

## Portrait of an Ethnographic Artist

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Review Essay:

**Harry F. Wolcott (2005). The Art of Fieldwork (2nd edition).**

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**Abstract:** The task of collecting and reporting qualitative data can be an overwhelming one. Fieldworkers are required to sift through numerous methodological, ethical and personal issues as they progress through the various stages of their research. Since qualitative research is the intimate study of humans, there is no dependable way to predict its course and no prescriptive manual to guide the fieldworker through it. It is an enterprise suited only to those individuals able to negotiate the many pitfalls and perils. Harry F. WOLCOTT's *The Art of Fieldwork* presents a thorough and captivating discussion of the issues surrounding ethnographic fieldwork, with particular focus on the many contradictory facets of the science. It is an excellent resource for both experienced and new fieldwork researchers. The following review synopsizes a selection of his ideas, extends some of them, and explores their broader applicability.

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## 1. Introduction

The goal of qualitative research is to identify and convey the human experience. This makes it both intriguing and exasperating, for the "human experience" refuses to be easily captured or defined. Certainly, it is true that "general criteria may not always be sufficiently sensitive to cope with complexities of social life" (SIKES, 2000, p.257) which is why the qualitative approach is well-suited to the task. In contrast to positivist research, which looks at large scale patterns in populations, qualitative research seeks to "learn about how and why people behave, think, and make meaning as they do" (AMBERT, ADLER, ADLER & DETNZER, 1995, p.880). It avoids the cold detachment encouraged by positivism (WONG, 1998, p.2) and seeks to "zoom in to give us particular descriptions" (VALSINER, 2002, para. 8). [1]

Even though qualitative and quantitative approaches are vastly different, they are frequently measured by the same yardstick. For the social scientist, this poses a significant challenge. However, in addition to issues like validity, transferability, and reliability, a fieldworker must also be prepared for deeper, more personal conflicts. Social research demands personal involvement with a subject while, at the same time, maintaining an acceptable degree of objectivity. This can truly test a fieldworker's ability to perform under circumstances where there are no concrete rules to act as a guide. To succeed in the field, the ethnographer must become comfortable with methodological, theoretical and personal complexities. WOLCOTT's book, *The Art of Fieldwork*, addresses all of these issues. [2]

## 2. Organization and Content of the Text

In *The Art of Fieldwork*, Harry F. WOLCOTT draws on some four decades of fieldwork to provide an indispensable guidebook covering many aspects of qualitative research. It is a book that balances what often seem to be irreconcilable differences in qualitative research. It is practical and theoretical, epistemological and methodological, reassuring and disquieting. Written in an engaging, professorial tone, it covers the full gamut of current issues in qualitative research. [3]

In Part I, "Fieldwork Contexts," WOLCOTT discusses how fieldwork is an art form and the fieldworker like an artist. Like art, fieldwork has both a methodology that can be acquired and a subtlety that remains elusive to most. WOLCOTT describes this as the difference between a craft and an art. Craft can be taught. Art cannot. [4]

Why is the art analogy so fitting? Just as "no succinct, unifying concept or definition of art emerges" (WOLCOTT, p.10), no succinct, unifying understanding of the human condition can ever be reached. Since "fieldwork involves the study of human beings in social interaction" (p.11), prescriptive rules are inappropriate. This is a conclusion also reached by researchers other than WOLCOTT. For example, in her reflections on her study of police culture, WESTMARLAND noted that many ethical scenarios arise in fieldwork for which there is no "coherent or

uniform solution for the ethnographer" (2001, p.533), which leaves fieldworkers to negotiate their own way through studies governed by rules that are as flexible and ephemeral as those that govern the artist. [5]

Part II, "The Fieldwork Part of Fieldwork," provides a practical guide for the aspiring or novice fieldworker. It ranges in topics from establishing oneself in the field to dealing with the "darker arts"—the paradoxical issues that can impede research. Even for the seasoned ethnographer, this section is a highly useful refresher. [6]

In Part III, "Fieldwork as Mindwork," WOLCOTT reviews the theoretical and methodological approaches to interpreting and reporting data. He explores the contradictions inherent in ethnography and the criticisms levelled at ethnographers. Then he offers practical advice on dealing with these challenges. [7]

Part IV diverges from the first edition, published a decade ago. Entitled "Fieldwork as Personal Work," it surveys the satisfactions of working in the field and then confronts the underbelly of the field in a frank and necessary discussion of discretion in fieldwork. Here he probes the idea that the fieldworker must make a "personal resolution" (WOLCOTT, p.212) about what to report. As an illustration of the point, WOLCOTT presents three of his own studies and analyses the reporting decisions he made while working on them. The chapter is an excellent addition to the original text, for it is a distinctly insightful, controversial and thought-provoking read. [8]

In summary, the book covers critical methodological and epistemological topics in a manner that is both approachable and demanding. It exposes many of the ambiguities faced by ethnographers and offers suggestions for coping with them. Furthermore, it challenges people interested in a career in fieldwork to examine their own suitability for the task. As a result, the book has many uses. [9]

### **3. Usability**

The value in *The Art of Fieldwork* lies in its capacity for eliciting reflection and dialogue, for propelling the reader along tangential lines. It is an ideal choice as a textbook in courses in qualitative research, as it raises many issues that would inspire spirited debate and discussion in both introductory and advanced classes. WOLCOTT presents his ideas in a way that circumvents idealistic approaches to fieldwork. On the issue of moral dilemmas, for example, he contends that acceptance of the existence of such problems is necessary to reasonably deal with them; anyone who is unable to deal with ambiguity head-on is advised to find a "safer approach" to research (p.116). Another discussion-starter is his declaration that, too often, a study is conducted merely to surmount a "hurdle along the route to an advanced degree" (p.27) and is thereby lacking in purpose or importance. [10]

## 4. The Ethnographic Dilemmas

The first chapters discuss the basics in fieldwork including interviewing strategies, tips for establishing rapport and strategies for writing, but it is the section on the "darker arts," as WOLCOTT calls them, and the discussion of discretion, that set this book apart. [11]

### 4.1 The darker arts

The darker arts address the contradictions that a researcher must confront. In this chapter, WOLCOTT introduces the self-contradictory nature of the accusations levied against fieldwork. On one hand, for example, fieldwork is viewed as superficial, conducted by an outsider who will inevitably leave the community of interest. On the other hand, to conduct a successful study requires a level of intimacy deemed by some to be excessive. "If fieldwork can be faulted for being superficial, how can it also be equated with spying?" (p.116), WOLCOTT muses. Along that vein, he identifies six distinct problems of qualitative research: superficiality, obviousness, being self-serving, lack of independence, deception and betrayal, and clandestine observation. Each of the six categories illuminates a similar contradiction. [12]

*Superficiality* occurs when a researcher tries to "convey a sense of commitment consistent with in-depth study" which may or may not be genuine (p.117). *Obviousness* occurs both in fieldwork approaches and in fieldwork results. The "participant observation" approach (originally viewed as a predicament before it was legitimized in the 1930s), continues to raise the question of how much of the researcher should be written into the report. As for obviousness in results, in essence, WOLCOTT asks, does fieldwork merely reveal what everyone already knows? (p.122) WOLCOTT presents and discusses two sides on this—that which argues that we gain only a deeper understanding of what we already know and that which argues that we gain a deeper understanding by "pointing to what people are already pretty much unaware of" (p.124). Both views, though, agree that a deeper understanding of some aspect of human behaviour is gleaned through fieldwork. Obviousness is also apparent in the very nature of social research studies which, while meant to be meaningfully and in-depth, can be perceived as too narrow for "real" science. Even studies that highlight important problems often elicit doubts about generalization. [13]

Research is *self-serving* in that it is often "little more than one more hurdle along the route to an advanced degree" (p.127). Graduate students mindlessly embark on studies on topics of "virtually no consequence, with yesterday's inconsequential experiments and field trials replaced today by quickie descriptive studies endlessly inventorying similarities and differences" (p.128). To further exacerbate the problem, topics for study are often governed by the bodies funding them. Such poor motivation for research is doomed to produce soulless work and would be better replaced with a synthesis approach, leaving the authentic fieldwork to those who are genuinely inspired to conduct it. [14]

The *lack of independence* experienced by fieldworkers is a result of the quantitative world in which they function. Even in a qualitative environment, "researchers are a powerless lot; within their own world, it is the administrators of research who wield what little power there is" (p.135); researchers are forced to fit their interests to the "funded problems of the day" (p.136); and novice researchers are pressured into joint authorships. All these contribute to the social scientist's lack of independence. Indeed, WOLCOTT warns, "never delude yourself into thinking that the choices you will face along the way will be yours alone to make" (p.139). [15]

*Deception and betrayal* are viewed by WOLCOTT as reporting issues that can be minimized by a judicious blend of candor and discretion. He continues the discussion in considerable depth in the newly-added final chapter, "The Art of Discretion." Clandestine observation is another issue that ethnographers must face directly. An unavoidable result of others' perceptions of fieldwork, observation is sometimes equated with voyeurism, casting a lascivious connotation onto it. Yet WOLCOTT points out that a certain element of stealth is warranted if one is to observe truly natural behaviors. [16]

Admirably pragmatic in his approach to many of these quandaries, WOLCOTT deftly negotiates his way through the quagmire of criticisms targeted at the field. Deception, betrayal and observation, he asserts, are always present in any research carried out on humans, and this is "something we must learn to live with" (p.146). Such forthright honesty typifies WOLCOTT's handling of many of the issues he puts forward in the book. [17]

## 4.2 The art of discretion

WOLCOTT's chapter on the art of discretion is both perceptive and provocative. In it, he briefly describes three studies which he has conducted at various stages of his career, then shares his personal thoughts and reflections on each. The chapter provides an exemplary illustration of how ethnographers are required to apply their best judgment to research situations, particularly in regard to which findings should be published. WOLCOTT condones keeping boundaries flexible, but never losing sight of them. In other words, fieldworkers must keep the purpose of their inquiry forefront in their minds, and control the extent of any extraneous exploration. This has major implications for the reporting process, as it limits the ethnographer to reporting only data that are justifiably linked to the study's declared purpose. Other facts and details, no matter how intriguing, are often better left out. His application of this principle to his own studies provides fodder for serious reflection and heated debate. [18]

### 4.2.1 The WOLCOTT debate

For the instructor seeking to stimulate lively dialogue in a qualitative research course, this section on discretion is sure to satisfy, for certain of WOLCOTT's discretionary choices have launched him, however reluctantly, into the ethical spotlight. Notably, his study entitled "Adequate Schools and Inadequate

Education: The Life History of a Sneaky Kid," published in 1983, led to a furor in the social sciences community. At the time of the study, the subject, "Brad," was a twenty year old man who had squatted on WOLCOTT's acreage on the edge of Eugene, Oregon. The initial report discussed the circumstances contributing to this young man's failure in his educational endeavors and concluded that the educational system was inadequately equipped to provide appropriate intervention services for at-risk adolescents. While the report received little attention from the governmental agency that had commissioned it, it nevertheless "remains a well-referenced source among qualitative researchers and graduate students in the field" (DENTITH, 2003, p.1324). [19]

After the study, however, Brad began to exhibit symptoms indicating mental or emotional instability, and ultimately left the property. Over two years later, he returned, brutally assaulted WOLCOTT, and burned down his house. During the ensuing trial, it was revealed that WOLCOTT and Brad had engaged in sexual relations during Brad's sojourn on WOLCOTT's property, a fact that, for some, cast an entirely different light on the study. Three articles which chronicle the tale, together referred to as "The Brad Trilogy," were published by WOLCOTT in *Transforming Qualitative Data* in 1994. Some time later, he also published a book dedicated entirely to the original article and subsequent events in *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath* (2002). [20]

While some have argued that WOLCOTT's actions were ethically questionable (ROTH, 2004), others have supported WOLCOTT's position that certain matters remain peripheral to a study and do not affect its outcome (BOUDREAU, 2002; BUSIER, et al., 1997; DENTITH, 2003; STROBEL, 2005). It is a subject that has sparked debate and controversy from the outset, just as it is likely to do in any graduate class. [21]

In the final section of *The Art of Fieldwork*, WOLCOTT examines his rationale for leaving out the fact that Brad and he had shared an intimate personal relationship. He points out that, "whatever an ethnography is, it is not an exposé, not a license to tell all. I would characterize this as keeping one's account close to the ground, but screening everything through a filter, a filter of respectability" (p.235). He applies this philosophy when he looks at the reporting choices he made in two other studies—one of a Kwakiutl Village in British Columbia, the other of a school principal. In each of these studies, too, he opted to either omit or include information about happenings in the community in question. This is an important aspect of the reporting process that echoes the contradictory nature of qualitative research. How do researchers determine what should be published and what should remain undisclosed? Here, WOLCOTT again acknowledges that there are no simple solutions, that "there are myriad forces to contend with; there are no precise guidelines" (p.251), and perhaps in no other area of social research is this more true. It is the task of the researcher to make judgments that will neither unduly distress the subject nor misrepresent the study's findings. In some instances, such a task is a formidable one. [22]

## **5. Beyond WOLCOTT: Extending the Discussion on Contradictions**

In a magnificent oxymoron, WOLCOTT proposes faking everything, including honesty, in order to reconcile the many contradictions inherent in fieldwork. It is a declaration that induces reflection. On the surface, the suggestion appears facetious, but it illustrates the idea that, in many ways, qualitative research is the art of the oxymoron, several of which WOLCOTT identifies. Further exploration into the area of self-contradictory concepts in qualitative research makes for stimulating discourse. Paradoxes parallel to WOLCOTT's—intimate objectivity, caring non-intervention and consensual betrayal, for example—are incongruities that further exemplify the predicament of the researcher. The crux of the problem lies in the relationship between the ethnographer and the subject, and what it means for the process of the study and its findings. [23]

Several researchers have published their musings on these topics and are worthy of examination as they relate directly to WOLCOTT's position on the paradoxical nature of fieldwork. The following paragraphs exemplify how the ideas in WOLCOTT's text can meld seamlessly into further dialogue and enquiry. The discussion elaborates on WOLCOTT's contention that fieldwork is characterized by self-contradictory notions. [24]

### **5.1 Intimate objectivity**

The first dilemma proposed here is the notion of intimate objectivity. As opposed to the positivist approach, "qualitative research seeks depth rather than breadth" (AMBERT, ADLER, ADLER & DETZNER, 1995, p.880) but, to obtain that depth requires the researcher to cultivate a closeness that creates complications that cannot be easily discounted or nullified. Because of the familiar relationship between researcher and subject, the researcher's ability to maintain impartiality can be impaired. [25]

To deal with the quandary this causes for researchers, some shift between "the desire to be friendly and reciprocal with [their] respondents and yet, at the same time, to be distant, with a wary reminder about the power and exploitation that may arise during research" (WONG, 1998, p.4). WOLCOTT states it plainly: Deception "is a fact of social life and therefore a fact of fieldwork life" (p.146) and fieldworkers must learn to live with it. Only then can they comfortably elicit the intimacies of their subject, which they must then filter through their own sense of discretion. [26]

### **5.2 Caring non-intervention**

Addressing the issue of researcher-subject relationships, WOLCOTT proposes that there is a "question of whether one needs to be neutral in order to be objective" (p.157). While WOLCOTT largely restricts his discussion to the issue of the researchers' personal feelings toward their subjects, he provides opportunities for a much wider application of the question. For example, in extreme situations, how do researchers refrain from intervening on behalf of their

subjects when they have "inevitably come to care deeply about what and whom they are studying" (TOMA, 2000, p.177)? [27]

During his study of Clay, a juvenile delinquent, VANDERSTAAY (2005) reflected on the possibility that his involvement with the boy may have indirectly led to a "sequence of events that included several drug deals, a murder, the arrest and imprisonment of [his] subject, and the ruin of his mother" (p.372). Ironically, his culpability arises largely from his well-meaning attempts to help Clay and his family. Throughout his study, VANDERSTAAY struggled unsuccessfully to balance his feeling that he was somehow responsible to protect Clay's life while he endeavored to study it (p.400). His well-meaning actions, motivated though they were by his desire to help, may have altered the course of events, possibly calling into question the validity of his findings. Yet, given his altruistic intentions, can he be faulted for the choices he made? [28]

In a study of police culture, WESTMARLAND observed instances of police brutality which placed her in a similar situation. While VANDERSTAAY chose to intervene in his subject's life, WESTMARLAND opted to maintain her distance to preserve her access and trust relationship (2001, p.532). Her decision caused her considerable angst, but she reasoned that

"the problem of viewing police violence and when to make a disclosure regarding inappropriate behaviour is complicated by a number of factors [such as] defining violence, the feelings and personal morals of the researcher, and the perceived reasoning behind the actions of the observed" (p.528). [29]

Put starkly, abuse became a matter of opinion. [30]

In these cases, the researchers made decisions based on the circumstances of their study and on their own personal values and beliefs. Yet, both researchers were troubled about the choices they made and, for both of them, that discomfort became a personal burden. [31]

### **5.3 Consensual betrayal**

The issues of intimate objectivity and caring intervention are closely tied to consensual betrayal. Although WOLCOTT (p.140) concedes that the possibility of betrayal by the ethnographer is always present and finds such accusations to be disturbing, he dismisses this difficulty too hastily. Other researchers give the matter of betrayal more serious attention. [32]

In his study of women in a workfare program, WONG (1998) observed that the confidences shared by the women were "construed as data to be recorded" (p.16) and ultimately published, an incongruity that did not escape him. From the outset, subjects were aware that their disclosures would be made public in some way, yet they consented anyway. In effect, they consented to their own betrayal, an irony that is often made possible by the ethnographer's skill as "a negotiator of

access" (VALSINER, 2002, para.13) and accentuated by the "subtle manipulations of the interview process" (WONG, 1998, p.15). [33]

There are other forms of betrayal as well. A researcher may publish a subject's most intimate disclosures, yet may also agree to suppress the publication of blatant atrocities, thereby thwarting even post hoc intervention that could help the victims. When seeking access to a police force for study, WESTMARLAND (2001) was asked what action she would take if she were to witness police brutality. Had she not indicated her willingness to collude, her access would certainly have been denied (p.529), but in doing so, she essentially agreed to suspend judgment of any unethical behavior that she observed. [34]

As a condition of gaining access, TAYLOR (1987, p.289), too, "promised to maintain confidentiality and refrain from interfering in institutional activities." In doing so, he committed himself to standing by while patients were physically and emotionally abused. Again, this illustrates how researchers are required to countermand their humanitarian instincts in the name of scientific advancement. [35]

#### **5.4 The ethnographer's dilemma**

Ideally, someone interested in fieldwork should be seeking to improve the human condition by understanding it better. Yet, such a person is the most likely to be discomfited by the moral dilemmas faced by a fieldworker. The imperative to observe the struggles of their subjects without intervening on their behalf would prove difficult for most caring individuals. Even in comparatively innocuous situations, must researchers refrain from offering advice or support, even though it may abrade their sense of compassion? [36]

How do fieldworkers prepare themselves to develop intimacy with a subject yet sustain the one-sidedness necessary to collect meaningful data? In the absence of rules and faced with ethical dilemmas, the researcher must rely on judgment, and judgment becomes central to ethnographic studies. [37]

##### *5.4.1 The question of judgment*

The ethnographer operates in a field where the terrain is constantly changing—where ambiguity is the norm rather than the exception—making the application of rigid rules impractical. "There are no definitive rules on which to base [a researcher's] decisions, a task which is troubling to some, and inevitable to others" (TAYLOR, 1987, p.297). Each decision is dependent on the researcher's best judgment. [38]

The challenges are further compounded by the fact that both the researcher and the subject are influenced by their own foibles and idiosyncrasies. Each study is one researcher's perceptions and experience interacting with one subject's perceptions and experience. Interwoven throughout are the many questions that complicate such an interaction. All of these affect judgment. [39]

TAYLOR (1987, p.300) also makes the point that "it is impossible to completely codify a morality" and it is to this tenet that WOLCOTT frequently speaks. In his words, the answer to some judgment questions is, simply, "it depends" (WOLCOTT, p.120). In one setting, a researcher may observe a subject undergo great hardship or suffering, while doing nothing to alleviate it. In another, the researcher may intervene. Again, it is a matter of judgment, and judgment implies moral ambiguity. [40]

## 6. Moral and Ethical Questions

Given the ambiguity inherent in qualitative research, is it reasonable to expect any individual to carry the burden of objectivity in the face of subjectivity? How do researchers separate their moral selves from their objective selves? They can't. [41]

Because a researcher cannot endorse consensual betrayal or maintain compassionate objectivity without causing substantial inner conflict, there is a cost for the researcher on a very personal level. It is virtually impossible for researchers to achieve any level of intimacy while simultaneously maintaining sufficient distance to protect themselves from emotional distress. That is why "people who cannot deal with moral ambiguity probably should not do fieldwork because of the internal conflicts it will pose" (TAYLOR, 1987, p.294). [42]

However, it is ambiguity that makes ethnographic research intriguing as well as exasperating. Of the treatment of the inmates of a state institution for the mentally retarded, TAYLOR (1987, p.291) observed that "the abuse was morally appalling, yet sociologically interesting." [43]

While the personal and professional predicaments presented should certainly cause the researcher to pause, the benefits for social research must be weighed against the costs to the individual researcher. [44]

In the final analysis, it is the ambiguities and moral dilemmas of qualitative research that make it possible to describe the human experience. "Moral dilemmas present some of the more interesting aspects of observing social life of any group" (WESTMARLAND, 2001, p.531), and to eliminate them would dilute the richness of the data collected. [45]

### 6.1 Portrait of an artist

When WOLCOTT compares art with craft, he concludes that, while a craft can be taught, art depends on some innate quality within the artist. He then compares the fieldworker to the artist. Does it follow that an individual who lacks the necessary innate quality cannot be trained to become a fieldworker? Perhaps this is the case, for a fieldworker must not only be *willing* to cope with the ambiguities and moral dilemmas that can accompany fieldwork, but must also be *able* to do so. For those not fitting these criteria, WOLCOTT suggests alternative approaches to research (p.116). [46]

In the end, he states "the approaches to fieldwork are, in their almost infinite variations, alternatives rather than sequenced steps, choices among strategies rather than the selection of proper techniques" (WOLCOTT, p.152). Combine this rather unsettling reality with the paradoxes inherent in fieldwork, and it becomes clear that qualitative research is suited only for a unique individual—the true ethnographic artist. [47]

## 7. Conclusion

WOLCOTT's book makes it clear that only certain portions of research can be governed by any set of rules. The range of possible directions a study can take precludes a manual of prescriptive rules. After all, how can one plot the course of one's research when there are so many paradoxes and contradictions to reconcile? The answer is, essentially, that one cannot. [48]

What WOLCOTT does, though, is alert the fieldworker to the possible hazards of the field and offer an array of options for coping with them. Granted, he does share a substantial amount of his expertise in the field, but he also openly concedes that, to some problems, there is simply no reliable resolution. For these instances, he addresses the observation by TAYLOR (1987) that, "it is important to go into fieldwork thinking about potential moral and ethical dilemmas before encountering them in the field" (p.300) by providing an essential guidebook for dealing with the unforeseeable. The critical phrase here is "thinking about" and it would be impossible to read *The Art of Fieldwork* without doing just that. [49]

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