

# Looking not for Truth, but Meaning: An introduction to ethnography with Professor Marion Demossier and Dr Margaret Hills de Zárate

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## Abstract

*Addressing scholars new to ethnography in an interdisciplinary perspective, Prof. Marion Demossier and Dr. Margaret Hills de Zárate offer some reflections on the broader opportunities and implications of ethnographic approaches as a search not for truth, or rules, but for meaning in context. The authors discuss the opportunities and challenges of ethnography as opposed to other forms of data collection, reflexivity, the relationship between ethnography and text, and provide a range of further references.*

Keywords: ethnography; methodology; reflexivity; participant research

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## Introduction

We can productively think of ethnography quite literally as ‘people-writing’ in two senses; as a writing of people, of human culture, but also as a necessarily subjective perspective, conditioned by the viewpoint of the person or people writing. It is therefore a search for meaning in context, rather than objective or generalizable ‘truths’. Though ethnography is usually associated with anthropology or the social sciences, an ethnographic understanding of research as an inductive process, as a balance of meticulous planning and reflexivity – with an openness to chance and the coincidental – can be seen to echo the principles at the heart of many disciplines.

I was first introduced to Margaret Hills de Zárate as a PhD student on the [‘Transnationalizing Modern Languages’](#) project. Margaret’s research, which draws on the parallels between ethnography and her experience as a psychotherapist, opened my eyes to the promise of participatory research and invited me to reconsider my understanding of what constitutes research ‘findings’. More recently, at a workshop entitled

[‘Ethnography and Modern Languages: Critical Reflections’](#) organized by the [Translating Cultures](#) theme and the [Open World Research Initiative translingual strand](#), I was inspired by Marion Demossier’s affirmation, as a trained anthropologist, of the resonance of ethnography within the field of Modern Languages. Following this workshop, I corresponded with Margaret and Marion via email and put to them some of the questions I had had as a newcomer to ethnography. Their answers, reproduced below, offer theoretical and practical reflections as well as a range of further reading pertinent to scholars concerned with culture, human practice and reflexivity in research more broadly.

### **Interview**

Georgia Wall (GW): What do you see as the most significant advantage of ethnography compared to the sociological forms of data collection that are often the go-to for scholars new to participant research?

Marion Demossier (MD): The most significant advantage of ethnography compared to sociological forms of data collection used in isolation – such as questionnaires, surveys, etc. – is that it is first based upon an inductive approach rather than a social-constructivist one. It is interested in what people have in their minds and what they do as a holistic and dialectical way of understanding human beings, and it focuses on bringing back complexity and people into the equation. It has been described as the most humanistic of the social sciences and the most scientific of the humanities. Moreover, it relies on the study of other social groups – language being the key element in the cultural make-up. It is defined by a process of learning about the other; ‘a dialectic relationship between intimacy and estrangement’ (Shah, 2017), a specific mode of enquiry and comparative dimension, long-term fieldwork, and a critical and holistic perspective.

Margaret Hills de Zárte (MHZ): Ethnography allows the researcher to be flexible and therefore able to respond to situations in the context in which the research is being undertaken. As there are many unknowns it is impossible to plan the research in detail from the outset. The researcher has to be responsive to what is being learnt as the research proceeds – and this necessarily involves an inductive approach. An inductive approach to research is one where the researcher begins with an open a mind and as few preconceptions as possible, allowing theory to emerge from the data as opposed to a deductive approach where the data collected in the field is collected in order to test hypotheses emerging from existing theory, informing the focus of the research and potentially forcing the data into preconceived *a priori* categories or relationships (O’Reilly, 2009: 100). In reality, we all have preconceptions and enter the field having undertaken a preliminary review of the literature, which informs the focus of our

research, its boundaries and framework, the point, as O'Reilly (**ibid**) notes, is to acknowledge their role in the research.

It is important to emphasise that ethnography is a methodology, a theory, or set of ideas about research, rather than a single method of data collection. The ethnographer has a range of methods to draw upon, which might include using questionnaires or surveys but is not confined to a single method. It is the object of study, the 'thing' the ethnographer is trying 'to come to know' and understand, which suggests the method she should adopt, and this might involve multiple methods employed at different points in time throughout fieldwork, for example from observation, participant observation or interviewing. The ethnographers research design evolves throughout the study, draws on a wide-ranging variety of different methods of data collection usually over a fairly prolonged period of time *in situ* while undertaking fieldwork in a specific site involving sustained contact with its inhabitants within the context of their daily lives and culture.<sup>i</sup>

GW: What would you say are the main challenges of ethnographic approaches for scholars who are used to studying cultural products, such as texts or films, rather than people?

MD: The key challenges are attached to the fuzzy and messy dimension of the cultural encountering; you are dealing with people both in the research process and when you publish and write about them. This is also about going beyond preconceived ideas about what Anthropology should be about in the 21st century and how it has evolved as a discipline. However, both ethnography and anthropology more generally rely on the vast literature which has been published in the last three decades addressing the relationship between literature and anthropology.

MHZ: Ethnography is always involved with text. It involves studying texts and creating text, the fieldwork diary, transcribing interviews and the final ethnography is presented as text, illustrated or otherwise. Film is used extensively in ethnographic research, which is mostly referred to as visual anthropology that is concerned, in part, with the study and production of ethnographic photography, film and, since the mid-1990s, new media. Visual ethnography, a term sometimes used interchangeably with ethnographic film, also encompasses the anthropological study of visual representation, including areas such as performance, museums, art, and the production and reception of mass media (see <http://www.visualanthropology.net/>).

I think it is important to point out that most research projects actually begin with textual materials or secondary sources, with what Paul Thomson (1988) has called the 'general gathering stage'. The ethnographer studies the topic, collecting background information, reading up on theory and previous research undertaken or related to the field of study. This might involve collecting secondary data, background statistics, policy documents and so forth. As Schensul and LeCompte (2013) point out, 'the use of archival and secondary data sources can further the comprehensiveness of data collection, understanding of results, and the cross-cultural and cross-national comparability and generalizability of a specific study' (Schensul and LeCompte, 2013, vol. 4: 907-908).

Both local (data gathered by other researchers on the population under study) and non-local (data obtained from related research conducted elsewhere on related topics/populations) can be useful. One may consult are maps, historical documents, newspapers, photographs, film or artifacts. Sources of historical data are classified as either primary sources such as the oral testimonies of eyewitnesses, documents, records, and relics, while reports of persons who relate the accounts of eyewitnesses and summaries, as in history books and encyclopedias, are secondary sources.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) and provide a useful list of what this might encompass:

(a) contemporary records, including instructions, stenographic records, business and legal papers, and personal notes and memos; (b) confidential reports, including military records, journals and diaries, and personal letters; (c) public reports, including newspaper reports and memoirs or autobiographies; (d) questionnaires; (e) government documents, including archives and regulations; (f) opinions, including editorials, speeches, pamphlets, letters to the editor, and public opinion polls; (g) fiction, songs, and poetry; and (h) folklore (i) recipe books. (Marshall and Rossman 2006: 119).

Primary and secondary data are integrated as the research develops in the field as one may inform the other. As one proceeds the data will raise questions resulting in an ongoing development of ideas. O'Reilly suggests that it is best to understand the ethnographer as progressing in a spiral, 'moving forward from idea to theory to design to data collection to findings, analysis, and back to theory, but where each two steps forward may involve one or two steps back (inductive and deductive)' (2009: 110). Thus, ethnographic analysis is not a stage in a linear process but rather a recurring phase in an iterative process of learning episodes, tangled up with every stage of the research process.

Ethnographies are usually written up and presented as texts. One is always engaged with text, in the form of pre-fieldwork background reading and theorizing, writing up or transcribing self-generated primary field data, all the way through to the post-fieldwork synthesis of primary and secondary forms of data (**Madden, 2017: 152**).

GW: Marion, you have reflected recently that how ethnographic fieldwork is undertaken (as well as how it is understood) has changed a lot since you began your career. What would you say are some of the hazards and opportunities related to contemporary ethnographic research?

MD: In the digital era, the critical and reflective dimensions of ethnography need to be pushed further in analytical terms. We are just at the beginning of understanding what the digital revolution is doing to us as human beings. See Daniel Miller's recent global anthropological ERC-funded project, '[Why We Post](#)', on the uses of the internet (forthcoming as a free pdf download). Speaking in disciplinary terms, Modern Languages is extremely well placed to define the agenda at a global level because of language based knowledge, which is a broad and as yet embryonic field where Modern Languages scholars need to be more active.

GW: Margaret, you have suggested that one of the most crucial aspects of ethnography is reflexivity. How would you define reflexivity, why is it important, and how can we bring it into our research and our reports?

MHZ: There is a need to account for the inevitability of the ethnographer's influence on the research process and to manage the tension between objectivity and subjectivity which makes dealing rigorously with reflexivity an important aspect of contemporary ethnography (**Madden, 2017: 2**).

The concept of reflexivity in research therefore refers to the thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the inter-subjective dynamics between researcher and the researched (**Finlay and Gough, 2003**). Practicing reflexivity requires an ongoing critical self-reflection of the ways in which the researcher's social background, personality, personal assumptions, position and behaviour can impact on the research process, particularly the collection and analysis of the data.

Reflexivity requires that researchers reflect upon the research process in order to assess the effect of their presence and their research techniques on the nature and extent of the data collected. This might involve considering to what extent respondents were telling the researcher what they thought she wanted to hear or reflecting on the form of the data collection which may have restricted the kind of data being collected or reflecting on what might have been lost in translation. The ethnographer should locate herself in the study honestly and openly, in an admission that her observations are filtered through her own experience, rather than

seeking to adopt a voice of authority. This does not mean the text becomes one about the researcher. It means confronting one's relationship with others, conveying the context and the researcher's place in it (**O'Reilly, 2009**). Or as Madden (**2017**) puts it: 'reflexivity is not really about 'you, the ethnographer'; it's still about 'them, the participants'. The point of getting to know 'you, the ethnographer' better, getting to know the way you influence your research, is to create a more reliable portrait, argument or theory about 'them, the participants' (**Madden, 2017: 23**).

Ethnographic reflexivity also requires researchers to critically reflect upon the theoretical structures they have drawn out of their ethnographic analysis. This involves making the process of collecting data and its analysis transparent and 'offer as full a description as possible of where the ethnography was done and how, with what misgivings, what mistakes, what expectations and disappointments, what revelations and what pleasures, to enable the reader not only to enjoy but also to evaluate the written product. Subjectivity is therefore not a problem for a putatively objective ethnography if it is dealt with rigorously' (**Madden, 2017: 23**).

Here Madden (**2017**) adopts Bourdieu's (**1992**) construction of reflexivity that stresses its methodological value and the potential for such an approach to dissolve the putatively oppositional relationship between the subjective and the objective, the emic and the etic,<sup>ii</sup> the inductive and the deductive. In Madden's view, Bourdieu's argument conjures up the potential for reflexivity to help create a resolved ethnographic account (**Madden, 2017: 22**).

Reflexivity is also a concept that appears in the literature on ethics in research, particularly relevant when confronting issues arising in the field. In what is now regarded as a classic article on reflexivity, Guillemin and Gillam (**2004**) distinguish two different dimensions of ethics in research, 1) procedural ethics, that usually involves seeking approval from a relevant ethics committee to undertake research involving humans; and 2) 'ethics in practice', for example during fieldwork, where 'ethically important moments' may arise and the researcher is forced to make immediate decisions about ethical concerns, or when information is revealed that suggests she or her participants are at risk (**Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 273**). Ethically important moments may for example arise with disclosure or coercion in a group situation.

Reflexivity is not prescriptive in the sense that it specifies in the abstract precisely what a researcher should do in response to any given situation. However, it does have a number of ethically important functions. In being reflexive, researchers both reflect about how their research intervention might affect the research participants before any actual research is conducted and consider how they would respond as a researcher in the sorts of situations that they can at this stage only envisage.

GW: Finally, I think it's easy to get excited about the promise of contemporary ethnography as 'new' approach and overlook the diverse range of decades of relevant critical writing. Could you recommend a methodological/theoretical text to scholars new to ethnography, and suggest why you think it useful for bear in mind?

MHZ: in terms of methodology I have referred to those texts which I think are accessible e.g. Raymond Madden's book, *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (2017) Sage Publications. I think it's very good on many topics. Another useful introductory text is Karen O'Reilly's *Key Concepts in Ethnography* (2009) Sage Publications. It is well written and provides a good overview and useful definitions of terms and references for further reading. I recommend reading widely though and consulting different texts including ethnographies themselves including some of the classics such as William Whyte's *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, (1943; 1981; 1993), 4<sup>th</sup> edition with appendices, or Anton Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island* (1890) Alma Classics, Bloomsbury Publishing. Sophie Woodward's work on material culture studies is very interesting and a pleasure to read as is Daniel Miller's work on 'Stuff' (2010) Polity Press. On writing ethnography, Van Maanen's (2011) *Tales from the Field* is an interesting text. In my own work I have drawn upon a wide variety of texts. Ethnography is never simply descriptive. Critical appraisal is always involved and the aim is to contribute to both the academic debate and the existing literature in the field.

MD: I agree. This is how I felt after the 'Ethnography and Modern Languages: Critical Reflections' workshop; we have so much to offer to our colleagues and we have not made ourselves heard as there are possibly political and legitimacy issues attached to the sector, which I feel has a tendency to be too conservative. It has taken me 20 years to become vocal about the fact that I am anthropologist and I am ready to help. In terms of key readings to start: the online journal of ethnographic theory, [HAU](#), is a very useful platform with very accessible articles published on ethnography. We are using it with our students. We have also launched a Facebook account 'Debating Ethnography' open to all and especially we have a big group of Linguistics PhD students as well as archaeologists -



there are only fewer cultural and literary studies specialists. The 'Ethnographic Encounters' [website](#) provides some useful resources available for download for both students and teachers, including the [LARA materials](#) developed by Shirley Jordan and Celia Roberts. The LARA exercises and plans grew out of the pioneering ESRC funded project 'Language Learners as Ethnographers', whose findings are explored in the eponymous book by Celia Roberts, Michael Byram, Ana Barro and Shirley Jordan (2001) Clevedon, Multilingual Matters.

### **Speaker Biographies**

**Marion Demossier** is Professor of French and European Studies and Head of the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics and at the University of Southampton. She holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the EHESS École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris and has published scholarly articles in leading academic journals in Britain, France and the United States, including the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Cultural Analysis*, the *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* and *Modern and Contemporary France*. She has also written widely for a student audience, contributing chapters to prestigious series such as *A companion to the Anthropology of Europe* or *Culinary Taste*. She has been involved as an expert with the wine industry in France and New Zealand over a period of twenty years. She is a member of the ESRC Peer Review Panel 'Anthropology of Europe' (2010-2019), sits on the UNESCO [Climats de Bourgogne](#) scientific Committee and is a member of the UNESCO network Chair Culture of Wine, Dijon (2006-present). Her most recent book, *Burgundy: A Global Anthropology of Place and Taste* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2018) offers a long-term ethnographic analysis of the professional, social and cultural world of Burgundy wine production.

**Margaret Hills de Zárate** is a Senior Lecturer in the Division of Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies at QMU, Edinburgh. After graduating in Fine Art from Grey's School of Art and training as an Art Therapist at Goldsmith's College, University of London, she worked as an art therapist in Scotland for the Department of Social Work and at WellSpring, a charitable trust offering psychotherapy and counselling. She later studied at the University of Havana, undertaking supervised postgraduate training in child and adolescent psychology and conducting fieldwork leading to the award of PhD. Alongside academic positions, she has worked in the Republic of Georgia with the Centre for the Psychosocial Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture, with a team of professionals in the refugee camp of Duisi, and subsequently with child ex-combatants in Colombia at the invitation of the Public Advocate of Bogotá. More recently, as part of the 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages' project



(TML), her research has focused on the experience and representation of Italian communities in Latin America. Findings and reflections on this research have been published as part of a co-edited volume with Ditty Dokter, *Intercultural Arts Therapies Research: Issues and methodologies* (Routledge: 2016) and in *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook*, ed. by Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan (Liverpool University Press, forthcoming).

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<sup>i</sup> There are other models, such as multi-sited ethnography in which data collection follows a topic or social problem through different field sites geographically and/or socially (Marcus, 1995; Schepers-Hughes, 2010); and various time-limited models (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004: 538-540).

<sup>ii</sup> An emic perspective is one, which reflects the insiders' or research participants' point of view, whereas an etic perspective is one that echoes the outsiders' or researchers' point of view.

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<http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/article/view/254>