

On the Rhetoric and Politics of Ethnographic Methodology

Jack Katz, UCLA

Three Genres in Sociological Ethnography

This essay analyzes three dominant genres in sociological ethnography that describe the researcher's ways of relating to the practice of fieldwork and of responding to political rhetorical challenges that face all ethnographers. The distinctions are among ways of working: given researchers may work in more than one genre, whether by using different genres in different projects or by mixing work styles in a given project.

1. "Worker" ethnographies present a picture of social life that is juxtaposed to common stereotypes.
 - To develop a politically powerful juxtaposition, ethnographers operate in the field as a novice jack-of-all-trades, laboriously detailing varied regions of subjects' lives in a given time and place.
 - Humbling his authorial posture, the worker ethnographer maintains a transcending respect for the subjects, who are rendered as fully human beings.
 - Ironically this lowest of ethnographic postures often wins the highest professional accolades, as witnessed by the success of studies by Duneier and Anderson.
2. "Aristocratic" ethnographies do not reflect much time spent with subjects. Even when long periods have been spent in the field, texts fail to present empirical materials showing variations in the lives of subjects that are directly relevant to the theory offered.
 - Work in this genre proceeds from and constructs a position of privilege and power for the author relative to both research subjects and readers. Subjects' meanings, which require descriptions of variations over time and place to render, are suppressed. Readers are denied access to data showing variations that could test the theory.
 - The analysis focuses exclusively on a preferred explanation; alternatives are not considered seriously or at all.
 - This genre usually provides an invariant but morally sympathetic picture of subjects. The value of the work depends on the clarity and novelty of the case as a model, and the rhetorical appeal of the theory.
 - Begun by Radcliffe-Brown, contemporary examples include the anti-capitalist ethnographies of Burawoy and the popular study of female emotion work by Hochschild.

3. “Bourgeois professional” ethnographies are the least formally political of the three.
 - The ethnographer works as a specialist studying a kind of social process, constructing and analyzing series of cases that show fine variations between similar events, biographies, or types of social action.
 - The researcher amasses situationally specific observations of contrasting behavioral interactions and diachronically described cases, such as the biographies of collective phenomena (riots), natural histories of work careers (school teachers), the stages through which a given type of conduct is built up (opiate addiction) and status passages in personal life (becoming a...).
 - The text becomes political only through conveying the indirect message that local and popular culture obscures how universal social processes shape local life. This genre harbors an ongoing suspicion of any local culture that claims distinctive social realities and causal forces.
-

**A Moral/
Political
Challenge**

In the conduct of fieldwork, methods and theory are so closely mixed with each other and with history and social contexts that neutrality is relatively hard to come by.

Study Context

A question that is too often ignored in facile rejections of technical, policy silent, universally cast analyses is: Who determines the context in which a work should be read? Studies of transcribed recordings of rape trials or of the table manners of SS officers guarding a concentration camp are apolitical or political, depending on the context the reader brings to their reading.

- Does a study of tactics at rape trials show a commitment to positivist science carried to amoral madness if it fails to note that cross-examination techniques compound the assault on a victim’s subjectivity by attempting to thrust unwilling meanings in her mouth?
 - Does a study showing table manners being honored a mere matter of feet beyond a view onto grotesque horrors become a study of how people collaborate to sustain identities as good people while doing dirty work?
 - In an important, neglected sense, the critic who would damn these studies as amoral covers up his or her failure to argue for the context that would reveal their political significance.
-

Goffman's *Asylums* and Three Relevant Distinctions

Erving Goffman's *Asylums*, which is conceded by all sides to be both theoretically and politically/policy significant, is instructive for understanding the policy relevance of ethnography by illustrating three distinctions. Together they indicate that the political character of a study is not inherent in the text but is a varying phenomena, one that is the upshot of historical contingency and social interaction with readers.

- One distinction contrasts Becker's and Gans's positions:
 - Gans sees research as policy/political relevant depending on the author's rhetorical engagement in debates current about the area or institution studied.
 - Becker sees the policy relevance of research from a perspective that transcends an institution's ongoing debates – a perspective that uses neutral language to find commonalities across social settings segregated by cultures claiming uniqueness (Becker).
- A second distinction is between potential and realized political/policy relevance, or how a text might be read and how it is read as a social fact.
- A third, related distinction is between the self-conscious purpose of research and its social significance.

Each genre of ethnographic work has political significance depending on the perspectives imported by readers and on historical processes that an author cannot control.

Current Biases

Ethnography, as currently practiced, is biased toward the parochial and the present.

- Too often, when concerns arise that ethnographic research is too "micro" and not sufficiently contextualized historically, the response is to abandon fieldwork for reading and theorizing.
- On the one hand, a variety of intellectual traditions point ethnographers to appreciate that whatever site they study is an artificially bounded fragment of a larger social reality—that the events the participant observation fieldworker can study up close in the "here and now" of the research have already been shaped by social experiences in some other "there and then."
- On the other hand, the social psychological realities of ethnographic fieldwork as an occupational practice constantly tempt the researcher to limit data gathering and analytic perspective to the "here and now."

The first step in making a new advance in methodological quality is recognizing that the quality of ethnographic work is in this sense of the phrase formed at the crossroads of "being here and being there."

A New Wave of Research

We need a new wave of ethnographic research strategically designed to reveal both the “there and then” as well as the “here and now.”

- This new wave is likely to point not only in surprising political/policy directions, but also to require a fundamental rethinking of basic theoretical preconceptions.
 - Researchers on the effect of work on personal identity will, for example, have to struggle with the dizzying complexities of the relationships between home and work. How do we know which behaviors and sentiments to attribute to “home” and which to “work,” given that formally defined work is increasingly done at home and as we appreciate how personal life is shaped and sustained at work sites?
 - A reliance on the boundaries of social realities as defined in the “here and now” usually fails the ethnography of community research in that:
 - the social reality of any place exists not only as a present for those currently in occupancy, but also as a past in the lives of those who have left and as a future denied to others who took courses of action that led them elsewhere.
 - we rarely learn much about the lives of those who have left the town or city; we learn even less about the meaning of the local area to those who settled elsewhere.
 - on the latter: by studying those who leave, one may find otherwise hidden meanings of attachment among those who stay, but even more, that policies of preserving people in place may be short sighted.
 - Current populations are also shaped by processes in the lives of those who never arrived. We must be able to imagine a perspective that will include not only current residents, and those who commute in and out, but also the masses who never contemplated arriving because local conditions have indirectly, but powerfully, blocked entry.
-

Search for Community

All research is essentially a search for community, at least in the sense of an effort to be embraced by an audience to which the study’s results will be pitched.

- Because community is always political, each search for community has its distinctive political aspirations/pretensions.
 - Community may be sought not only by arguing the moral significance of social life at a given time and place, but in cultivating sensitivity to the universalities of social process. In the latter case, political significance comes from debunking the claims of authentic boundary made by local culture and by offering the liberating perspective of commonalities found across formally segregated sites.
-

Conclusion

It might be said, “You choose your genre and you get your methodology,” but as sociologists we know that class identities are not freely chosen. What you will be able to do is a matter of personality that you cannot always know in advance. Ethnographers always have a class status, but, we may hope, not one that is fixed at birth.