

Ethnography as a social science perspective: a review

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews references of ethnography as a method in the social sciences gathered by using Google™, EBSCO, ProQuest, REDALYC, PSICODOC, Dialnet and LATINDEX. Anthropologists' postmodern self-critique has influenced social scientists and ethnography has increasingly become a way to explore our forms of life. This translates into a perspective that responds to ethical, political, cultural, and social concerns about the production of knowledge. It seeks to excise the distance between researchers, often by collaborating with consultants in research projects. The ensuing reflections evoke possibilities generated from interactions in the field and an appreciation of a complexity that poses methodological challenges for researchers who see the field as a space from which they cannot be extricated.

Keywords: Ethnography; method; Social Sciences; database.

RESUMO

A Etnografia como uma perspectiva em Ciências Sociais: Uma revisão de literatura.

Este artigo revisa as referências que falam sobre etnografia como metodologia e que foram recopilados através de Google™, EBSCO, ProQuest, REDALYC, PSICODOC, Dialnet e LATINDEX. A autocrítica dos antropólogos chegou a influenciar os cientistas sociais e a etnografia cresceu como uma maneira de explorar nossas formas de vida. Isso se traduz em uma perspectiva que responde às preocupações éticas, políticas, culturais e sociais acerca da produção de conhecimento. É uma perspectiva que trata de evitar a distância entre os investigadores e que costuma constituir-se em projetos de investigação colaborativa com consultores. As reflexões resultantes desta perspectiva evocam possibilidades geradas nas interações no campo e de uma apreciação de uma complexidade que suscita desafios metodológicos para os investigadores que vem o campo como um espaço a partir do qual não podem ser arrancados.

Palavras-chave: Etnografia; metodologia; base de dados; Ciências Sociais.

RESUMEN

La Etnografía como una perspectiva en las Ciencias Sociales: Una revisión de la literatura

Este artículo pasa revista las referencias que versan sobre etnografía como una metodología y que fueron recopilados a través de Google™, EBSCO, ProQuest, REDALYC, PSICODOC, Dialnet y LATINDEX. La auto-crítica de los antropólogos ha llegado a influir a los científicos sociales y la etnografía ha crecido como una manera de explorar nuestras formas de vida. Esto se traduce en una perspectiva que responde a las preocupaciones éticas, políticas, culturales y sociales acerca de la producción de conocimiento. Es una en perspectiva que trata de obviar la distancia entre los investigadores, y que suele consistir en proyectos de investigación colaborativos con consultantes. Las reflexiones que resultan de esta perspectiva evocan posibilidades generadas desde las interacciones en el campo y de una apreciación de una complejidad que suscita desafíos metodológicos para los investigadores que ven al campo como un espacio desde el cual no pueden ser extirpados.

Palabras clave: Etnografía; metodología; base de datos; Ciencias Sociales

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography has become an essential part of scientific inquiry over the last century as researchers have moved away from traditional methodologies that seek to represent the reality in which we live. The question, "What is ethnography?" has become

an inquiry into how an ethnographic perspective influences a social scientific academic environment that no longer relies exclusively on realistic descriptions or inferential practices. Epistemological debates centered on distinguishing opinions from justified knowledge have shifted towards debates about the actual role of knowledge, especially of knowledge

that is not questioned for how it participates in reproducing circumstances that are within the realm of influence of the very act of research. Ethnography has also grown amid a theoretical ethos that questions the very character of scientific inquiry where the quantitative-qualitative divide happens to be only one of the debates in discussions about the production of knowledge. It shares a stage with case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative research within qualitative social science research, making for five traditions that inadvertently overlap each other at the moment of going with a method that best fits the object of study. What emerges upon having to choose from this short list is the need to problematize the method-object fit. The methodological determinations researchers are now making depend on how a method helps them find ways of participating in the day-to-day practices of persons to critically assess the social realities in which we live. It is a process that is analogous to the maneuver ethnography has made from looking at primitive peoples to answering questions about the nature of ourselves.

While an ethnographic perspective privileges the “social”, it does not overlook the “individual”; persons constantly acting in concert with institutions of their own making. It is a perspective in which researchers are understood as actors acting from the inside as well as from the outside, never being completely severed from the object of study while always being somewhat removed within the confines of their activity. Reflection, as part of an ethnographic perspective may simply be one of the ways through which researchers inform what is called the social. Understood as one of the many things an individual (inherently) does, it informs what we will do next. It is thought, understood as a cognition that stays close to practices without having to allude to mental processes. The social science perspective ethnography offers focuses on individuals’ reflections without wandering away from interactions themselves, subsuming the phenomenology and the hermeneutics of events that occur between persons and others, as well as between persons and things.

The choice of one or some combination from the list of methods may also emerge from being in the field. Deciding upon how to enter, attending to the *permanencia* or the duration of stay, as well as on how to trace some sort of exit from the field pose methodological issues. An ethnographic perspective considers researchers’ active appropriation of a field and how this informs their study from inception to dissemination. In this sense, a natural history of research would be more than methodological disclosure. It would be a report about researchers populating a field as much as a story about the field folding in upon itself,

of a contestation where actors yield to and resist the very act of research. Ensuing descriptions would then reflect a field where persons and things are coupled with researchers and their things (field-book in hand).

Researchers live a sort of simultaneity, responding to discourses about the production of knowledge and to imperatives that heed the partaking of the field. Entering a field entails opening a door between the political arena in which research is concocted and the political realities of the field. Sometimes investigations revolve around expressed goals of favoring a symmetric relationship between those researching and those being researched. In other cases, institutional or government interests establish the engagement guidelines. As an ethnographic perspective allows for reflections on discourses, imperatives and political commitments that come from all sides, it can address the character of emerging contextual differences, a process through which it can ascertain the complexity of emergent field evidence, from the collective to the personal, between humans and nonhumans, as well as from under irreconcilable imperatives.

More than an end product, the contribution of an ethnographic perspective hinges on presenting a complexity that seeks to open up new ways of being. The production of grand theory is set against Gadamer’s (1998) reminder of the original Greek sense of theory. It “is not so much the momentary act as a way of comporting oneself, a position and a condition. It is a ‘being present’ in the lovely double sense that means that the person is not only present but completely present” (p. 31). Calling upon these ways of being in research, feminist scholarship, postcolonial inquiry and critical theory return once removed scientists to the site of study as protagonists in their own right. As a result they can no longer indiscriminately utilize predetermined or extant categories. Immersed in a singularity of nuances they “participate of” and write about a complexity of relationships. This can be further exemplified by their use of the word “social”, augmented from the standard usage reference as an informal gathering to the grammatical equivalent of the noun “individual”, annulling a limitation that may have to do with a philosophical unidirectional convention of individual-orders-social. It involves a squeezing out from a central or universal position of the individual that begins to be replaced by some materializing other residing in the membership knowledge inherent in interactions (Have, 2002).

FROM A PERSPECTIVE TO THE RUB

Psychology and the other social sciences take on research perspectives that get translated into

techniques. These have effects that are similar to the full appreciation of the consummate aesthetic of an artist's expression of form that evokes others. The techniques are judged in terms of how they are successfully utilized to compose presentations. Beyond technical dexterity, the difficulty is in setting distinguishable generalities and specificities of the field to communicate something meaningful. An ethnographic perspective finds ways of showing objects in their movement and the resulting relationships that materialize. It has a quality that Michael (2004) finds in Michel Serres' exploration of objects, pertinent to the task of making the strange familiar or vice versa by addressing "the disparate shifting relationalities between heterogeneous entities that are at once material and semiotic, objective and subjective, human and nonhuman" (p. 12).

An ethnographic perspective also maintains a pragmatic approach towards the field, a fact researchers realize when they find themselves saying, "it's all data", their theories too. It is a planing, not a landing, with vast amounts of data flying about coupled with methods that perform the business of "ontological politics" (Mol as cited in Law & Urry, 2003). "Moreover, in a complex world there are no innocent 'methods'; all involve forms of social practice that in some way or another interfere with the patterns of the physical or the social. They are all part of that world" (Law & Urry, 2003, p. 9). As such, more than consider the ethics of research social scientists need to come to grips with the political constitutions of their own making.

Ethnographers that approach their work ethnomethodologically attend to the politics of research by interrupting a professional "indifference to the quiddity of their work as part of that quiddity" (Pollner & Emerson, 2007, p. 130). The ridiculous obvious radicalizations of this type of research heed Birth's (2001) warning that "the danger of assuming something as 'obvious' is that 'obvious' often serves as a gloss for 'never has been critically examined'" (p. 234). It is not simply translating a "domain of experience" (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005, p. 823). It calls upon a contextual gesture drawing of a performance. When the political championing of a cause evokes or provokes, there is an uptake loop that consists as much of resistances as it does of reproductions. Ethnographers who make these productions intelligible via radicalizations draw resources and recourses. As palpable recurrences they begin to make our very own enculturations obvious, potentially helping us evoke new possibilities.

ELBOW-TO-ELBOW

An ethnographic perspective in psychology requires a social scientific approximation towards the field.

While it may be a crowded place, the Spanish phrase "codo a codo" refers to persons gathered together in company or in cooperation. Together with things and irrespective of any identifiable intentionality or agency this constitutes the social. And a methodology needs to be able to study the noise generated by a wide assortment of actors, a task many methods texts delineate in descriptive and reflective terms. These limitations have placed ethnography as a method that is not reliable or valid when compared to work done in experimental and quantitative areas. Issues about the credibility of descriptions, however, sometimes get overlooked when objectives emerge that may not be directed at producing theory (Hammersley, 1995). Although some researchers reluctantly say that qualitative research can determine causality (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), Team Ethnography is offered as a solution by some who say having more persons in the field facilitates the comparing and triangulating of data (Woods et al., 2000). While some offer content analysis and complementarity in research design as solutions, Warrington (1997) argues that research also depends on knowing how to pick from a gamut of available methods reminding us that whether theory driven or methodologically defined (Bernard, 2002), the emergent nature of field research will continually raise issues of credibility.

Field research is a constant balancing act between its merits and drawbacks. The solutions to administrative and technical problems are sometimes met with a reluctance to yield to overriding judgments about how research is done (Reid & Gough, 2000). Writing field notes is compared to learning to play a musical instrument (van Maanen in Humphreys et al., 2003), as in the intricate 'conversation' of jazz, creatively writing about, engaging with, and judging the best way to explore and interpret the field. However, a climate of governmental and institutional mandated peer reviews, Institutional Review Boards (IRB), and narrow interpretations of the law have lead Nespore (2006) to say that Hammersley's book, *Reading ethnographic research: A critical guide* is "[a] bit fetishistic – that is, a bit too concerned with laying down the law about what should or shouldn't be allowed – but a useful short discussion of problems in ethnographic criteria for validity, etc." (General Texts section, § 16). This comment appears to reflect the nature of the debates about qualitative research and highlights attempts to hone description, a focus that often crosses over into debates about ethical standards.

In contrast to realist approaches that favor a palpable degree of distance to assuage concerns about objectivity, there are ethnographic perspectives that respond to critical approaches that seek to lessen researcher distance. Concerns about the presentation

of otherness come through in the critiques of feminist scholars (Gregorio Gil, 2005), academics in postcolonial inquiry (Mookerjea, 2003a), critical theory (Sarno, 2004), as well as those critical of a “colonial science” (Castro-Gómez, 2005). They have different ways of approaching what Hallam and Street (2000) call European cultural depictions of otherness. However, data gathering that serves as the springboard for writing raises the issue of the representation of otherness, which then folds over on the question of researcher distance. The literary turn in ethnographic writing has surfaced as a solution while at the same time raising doubts about the undertaking of research itself when it fails to maintain the “tension between trying to understand people’s perspectives from the inside while also viewing them and their behaviour more distantly” (Hammersley, 2006, p. 11). From a different plane, perhaps researchers are becoming more circumspect, effacing a boldness that adds to a tension that is a matter of fact in the field.

Including reflections on the field research process has produced knowledge otherwise considered unimportant or inaccessible. While natural histories or research biographies offer a vicarious presence in an investigation, biographical research has been extended to include the voices of those being studied (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). Lassiter (2005) shows how Collaborative Ethnography has emerged from an anthropology “replete with collaboratively conceived and dialogically informed ethnographic projects” (p. 89) where researchers and subjects work together to produce texts. He reveals how Public Anthropology relies on collaboration between the researcher and an other, where the latter is approached as a consultant after having been a subject or an informant. Representation is seen as a matter of action amid a multiplicity of voices, resulting in changes in the character of engagement that have gone from the “trope of rapport” (p. 93) to a “collaboration ... cliché” (p. 94) and beyond. At the center is an ensuing dialogue about who we are and who we are becoming, in a contemporary ethnographic perspective where researcher privilege, the power of those who are allowed to tell, seeks to be mitigated or put into a preventive space by a reflexivity that critically assesses what is being written. Feminist (Behar & Gordon, 1996) and critical modes of ethnography (Madison, 2005) have insisted on the political importance of narratives. Along these lines subjectivity is not an “*exclusive* experience – that is autobiography, travel writing, or memoir (or what some people call *autoethnography*)” (original italics, p. 9). An ethnographic perspective calls upon a transparency that reveals the “underside” (Fine, 1993) of researchers’ responses to unforeseen issues methodological, ethical or related to failures

as opposed to simply writing reliable reports of their reactive positioning (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). While opening a space to discuss researcher adaptation to the contingencies of the field (Bohannon & van der Elst, 1998), a critical reflection also brings to light issues about the field, about researcher’s responsiveness throughout the entire research process (Evans, 2002).

Perhaps the exposure Conquergood (cited in Madison, 2005) favors in a Performance Ethnography is a way of taking on the risks of research in a playful space where scholars can “privilege action, agency, and transformation” (p. 149). For some, autoethnography’s reflective nature offers insight into the social (Ellis, 2004), to include intelligible portrayals of researchers themselves as the subjects of investigation (Holt, 2003). The reflexivity elicits voicings from “marginalized representational spaces” (Tierney as cited in Holt, 2003, p. 16), which may be akin to the interstitial place “colonial science” critics mention in their writings (Castro-Gómez, 2005). Yet despite the openings offered by reflexivity, it could also simply be considered a “methodological device” (ESRC, 2003, p. 4) for gathering information that can later be evaluated for how it effectively depicts reality, or as a way to foreshadow problems in the field to maximize the research effort when it officially begins (Sampson, 2004). Indeed, limiting reflexivity to these specific uses is feasible while exploring the implications of these focalized applications of reflexivity would not be beyond the scope of a Reflexive Ethnography (Aull Davies, 1998). By the same token, the freedom to gravitate toward any topic of concern requires constantly attending to what we generate in the field and when autoethnographers choose to use fiction in their work (Ellis, 2004), they walk the creative ground of the road of agency.

WHAT MATTERS?

Efforts aimed at eliminating the messiness of qualitative research also offer an opportunity to examine the imbricate character of field research methodology. “The five-question method for framing a qualitative research study” ((5QM) McCaslin & Wilson Scott, 2003) presents a way to teach a graduate course where design issues are handled as “primary colors ... intricately blended as a holistic mural, rather than merely assembled side by side in a paint-by-number fashion” (p. 448). In another example, “The use of qualitative research methods in student affairs: A practical Guide” ((APG) Walters, 2001) is intended for university administrators taking on qualitative researcher. It first paints a picture of the institutional scenario and the obstacles they will face as they seek

a “practical and practicable” (p. 192) path to submit a credible report. The 5QM intends to offer pedagogical efficacy while the APG responds to administrative efficiency demands, and where the painting metaphor is explicit in the 5QM while it is implicit in the APG. The painting metaphor in the 5QM initially helps us conceptualize the process of developing a “coherently colored study framework” (p. 450) through a series of questions directed at identifying a best-fit method from among the five traditions of qualitative research. The metaphor falls short since the different traditions are discretely spread out as different colors, suggesting that it may be entirely possible to paint with one color. The design process, however, involves building a frame on which to stretch a canvas, taking a pencil and an eraser to sketch some type of perspective before reaching for a brush. There is evidence of this in the introduction to the APG. It illustrates the academic setting with its rules, roles, and rhythms but without connecting them to the research project’s institutional pressures. It fails to address the representation and communication of embodied inscriptions in this social space. An ethnographic perspective would take the scenario *itself* as field data, sketching these direct lines of authority on a canvas where everything else will be placed.

Research consists of busy work, of hours spent staring blankly at a canvas. An ethnographic perspective cuts across the other four qualitative methods of the five traditions by giving movement to the historical aspect of biography, to the experiential feel of phenomenology, to the specific focus of case studies and to the abstract lines of grounded theory. There is evidence of this in Walters’ (2001) introduction to the APG. We start to hear the administrators’ initial questions, their responses to the contingencies of the academic setting, the collaboration they establish between professionals in their daily activities, how they plan to gather data, and how they plan to train those persons who will actually be collecting it. The APG recommendations, however, eschew messier research protocols to meet the overriding institutional demand of fostering a stable academic environment by developing an evaluation system to replace others that “often are inconsistent, predictable, and reactive” (p. 184). All of these offer insight into an institution looking at itself as it tries to identify a “social haven” (p. 186) where a specific population of interest can be engaged. As such, the research itself is a device or technique for the tweaking of governance, and as authorities try to engage a specific community (of others) they are entering into what Rose (1999) calls a field of contestation, an “apparently natural space [where] the authority of community authorities, precisely because it is governed by no explicit codes and rules of conduct,

is often more difficult to contest than that of experts and professionals” (p. 189).

At least two surfaces have touched. The first consists of administrative research efforts, where speaking or acting have the incipient effects of materializing alterity, of subjectivities voiced from identities or implicit categories. The bold research directives are designed to guarantee credibility through machinations such as triangulation. However, they have costs that come from object distance requirements, of planning *in absentia*. The other surface consists of subjects responding to an objective inquiry produced by efficacy, efficiency and feasibility demands geared towards the production of knowledge. The price paid for this split has costs that an ethnographic perspective may be able to mitigate. While bridges, windows, or portals are designed to enter discoverable places, they do not provide the benefits of the doors of ethnography that can be open and shut as needed. A loosely designed ethnographic study responds by taking all of the actors in the field seriously, even to appreciate the goodness of an authoritative other.

CLIMBING OUT OF THE FOLD

Taking an ethnographic tradition and kneading it into a “framework for thinking about the world” (Sigman cited in Ellis, 2004, p. 26) requires a sensitive adaptability that includes excising an analytical distance from the field. Reporting the results of the messy methods we enact as participative and interpretive actors (Law & Urry, 2003) entails meeting the challenge of communicating an intelligibility of complexity. There is a long history of debates about ethnography that highlight the importance of collaborative field engagement in anthropology (Tani, 2004; Lassiter, 2005), in a move from cultural assessments of global differences to studying the local, and including academic past and present views of ethnography since researchers cannot simply paint over stains on a canvas (Castro Meira, 2005).

Concerns about the appropriateness of making students objects of study appear in the initial use of ethnography by education researchers. The growing interest in ethnography was made possible by a group of activist education scholars (LeCompte, 2002) who had ideas that were initially resisted in academia. The growing interest in what was happening in the classroom developed qualitative research methodology in the discipline (Smith, 1978), around the same time researchers began to write in terms of “sociology of the classroom” (Cohen, 1972). It was a movement that also encouraged educators to reach out beyond the school building (Erickson, 1984).

In the 80's, various edited books were published covering the research process, from field methods, to ethnography, and about the ethics of research in schools (Ball, 1983; Atkinson, 1984; Hargreaves, 1987). Despite a growth in the ethnographic methodology literature, there was a continued resistance to the method (Heath, 1982), or concerns about its superficial application (Ogbu, 1981). During the same period, Murray (1986) looked for ways to fine tune methodology in special education research by contrasting ethnography, microethnography, and ethnology. Life histories were explored as a way to do school research (Ball, 1983) given the political problems of institutional research addressed by those doing evaluative ethnographies (Fetterman & Pitman, 1986). Educators also began to explore other social science disciplines (Delamont & Atkinson, 1980), and critical approaches to ethnography were recommended for research in minority communities (Anderson, 1989) following a similar move in the area of comparative education (Masemann, 1982).

A more recent Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) edition of an ethnographic manual first published in 1983 shows an education research methodology trend of writing for other disciplines, similar to work done by Velasco (1997) who first wrote a general ethnography manual with Díaz de Rada and later wrote one for research in schools. This evidence of a cross fertilization in the 90's emphasizes the qualitative research traditions shared by education and other disciplines (Lancy, 1993). While sociologists conceptualized the influence of sex, age and income level in educational settings (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1998), a cultural approach revealed the workings of social privilege in schools (Jones, 1991). Influenced by the trend, Scollon, Bhatia, Li, and Yung (1999) combined sociolinguistics with qualitative research methods to delve into students' "world of discourse practices" proving the relevance of educational research to other disciplines (Heath, 1999). In the process, Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) remained concerned about developing theory and evidence to effectively serve the public. The field context became more significant in education research and allowed for less rigid explorations (Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993) throughout the time educational qualitative and ethnographic design were getting carried over to other disciplines. A concern about labeling began to grow, as when researchers implement "inclusive programs" without considering important aspects of the community context (Zollers et al., 1999). This trend got translated into concerns about the ethics of recording students in ethnographic research (Tobin & Davidson, 1990), while methods such as journaling began to be used to meet data gathering demands and to

foster community members' educational partnerships (Shockley et al., 1995). Some researchers began to use expressive writing for research and community building (Ellis & Bochner, 1996) amid increased concerns about research ethics in a climate of growing institutional reviews of research projects. What surfaced was a general tendency for ethnographic research in education to move away from strict methodology (Wolcott, 1999), having taken anthropology's lead to look for new ways of doing research and setting new sights for creative entries into the quotidian (Parra Sabaj, 1998).

Since the last decade and despite the prominence of traditional methodology in education research, researchers have continued to seek ways to respond to complex field contexts such as team research that seeks to meet traditional requirements while simultaneously carving out new modes of inquiry (Woods et al., 2000). On a grander scale, the ethnography of the university at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (EOTU, 2009) makes the educational site the subject of inquiry for students as well as for academics. It calls to mind the pervasiveness of education in our lives and its research trajectory parallels the trend of ethnographers to engage in social transformation (LeCompte, 2002). However, ethnography's growth as a perspective has had problems, especially in cases where issues of difference meet institutionalized educational practices (Evans, 2002). At the same time, the critical work that stirs debates about otherness has moved the discipline towards appreciating the weight of its own production of knowledge (Pasco, 2003). This has taken education researchers and even teachers towards using ethnography in their work (Velasco Orozco, 2003), responding to an ethnographic perspective that has taken the discipline to a place where it adeptly entertains debates about "what counts" as research (Smith, 2004). These are ways of responding to Garfinkel's (2002) reflection on the nuance in one of Durkheim's aphorisms. In contrast to the sense that 'the objective reality of social facts is sociology's first principle', there are many sociologists who are instead saying that 'the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental phenomenon'.

Concerns about the development and legitimacy of qualitative research has led clinical psychology researchers to propose a set of research guidelines to review qualitative manuscripts in the interest of quality control (Elliott et al., 1999). Campbell, Pound et al. (2003) examined Meta-ethnography as a way to synthesize qualitative research findings and make them more accessible to medical researchers. With respect to actual ethnographic studies in healthcare, Savage (2000) has raised concerns about the intensive supervision required and the limited generalizability

of the studies while recognizing that ethnography offers insights for conventional research methods. In terms of methodological issues, Sorrell and Redmond (1995) recommend interview techniques for nursing research, noting the importance of the interviewer and efforts to individualize the technique. Along these lines Callejo Gallego (2002) poses the problem of what is silenced when researchers observe, interview, and run discussion groups while Maggs-Rapport (2000) argues for the combination of methods in ethnographic and interpretive phenomenology research, focusing on the importance of triangulation in establishing the trustworthiness of nursing research.

Although ethnographic research can also be found in Geography, Communication and Media Studies, Political Science, and Business Administration, I will close this section by focusing on the field of Science and Technology Studies. It is a branch of social psychology greatly influenced by Actor-Network Theory that approaches ethnography in a manner that appears to be once removed from cultural inquiry, perhaps with the hope of making the cultural intelligible without explicitly looking for it. Research that looks at the implications for patients who have access to medical care technology installed in their homes use ethnography to study the influence of technology in our lives (López Gómez, 2005). There is also Hine's (2000) contribution to *Virtual Ethnography* and other studies that look at the social networks formed through the Internet (Gálvez Mozo, 2005).

PLANNINGS

Given the varied applications of ethnography it is difficult to land on a precise method or elucidate an overarching perspective. However, as anthropologists have started to move out of their respectable and comfortable places in the academic ivory tower (lower levels of) and back into the middle of the very world they study, they are embracing a spirit that characterized the discipline when it had been circumscribed to museums (Lassiter, 2005). Similar to what the philosopher Félix Duque (2002) says, "one starts to get fed up with so many shibboleths" (my translation, p. 17), theoretical and methodological classifications that say little about what is studied. Instead, a collaborative repositioning responds to the ethical, political, cultural, and social concerns about the production of knowledge. When consultants participate in thinking about the broader implications of their actions, the knowledge that is produced disseminates a reality that is reflective of a creative process of research in which a successful translation of life into text requires an eloquence that seeks to seed or evoke possibilities. More than

simply describing, the process reflects a move towards a problematization couched in terms of a curiosity evoking "the care one takes of what exists and what might exist" (Foucault, 1984, p. 328).

An example of a problematization would be a questioning of an inherently anthropological focus on culture by those concerned about how culture gets used (Geertz, 1986), not in terms of a contentious debate but as a way of jointly working out the detailed instances of the asymmetric positionings of cultural difference. The perspective of ethnography assumes the responsibility of the knowledge produced by offering "ideas to think with" (Eisenhart, 2001). How culture is used is similar to studies that focus on how reality is created by social action in the form of language, where psychological research methodology entails drawing limitations of a 'way of living' or a grasping of "meaningful cultural worlds" (Ortner as cited in Eisenhart, 2001, p. 187). When Bartolomé (2003) defends ethnography, he is linking it with studying the apparent parallel processes of hegemony and differentiation of globalization. Castro Meira (2005) shows why transnational theory needs to recognize the past and present academic views of ethnography, a perspective that is akin to Mookerjea's (2003b) concern about simple reductions of meaning and action into information.

If we were to study the activity of ethnographers, autoethnography would be a way of understanding their practices of representation and legitimation as members of a "research culture" (Holt, 2003, p. 4) and when Fonseca (2005) looks at how ethnographers approach class she is questioning how they resolve their transformative endeavors in research. Amid this activity some might argue that ethnography has won a methodological war and can now withstand the suggestion of a "narcissistic turn" (Leicht cited in Ellis, 2004) some sociologist autoethnographers had to withstand. Having seriously taken a variety of turns (linguistic, literary, critical, performative, rhetorical, discursive, etc.) and venturing into the spaces of a conversational turn as when Ellis says that written dialogue can "stand in for pages of description" (p. 343), ethnographers have accumulated the intellectual grist to entertain discussions about knowledge and its veridicality. What still loom, however, are the settled discourses or pronouncements of knowledge. Thanks to the image of historians tripping over themselves to unleash the complexities of the past, ethnographers recognize how their activity affects a complexity that has continually suffered the subsuming forces of scientific productions of knowledge; forms of life translated into texts. Instead of pitting methods against each other, an ethnographic perspective in the social sciences takes on the responsibility to those studied through

a constant assessment or reflexivity on how some voices are presented above others. This very exercise of reviewing a sundry list of references and sources (using Google™, EBSCO, ProQuest, REDALYC, PSICODOC, Dialnet, and LATININDEX) reflects one approximation of ethnography as a method in the social sciences. As such, it may only reflect its pulse at rest but the evidence of efforts to think creatively about our forms of life show that ethnography is hardly waiting around to get noticed.

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