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Attempting to Ground Ethnographic Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a response to continued discussion about the necessary and sufficient character-istics of a claim to 'ethnographic method' when made by researchers in the Media and Cultural Studies traditions.

Many of the seminal studies informing—particularly—audience studies research have claimed that they were 'ethnographic'. But is this a variety of ethnographic that an anthro-pologist would recognise? And if not, what kind of ethnography is it, and why might it be more or less appropriate as a research framework than straightforward 'interview' or 'focus group' research? Further, when might we say that an interview is conducted in the course of an ethno-graphic study and when might we exclude a claim to ethnography?

The discussion around these issues is fraught with a certain slipperiness in terminology, and in the borrowing of research clothes from other traditions, but the Media and Cultural Studies canon is sufficiently robust to claim both difference from and similarity with versions of ethnog-raphy borrowed from a variety of research paradigms.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODEL

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My first introduction to ethnography was through the study of Social Anthropology in the mid-1970s. I was enrolled in a sub-ject that glorified in the contracted title 'Arch and Anth', indicating a focus upon Archaeology and Physical Anthropology, as well as Social Anthropol-ogy. Each of these sub-specialisms required acade-mic researchers to engage in protracted periods of fieldwork, but Social Anthropology also included ethnographic study, as well as fieldwork.

I learned later that I was in a very traditional school of Social Anthropology. The model of ethnographic research that I was offered involved learning a (usually Indigenous) language inten-

sively for at least six months, living out in the field in ways that resonated with the 'population' under investigation, and keeping records of kinship (and romance) networks, religious practices, economic transactions, and political structures (including relationships with groups outside the researched community). The total experience involved a minimum commitment of about three years, at least 18 months of which were to be immersed in the field. One of the major risks of the methodology was that researchers became 'lost': they never returned to their everyday Western lives.

I was bad at languages, I didn't like spiders or places without running water and electricity, I had a boyfriend who had his own career plans, and I felt intuitively that I would become physically lost very quickly—so this model of ethnography was not for me. Had I been at a different university I might have learned about ethnographic work with people serving life sentences in high-security prisons, within nudist 'colonies', within boarding schools, and within fire stations, and I might never have moved—as I did—into Philosophy, and then into Psychology, to end up in the media (and from thence to academia). At that point in that place, however, the ethnography I was taught in my Social Anthropology course was too pure, and too terrifying, to be seriously contemplated as anything other than a life-inverting commitment.

AUDIENCE STUDIES

I became interested in audience studies as a result of seven years in television production, partly because the television program I spent most of my time working for (*Songs of Praise*) was an 'everyday people' sort of show. Typically, for each program, I would interview 20 people for between 45 minutes and an hour-and-a-half before recommending the five or six who would make it onto the screen. Instead of getting interviewees to turn up at my hotel, or a local office, I went to them. Further, the people I met had been nominated by a range of different 'informants'—usually at least five or six voices and perspectives made up the nominating committee. Interviewing the 20 or so nominees constituted a crash course in the community.

Each *Songs of Praise* program is about a specific community and the people who live there, or who belong to that community. An important part of the research was driving around to meet the people, seeing the local places and beauty spots of importance to them, and generally getting the feel for their daily life. In this capacity, I was operating as participant-observer and triangulating my findings from a range of sources. ('Triangulation' is when at least three sources: first hand, key

informants, interviewees, documents, etc., agree, thus confirming the likelihood of a finding). My delight was tangible, therefore, when I entered academia and discovered that a very similar methodology was gaining credibility in audience studies research, and was being called 'ethnographic'.

The guru of audience studies ethnographic research in the mid 1980s was David Morley, who eventually was one of the markers of my PhD. If he had no qualms about accepting my ethnographic methodology as valid, this would be because it was closely modelled on his. In this I was not simply being a simpering mimic (although I would argue that it is silly to choose as a PhD marker someone whose work is dealt with adversely by the thesis in question), but was following established ethnographic method. One of the key starting points for ethnographic research is to read other ethnographies and identify characteristics that speak to you in the context of your proposed research project.

THE VISIBLE ETHNOGRAPHER: PARTICIPANT OBSERVER

I am communicating this history of my exposure to the notions of ethnography and my own experience of how I came to use an ethnographic methodology in my PhD because this is an important element of the ethnographic research and reporting process. The ethnographer knows and accepts that their research is not valid in the same way that a scientific experiment would be. In particular, it lacks the element of repeatability as a test of validity. The ethnographer recognises that they are deeply embedded in the text that they create and thus they are under a professional obligation to make 'themselves' visible, preferably before they communicate their findings, so that the reader has relevant information when they come to judge the credibility of the research.

Skeggs (2001) defines (feminist) ethnography as:

> A theory of the research process—an idea about how we should do research. It usually combines certain features in specific ways: fieldwork that will be conducted over a *prolonged period of time*; utilizing different research techniques; conducted *within the settings* of the participants, with an understanding of how the context informs the action; *involving the researcher in participation* and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched and focusing on how experience and practice are part of wider processes.
> (p. 426, author's emphasis)

Wolcott (1994) suggests that a first strategy for ethnographers is to 'observe and record everything'. Two consequences follow from this: 'because you cannot possibly record everything, you are immediately

struck with the evidence of what you do actually record. Second, what you select provides important clues about your own observing' (p. 161). The ethnographer is going to be visible in the ethnography: thus, they might as well be properly introduced to the reader.

Willis (2000), whose seminal text *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977) was one of the first cultural studies applications of the ethnographic method, comments that the 'ethnographic account should be as rigorous as possible, recount what happened, where and when, record regularities and ensure the accuracy of transcripts' (p. 116). However, he goes on to argue that the recording of what happens and the interpretation of that record are two separate processes. '[S]ubjective evaluation and meaning of these things ... practices and ways of being', as observed and transcribed in the ethnography, 'cannot be recorded in the same way as facts. Reality itself ... is composed of the fluid relation between representations, practices, juxtapositions of expressive forms, circumstances and experiences—there is hardly a solid "original" to reflect' (Willis, 2000, p. 116). The ethnographer is visible in what they record, in how they record it, and particularly in the meanings they make of the ethnographic method.

However, this stage of maximum subjectivity—'data analysis and theory development'—is among the last stages of the ethnographic process. According to Garson (2003), 'the ethnographic researcher strives to avoid theoretical preconceptions and instead to induce theory from the perspectives of members of the culture and from observation. The researcher may seek validation on induced theories by going back to members of the culture for their reaction'. In this respect, the ethnographic process resonates some features of 'grounded' theory—theory that emerges out of (and that is grounded in) the perceptions of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD(S)

Most authors avoid spelling out the necessary components of the ethnographic method, contenting themselves with observations such as Hammersley's (1990, p. 15): 'there is no single ethnographic paradigm or community, but a diversity of approaches claiming to be ethnographic (and often disagreeing with one another)'. In a similar vein, Wolcott (1994, p. 390) comments that the issue with training ethnographers is more driven by providing 'a basic orientation and overall sense of what is involved than with trying to devise a list of minimum essential techniques with which every fieldworker ought to be acquainted'. Nonetheless, a few authorities are prepared to gamble with an outline of 'essentials', to which I broadly subscribe.

Notwithstanding his later argument for a plurality of possibilities, Hammersley's (1990) view is that:

> The term 'ethnography' refers to social research that has most of the following features:
>
> a) People's behaviour is studied in everyday contexts rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher.
>
> b) Data are gathered from a *range* of sources, but observation and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main ones.
>
> c) The approach to data collection is unstructured in the sense that it does not involve following through a detailed plan set up at the beginning; nor are the categories used for interpreting what people say and do pre-given or fixed. This does not mean that research is unsystematic; simply that initially the data are collected in as raw a form, and on as wide a front, as feasible.
>
> d) The focus is usually on a single setting or group, of relatively small scale. In life history research, the focus may even be a single individual.
>
> e) The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most. (p. 2, author's emphasis)

Lull (1987) teases out the meaning of context and 'the "fabric of everyday life"' as placing a responsibility on the researcher to: '(1) observe and note routine behaviour of all types characteristic of those who are being studied, (2) do so in the natural settings where the behaviour occurs and (3) draw inferences carefully' (p. 320). In particular, Lull urges researchers to consider 'the details of communication behaviour, with special attention paid to the often subtle, yet revealing, ways that different aspects of the context inform each other' (1987, p. 320). Recognising that the ethnographer has an unavoidable impact upon the context, the participant-observer element of the research nonetheless involves minimising that impact so that the interviewee is better able to reclaim the 'everyday' while participating in the research.

Feminist ethnographers sometimes add additional riders. Heyl (2001), for example, suggests that the ethnographic interviewing should involve listening 'well and respectfully' and 'an ethical engagement with the participants at all stages of the project' with an active awareness 'of our role in the co-construction of meaning during the interview process' while being aware of 'ways in which both the ongoing relationship and the broader social context affect the participants,

the interview process and the project outcomes'. She concludes with an injunction to 'recognize that dialogue is discovery and only partial knowledge will ever be attained' (p. 370).

Seiter et al. (1989) adopt a particularly political view of sub-contracting elements of the ethnographic interview method: 'While some audience studies hire interviewers who are not involved later with the analysis of the transcripts and tapes, we remained within the boundaries of the ethnographic method in that all of the interviews [26 interviews with a total of 64 participants] were carried out by the four primary researchers on the project' (p. 226). Thus there is an element of 'who's asking and why?' when discussions are raised about the nature of ethnography.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

I have written elsewhere (Green, 1999) on the details of my preferred methodology for carrying out interviews. This was the approach used in my PhD, where the interviewees were volunteers—often refereed by people they knew through 'snowball sampling'—and the interview methodology was semi-structured, open-ended, and one-on-one (usually). Thus, my methodological approach is characterisable as qualitative, or 'soft' research, dismissed in some circles as less rigorous than quantitative or 'hard' research (Green, 1991). A range of 'prompt questions' encouraged the interviewee to contextualise their television consumption within a wider framework of alternative communication resources and channels.

The ethnographic interview design tends to compromise 'consistency' by privileging the areas interviewees find most interesting, allowing them to be pursued in greater depth, and in the order in which the interviewee guides the discussion. This technique earns the descriptor 'semi-structured'. There is a 'guide list' of important topics covered in every interview, but not all respondents want to address all areas in equal measure. This is only to be expected when research deals with individuals—individuals differ from one another.

Not everybody is asked the same things in the same way, but arguably the ethnographic interviewer understands far more about an interviewee's viewpoint by allowing that individual to set their own agenda within the research agenda than if they resolutely inflict the same questions, with the same wording, in the same sequence upon all interviewees. This kind of interviewee-centred approach is increasingly the accepted methodology within audience research (Moores, 1996):

> Interviews were relaxed in manner and conversational in tone—lasting up to two hours—and whilst I kept a mental checklist of key topics to be covered, informants were allowed the space to pursue issues which they perceived as important or relevant. They were actively encouraged to speak from experience and to relate episodes from their everyday lives. My style of questioning was chiefly open-ended, designed to produce narrative responses rather than brief answers. (p. 34)

Open-endedness also lies in the lack of closure—both in terms of asking open questions, and in terms of multiple prompts: 'Anything else?' Generally, researchers should aim to offer as much time as the interviewee wishes to take, rarely carrying out more than three or four interviews a day. The 'average interview' length is typically about an hour, although preceded and followed by unrecorded discussion and general social exchange.

I record all ethnographic research interviews on audiocassettes, although, given the power of the interviewee to define place and circumstance, it is sometimes the case that not every recording is fully decipherable upon replaying. All quotations referred to in the final research reports, however, come directly from tapes that are decipherable and that are appropriately stored and referenced. Details of individual speakers tend to be partially fictionalised to help protect confidentiality, although some biographical data does also help reader identification.

At the time the interview is recorded, I take full interview notes, while maintaining eye contact for the majority of the time that the interviewee is speaking. (Because of my previous career, I know the interview notes are of a standard acceptable to professional practice in television documentary research.) Unless I'm working on a fully funded-project and can afford transcription, I decide which extracts to review, and to transcribe, with the help of these notes. Two categories of interview material are routinely included. The first category is 'common' experience: the threads that recur, time and again, in different contexts[1]. The second category is the truly exceptional (partly because it proves the rule).

The 'conversational' context of the ethnographic method also underlines the manner in which the contributions of interviewees are integrated within the research. It empowers the participant to set a wider agenda within which the ethnographic research agenda is subsumed. Potentially, each respondent communicates a picture of themselves, and their household and/or community. By accumulating a number of

respondents who share common community parameters, the research constructs a multifaceted picture, not unlike that resulting from a *Songs of Praise* research trip[2].

ETHNOGRAPHIC AUDIENCE STUDIES

In adopting this approach to my research, I am partly exploring one of Silverstone's specific agendas (1994, p. 151, referring to Seiter et al., 1989, and Morley & Silverstone, 1990): to investigate 'choices of programme, freedoms to watch favourite programmes, the interruptability or non-interruptability of viewing ... the study of family life and media use' at the level of the household and within wider social and community contexts. Overall, the aim is to contribute, albeit in a small way, towards an endeavour that Silverstone (1994) was to conceptualise as:

> There is a need not just to describe differences, but to explain significant differences ... Second, there is a continuing problem in our work not so much of the subject (for the subject is after all a theoretical construct), but of the individual, and of the relationship between the social and psychological dimensions of viewing. And finally there is the problem of the explanatory theory. The relationship between television viewing and social structure is not explained but only mediated by a consideration of domesticity. Domesticity too, which is not in any sense simply coincident with home or hearth, has to be understood in its relationship to the changing balance of public and private spheres. (p. 157)

This problematic had previously been explained by Morley (1992) as a need to investigate 'specific ways in which particular communications technologies come to acquire particular meanings and thus come to be used in different ways, for different purposes, by people in different types of household'. Morley could have added here, 'and by different people in the same household'. Instead, he finishes with an injunction to 'investigate television viewing (and the rules of its "accomplishment") in its "natural" setting' (p. 177).

Benchmark Australian audience studies have frequently involved participant/observation techniques—such as Noble's (1975) work, or Gillard's—once Palmer's (1986a, 1986b)—as did the methodologically rigorous Economic and Social Research Council (UK) Programme on Information and Communication Technologies. Participant/observation techniques are without doubt the 'gold standard'. The key issue remaining, however—for interviewers as well as participant/observers—is how

to encourage interviewee participation, and a contribution on the part of a respondent that is representative of that individual's 'normal' behaviour or opinions in 'everyday' contexts.

The ethnographic research methodology generates what Geertz (1973, cited in Barrett 1997, pp. 158–159) calls 'thick description'. Geertz starts his explanation of thick description with his belief that: 'Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of a meaning' (p. 5). He later continues: 'Rather than generalizing across cases, which is the normal scientific procedure, interpretive anthropology aims for "thick description" by generalizing deeply within cases' (p. 26). Morley (1992) also refers to Geertz: 'in the first instance, the prime requirement is to provide an adequately "thick" description (cf. Geertz 1973) of the complexities of [television viewing] ... an anthropological and broadly ethnographic perspective will be of some assistance in achieving this objective' (p. 173).

In place of thick description, Barrett talks about 'the burst of insight' that characterises 'a well-developed sociological imagination and a flair for perceptiveness' (p. 221). He comments that 'although long periods of fieldwork and hard work are prerequisites to sound ethnography, these alone will not generate bursts of insight [that involve] deep penetrations into the minute details of people's everyday life, quick perceptions that allow the fieldworker to understand their innermost motives' (pp. 220, 221).

This search for the intuitive (but well-founded) flash of comprehension is a very different starting point for audience studies ethnographic research than the people-meter technologies and television diaries used by commercial researchers operating to a marketing agenda. Nightingale (1986) argues that the powerful forces at the centre of consumer society (which employ market researchers, lobbyists, etc., to poll and interrogate audiences) do so to ensure their dominance over audience members:

> Quite simply, the people who want to know about audiences, want to know information about them which can be used to control them, and make their behaviour more predictable. Such control ranges from the behavioural (getting people to vote, to buy, to phone in) to the affective (getting people to like your programs more than the opposition's). (p. 22)

Ang (1991) further develops this perspective in her groundbreaking book *Desperately Seeking the Audience.*

The emergence in the 1960s and 1970s of a different rationale for audience research, championed by David Morley and others in the tradition of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, challenges the notion of all audience research as being prompted by the motive of controlling the audience. Instead, the Cultural Studies impetus is to construct an understanding of the ways in which audiences use cultural products to negotiate for themselves representations of their relationships with the wider society. The audience, given its voice as individuals in the ethnographic interview process, constructs and represents itself in collusion with the researcher. The reader constructs the audience again at a later stage of the process, when the researcher prepares a text or presentation for public consumption. A reader of such a text or presentation has available to them only a small sub-section of the information provided by respondents to the researcher, and the information made available to the reader is necessarily refracted through the filter that has been used in selecting 'relevant' information for inclusion in the findings.

The synthesis and comprehension of a group understanding is inevitably an individual act. The validity of an ethnographer's constructions of other people's understandings is explored in three ways. First, research constructions are checked through discussion with the participants—feeding back perceptions and understandings for clarification and to establish accuracy. Second, they are checked through drafts and through discussions with colleagues and collaborators ('peer review'). Third, readers validate for themselves the emphasis and meaning constructed around the elements presented to them in the ethnographies they read.

CAN ETHNOGRAPHY GET IT WRONG?

The issue of 'bad ethnography' has been raised several times over the decades of ethnographic practice. Kirk and Miller (1986) discuss one of the most celebrated cases. They take as their starting point Mead's (1928) historically accepted view of Samoan society, which was 'overturned' in 1983 by Freeman. In addition to describing a Samoan society radically different from the one portrayed by Mead, Freeman goes to some pains to establish that the society has not changed in these specific respects in the five to six decades between 1928 and 1983. Freeman's assertion is that Mead got it wrong, he's got it right, and there's evidence to prove this.

Is this valid? Kirk and Miller (1986) suggest:

> Mead talked with female adolescents at a time when she herself was a young woman. Freeman conducted much of his study of Samoa with male parents at a time when he was a high ranking adult ... By analogy, an American daughter might well tell (to a young and female adult ethnographer) some pretty interesting stories based on considerable sophistication; at the same time, an American male parent might assert (to an adult male ethnographer) that his daughters are virgin ... Mead and Freeman were onto two different aspects of a very large and complex subject. The partial understandings they achieved are different for good reason, and we are better off with both sets of findings than only one. (pp. 46–47)

Individuals who are marginalised by the dominant culture in a society (e.g., women, Indigenous people, some remote and regional residents) are aware that there are differences between the social/political/power realities for themselves and those that apply to the dominant 'other'. These are multiple realities that depend, for their reading, upon the position in society of the researched and the researcher. A judgement of reliability demands deliberation as to what use the research has: not so much in terms of the recordings by the text-researcher, but in the quality of understanding constructed by the text-reader, and their production of meaning.

This search for meaning is a discriminating process but need not depend too heavily upon the standardisation of methods. Manning (1987), discussing ethnographical studies, declares:

> Some are overt, some covert; some are based on intense participation, some on very limited participation; some studies are systematically reflective and self-reflective, others are not; some rely importantly on key informants, while others are surveys; some studies are based on long-term relationships over virtually a lifetime ... but most are single studies carried out in settings to which the researcher never returns ... Regardless of one's model of truth or knowledge, it is very difficult to compare these studies. (p. 24)

This is an injunction to take such studies and consider them in terms of their context and proposed utility. Indeed, even where research findings are compared and found inconsistent, there are many reasons, as with Samoan culture, for believing that this may be a positive result: 'Paradoxically, synchronic [within the same time period] reliability can be most useful to field researchers when it fails because a disconfirmation of synchronic reliability forces the ethnographer to imagine how multiple but somehow different qualitative measures might simultaneously be true' (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p. 42). In the same way that quantitative researchers should be (but are only rarely) digging beneath the surface arguments to uncover the philosophical underpinnings of the

relationship of their research to society, so too should researched knowledge be reconstructed in these terms: 'Knowledge is not, as positivism suggests, the objective, universal and value-neutral product of the "disinterested" researcher. Rather, it is subjective, context bound, normative and, in an important sense, always political' (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 73).

Notes

1. The 'common' experience is normally included via the quotation within which it is most clearly stated.

2. Here, typically, 20 people would be interviewed to yield the five program participants who would between them represent the community's commonality, diversity, and idiosyncrasy.

Acknowledgments

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