

WHAT IS ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH?

An interview with Jean Lave by Steinar Kvale

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Abstract

An interview about anthropological research with Jean Lave by Steinar Kvale is presented. The interview focuses on Jean Lave's anthropological field work on apprenticeship among Liberian tailors. It pursues issues such as whether there is an anthropological "method", the practicalities of doing field work, including the use of interviews, the role of interpretation and theory in empirical work in the field, and the issue of subjectivity in reporting anthropological studies.

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The interview to be presented here provides an example of one form of qualitative research - anthropological field work, as driven by a quest for understanding the social phenomenon of learning through apprenticeship.

Jean Lave is professor of education at the School of Education at University of California at Berkeley. She has conducted anthropological field studies in Brazil and Liberia. And she has studied mundane daily activities in California, such as dieting and grocery shopping for "best buys" in the supermarket, and thereby moved the analysis of one particular form of cognitive activity - arithmetic problem solving - out of the laboratory and the classroom into the domain of everyday life (reported in "Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics, and Culture in Everyday Life", 1988). The study results in a vision of cognition as the dialectic between persons-acting and the settings in which their activity is constituted. This approach is further developed with Etienne Wenger in the book "Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation" (1991), here viewing agent, activity and world as mutually constitutive. Learning is quintessentially social in character: it is a process of participation in communities in practice. The book analyses different forms of apprenticeship as a social practice, including the tailoring studies treated in the following interview.

Steinar Kvale is professor of educational psychology, and director of the Centre of Qualitative Research, at the University of Aarhus. He has pursued the development of qualitative research methods, in particular the interview, e.g. "The qualitative research interview - a phenomenological and a hermeneutical mode of understanding" (1983).

The interview took place in June 1991 at the conclusion of a research course for phd students on "Anthropological studies of learning" taught by Jean Lave at the Centre of Qualitative Research. The interview was taped and transcribed, and is here reproduced in its original form, with minor linguistic changes and a few retrospective clarifications by the interviewee.

While the interview in our opinion speaks for itself, we find that the comments from one of the anonymous reviewers of the interview gives an apt introduction, and they are here reproduced with permission:

There is a good deal of interest -- as Jean Lave suggests at the end of the interview -- in ethnographic methods generally and "anthropological techniques" in particular. The strength of the interview is its explication of "anthropological research" and the illustrations of just what "research" implies for Jean Lave. There are some quite general properties of her discussion as well as some rather idiosyncratic, person-specific touches and particularistic, topic-specific matters. The "techniques" (field journal, note cards, piles and files of materials, etc.) are perhaps less general.

The interview quite usefully adds to our understanding of qualitative work. This concerns especially Jean Lave's comments on preparation for the field and the importance of building up a local history: the remarks on the early days in the field (and their relevance and irrelevance): the need to build a rather holistic understanding of what is happening in the community of interest (even if such understandings are not central to the analytic aims of the project): the importance of pushing for conceptual organization and insight during the fieldwork phases of research (as opposed to simply "collecting data" to be unpacked and understood back home, after the data are, so to speak, "in"): and the quite important idea that fieldwork moves at a "slow pace" and to a large extent cannot be hurried along without paying a price (and once this is understood, many questions related to objectivity/subjectivity, validity, distortion, etc. melt away).

These points are important to an understanding of ethnographically-sound techniques yet are often misunderstood (or breached) by qualitative researchers. They are not argued in this interview, but put forth in a conversational fashion and, as a result, have a persuasive force without the downpour of famous names, references, philosophical/epistemological arguments, disciplinary logic etc.

What comes across well is the relation-dependent aspects of Jean Lave's work and the dedication to empirical detail and understanding that mark her work. And while she says clearly in the beginning of the interview that the notion of a "anthropological method" is nonsense, there is still the sense that a method is being laid out for the reader, while implicitly acknowledging a great deal of variety in anthropological research.

SK: Is there an anthropological method? and if so, how would you describe it?

JL: I think it is complete nonsense to say that we have a method. First of all I don't think that anyone should have a method. But in the sense that there are "instruments" that characterize the "methods" of different disciplines -- sociological surveys, questionnaire methods, in psychology various kinds of tests and also experiments -- there are some very specific technical ways of inquiring into the world. Anthropologists refuse to take those as proper ways to study human being. I think the most general view is that the only instrument that is sufficiently complex to comprehend and learn about human existence is another human. And so what you use is your own life and your own experience in the world.

SK: What do you actually do? You have been doing anthropological studies in the area in Brazil, Africa, and even in Southern California. I would like to try to get to how you start and how you collect your data. The

first thing I want to ask you is: When you start a project, what do you do? Do you as the first step take a plane and land in the jungle and go out knowing nothing? Or do you spend half a year in the library at the university and read everything about the people you are visiting? What do you do before you get out in the field?

JL: Anthropologists are expected to choose a field area, and to become deeply knowledgeable about it. The field area might be West Africa or Africa south of the Sahara, or Brazil or something like that and you read everything you can find in anthropological studies. And nowadays, thank goodness, also all the historical materials you can find. And more and more in anthropology there is an emphasis on trying to build your analysis of current ways of life out of your understanding of the past and it's changing character -- what it has been through time. And you must also learn to speak the language, so you will spend at least a year studying a language before you go to the field.

That is the way you are supposed to do it. I have done it in another way myself which I think is funny and certainly embarrassing. But I think it is also part of the real way that real research gets done. I first went to Liberia because I read a book manuscript that Michael Cole had produced about his research in Liberia. I disagreed with some arguments in it, and we had long discussions together about it and he sort of said: "If you think you know how to do it better why don't you do it?" And I said: "Sure, I would like that." So I went to Liberia.

The first time I went to Liberia, I didn't know anything about it, except this manuscript of his that I had criticised. I spent a few weeks and I just tried to soak up a feeling for the place, I thought it was an interesting place, I thought the people were fascinating. And I felt excited about the thought of spending two, three or five years of my life there. It looked like there were productive problems that I could work on about the relations between apprenticeship and schooling and how people come to know and think. It was clear that there was so much that could be done that it would make sense to do it. I went home and spent months reading about Liberia. Then I went back and spent six months. I went home again and analysed that material for months and months, then went back again for three months. I repeated this twice more. And that was the way I did that field project.

SK: When you started on that field project, what did you do the first day?

JL: One of the reasons for doing field trips is that you are presented with how abstract is the most concrete of your concepts and questions when you are at home in the library. When I first went to Brazil, for example, I made my way 2,000 miles into north central Brazil and I arrived in a small Brazilian town, 15 km from the Indian village I was trying to find. I heard that there were Indians who actually were in town. This was incredibly exciting. I rushed out and walked around town until I found this group of Indians. I walked up to them, and then I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say, "Have you got moiety systems?" (a division, through kinship or ceremonial relations, of a community into two parts). And it did not make sense to do that. In fact it took four months to find a way to ask a question to discover from people that they did have moiety systems.

I would say, it takes 3 or 4 months of simply living in a community before you become someone who people are comfortable to see and who they think of as kind of a friend.

SK: The Liberian tailors, you were spending time with, how did you get to know them?

JL: I got to Liberia. There was an acquaintance of an acquaintance who had a cousin who was a tailor in an uptown tailorshop. So I got the acquaintance's acquaintance's cousin to take me to that shop and I sat there for two or three days. I asked if I could just sit and watch what was going on and talk to people. Later I asked: "Are there other tailors?" and they said: "You ought to try Happy Corner," which turned out to be a little dirt path lined with 20 tailor shops at the very edge of the commercial district of Monrovia. And so I got a tailor to take me down there and introduce me to a cousin of his. It is through "cousins", basically, that one penetrates into new social worlds. Cousins, and cousins of cousins. So again, I arrived at the Tailors' alley through a personal introduction to someone there, and then again I spent a few days. I just asked if I could come and be there, and then after a few days I said: "You know, I would really like to come and spend a long time here. I want to know if that is alright with you, if you wouldn't mind if I did that. We had a talk about why I was there. I told them directly what I wanted to do and why. And they sort of said: Alright.

I spent a lot of time there every day for about six months. As I said, it takes 3 or 4 months to just become sufficiently part of the everyday world, so that nobody notices any longer when you pass by. For instance, I always had a small notebook and a pencil in my pocket, and whenever things happened that I wanted to remember to write about later, I got out my notebook and I wrote notes to myself. And after several months if I was talking with a tailor and I didn't pull out my notebook, he would say: "What is the matter? Is what I am saying not important enough to you to write down?"

SK: Did you just sit there and observe, or did you interview the tailors and apprentices systematically?

JL: There is this horrible story about when I first went to Liberia and I wanted to see apprenticeship happening and I expected to be able to see apprentices being taught by their masters how to make clothes. So I sat there a few days and it became clear, quite quickly, that the apprentices knew how to carry out many different aspects of tailoring, but I couldn't see anybody teaching them to do those things. I started asking masters if they would please teach their apprentices so that I could see how apprenticeship was done. And the masters, who were pretty kind, they would get some little boy to sit there and they would say: "Now here is how you sew a button, do you see it?" And the little boy would say: "Yeah", and sew the button on the trousers. But one day one of the masters said to this little boy in a very loud voice (for my benefit): "The fly always goes on the front of the trousers."

At that point I said to myself: "Okay I don't know anything about apprenticeship, I don't understand it at all. This has got to be the wrong question, and trying to get masters to show me how they teach

cannot be what apprenticeship is about. That means that I still have months of work to do, sitting here and looking for occasions on which I can come to understand better what is going on." What I did was pick one of the 20 tailorshops where there were several children of different ages -- a couple were new, a couple had been there for a year or two, one or two had been there for several years, and I figured that was the social arrangement that ought to produce what I wanted to see.

Every morning I would walk up one end of the alley and back the other and say good morning to everybody and sit down at different shops, spend an hour or two just sitting talking with people, asking them what they were doing watching them work. Sometimes I took many photographs at 10 or 20 second intervals (which I went home at night and analysed) of processes of producing clothes. I did this in order to see if different tailors make them in the same or different ways, and then I spent a lot of time talking with apprentices and with masters, asking them to: "Tell me about when you were making that garment. What did you do? How was that? How did you decide to become a tailor?" So many conversations, but no formal interviews for about nine months. You don't do that until you get to a certain point.

SK: And this way you got a lot of observations and many notes I guess. What did you do with these notes?

JL: A field anthropologist spends about an equal amount of time working with her field notes as she does in taking part in what is going on in the community. With a bit of work, you develop an ear for what people say, so that you can get to a point where you can write practically everything that someone is saying when they are talking with you. That becomes a very important part of how you work. You always try to put in your notes the things people say to you, the way that they say them. You don't want to paraphrase, you don't want to put some summary description of your own; you try as hard as you can to capture the words and in the way that they come to you from other people. Also, for every two or three hours you spent in tailor shops you spend two or three hours typing field notes, trying to record what you have seen, what you have heard, what did happen, using your rough field notes as a guide. But you always make careful distinctions between the field notes as you take them on the spot at the moment and the way in which you elaborate them and add to them as you think about it when you get home to your typewriter. Everyday you also ask questions of yourself about what you have been learning, what you don't understand, and where you missed something that was going on. You note questions about "what happened here? Is this related to what somebody else did yesterday?" and remind yourself to go ask that person "what was going on?" and "is there a connection between these things?"

At the end of the day, I put away my field notes and get out small notecards and just ask myself: "What did I learn today? What do I know that I didn't know yesterday, or two days ago?" I find it helpful to write my ideas down, one to a card. You try, in this way, to write some sense of your changing understanding of what is going on. You keep piles of these cards. Every now and then, maybe once a week, or every two weeks, you lay them out on the table and look at them and then try to write summary notes that say: "Here is what I think this whole stack of cards/ideas is about; here is what I think this other stack of cards is about." You keep a record of each sorting that you make. After some

months in the field you begin to file groups of closely related cards in half a dozen or a dozen envelopes. And you begin to get a sense for yourself of what the major issues are. By the time you have been immersed in field research for a year or so you discover that you have some envelopes that take on the character of chapters of a book. The stacks of cards begin to stay steady week after week. You elaborate and develop some so that they subsume others, and a complex argument begins to emerge. Then you begin to have a sense of shape and a sort of closure.

SK: Are you saying that your notes and cards more or less spontaneously organized themselves into clusters of chapters? rather than you coming up with the organizing structure?

JL: It is more complicated than that. I would say that those clusters that begin to develop are constituted out of the interests and problems you come with from your years of participation in the academic field, and of course they should be issues that fascinate you. At the same time you try to understand central issues, structures and meanings in the community you study. One of the things I like about anthropologists' way of doing things is that you try to do something which you know is impossible. You say to yourself when you start, "I want to be surprised by what happens here. I don't want the questions that I have arrived with to be so narrow that I cannot see anything but the answers I expect. And I don't want to be so completely unfocused that nothing surprises me, because I am not expecting anything." You want to be somewhere in between, so that what happens can lead you to be really shocked and surprised -- you didn't expect things to be the way they are -- and they really are different and you learn from that. If the enterprise of doing empirical research has any purpose to it, it ought to change your theory as much as your theory informs the empirical work. And I see this as a process of going back and forth in an open-ended way so that you keep doing field research and you keep working on your theoretical understanding of the world. And hopefully, each of them makes the other better over time.

SK: When does this open process, back and forth between the theory and the field research, stop?

JL: To me, good research is about a sustained lifetime of work on interconnected research projects. They are all closely related. However, let's talk about one project. What happens when you have to quit working in the community you are studying? You have to write. There you are. You come home with your "envelopes," your hands full of cards and your suitcases full of field notes. Most anthropologists work for a year with their field notes, say, 1,500 pages of field notes, and somehow have to sort them all and make them into something. This is not easy; in fact, it's generally overwhelming.

But in the end you take those real -- or metaphorical -- envelopes, that express crudely and telegraphically your best guesses while in the midst of fieldwork about what constitute the most important "news" to grow out of your efforts. You sift, sort, organize, develop lines of argument, write descriptions, make connections between events, conversations, insights, and so on. You begin to try and shape a story of what it is, an argument for what you have learned. And you forge a position, a point of view, about the problem. You work back and forth between partial,

preliminary, general understandings and the field notes and detailed records of daily life. You read through that pile of field notes numerous times and you plough through it looking for things. You work with all of your materials, but you probably never formally find a way to encompass all your field materials in a single analytic framework.

I have just moved from one university to another. With me came 70 boxes - the kind that you get paper for the xerox machine in -- of field notes. And I may never use them again, but I always feel that they are far too precious to throw away.

SK: And the material from these 70 boxes -- is that what you somehow condensed into maybe 100 or 200 pages in your book "Cognition in Practice?" Can you say more about how you do that?

JL: The way to do that would be go back to the field research situation again. There is one phase of doing the field work itself that I skipped over. That's when you do turn to interviewing people in a very special way towards the end of the time in the field. After you have been a participant in a lot of the daily life of a community, you at least understand, one hopes, something about it. It takes long, continuous participation to develop a common fund of experience with community members. You have to be present at many of the events that partly shape your understanding, but you also must come to understand community participants' understanding of these events. You need to participate in events you want to discuss with people later. You try to talk to as many different people as you can, and get as many different views as you can, of what was going on in events or practices or social processes that seem key embodiments of important issues. You keep hoping that the next time there is a complicated event you will be able to guess before you even go and ask people about it, what different people are going to say.

You begin to think of as many kinds of alternative explanations of the same thing as you can, and you try to explore the plausibility of alternative interpretations by again looking at events, by asking different questions, by going some place else, by spending time differently; checking out for yourself alternative explanations of what you are seeing, and so on. You make various efforts to disrupt the habits you fall into in the first months in the field. It is impossible to avoid developing such habits of social participation because of another important aspect of fieldwork: at the beginning of fieldwork you need to just sit there. Until you get accepted as a part of people's everyday lives, so that you become a nondescript, small fly on the wall, you cannot do much else. You can introduce yourself, you can count everybody, you can get everybody's names, you can find out how each is related to others as kinfolk, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or whatever, but you cannot do much more than that. Life, and tolerance and acceptance of your presence, move at a slow pace.

This reminds me of quite a different point about pace and rhythm in fieldwork. As the months unfold, you gradually develop habits of moving in and out of the field setting. Perhaps you spend 10 days in the community. On day one, you have a lot of questions in your head, things you need to do. By the end of 10 days you cannot remember what you have asked, you don't know what you know. You have to retreat for a day or two, to do a bunch of organizing and writing, and then you come back

again. And in moments of retreat you do try to say to yourself, "Well, could something different be going on than I have assumed so far? Can I go find out?"

Also, after you have been in the field for 8 or 9 months or a year, you come to make some close ties with people. They may be friendships, they may be something almost like colleagueship. Some people gradually come to see what it is that you are trying to do. You develop trust and a sort of common understanding. You share a year's worth of common experience.

At that point, sometimes you do an interview that might extend an hour or two at a time, over a period of weeks. Maybe it would take 24 hours of somebody's time in which you say: "Look, what I am interested in is apprenticeship: what would I need to understand about you and your life in order to understand your participation in apprenticeship?" And that is a very complicated question. It is not a request for someone else to analyse apprenticeship in your terms. It is not just a request to a (presumed) naive, unreflective subject, to "talk to me about apprenticeship." It is a process that involves the other person in your enterprise, but from her point of view.

Let me try to state the question again: "What do I need to know about your life, your history, your everyday practices, to understand why you have raised this apprentice the way you have, why you run your business the way you do, why you do what you do?" And then, you hold an open-ended conversation. It has structure to it -- that given by the person being "interviewed." Part of the craft of this kind of interviewing involves keeping track of the structure and branching points in long conversations so that on subsequent occasions it is possible to come back and pursue different facets of issues, talking some more, opening up topics that didn't get dealt with previously. This way you build an intensive fabric in your conversation with someone. You do that with a number of different people.

By the time you bring the field research to a close, you have your field notes, interviews, local documents and other meaningful artifacts. You also have your daily journal. You always keep a record through time, because it turns out to be important to you; there is a sense in which it is the transformation of your own understanding. You want both to note and to reflect on your own understanding of events at some given point in time. Part of the enterprise is to come to understand them from as many different points of view as you can.

Another part is to keep a record of your differing, changing points of view. The journal, and the constant dating of all field materials are important for this process. Your thinking will change a lot. So when you go back after 6 months to your early field notes, it says: "George Jones looked at me funny on Thursday I wonder what the matter is?" Then, in your journal two months later you find an entry like this: "George Jones wasn't looking at me at all. He was looking at somebody else, and his actions didn't have anything to do with me."

Three months later you find out that there was a deep political struggle going on when you first arrived in the community, in which you were a pawn in arguments between George Jones and somebody else. It is the case that part of the exercise of journal keeping is to record your own sense-

making from the very beginning. If you are lucky and work hard, three months later you will go back and laugh at your earlier interpretation. It should look very naive. Occasionally, it will provide you with descriptions of things that you noticed at one time that became too familiar and that you cannot "see" anymore. This is also a good reason for having journal records: It makes it possible to keep going back to your old notes as well.

The transformations of your understanding, of your changing views at different points in time -- as this is gradually layed down in your journal -- constitutes a kind of verification, the insistence you want for yourself, that what you are arguing as you write is robustly persuasive as an interpretation and not just something you made up out of whole cloth or private concerns. And then, your journal, all the interviews and field notes, are the basis on which you come to make some sense, when you start to write.

SK: These interviews in the later stages of the field study appear to have several purposes. One is summing up the whole, trying to make clear the understanding of what you have learned, at the same time checking the verification. Another purpose is checking your own interpretations of observations.

JL: One of the differences between this kind of interviewing and a lot of interviewing is that you don't rely solely on retrospective discussions as the reality that you are basing your analysis on. You never want to interview people when you don't know what it is that they have been engaged in doing. You want both to have been present at what was going on and to interview people about their understanding and their participation in those events. You want for yourself to have several different kinds of accounts of what was going on.

SK: But couldn't you be subjective in what you say?

JL: There are two or three responses to that question. One is that there are professional research practices that people engage in, professionally crafted subjective practices, you might say. An anthropologist would also say to you: Better to risk the danger of having subjectively constituted aspects of interpretation of what were robustly understood, active, participations in people's lives, than to gather apparently comparable information through "objective" (read: exotic, subjectively constituted), "formal," "methods" that "scientists" use and that can only address artificial and distorted little pieces of peoples' lives. Distortion and deep misunderstanding would be the result of most other research methods -- think of experiments and interviewing methods where you don't know enough about people's lives -- or where you even set out to systematically erase or "control" their differences in order to study them, as experiments do.

I wonder if you are asking something like this: Sometimes people say: "Oh my goodness, if you go as a participant-observer into other people's lives, maybe you will change their lives and thereby create a different reality than the one that you wanted and intended to study." To which my reaction is: "Well, that is exactly what happens in most methods of social science research when you violently distort people's lives by the way you go about studying them. You haven't a clue, in the end, as to

what they are really about." But the answer from an anthropological point of view is that the experience you have through field research is of a whole way of life, one that is so robustly structured in its own ways that you couldn't change it if you wanted to. There are common practices in American life that I dislike very much and if, just by being a participant observer, I could change them, I would certainly do so. It turns out not to be easy to change social formations, or communities, or peoples' ways of life. In fact, it is very difficult.

SK: What I hear you say to this standard argument about selectivity and bias in interpretation is that you have collected such comprehensive material, not just quantitative, but also in its qualitative structure, that it is so robust that you really couldn't mold it to fit your pet interpretations.

JL: That is a very nice way of saying what I think anthropologists hope and intend and believe to be the case about their work. One more small point about that: I always have the idea that I want to write about, try to make a public argument concerning, some aspects of peoples' lives that is much smaller than the whole context of what I have come to know about them. That is, I want my knowledge and experience and participation in a community to extend sufficiently beyond my own immediate concerns that when I write about those immediate concerns I know that there is much more beyond it that substantiates and supports what I am trying to say. As an anthropologist, I never want to write at the edges of my own understanding of what the life in the community is about.

Part of the process of working through field materials and developing your ideas in writing is that you come to discount the value of your own shakiest understandings and insist to yourself that what you do write about is the core of the work. If you go out to the edges of your own participation in that community in some way, you have an obligation to say so, to indicate where what you have to say is highly speculative. (I think, however, that it is all right to do this, as long as you are perfectly plain about your own understanding of the robustness of what you are talking about.)

There may be one more point: I believe we are all in the business of trying to illuminate the human conditions of human being for each other. It seems more important to me to err, if need be, through daring to lay out publically the deepest effects of the unusual experience field research represents, than to err through an illusory loyalty to a cramped and narrow production of "factual knowledge." There are obvious limits in both directions. (Did anyone ever say you could engage creatively in your work without exercising good judgment? A thoroughly complicated matter itself, of course.) And you hope that your readers will take you seriously.

SK: Do your readers accept your interpretations, or do they just say you don't have any method? Or do they just disqualify your interpretations?

JL: I think probably 15 years ago that would have been exactly the reaction to this kind of work. It's sometimes true now because people who read that book "Cognition in practice" are often computer scientists, cognitive scientists, organizational sociologists, and so on, and they consider themselves to be "hard scientists" compared to those "mushy," "soft" anthropologists. It is, among other things, a way of trivializing.

SK: Trivializing you as a person ?

JL: I don't think so. I was trying to say that a lot of non-anthropologists have recently developed an interest in ethnographic research. They come around and say "How about you collecting the data and then I'll analyse it and tell you what it means?" A sort of attempt to annex or colonize anthropological method in a decontextualized way. But most social researchers don't dismiss ethnographic research today, nor complain about the validity or the reliability of the data.

I think there has been a big change towards qualitative methodology among social scientists. The kind of heavy scientific approach to gathering data, analysing it and reporting it doesn't have quite so hegemonic a grip on social scientists today. For reasons, of course, that you know a whole lot about.

SK: I have no more questions - thank you very much.

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Notes on Contributors

Jean Lave is Professor of Education at the University of California at Berkeley. She is educated as an anthropologist and has conducted field work in Brazil and Liberia, and is at present beginning a new field research in Northern Portugal. Her works include (all by Cambridge University Press): *Cognition in Practice* (1988); with E. Wenger *Situated Learning* (1991); and the volume edited with S. Chaiklin *Understanding Practice* (1993).

Steinar Kvale is Professor of Educational Psychology, and Director of the Centre of Qualitative Research, at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, and is an Adjunct Faculty member at the Saybrook Institute, San Francisco. His research areas are evaluation and qualitative research. He is author of *Praxis und Herrschaft* (Beltz Verlag, 1972) and has edited *Issues of Validity in Qualitative Research* (Studentlitteratur, 1989) and *Psychology and Postmodernism* (Sage, 1992).