

. . . .the Gumuz family brought their children to the Agaw [mijim] home when they were nominated for enslaving. The holes were dug in the coop with the size and length of the
proposed slaves. The wooden planks were placed over them. Over the planks, the place was cooped and the goats and sheep were kept over it. When the raiders come, they check the entire home to find the fugitives. They check for all corners and went back without finding one who had been hidden in the coop hole. They [the Agaw mijim] also used to hide the children in a granary, bed floor, and other secret places. (p. 96)

As a researcher who was able to establish a mijim relationship, I fulfilled expectations by buying clothes and small food items such as salt and sugar to the Gumuz family with whom I created the relationship. The Gumuz mijim also invited me to his home, and I enjoyed foods and drinks offered to me abundantly. The relationship would become full of gifts and caring. What matters was not the size of a gift, but how to learn to respond. This does not mean that some violations of role expectations did not occur. But they were even positively interpreted, and one would enjoy the Gumuz teaching social roles to an apprentice mijim. The relationship also offered me protection from any risk of getting attacked by other Gumuz villagers. The mijim would be around me during the fieldwork, introducing me throughout villages and offering me security. In a few weeks, I enjoyed the relationship with the Gumuz during the fieldwork, growing from a mere shuwa to a mijim. The relationship offered openness for interviews not only with the mijim themselves but also with other Gumuz interviewees whom I was introduced through my mijim.

Fieldwork Among the Agaw: “nexuasu”

Being a cultural insider, born and grown in the community, I was often called “nexuasu,” in Agaw language, the term used to show my belongingness to this community. This status unconditionally allowed me to be involved in the everyday lives of the local people. I received warm and intense treatments as a person who was part of this community, but had changed residence and came back as a guest to visit home. Many families invited me to a local coffee ceremony and to various types of ceremonies such as a wedding. I was expected to take part not only in the events of happiness but also in funerals of the locals. When I refused their invitation or failed to participate in local events, I was labeled to have been changed. Community members while talking with me would remember a virtue of respect that they had to my parents for good upbringing of their children including me. But when I failed to meet their expectations, the community members thought I had forgotten how to behave well like in my early days, or some thought I was not willing or did not care to behave the way I behaved before I left the area. Many even expected behaving a little better because this time I was educated, and more educated means more bigness.

Being a person who has been educated and earning money also means the community expected more from me. Some members of the community expected gifts such as cloths or anticipated to give them money. Others asked me help. Some of them asked me to take some of their unemployed youth and find a job for them in Ethiopia’s capital city where I reside. Some also requested me to take the informants themselves to their migrant youth sons and daughters living in Addis Ababa (Amsalu, 2019). These role expectations were not based on the fact that I was a researcher. The community expected me to take these roles because I was a member of the community. These expectations were made from a member of the community who was educated and earning money, from someone considered better off and is expected to give for those in need at home.

The immersion into the community was not correspondingly rewarding to my scientific role but creating stress because I was not doing enough on my other role. The more I tried to meet local people’s expectations, it became expensive and time-consuming. The price of the social roles, be in terms of time or logistics, was more than the price for the data I was trying to collect. I was collecting data amid these social engagements. In response to my questions, some told me what they considered “secrets” because I was an insider entitled to know them. Some took for granted that I know many of the things I was asking them to tell me. Some also suggested I was there to visit them and anything like work could be done in my office. Social relations often distracted my effort to get specific data for what I was prepared to collect. Amid all these situations, data sometimes appeared to be confusing and incomplete.

When I was doing the social role in excess that was not really contributing to my effort to data collection, I tried to keep an intense balance. I resisted assimilation and cut some of the social roles. Many times I avoided social responsibilities, like attending funerals of people whom I knew a long time ago and attending celebrations in neighborhoods. I provided repeated “verbal reminders” as Pawluch et al. (2005, p. 95) suggested, explaining my role as a researcher, and that is what I was paid for. I even changed villages to where I am less known or unknown. As a researcher, and that is what I was paid for. I even changed villages to where I am less known or unknown. Yet, I did not have any readily available “science” for balancing the two roles. It just required skill and a sense of weight control. The act of balancing requires understanding the cultural context of the people and knowing what to say and not to say to balance because resisting roles may lead to misunderstanding on the part of the locals. The resources I use to balance among the Agaw and that of the Gumuz could not be likewise the same given my position in the two communities and cultural difference in how the two communities would interpret what I say or behave for balancing.
Social Role Along a Continuum, Not Category

The above fieldwork contexts presented two contrasting scenarios. In my fieldwork with the Gumuz, I wanted, rather than resisted, social roles. Instead of the social role assignments coming to me, I have gone to them. I asked them to give me a certain role through mijim so that I can be integrated to do my work as a researcher. For me, it was a necessary decision to avoid the risk of getting blocked from undertaking intended research. Yet, as my experience among the Gumuz tells me, my new identity in the field as someone who is a mijim did not swallow or even overwhelm my identity as, say, a shuwa. Nor were my roles completely shifted into the natives. The fact that I have the status of mijim did not automatically entitle me access to everything about the Gumuz. My integration was still limited and I did not really fear the risk of getting swallowed by the community roles and compromising my work as a researcher. Mijim is only a limited aspect of the different statuses and roles one may assume. In the fieldwork, I rather wished to take more status and more roles, to push the boundary deeper into the social structure of the Gumuz.

However, my fieldwork experience with the Agaw was radically different from that of the Gumuz. My affiliation changed from “outsider” among the Gumuz to “insider” among the Agaw, better say, from complete outsider to complete insider. I moved from extremely closed social field to extremely open.

Both being too rigid and too open for social roles are not desirable to a successful fieldwork. To begin with, it is time-consuming. Being too closed, by the choice of the researcher himself or for host community social structure, does not allow spending time on social roles and may affect the original plan. Being too flexible also consumes time because a researcher is expected to spend significant time in social roles than research. Being on either side of the extremes also incurs economic cost. As researchers are involved in the social life of the community, they have to meet societal requirements which may incur economic costs which are not in an original plan. Besides, social roles may sometimes assign only a submissive role—expect role only from the subjects. All this has an impact on our role as researchers in the field. Being on either side of extremes denies the chance for enriching one’s data as one is confined to a specifically prescribed social role, is immersed into too much role, or is not assigned any role at all. Being on either side also creates a possibility for subjectivity for too much or too little association of researchers with the subjects may influence them to subjectivity, misunderstanding, or lack of understanding of data.

As discussed earlier in this article, scholars still debate on whether a researcher should resist or welcome social roles depending on perceived advantages and disadvantages. These arguments are framed on extreme sides of social roles, fixed at taking or avoiding them. The fact that social roles can lead to “total assimilation,” poor data quality, and too much time consumption depends on fieldwork context. Let alone assimilation, some level of integration was difficult if we take my experience with the Gumuz. On the contrary, that social boundary was open for me among the Agaw does not mean the field is not limited to me. Even if I had a maximum level of social roles, I could not have access to all aspects of knowledge. For example, one’s access to the social world is limited by one’s gender.

The consequences of the categorization of social roles are distortion of the importance or otherwise disadvantage of them. In the social world of fieldwork, the situation is more complex and sometimes requires individual decisions based on one’s identity and the fieldwork realities. Social roles should not be reduced to taking or not taking them in the field but making an informed decision based on fieldwork realities. It is important to be flexible to the extent possible and to the extent necessary. Disadvantages or advantages of social roles can be overcome or made use of by ethnographers’ personal skills, adaptability, and negotiation. Either to be distanced from them or get assimilated into local roles is not tenable in practice for researchers. Depending on how we are able and willing to use it, it seems to me that controlling the level of social role fluidity or rigidity is one of the most powerful techniques in conducting successful anthropological fieldwork.

Conclusion

Categorical debate on whether to take or not take social roles has significantly featured in the ethnographic studies since early times. Scholars often talked about insider versus outsider, taking or not taking social roles, subjectivity versus objectivity of data, and total assimilation versus resistance. This binary division is inappropriate because ethnographers cannot, for example, live the way the natives live because they cannot be natives, or they cannot completely refrain from social roles because that would have a negative impact on the fieldwork itself. A social role is a continuum and fieldworkers fall on the line the fieldwork contexts require. We cannot rigidly prescribe behavior toward social roles; if so, we end up debating semantics without addressing the real fieldwork situations. Taking or rejecting social roles in the field is not as simple as one may argue in the article. Social roles are the best researchers can do, depending on a given situation.

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