

Practices of Ethnographic Research: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Ethnographic research is the product of multiple practices. It is an assemblage of seeing and looking, hearing and listening, handling objects, describing, interviewing, recording, reading, documenting, and working with data—transcribing, storing, transforming, sharing, labelling, coding, sequencing, comparing, interpreting, visualizing, and quoting—as well as many other practices. They occur in all stages of the ethnographic research process and in a broad variety of social settings including fieldwork sites, data sessions, seminars, conferences, and the writing desk. Like all practices, practices of ethnographic research interlink bodies, minds, artifacts, technologies, and built environments, and imply specific temporalities and spatialities (cf. Schatzki et al. 2001).

Although all of these practices are integral to the process of producing ethnographic knowledge, only a few of them are addressed in methodological textbooks or seminars. Even the field of science studies has long ignored ethnographic practices. Since the 1980s, scholars in the field of science and technology studies (STS) have described and analyzed epistemic practices in the (natural) sciences (e.g., Knorr Cetina 1981; Latour and Woolgar 1986). The resulting research, which showed that the “hard sciences” are a product of social processes, provided empirical support for the argument that *all* academic knowledge is socially constructed. Despite this promising line of research, it was another 30 years before STS and the sociology of science

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began to pay serious attention to the social sciences and humanities, let alone to reflect on the practices of knowledge production within STS itself (cf. Kuznetsov 2019). While a growing number of projects have addressed this gap in recent years (e.g., Benzecry and Krause 2010; Dayé 2014; Desrosières 2009; Deville et al. 2016; Engert and Krey 2013; Greiffenhagen, Mair, and Sharrock 2011; Tutt and Hindmarsh 2011; Law 2004; Law and Ruppert 2013), there is still a lot of work to do. One of the goals of this Special Issue is to embark on the analysis of practices in the social sciences and thereby advance this evolving field.

Practices, Methods, and Methodification

Methods and practices of ethnographic research are closely connected: practices inform methods, and methods inform practices. In a recent study on the history of qualitative research, Ploder (2018) found that methods are typically developed by researchers conducting pioneering studies that deal with an unknown phenomenon or field (a study of Andreas Franzmann 2016 points in a similar direction). In the absence of methodological guidelines for the specific research problem, researchers employ practical skills acquired in other academic or professional contexts or their everyday lives to produce knowledge. At a certain point, they begin to reflect on what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how their actions contribute to the epistemic process. Proceeding from these reflections, researchers then select some of these practices and identify them as epistemologically relevant. Their descriptions of, systematic reflections on, and methodological justifications of these practices serve as the foundation of a novel method.

This “methodification” of practices has several consequences: It determines which practices must be explicated, reflected on, and methodologically justified in research projects; which practices are highlighted in ethnography courses; and which practices are examined to evaluate the quality of the research products. Most importantly, methodification involves black-boxing other practices. For example, researchers rarely acknowledge the practices of collaboration, reenactment, seeing, reading, and writing papers as epistemologically relevant. As a result, these practices are excluded from methodological reflection, teaching, and evaluation. Further, even the practices that do receive methodological attention entail certain aspects that are not addressed in textbooks. These neglected (aspects of) practices can be considered a “practical surplus” of ethnographic research, and their epistemic weight is at the center of this Special Issue.

Once established, methods can inform practices of ethnographic research. Reading textbooks or accounts by other ethnographers, completing methodological classes and conducting trial studies as part of these classes, and reflecting

on one's own research practices paves the way for translating methods into practice. This process always yields a practical surplus that can have a crucial influence on the type of knowledge produced. Moreover, many practical questions remain unanswered by methodological guidelines and thus researchers must utilize practical skills from other sources. One author in this issue (Schmid 2020) claims that *none* of the epistemologically relevant practices in his research have benefitted from established ethnographic methods. While this is an extreme position, and likely quite rare, Schmid's claim points toward an observation that is important for all ethnographic research: methods alone are not sufficient for conducting high-quality ethnographic research, and the practical resources of individual ethnographers often (if not always) have a significant impact on the knowledge they produce.

Consequences of the Practice Perspective

Examining the practices of ethnographic research and the relationship between methods and practices has epistemic, methodological, reflexive, and didactic consequences for the field of ethnography. More broadly, such an examination produces new insights for Social Studies of the Social Sciences. Below, we highlight the central consequences and insights generated by this type of analysis:

1. **Epistemology:** First and foremost, this perspective raises awareness of the actual epistemic weight of practices that are typically not considered epistemologically relevant. This analytical lens can encourage ethnographers to attend to seemingly small details or peripheral aspects of their work, exploit the epistemic potential of these details more thoroughly, and explicate them in the analysis and discussion of their findings. This Special Issue creates a more nuanced understanding of the epistemic weight of a broad variety of research practices that exist beyond the rules and guidelines covered in textbooks and classes.
2. **Methodology:** All methodologies, from established approaches to spontaneous innovations, are rooted in practices, systematic reflections on those practices, and their justification. Vice versa, many practices of ethnographic research (e.g., producing and interpreting data) are part of the application of existing methodologies but also translate, transform, and exceed those methodologies in the process of research. "Methodification" is the process by which certain practices are labelled as epistemologically relevant while others are excluded from the realm of "methods" and thus their epistemic weight

is obscured. The contributions to this Special Issue examine a variety of practices of knowledge production that are typically *not* framed as a matter of method (e.g., practices of establishing ethnographic presence or writing scholarly papers, cf. Laube 2020, Schindler/Schäfer 2020). In doing so, the contributions expose the gap between doing ethnographic research and explicating a very narrow set of practices as “methods.”

3. Reflexivity: Ethnographic studies of ethnographic practices offer an empirical approach to questions of reflexivity. Such studies include a detailed analysis of the microdynamics of what ethnographers do, how they do it, and which type of data and analyses their practices engender. This empirical approach allows researchers to reflect, question, and advance established methods, rules, and guidelines—a perspective that can be described as “reflexive methodology” (Knoblauch 2020). All contributions to this issue benefit (at least in part) from an analysis of the authors’ own ethnographic practices, which implies multiple layers of reflexivity. The authors not only thought about their own approach while conducting ethnographic work, but also used their own memos, field notes, and other material as ethnographic data on doing ethnography. Using their own involvement in the field as a primary source of data and a basis for interpretation advances the growing movement of “epistemically strong reflexivity” (Kuehner, Ploder, and Langer 2016, 699). Employing a descriptive and reflexive account of “what ethnographers do” rather than a methodological normativism of “what ethnographers should do” yields results that can be used to critique and improve existing methodologies and their application.
4. Teaching: Ethnographers’ performance in the field draws on both a large set of practical skills and extra-academic elements of their habitus. Courses and texts on ethnographic research can systematically address this insight. Learning *how to do ethnography* requires not only doing ethnography but also being aware of the multitude of practices involved in this type of work as well as being able to systematically activate, transform, and employ these practices and reflect on their relevance to specific research situations. While methodological training is an important resource for the professional socialization of ethnographers, their actual performance in the field often includes practices that are not “methodified” and sometimes are beyond the realm of academic skills altogether. The contributions to this Special Issue show that ethnographic practices rely on both cultural techniques (e.g., taking a break, interacting with strangers;

cf. Neubert/Trischler 2020) and individual habitual dispositions (such as the ability to “blend in” to certain social groups; cf. Schmid 2020) that connect (or disconnect) specific researchers and specific fields. Revealing the didactic potential of the practices of ethnographic research encourages a teaching approach that systematically builds on the skills and practical knowledge that students bring to the classroom from their first day of academic training onward.

5. **Social Studies of the Social Sciences:** This Special Issue is relevant beyond the field of ethnographic research. The contributions also advance current debates in STS and the sociology of scientific knowledge that focus on contemporary and historical practices in the social sciences and humanities (cf. Dayé 2014). First, the notion of methodification raises questions about the epistemic status of research practices in other realms of the social sciences and humanities. Some epistemic communities employ relatively more objectivistic and positivist epistemologies than most ethnographers do. Researchers in these communities may still cultivate, rather than expose, the gap between methodified and non-methodified practices. Against this backdrop, it is important for Social Studies of the Social Sciences to address this gap. Second, the contributions to this issue highlight the relevance of “ethnographic situations,” in other words, the embeddedness of ethnographic research in the interplay of specific bodies, artifacts, technologies, and built environments. These articles highlight unexpected situations that emerge in ethnographic knowledge production and explore the transsituativity of ethnographic research.

The Contributions to This Special Issue

The Special Issue includes six contributions:

Larissa Schindler and Hilmar Schäfer (2020) show that practices of writing play a key role in producing ethnographic knowledge. The authors reconstruct the cognitive, embodied, and material dimensions of jotting down and writing field notes, transcribing and annotating, and drafting and authoring papers, and they show how these practices connect theoretical and empirical work and bridge the different stages of the ethnographic research process.

Christian Schmid (2020) discusses how his habitus informed his ethnography of the outlaw biker subculture. He argues that his primary socialization allowed him to “extra-methodologically compensate for the vagueness of ethnography in theory” and enabled practices of approaching/entering the field, negotiating participation, and managing (un)fortunate circumstances far beyond those covered in methodology textbooks.

Stefan Laube (2020) highlights three material practices of establishing presence in the ethnographic field: changing costume, jotting notes, and sharing a camera. He shows how these routines constitute a practical and material accomplishment of overt ethnography, discusses their epistemic potential, and connects them to recent debates on materiality and reflexivity in ethnographic research.

A team of seven researchers (Bieler et al. 2020) investigates modes of achieving reflexivity in practices of co-laborative ethnography. On the basis of selected research projects, the authors discuss how reflexivity can be distributed among research participants in practice and how these co-laborative practices can increase the interpretative authority of ethnographers.

Christine Neubert and Ronja Trischler (2020) analyze practices of material theorizing in the ethnographic field. Based on two case studies (one on the everyday experience of the built environment and one on cooperation in digital post-production), the authors show how scholars materialize and “pocket” ethnographic situations and transform them into data for ongoing research.

In the final paper, Christian Meier zu Verl and René Tuma (2020) examine practices of interpreting ethnographic (video) data in academic data sessions. They use the data session itself as the object of analysis and analyze interpretation as a social and communicative activity. Their empirical findings show how video analysis is conducted communicatively. The paper focuses on how different forms of knowledge are both a resource for and the topic of ethnography and video analysis and how these forms of knowledge are labelled as “knowledge”, made into quotable objects via bodily reenactments, and translated into professional knowledge, as well as how irritations are re-assessed.

The *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* has a tradition of looking behind the scenes of ethnographic field work and exploring how ethnography is actually practiced (e.g., García-Rapp 2018; Katz 2018; Thompson and Lashua 2014; Vanover 2015). This approach makes *JCE* the ideal home for this Special Issue, and we would like to thank the editor, Charles Edgley, for his continuing support in putting it together. We hope the articles in this Special Issue will inspire more in-depth studies of ethnographic practices and intensify the ongoing discussion about the relationship between practices and methods.

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