

Researching the social: an introduction to ethnographic research

The aim of this Reader is to illustrate the innovation and variety within recent ethnographic research. It will be of interest to academics and students across the social sciences but is particularly directed towards novice researchers. It includes work from a range of disciplines and different social and national contexts, including Britain, the USA, Australia, India, France and Lebanon. The studies collected here provide an introduction to ethnographic research through example, demonstrating multiple approaches to data collection, analysis and project design. They range from a conventional ethnography, for which a researcher makes the enormous personal investment of moving into a different community for an extended period, to a tightly scheduled team project which employs several discrete methods of formal data collection (the first two studies in the collection exemplify these extremes) to, in a further contrast, a relatively small-scale project in which the principal form of data is audio-recorded talk (for instance, in the second to last reading). Despite their differences, these are all examples of ethnographic research, as are the other seven studies in the Reader.

What, then, characterizes ethnography? The term is wide ranging, with different associations and traditions within different disciplines. Some common features which are often identified are that it involves empirical work, especially observation in order to study people's lives, defined broadly ('human activities', Baszanger and Dodier, 1997: 8; 'ways of life', Denzin, 1997: xi; 'human experience', Willis and Trondman, 2000: 5). Recent theoretical texts also emphasize the centrality of writing (e.g. Denzin, 1997; Van Maanen, 1995). The studies in this collection conform to these points. More precisely, they have in common, first, that the researchers set out to study people and aspects of their lives and social worlds, and to produce a research text; secondly, that the text aims to be

full, nuanced and non-reductive, incorporating change and process without resorting to simplistic aetiological models; and, thirdly, that the researchers consciously locate their work within the cross-currents of ongoing debates about ethnography and qualitative research. I use the term 'ethnographic tradition' to refer to these debates and their background and I will attempt to outline them in the next section, although it is impossible to explore them thoroughly in the space available. Some readers may therefore want to read the studies in conjunction with a text on ethnographic and qualitative research.¹ The exercises at the end of this book provide additional support. They are designed to draw readers' attention to the key features of each chapter. If the collection is to be used as a teaching text, these exercises could also provide a basis for seminar or tutorial discussion.

The ethnographic tradition

A historical overview of ethnographic research generally refers to European colonizers' accounts of 'other' peoples, the development of Western anthropological fieldwork in pre-industrial societies, and various studies of migrant and ethnic minorities and urban populations within the USA, particularly from the middle decades of the twentieth century.² This complexity is sometimes given chronological order as a succession of phases or 'moments' (Denzin, 1997: xi), characterized by differences in the relationships between the researcher and those being studied, and also in the researcher's aims and assumptions about the knowledge which such a study can produce. However, these phases can also be said to persist and co-exist across the contemporary field of academic social research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998b: 12–13). An alternative way in which they can be summarized is therefore in terms of competing ideas, as a collection of challenges and counter-challenges around the central concern of social research, to understand people and their lives.

One major issue for social researchers has been a contest to achieve the same status as their counterparts in the natural and physical sciences. This has led some social scientists to advocate the use of quantitative methods which resemble those used to study the physical world. On the other hand, certain kinds of qualitative analysis (such as grounded theory) have been defended on the grounds that they too are rigorous and scientific. A third position has been the rejection of so-called 'scientific' methods and their premises as inappropriate for social research. One argument against such methods is that they deny social complexity in order to produce (over-) simple cause-and-effect models. Another related criticism is that they deny human agency and creativity in order to identify social laws as a basis for prediction. 'Scientific' approaches have also been criticized for producing an empty universalism by abstracting from the complexity of particular societies and their historically and culturally specific circumstances.³

Ethnography has been mainly associated with qualitative research but can also employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Ethnographers may refer to these debates to make an argument for employing this form of research. They may present an ethnographic approach as a practical choice from one out of several alternatives; for instance, Maher and Dixon, the authors of the second study, suggest their ethnographic project produced a 'more accurate representation' of a street-level drug-using population than could have been achieved through survey research. Alternatively, ethnography may be associated with a rejection of the theoretical principles underlying scientific/quantitative research; this is the position taken by the first author, Bourgois. Several arguments have been presented to support the claim that ethnography is more appropriate to the study of the social world than scientific/quantitative methods. The ethnographic researcher is said to obtain an insider's view of a society and so to understand other people's own worldview, instead of taking the outsider's perspective of the conventional scientist. Ethnographic research is said to produce situated knowledge rather than universals and to capture the detail of social life (e.g., through 'thick description', Geertz, 1973, cited in Vidich and Lyman, 1998: 78; and 'slice of life' accounts, Denzin and Lincoln, 1998b: 15) rather than abstracting from this detail to produce reductive models.

The distinction between insider and outsider perspectives is implicated in several other issues. One of these is the extent to which research findings can be objective. The notion of objectivity suggests that a researcher is *able* to obtain knowledge of an external world as it exists independently of the research process (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Silverman, 1985). If this is accepted, then the aim of research is to maximize accurate observation and reduce distortion and bias to a minimum. (The term 'rigour' is often employed to suggest that research findings derive more from the data than from the researcher's interpretation, as if these can be separated, which is itself a part of the same realist/naturalist premise.) These assumptions are strongly, though not exclusively, associated with quantitative research methods (see Seale, 1999). Similar claims have also been made for conversation analysis.⁴

However, the notion of objectivity has been challenged by the reflexive turn in the social sciences. This draws attention to the researcher as a part of the world being studied and to the ways in which the research process constitutes what it investigates. It considers the identity of the researcher and the relationship between researcher and researched, which is seldom one of equals. Any form of research involves issues of power and these are particularly relevant to ethnographic research as it has so often been about people who are positioned as 'other' within large-scale relationships of domination and subordination. Examples would be the colonizer studying the colonized, a white person studying people of colour, or an established citizen studying an immigrant population.⁵

A somewhat different but related argument is that objectivity is not attainable because people's perceptions and interpretations are inevitably selective and are shaped by the understandings they bring to any situation; it is not possible to perceive the world as a separate step prior to attaching meaning to it. As Denzin says: 'Humans are always already tangled up . . . in a secondhand world of meanings and have no direct access to reality' (1997: 246). Accepting that people always experience the world through what Vidich and Lyman call 'a mediated framework . . . of symbols and cultural meanings' (1998: 44) has led some researchers to explore these meanings rather than attempt to investigate reality as if it were separate. This kind of exploration appears in the studies in this collection, for example, in accounts of the intersection of the social and the personal, and of discourses (e.g., in the chapters by Hey and Alexander). It is also part of the project of symbolic interactionist researchers (see Rock, 1979; Silverman, 1985). However, it is important to note that a researcher who is conducting such a project still does so from within the meanings in which she or he is already tangled.

It follows logically from this position that any account of a research project is also an interpretation rather than an objective description. This has led to a new focus in ethnography on writing and the research text. Classic texts have been re-examined as artful and selective constructions with similar features to writing which is referred to as literature or fiction.⁶ For example, a 'realistic' piece of writing does not necessarily have a special relation to any reality but rather is characterized by a certain style which is *accepted* as realistic. Some postmodern ethnographers have experimented with producing new forms of text, for example, by including very extended passages of quotation in order to undermine the authority of a single authorial voice, or using poetic language in order to convey an emotional truth (such as pain) (see Denzin, 1997: chapter 7).

These developments have led some researchers to what Denzin and Lincoln have described as a 'double crisis of representation and legitimation' (1998b: 21). The crisis of representation arises when the research text is no longer assumed to capture the world which was studied; instead, the world presented in the text is accepted as the construction of the author. Does this mean that an ethnographer is unable to say anything about the social world which she or he set out to study? The crisis of legitimation arises when it is no longer assumed that research can be evaluated by checking it against the reality which it supposedly represents; this undermines conventional criteria for evaluation such as validity (see Seale, 1999 for a fuller discussion). Does this mean that there is no way of distinguishing good research from bad, or ethnography from, say, journalism or fiction? Denzin also identifies a third crisis, of 'praxis' (1997: 3), which concerns the application of findings. Together these might suggest that ethnography has reached an impasse in which ethnographic researchers can no longer trust themselves to collect and interpret data, write about other people or produce findings which have useful applications.

Fortunately, however, as this collection shows, the ethnographic tradition has not led to such a point of paralysis. Significant work continues. The writer who is perhaps most strongly associated with identifying the crises outlined above, Denzin (1997), does consider that the nature of ethnography and, especially, the ethnographic text should change. He suggests that there are other possibilities beyond conventional ethnography: for example, 'A feminist, communitarian, public ethnography, working hand in hand with public journalism, is one way to forward this project' (1997: 287). Other writers have suggested that the crisis of representation is exaggerated and more established approaches can still be employed. For instance, Hammersley (1998) argues that it is possible to accept that our perceptions and understandings of the world are mediated but still to operate with knowledge which is less than certain: in other words, 'knowledge claims can be judged in terms of their likely truth.' (Hammersley, 1998: 66).

Similarly, Willis and Trondman (2000) reject the idea that societies can be understood without reference to mediating ideas and culture, but they also consider it fruitless for a researcher to analyse culture as if it were free-floating. They call for 'the ethnographic recording of lived experience within the social' (Willis and Trondman, 2000: 10), suggesting that through such experience a researcher *can* obtain knowledge which has a wider reference. They also call for 'theoretically informed' ethnography and I would suggest that the studies collected here all fit into this category. The researchers proceed with an awareness of the issues and debates which I have outlined, acknowledging the limits to their claims and the situated nature of their findings, but still successfully conform to Willis and Trondman's description of ethnography as 'the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events' (2000: 5). The studies are not necessarily new classics (although this may be because they are so recent and some may well be on their way way to becoming so) but all are of high quality and all are texts which I found exciting and satisfying to read because of their complexity, elegance, commitment and energy.

The chapters

The first two chapters, in Part I, 'At society's margins', present studies of drug takers in inner-city areas. Bourgois's research was conducted in the area of New York City known as El Barrio, Maher and Dixon's in Cabramatta in Sydney, Australia. Both readings present an argument for the appropriateness of ethnographic methods to their concerns, although they differ markedly in their research approaches and style of writing.

The first chapter, by Bourgois, is based on an immersion study in the anthropological tradition. Bourgois moved into the area he was studying and tried to become a part of its community. His data are therefore his observations and his own experiences over an extended period as well as

the transcribed talk which is presented in the text. His aim was to describe a phenomenon, social marginalization, and also, in doing so, to challenge an earlier, highly influential study of the same population, 'Nuyoricans' (New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent). That study, by Oscar Lewis, gave rise to the theory of the 'culture of poverty', according to which successive generations within poor families become locked in a cycle of failure and crime. Bourgois is committed to a (by his account) less deterministic view of society which takes account of individual freedom to act, or agency, while also showing how 'history, culture and political-economic structures constrain the lives of individuals' (p. 17). The extracts which are included here from his book-length study concern the difficulties faced by 'Ray's network', a group of 'Nuyoricans' involved in the drug trade, when they try to move into 'legit' work. In response to the debates around writing referred to above, Bourgois discusses his selection of material and the process of creating the research text, and also the different impressions which readers may take from it.

The focus of Bourgois's study is broad. He is interested in the experiences and worldview of the group he is studying and how this shared culture impacts on their social position and prospects for the future. In contrast, the authors of the second study, Maher and Dixon, have more immediately pragmatic concerns, about the effect of certain policing practices on street-level drug use and public health. In addition, they aim, as they state at the end of this chapter, to demonstrate empirically how a problem can be solved, so as to develop new theory and change practices about policing through negative example, that is, by showing what does *not* work. They also aim to challenge preconceptions, in their case about the effectiveness of policing drug use. This is a team study involving observation of behaviours in public urban areas and interviews with drug users. Maher and Dixon present tables summarizing relevant characteristics of their sample, in a similar style to that of statistical studies, and they compare their research favourably to survey research. Both the style and the claim may be connected to their broader aims and the audience they wish to address, since it is widely accepted that quantitative research has often been more influential than qualitative in influencing policy-makers.⁷

Part II, 'Gendered identities', contains two British studies which investigate the social processes through which identities are constructed and lived out. Both researchers studied young people (though rather different age groups) and their peer relationships. Hey investigated teenage girls' friendships, suggesting that such friendships are of unacknowledged importance and intensity, and showing how in the interactions and negotiations around them girls' gender identities are reinforced. The research was conducted in two British city schools and the data include the notes girls pass to each other during class. This is therefore an example of observation within a school context, considered as a site for socialization. The chapter includes Hey's discussion of her role as a feminist ethnographer and also some of the access problems she encountered.

Chapter 4, by Alexander, has certain theoretical and methodological parallels with Hey, although this researcher conducts her study from a position of gender and racial difference. Alexander is interested in cultural identity, understood as fluid and heterogeneous, and how wider social relations of power are incorporated in the formation and expression of personal sexual/racial identities. She analyses the shared identity of a group of young black men ('the boys'), focusing on the group's internal dynamics and the ways it functions in the public sphere as a 'base for interaction and negotiation with wider society' (p. 94). It is not a fixed or bounded group but one which exists in and through its social interactions. Alexander is arguing against similar notions of underclass to those challenged by Bourgois and, particularly, against theories of black masculinity as pathological. She therefore aims to overturn or debunk certain existing assumptions.

Part III, 'Workplace practices', contains two contrasting observation studies. The first, by Leslie Salzinger, is a study of a Mexican export plant. Salzinger analyses the organization of the physical environment and work processes, showing how sexual subjectivities become incorporated in workplace relations and production. Her unit of analysis is therefore the workplace as a whole, including its physical layout and also the status of the plant within the larger transnational business organization and the electronics industry. She is interested in structural processes and practices rather than static structures. She is also interested in power, understood in a particular way. She analyses the workplace practices in terms of interpellation rather than coercion. In other words, she looks at how the workers respond to being 'hailed' (roughly, organized and generally regarded) in sexual terms, and how this response is simultaneously a participation in the production process. Salzinger therefore connects the macro scale of the workplace and organization with the micro level of individual subjectivity or sense of self.

This chapter demonstrates the range of data which the ethnographic researcher may use as evidence in a single study, although there is less explicit description of the data collection than in some other studies. The text includes accounts of the researcher's own observations, references to interviews, and direct quotations from talk directed to her (perhaps in interviews, perhaps in passing) and to other people (presumably overheard). She also reflects upon her own interactions and feelings. Other data, we can surmise, include official records, in-company records and perhaps news and academic articles on topics like the electronics industry and the Mexican economy. And of course there are the various sources listed in the references to the chapter.

Chapter 6 in this section, by Hutchins and Klausen, concerns a US study of pilots in a (simulated) airline cockpit. The researchers investigate work processes by employing a fine-grained analysis of talk between the pilots, analysing their talk and activities. Like Salzinger, they are interested in a unit which is larger than the individual person, but the focus here is on the

effective operation of the workplace as ‘the system that is composed of the pilots and the technology of the cockpit environment’ (p. 139). This is analysed as ‘a unit of cognitive analysis (p. 139)’ and ‘a system of *distributed cognition*’ (p. 140). This focus derives from psychology but will be familiar to some students from other disciplines, such as education. Hutchins and Klausen want to demonstrate how flying a plane is not something which is ‘done’ by one person, acting as an individual expert. Rather, it is accomplished by a number of individuals coordinating their actions and using technology and a body of knowledge which has been developed by many people, over time. This may sound obvious: we are all familiar with the idea of a team, or a successful person who depends on her or his assistants. But Hutchins and Klausen are suggesting that the air crew interact so closely that they need to be understood as a single entity and not just as individuals working together. Human and non-human channels can be understood as alternative ‘representational states’ within the same system. One implication of this is that non-human entities can be ascribed human traits, like memory. Another implication is that administrators and designers who want to ensure that a task, like flying a plane, is accomplished more effectively, need to consider the system (e.g., how information is distributed within it), rather than the expertise of individuals.

Part IV contains two studies on the consumption of cultural products. The first, by a geographer, is an observation and interview-based study of the ways that tourists ‘consume’ the Taj Mahal. Edensor analyses the activities of different categories of tourist, Western and Indian, and in particular how they walk around the site and gaze at it, the activities which, he suggests, ‘make’ the space which they experience. Some tourists are limited or constrained in what they can do, for instance, because tour guides hurry them along. Others are freer to create a different experience through different behaviours. His evidence includes his observations of people, their accounts of what they do and feel, and his own behaviours and feelings. His quotations from their accounts can be seen as a means by which the researcher incorporates multiple voices in his text, although the interview extracts also serve as additional evidence, supporting his analysis of other data. The extracts presented here include a discussion of ethnocentricity, cultural imperialism and the position of an ethnographer conducting research in a different culture.

The second chapter in Part IV, by Kraidy, concerns people’s consumption of the media, especially television. Kraidy conducted a study among Christian Maronite youth in Lebanon, investigating their responses to imported and local television programmes. Kraidy shares with Bourgois the broad aim of challenging theories which present people as the passive products of their life circumstances. He is disputing that identity is *imposed* on people, whether this is something done by predominantly Western media, which give everyone the same ‘global’ identity (an example of ‘cultural imperialism’), or by former colonial rulers who destroyed local cultures and forced foreign identities on to the colonized peoples, or even

by surviving local cultures which create a common identity for everyone living in a particular place. Kraidy suggests instead that the Maronite Christian young people he interviews enact 'hybrid cultural identities' in that they do not take up clear-cut positions which are 'either' Western 'or' Arab, either European/American or Lebanese, etc. Rather, in talking about and responding to television, novels and music, they 'articulate' (roughly, join together) different values and different discourses. Kraidy sees his interviewees (whom he calls 'interlocutors') as people who in these ways are actively making their own, hybrid cultural identities.

Kraidy suggests that Lebanon is a particularly appropriate case for the study of these issues because of its complex history as a 'crossroads civilization', its free media and the huge range of media and cultural products available. The people he interviews are in an especially complex position because they are Christian, not Muslim, and might therefore be expected to identify more with the West. The analysis sets up dualities including modern and traditional, Western and Arab, individual and communal. The argument is that the people interviewed do not occupy either side but move between and sometimes talk from a middle position. Furthermore, as someone who shares their identity, the researcher draws on his personal knowledge and experiences. He moves backwards and forwards between the two positions, as one of them and as ethnographer, which he variously describes as 'professional' and 'chronicler' (the one who writes and tells the story). This is what he describes as being a 'native ethnographer'.

The final section of the collection contains two studies of the provision of medical services. Chapter 9, by Griffiths, concerns care for mental health patients living in the community, in Wales. The main data are transcripts of talk from meetings in which teams of health workers negotiate the categorization and referral of patients. These transcripts record what was said, sequentially (including where speakers overlap or interrupt) and, to some extent, how it was said, recording laughter and other expressions of emotion ('Paah!'). This detail is similar to that in the transcript analysed by Hutchins and Klausen but Griffiths does not record body movements or direction of gaze, as they did. The form of analysis used here provides a bridge between ethnography and conversation analysis, incorporating the detail of context which is more characteristic of ethnographic studies with a close analysis of the interaction and 'moves' through which outcomes are jointly accomplished by speakers.⁸ The focus is on how humour and laughter function to unite members of the team against or with expert proposals, specifically the referrals made by psychiatrists. By joking and laughing about proposals, team members can resist them and present alternative versions of the cases being discussed. In particular, they can move between two available discourses and 'sense-making frameworks' by which the same individuals can be constructed as either having mental illness or social problems.

The final chapter, by Dodier and Camus, is a study of the processes involved in the categorization of patients in the emergency department of a Paris teaching hospital. A key issue is the hospital's dual functions of openness and specialization. Dodier and Camus suggest that the staff are aware of a dual orientation of the hospital to provide, on the one hand, a public service which should be available to all, and on the other, highly specialized medical services, which of course implies selection. The analysis shows how the staff build up the 'mobilizing worth' of patients to decide on their priority and whether to provide free care for them. Although this is a qualitative study, it therefore uses a more formal analytic framework than in most ethnographies. The researchers define their basic concept, mobilizing worth, and the four dimensions which comprise it, then analyse their data using these. They indicate clearly what they count as evidence, namely, the *explicit* references which staff make, through their words and actions, to the factors which influence them. This, of course, does not, as Dodier and Camus put it, 'throw light on the silent influence of factors' (p. 238), which is a limitation of the study, as they acknowledge. More positively, it enables them to present succinctly the data on which their claims are based. This could be seen as a form of validation, because it enables the reader to 'check' the analysis, and as a return to claims of objectivity, because it seems to remove the researcher from the analytic process and to imply the possibility of replicating the study or at least carrying out a parallel one elsewhere. Alternatively, these could be seen as stylistic features whose effect is produced through the way the study is written up.

Taken together, the two chapters in Part V demonstrate very different approaches to the ethnographic analysis of collective decision-making. We can see parallels with other health service contexts, though these might differ in details, such as whether users pay for services. The approaches and findings of the two studies could also be relevant to other situations in which decisions must be negotiated, for example in different kinds of workplaces.

Although the collection is wide-ranging, these ten studies cannot, of course, provide a complete picture of the field. For instance, there are no studies of home life or education included (although Chapter 3, by Hey, is from a study conducted within schools), and the range of writing styles does not include the more innovative postmodern research texts. The headings under which the readings are organized show some of the major concerns across the field of contemporary ethnographic and qualitative work. It should be noted, however, that these are rich studies and other connections and divisions could have been drawn to produce rather different groupings. To mention just a few possibilities, many of the studies concern work practices, including those in Part V. Salzinger's analysis of 'gaze' within a production plant and Hutchins and Klausen's analysis of human technology interactions could also have been grouped with Edensor's study as examples of practices by which spaces are constructed. Alternatively, the section on gendered identities could have included

Salzinger's study on how sexual subjectivities are mobilized within the workplace, and Bourgois's, on the conflicts around identity experienced by his participants when they entered conventional workplaces, and also, of course, Kraidy's, on the hybrid identities constructed by young Maronite Christians in Lebanon. Readers are likely to find other connections and also to identify features of particular studies which are relevant to their own disciplinary and theoretical backgrounds and projected future research projects.

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Notes

1. Two possibilities are Denzin and Lincoln, (1998a) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1995).
2. For a fascinating overview of this US social research, see Vidich and Lyman (1998). For a more extended account, which takes such research back to Thucydides, see Fielding (Chapter 9) in Gilbert (1993).
3. A rather different debate has centred on science's claims for itself: it has been challenged whether this is as detached, methodical and data-driven as has conventionally been claimed. See Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: Chapter 1).
4. See Billig (1999) for a discussion and criticism of these.
5. For a detailed discussion of the power relations within ethnographic research in anthropology, see Rosaldo (1989). The issue of power within the research relationship and process has been extensively discussed by feminist researchers: see, for example, Roberts (1981).
6. For a more extended discussion of these points, see Atkinson (1992) and Clifford (1986).
7. For a detailed discussion of assumptions about the relationship between research, policy and political reform, see Hammersley (1995: Chapter 7).
8. For a useful introduction to conversation analysis, see Wooffitt, in Wetherell et al., (2001: Chapter 2); also, Have (1999).

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