Ethnography

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The Greek etymology of the term ethnography is deceptively simple: writing about a people, where both writing and cultural difference are, respectively, explicit or strongly implied. Ethnography has had a long and complex relationship with its parent discipline, anthropology, and has come to mean more than writing alone, because the written record had to be based on knowledge of another culture acquired by the writer. Ethnography is thus a term that is used both as reference to the written product of the research process, usually assumed to be descriptive, and the research process itself. Ethnography, as a research process, is based on fieldwork. Since at least the time of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), fieldwork has meant living with a people for an extended period of time, learning their language, becoming immersed in their everyday life, understanding their whole cultural system and how the parts interrelate, and trying to understand the native point of view. The process of sharing in the daily life of one’s hosts while making a detailed record of their lives in the form of field notes is known as “participant observation.” Not all fieldwork is ethnographic—it becomes ethnographic based on the relationship one has with hosts or collaborators, and the intimate immersion in their way of life, with a keen concern for understanding how they act in the world and see the world in their terms.

Although fieldwork is often qualitative, it can and has included quantitative research as well (Bernard 2000, 2005). In the classic and standard works of the anthropological discipline, ethnographies were holistic accounts in that they strove to present comprehensive accounts of another society and its culture, showing the interrelation of elements such as political organization, religion, law, kinship, mythology, and subsistence practices. Often the unit of analysis was as small as a single village, and the society in question was a tribal one. Ethnographies contained little or nothing in the way of a historical perspective. Today, ethnographies written by anthropologists take a much sharper focus, addressing a specific research question rather than cataloging another way of life, and they tend to do so in a reflexive and often very theoretical manner as well. They also engage in research across multiple sites, including the anthropologist’s home society. Yet, ethnographers still do not deal with large samples of people, focusing on smaller environments and more intimate interactions.

Given the unique nature of ethnographic research, which distinguishes it from impersonal archival work, mass-administered questionnaires and number crunching, public surveillance, and more remote ways of interpreting people’s behaviors and their meanings, many fields and diverse interests have become attracted to ethnography, from corporations and market research firms to other disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. Although ethnography is associated with anthropology primarily, there is an important tradition of ethnography in sociology, particularly in the Chicago school of sociology, which produced prominent ethnographies by distinguished sociologists such as William Foote Whyte (1994). However, unlike in anthropology, ethnographic fieldwork is not a requirement for a doctorate in sociology.
PROBLEMS OF EXPRESSION

Ethnography presents special challenges to the anthropologist and collaborators, and to the discipline’s status in the academy and wider society. Intimate, face-to-face research can be politically sensitive and can heighten the self-consciousness of all parties involved. The experiential and subjective nature of this mode of research opens anthropological reflections to the humanities and to ways of becoming involved in social issues. Anthropological self-questioning concerning the conditions and outcomes of knowledge production are especially acute where ethnography is concerned.

In the introduction to a controversial collection edited with George Marcus, James Clifford argued that ethnographic accounts are at best incomplete and partial truths, much like fictional works (Clifford and Marcus 1986, pp. 6–7). Clifford Geertz (1988) also interpreted anthropology as a kind of writing, a literary creation. Interest in the writing of ethnography focused attention on the rhetoric, metaphors, and tropes used by anthropologists to assert their expertise, authority, and credibility, especially when objectivist science had once held such sway in the discipline. A growing concern with narrative styles, acts of interpretation, and issues of cultural translation in ethnography began to turn the discipline in on itself, and led to the erosion of confidence in realist approaches. Expression seemed to overtake explanation as the focus of these critiques of realism that have been labeled “postmodernist.” The attention to how ethnographic texts are constructed was accompanied by an interest in the subjective and personal conditions of knowledge production, by critically examining the ways the anthropologist becomes part of and shapes the situation that is being studied. Reflexivity became a key term, prompting many ethnographers to reflect on how their personal biographies led them to certain subjects and to ways of understanding those subjects. Ethnographic film-makers such as Jean Rouch (1917–2004) deepened and extended discussions of reflexivity, of anthropology as a humanistic art, and of ethnography as fiction, well before it became popularized as “postmodern” in the late 1980s. The question that remains open is a philosophical one: Is the mission of the ethnographer primarily to uncover truth, or to explain reality?

ETHICAL AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The act of writing about persons is based on actual interactions, and anthropologists have been keen to elaborate ethical guidelines for fair and proper relationships with their collaborators. The basics of most anthropological guidelines stress the principles of seeking informed consent, not causing harm to individuals, leaving the field situation in the way one found it, and safeguarding confidentiality (e.g., American Anthropological Association 1998), and much wider debates have raged since the 1970s (Rynkiewich and Spradley 1976). Revelations that some anthropologists had spied for the U.S. government during counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1960s in Asia and Latin America shook the discipline. Intellectuals, media, and political leaders in recently decolonized countries, as well as indigenous peoples, charged that anthropology functioned as an imperial discipline of surveillance, and researchers became concerned with how to decolonize anthropology. New ethical guidelines have stressed the need for collaboration, coproduction, and multiple
authorship, and for ongoing negotiation of the terms of access to research data. Much controversy has emerged over the status of “practicing” anthropology—anthropology done outside of the academy, in the service of governments and private firms—especially as ethical guidelines produced in the 1970s have been tempered by a concern of “practicing anthropologists” for the rights of those funding their research, such as commercial stakeholders.

Politics have been intimately tied up with issues of research, ethics, and writing. Since the 1970s more attention has been devoted to the politics of ethnography as a dominating knowledge that posits a different “other.” The rise of indigenous anthropology (Medicine 2001), feminist anthropology, and anthropology “at home” have all sought to confront and contest the colonial origins of anthropology (Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997; Brettell 1993; Deloria 1988; Harrison 1991). New approaches to ethnography call into question the older scientific “gaze” of ethnography as a kind of imperial vision that manifested itself in imperious writing—that is, writing in the “voice of god” as an unseen, authoritative, and trustworthy observer. More attention has been paid to how gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality condition one’s rapport with hosts, delimit access to spheres of life, and determine what kind of data can be recorded. Reinterpreting ethnography as premised on humanistic, face-to-face, intimate relationships; delving into intersubjective understandings; and not placing oneself outside of the research context as a remote analyst or, worse, as a spectator of zoological phenomena, have worked to produce more self-conscious and politically sensitive ethnographies (Rabinow 1977). Dialogic exchanges (Crpanzano 1980) challenged the previous, sportscaster-like narrations of what people were doing.

NEW TRENDS

Self-reflection has been acute in anthropology, at times bordering on paralyzing angst. The prolonged immersion in other cultures, the everyday and intimate interactions with one’s hosts, arriving as an outsider and becoming an insider, the questions of one’s own identity and the status of one’s involvements with others almost inevitably heighten self-consciousness. Hortense Powdermaker was aware of how involvement and detachment, art and science, worked in tension with one another in ethnography (Powdermaker 1967). Currently, the relationship between theory and ethnography is tense, too, and there is a greater tendency to produce theoretically heavy accounts that seemingly render ethnographic description as secondary in importance, or as ornamentation in predetermined exercises. Debates about writing styles in anthropology were conducted largely in private, among and for other professional anthropologists, with little or no impact on the social standing and public engagement of the discipline. Some have noted the limits to discussions of reflexivity, arguing that the result has bordered on narcissism and a failure to reflect on broader-than-personal conditions of knowledge production (Bourdieu 2000). Although ethnography still addresses the impacts of postmodern and postcolonial critiques, there are new trends emerging: fieldwork in one’s home society; feminist and indigenous anthropology; autoethnography; experimental writing, including fiction in the regular sense (Bowen 1954); and militant advocate approaches. In terms of the politics of writing, there are more dialogic and multivocal texts rather than authoritative, univocal accounts. Some scholars are questioning how anthropologists conceptually constitute “the field” at the heart of their ethnographies, with increased sensitivity to the realization that there is no definite beginning and end to fieldwork, no
clear “home” and “away” (Amit 2000). Revised ethnographic realism—understanding the differences between experience and reality—has led some to admit that what ethnography can capture is limited, with the resulting admission of multi-method approaches involving research in archives, media analysis, and use of statistics. Understanding how cultures are delinked from territories, with greater concern for globalization and transnational movements, has led some anthropologists to elaborate frameworks for multisited ethnography (Marcus 1995) premised on traveling cultures, on the movements of money, persons, metaphors, narratives, and biographies. As much as anthropology has been riven by debate about its ethnographic core, very few anthropologists have argued for abandoning ethnography. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes put it: “Not to look, not to touch, not to record can be the hostile act, an act of indifference and of turning away” (1995, p. 418).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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