

Alex Stewart: **The Ethnographer's Method**. Sage Series on Qualitative Research Methods, volume 46. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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Ethnography is a mysterious term for most people not versed in the science of anthropology. From the perspective of qualitative research in the social sciences, and from a still narrower focus of modern psychological research, ethnographic methods are important for many reasons. The editors of the Sage series – Marc L. Miller, Peter K. Manning and John Van Maanen - state in their introduction to this book that “qualitative research is an ethnographic process”. Further, they remind us that social scientists use participant observation on many occasions to gain insight into cultures, be they national cultures or other kinds like organizational culture. A book about ethnographic methods should therefore be welcome, but here we encounter a paradox: There is no specific ethnographic method. Many ethnographers would adhere to the view that a strict methodology or even a detailed description of method runs contrary to the aims of a true ethnographic research process. This theme is one among many interesting ones in this well organized book by Alex Stewart.

“The Ethnographer's Method” contains six main sections or chapters. In the first section called “Who will determine the expectations” the author discusses the state of the field of present-day ethnographic methodology and the reasons for writing this book. In the second chapter, “Depicting the Ethnographic Method”, the author outlines the main characteristics of method: participant observation, holism, context sensitivity, socio-cultural description, theoretical connections and founding in anthropology or sociology. In this chapter the author makes interesting comparisons between ethnography and grounded theory and between ethnography and naturalist inquiry. He also goes into the question of the nature of truth and a postmodern critique of truth as a goal in research. The chapter ends with a comparison between conventional research criteria and the specific needs of an ethnographic project, where *veracity* replaces *validity*, *objectivity* replaces *reliability* and *perspicacity* is adapted instead of *generalization*. These terms contain a meaning that is partly new and different from the older and accepted terms of research.

The third chapter is focused on *veracity* and how it may be obtained by using different tactics, such as prolonged fieldwork, efforts to disconfirm observations, attentiveness to speech and interaction and modes of data collection. The author stresses two main themes in this chapter, prolonged contact with the field and a willingness to reorient one's ideas in the light of new data. *Veracity* is defined as “devotion to and conformity with truth.” This definition openly implies that the researcher must take some philosophical stance to the nature of truth, as indeed all-serious scholars must do.

The fourth chapter concerns the *objectivity* of ethnographic research. The main topics of the chapter are the nature and limits of *objectivity* from the point of view of ethnographic research, and five tactics that are recommended to approach it. The tactics, most of them well known in

qualitative research method circles (see, for example Miles and Huberman, 1994) include respondent validation, description of methods used, feedback from outsiders, inter-rater checks on interview and observation analysis coding and the benefits of using a data archive. The conclusion of the author (p. 46) is that there is no method or combination of methods that guarantees objectivity in ethnographic research (or, for that matter, in any research, I would like to add).

The title of the fifth chapter is “Working toward perspicacity.” This chapter explains why ethnographers “cannot aspire to generalizability or external validity, but they can aspire to perspicacity, which is the capacity to produce applicable insights” (p. 47). But there are some limits to this approach to perspicacity. For example, the author points out that an ethnographer must rely on insight a good deal, and as we all know it may not be possible to describe a rational basis for psychological insight. Insight is really so important in much ethnographic work that the very value of other methods is questioned. This position plainly holds that method – in a classical or a formal sense - in ethnography is of secondary value to insight. This position openly invites possible counter-attacks from critics who would say that this kind of work is unscientific.

How, then, may perspicacity be attained? There are several deep problems here. To name only two: objectivity cannot be attained by the specification of research procedures, because all such procedures involve “judgement calls and offer opportunities to manipulate the outcomes”. A second problem is the impossibility of specifying exactly how ethnographic data is obtained because this process cannot be easily distinguished from the “socially embedded, emergent process of learning that is, at heart, what ethnography is (p. 52). When one adds to this the fact that tacit knowledge and creative insight are hallmarks of good ethnography, it is not surprising that exact methodological descriptions are way out of line for a true ethnographic spirit.

In the light of these special problems and the nature of ethnographic work, how is it possible to appraise the quality of ethnography? This poses a real problem for journal reviewers, people in charge of funding etc. In chapter six, the author addresses this problem by outlining a detailed “Editorial and funding review checklist for ethnographic method”. This checklist is based on the arguments of the first five chapters of the book. The list must be a really welcome tool for people involved in funding and reviewing ethnographic work, but it has other possibilities too. This checklist also applies, in many instances, to general qualitative interview projects, for example in psychology. Following this checklist, a researcher is guarded from many kinds of methodological pitfalls. Another possible function is to use this list as a part of a academic course or workshop on qualitative methods in general.

The book is aimed at four different audiences: students, professionals, reviewers for funding and journals, and scholars who for one reason or other want to learn about the basics of ethnographic methods. This is a broad group, and one could ask how it was possible to address so different audiences in a single volume under 100 pages. The answer lies in the special structure of this book. It is really an expanded and critical checklist of ethnographic methods, accompanied with highly relevant discussion of fundamental topics in a stage-to-stage design.

This does not mean that it is dull or uninteresting to read – on the contrary, it is highly readable, at least to people with a real interest in its subject matter.

The problems of ethnographic methods are many and complex, and the author has successfully outlined many of them here. The freedom of the ethnographer to use what methods he or she considers appropriate is accompanied with great responsibility. From a postmodern and a social construction-of-reality perspective, there is no single objective reality to be found. Moreover, we are faced with what Ian Parker calls ‘the methodological horror of inconcludability’ because “a complete description of a phenomenon is impossible” (Parker 1999, p. 28). This does not make ethnography less interesting, it makes it all the more challenging.

I reflected on this book in a kind of a hermeneutic circle, going from a general impression of the text and back again several times. I conclude that this book is concise and well structured and clear and comprehensive for its size. It is really an expanded checklist, and unlike checklists in general, this one is inspiring to read. From a general point of view, I feel that this book is an effort to put up a defense for ethnography as a science with a special position among the social sciences. The author greatly cares for his subject and wants to contribute to the progress and understanding of ethnography. Metaphorically speaking, ethnography is presented here as a valuable work of art made of fragile glass and careless handling may easily break it. What the author offers is an approach to prevent this from happening. In short: this book should be considered a valuable contribution in its field and to qualitative methodology in general.

## References

- Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Parker, Ian (1999) Critical Reflexive Humanism and Constructionist Psychology. In Nightingale, D.J., & Cromby, J. (1999): *Social Constructionist Psychology*. Open University Press, Buckingham, Philadelphia.