

Review:

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Marlene de Laine (2000). *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications, 231 pages Cloth (ISBN 0 7619 5486 4) £ 55.00, Paper (ISBN 0 7619 5487 2) £ 19.99

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Abstract: DE LAINE presents theoretical discussions and case examples of fieldwork to demonstrate the complexity of ethics that includes attention to both the ethnographic process and product. She demonstrates how ethical practice for the contemporary fieldwork researcher requires critical and reflective thinking, in addition to an understanding of codes of ethics. Her book is highly recommended for both experienced and new fieldwork researchers.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Highlights](#)
 - [2.1 Ethical dilemmas and ethical paradigms](#)
 - [2.2 Contemporary ethnography](#)
- [3. Evaluative Commentary](#)
- [References](#)
- [Author](#)
- [Citation](#)

1. Introduction

DE LAINE identifies two purposes for *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*. These are 1) "to promote an understanding of the harmful possibilities of fieldwork," and 2) "to foster ways to deal with ethical and practical dilemmas" (p.4). To achieve these purposes, DE LAINE presents theoretical discussions and case examples of fieldwork to demonstrate the complexity of ethics that includes attention to both the ethnographic process and product. She sets the stage by first discussing the moral career of the fieldworker and comparing the dominant and alternative ethical paradigms. DE LAINE furthermore compares contemporary approaches to traditional fieldwork in order to highlight different ethical considerations. [1]

The focus of the different chapters includes an exploration of the ethical issues related to access, the roles of the researcher, relationships including power dynamics and competing demands from various audiences (e.g., sponsors and academic supervisors), methodological choices, and writing the report, including the use of field notes. [2]

2. Highlights

2.1 Ethical dilemmas and ethical paradigms

DE LAINE describes ethical dilemmas as "a problem for which no course of action seems satisfactory; it exists because there are 'good' but contradictory ethical reasons to take conflicting and incompatible course of action" (p.3). To address dilemmas, professional and regulatory ethical codes as well as personal values can help guide fieldworkers. DE LAINE, however, cites HILL, GLASER and HARDEN (1995) who argue that not all ethical dilemmas can be resolved by adherence to codes or guidance from one's own values. Instead, grappling with ethical dilemmas requires an awareness of contextual factors such as "professional and power relationships" (p.3). [3]

Ethical dilemmas, according to DE LAINE, should not be considered as barriers to research, but, rather, should be viewed as opportunities to generate increased self-awareness of one's own ethical and moral perspective. While federal regulations exist that guide the ethical involvement of study participants, DE LAINE argues that the traditional ethical principles (e.g., Respect for Persons) do not adequately account for the range of ethical dilemmas that an ethnographer may encounter while in the field as well as during the writing process. DE LAINE describes the focus of the traditional principles on "what we do to others," thus inadequately accounting for the "wider moral and social responsibilities of simply being a researcher (Kellehear, 1993: 14)" (p.214). [4]

DE LAINE further describes how the positivist underpinnings of the regulations do not reflect the criticalist influenced ethnographic approach. As an example, she points to the differences in relationship between researcher and participants. She contrasts the researcher who has a more distanced or objective perspective, as formalized in the ethical codes, with the contemporary fieldworker who places value on the interpersonal and interactive. She writes, "there can be formal guidelines for ethics, but ethics in fieldwork are relational and subject to local contingencies" (p.56). [5]

2.2 Contemporary ethnography

DE LAINE provides a brief historical overview of the attention to ethics within the social sciences. In the latter half of the twentieth century, there was an increase in awareness of the rights of study participants. This was partially attributed to the influence of feminist scholarship, critical and participatory approaches to research, and the increase in ethical review boards. It should also be noted that in the United States attention to ethics was also motivated by the public's reaction to the media's exposure of ethical violations as those seen in the Tuskegee Syphilis study. [6]

DE LAINE offers the reader a greater understanding of the potential for ethical dilemmas in contemporary fieldwork. She contrasts the contemporary ethnographic approach that often assumes a more activist stance where

researchers engage with the participants versus the more traditional approach where researchers assume a more distant and impersonal stance both in the field and in their reports. [7]

DE LAINE discusses the multiple roles of the researcher and the relationship with the study participant as an example of where the contemporary fieldworker may encounter ethical dilemmas. For example, she cites STACEY's (1988) concern with the ethical issue of engaging with the research participant and creating a more intimate space than in the traditional research interview. Within this intimate space, the participant might share personal stories that would not have been disclosed in a more traditional research encounter. STACEY (1988) sees tension between the role of the researcher as participant and as researcher/observer. In the first role, researchers are more relational as they build rapport with the participant. In second role, researchers may become more exploitative as they are observing and participating in order to gain data. STACEY (1988) finds that the rapport between the research participant and the researcher creates a sense of collaboration, but ultimately it is the researcher who authors the final product by providing the interpretation and writing of the report. As a means to address these issues, DE LAINE urges researchers to be self-reflective and acknowledge their impact on the research process. She writes, "rapport comes from the inter-subjective construction of reality" (p.63). [8]

3. Evaluative Commentary

The use of case examples provides the reader with a greater understanding and awareness of the range of potential ethical dilemmas that an ethnographer might encounter in the field and in the process of completing the written product. The case examples ground the more theoretical discussions of ethics. DE LAINE's use of her own fieldwork challenges was consistent with her discussions of the importance of authors situating themselves in the text. DE LAINE provides both a description and an analysis of the presented fieldwork experiences. This is reflective of the differences she describes between the more traditional ethnographic report and the contemporary approaches that allow space for subjective experiences and critical reflections as sources of data. A shift from a more objective to an inter-subjective focus encourages researchers to become more critically self-reflective of such aspects as their politics and biases. [9]

Rather than framing the inevitable ethical and moral dilemmas as obstacles, DE LAINE encourages ethnographers to consider these dilemmas as opportunities for greater self-awareness and critical thought. I appreciated how she cited LINCOLN (1998) as accepting only student fieldworkers who demonstrate a high level of maturity. This helps to reinforce the seriousness of addressing ethics—both in terms of planning one's fieldwork to reduce ethical problems and for handling the unanticipated ethical issues that arise. [10]

DE LAINE effectively outlines the many layers of negotiation that the fieldworker encounters. These negotiations include gaining access into the back regions as well as negotiations with sponsors and academic supervisors. She describes the

potential for competing demands that can create ethical dilemmas for the field worker. For example, she describes how the agreements made in the field can be challenged by the need to satisfy the expectations of academic supervisors. Another audience that must be negotiated with is the Human Subjects Division. While DE LAINE offers a thorough discussion of how the formalized ethical regulations do not account for the range of ethical dilemmas relevant to the fieldworker, she did not fully explore how these differences in conceptualizations of ethics must be negotiated with the Human Subjects Division. For example, what are the potential challenges for the contemporary ethnographer if the human subjects' regulations are guided by traditional research assumptions? Additionally, how can the ethnographer anticipate or respond to these potential challenges? [11]

Although DE LAINE covers a broad spectrum of ethical issues, greater attention could have been paid to issues of accountability regarding how findings are shared and used. Some researchers would argue that participants share information and consequently deserve to benefit from the research process. This may include writing in a way that is accessible to those most affected by the issue being explored. CHAMBERS (2000) also suggests that ethnographers too often fail to follow-through on how the research is being used—for example, were findings used to create policy changes? Findings can also be appropriated and used in a harmful way that distorts the context in which the information was shared. Consideration, therefore, should be given to who the potential audiences might be and how they may use the findings to support their cause. This includes thinking about the political dimensions surrounding the research project. For example, does the project place already vulnerable groups at potential risk of further exploitation if the findings are used inappropriately against them? [12]

While DE LAINE primarily references anthropology and sociology, she acknowledges the growing popularity of fieldwork in other disciplines and professions. I would highly recommend *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research* as a text for the wide range of fields that currently engage in fieldwork. She does an excellent job of moving beyond basic ethical principles and informs the reader of the complexity of contemporary fieldwork. [13]

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