FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 3, No. 2, Art. 29
May 2002

Ethnography Lost and Found: Qualitative Methodology Between Science, Art, and Social Powers

Jaan Valsiner

Review Essay:

Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland & Lyn Lofland (Eds.) (2001). Handbook of Ethnography. London: Sage, 507 pages, Cloth (0-7619-6480-0) U.S. $ 89.95 / £ 75.00

Key words: ethnography, ethno-methodology, "Chicago school" of sociology, bureaucratization of science, generality of knowledge

Abstract: The Handbook of Ethnography reviewed here is a thorough treatise of the field as it currently stands—enthusiastically proliferating the uses of qualitative methodology, while remaining disoriented by the role post-modernist thinking has played in the contemporary social sciences. As a result, the uses of qualitative techniques become potential tools for telling journalistic stories, while removing the ideal of science—of creating universal knowledge—from the agenda. It is hoped that the time-honored traditions of ethnography will survive the social pressures of bureaucratization and institutional control over contemporary social sciences. The Handbook also provides an excellent overview of the various research traditions that have emerged from the "Chicago School" of sociological thought. At the same time it fails to represent the ethnographic thought in countries outside of the British-American axis. Nevertheless, the Handbook is a remarkable synthesis of existing thinking in and around of ethnography.

Table of Contents

1. What is Ethnography and Where is it Going?

There is inherent pleasure in knowing. Especially knowing of the exotic people far away from one's own mundane environment. Knowing relies on somebody's encounters with foreign lands (or of the view from one's window), description of those, and bringing these all to some wider audience. Ethnography gets its beginning from world travels and collection of objects of interest (and value). Exploration of the World brought with it the study of the ways of being of the "others"—"out there". And that study was ethnography—a form of collection of cultural artifacts. [1]

Ethnography itself is a term of wide proportions—and of venerable history. As Lodewijk BRUNT diplomatically notes,

> "The typical attempts of the early days of ethnography at conducting encyclopedic research, in which all the aspects of local social life had to be covered, have been replaced by more realistic and sociologically refined endeavours to highlight a limited number of particular themes" (BRUNT, Chapter 5, p.88). [2]

Contemporary social sciences are under various pressures from the politics of public's "right to know"—molded by the business of journalism—to render their accounts usable for local socio-political concerns. The concern about "epistemic density" of ethnography (James FAUBION, Chapter 3, p.52) in the contemporary history of the social sciences is no easy matter. Behind this complex word is the question of dangers and pleasures of emulating journalism. On the side of dangers we can see social sciences turning superficial in their depth of coverage of the phenomena—and let the sensations or exotic news carry the day. This is evident in the turn (implicitly supported by publishers' needs for revenue) towards increasingly popular style writing for wide audiences. On the side of the pleasures is the fame and remuneration as a successful author of a widely read (and bought) story about something exotic. Qualitative research seems to be wide open for this extra-scientific tension. [3]

The Handbook is a tribute to the qualitative research traditions many of which stem from the "Chicago School" of sociology. While it also includes key issues from cultural and social anthropology, cultural studies, and social protest movements (such as feminism), its real intellectual inheritance is that of the "Chicago sociology." That is a powerful intellectual force that crushes journalistic frivolity when it comes to the making sense of the sophistication of the dynamics of social systems. Its power is particularly remarkable since its qualitative ethos has survived, for a whole century, in the middle of a society—the United States of America—which is inherently privileging quantification of most social phenomena. In the middle of this all stand the qualitative studies from Chicago, and its intellectual environs. [4]

The social survival of qualitative research in and around of "Chicago sociology" has of course deeply American character. The "Chicago tradition" constitutes a distinctive enclave of the qualitative research in the middle of distrust of it by the quantitative "mainstream". Its survival is linked with the encapsulation of the "minority" views in the U.S. society—such views will have their legitimate "voice" in public, yet are kept under control as something to be known but not necessarily accepted. It is almost the reverse from the times of the beginnings of the "Chicago tradition" in 1890s and 1900s—when the work of Georg SIMMEL was taken from its stalemate in German philosophy to guide the beginnings of sociology in the United States. At those times—and under the turmoils of economic and social change in U.S. society of the 1890s and 1900s—the scholarly world of the U.S. gave rise to a number of universally relevant ideas in the social sciences (MEAD, 2001). [5]

2. The Heterogeneity of the Field

The Handbook covers a wide territory of knowledge. It includes 33 chapters, divided into three parts. Interestingly there are no sub-titles given to these parts—perhaps in line with the tradition of post-modern art of giving titles that indicate the absence of title (the title "untitled"). This fact may be a coincidence in the case of the Handbook—or a reflection on the contemporary field of ideas in ethnography. It is not easy to find sentence-long common grounds for the variety of contributions—hence careful reading of the introductions of each of the three parts is in order. [6]

However, the untitled parts are clearly substantively coherent. In Part One, the intellectual/historical roots of ethnography are given. It is here that one gets perhaps the best overview of all the richness of the "Chicago School" of sociology, about its history (Mary Jo DEEGAN, Chapter 1). While most of the readers may know—or think they do—about Robert PARK and Ernest BURGESS, there are over 20 different ethnographic accounts of most relevant social phenomena produced only in years prior to 1940. Most of those get credit in their specific sub-areas, but it is rare to see them brought together to their "source". The social embeddedness of ethnographic fieldwork is discussed by James FAUBION (Chapter 3) with honest explicitness. Ethnographers' work can lead to political protests and even bomb threats—a far cry from the illusions of creating objective knowledge for the sake of humanity. Aside from the "Chicago School" in sociology and its offshoots (such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology) the traditions of British social anthropology are notable in their historical prominence in ethnography. As Sharon MACDONALD elegantly demonstrates that discipline has moved from living in the coattails of the colonial role of the British Empire in the past to the focus on the complexities of the communities back home. Contemporary interests of social anthropologists are in the communities of European countries—rather than in the hinterlands of Africa. A similar tendency can be discerned in the North American sibling—cultural anthropology. No longer would an anthropologist go to another end of the World for one's fieldwork—instead, the place next door may be worthy of an ethnographic investigation. [7]

This tension between "foreign" and "one's own" has been with ethnography all the time—creating the curious phenomena of fascination with "the other" together with blatant inconsideration of that other (as described in the chapter on orientalism by Julie MARCUS, Chapter 5). The opposite is true as well- the role of the scientist who studies "the other" has likewise been left out of the picture—despite calls for (MORGAN, 1894), and empirical demonstration (KNORR-CETINA, 1999) of the importance of knowing the knower. The tension between the familiar and the foreign is a basis for all living—and knowing. Thus, the *Heimweh/Fernweh* opposition described by BOESCH (1998, pp.59-76) as a basic psychological tension finds its counterpart in the minds of social scientists from the Occident trying to deal with the Orient and vice versa (CARRIER, 1995). [8]

Finding the "other" to be different has of course a base in the history of humankind that is of basic cultural-psychological kind (JAHODA, 2001; VALSINER, 2000), and its interpenetration into the social sciences is a natural continuity of the researcher as a person who transcends one's cultural basis—yet never becoming fully separate from it. Furthermore, the researchers recreate their own "indigenous tribes" around ideas that they cherish—so we learn from the Handbook also about the frictions between ethnographers and ethnomethodologists—and once again one is reminded of the wonderful capacities of academics to fight with one another on issues that actually entail close perspectives (Melvin POLLNER and Robert EMERSON, Chapter 8). The richness of the Handbook is further exemplified by the coverage of semiotics (Chapter 10 by Peter MANNING) and "grounded theory" (Chapter 11 by Kathy CHARMAZ and Richard MITCHELL). [9]

Part Two includes chapters organized by domains of application—those of health, illness, education, crime, deviance, science, childhood, material objects. Almost all imaginable aspects of human living are covered by the users of ethnographic procedures. Furthermore, social processes such as communication are analyzed by ethnographers. Perhaps the main obstacle for all ethnographers in these empirical application areas is that of their complicated relation with the social tendency of thought that has proliferated in recent decades—loosely labeled "post-modernism." Together with the abandonment of the generality goals of science, that kind of orientation brings to the ethnographers the challenge of becoming fiction writers—albeit with the assumption that they describe some "local reality". Thus, we can find nice imperatives, such as "Ethnographic authorship must remain *a commitment to veracious description and systematic method* alongside a reflexive awareness of the *ethnopoetics of scholarship*" (BLOOR, Chapter 12, p.183, added emphases). [10]

Such imperatives sound like those of parents who tell their adolescent children to be independent—and then go on to try to punish them for being independent in ways not controlled by the parents. What may be at stake here is the quest for public prominence—in terms of the shift in what kinds of Nobel Prizes social scientists are hunting for. So far those have been limited—with occasional success—to those in economics and medicine. It seems that the development of ethnographic approaches in the social sciences opens this alley to race for one in literature, as the Peace Prize becomes increasingly limited to politicians, who usually get it before becoming involved in some new conflict. In contrast with that, it is more appropriate that the Peace Prize becomes available to ethnographers' informants— who may narrate their life stories from under the influence of political actions (Rigoberta MENCHÚ, in 1992—see Kenneth PLUMMER, Chapter 27). The ethnographer may assist to get the life story written down, and bring to wide public attention. [11]

Ethnographers may have a long way to go to elevate their rich narratives of their relations with their particular contexts to a level of generality that would be comparable to that of the works of Henri BERGSON (winner in 1927), Bertrand RUSSELL (in 1950) or Jean-Paul SARTRE (in 1964). It would be a real revolution

for ethnography when one day an ethnopoetic description of a local neighborhood or school reaches the generality of contribution to humankind (rewarded by a Nobel Prize for literature)—and the pressures of "post-modernism" against generalization of knowledge surely work against this. Here is the problem—both sciences and humanities give credence to basic, universal understanding—while the focus of contemporary social sciences zooms in to give us particular descriptions. Those can be "rich", or poor, be written from well-specified positions —yet whether they tell us more than the particulars involved determines whether they have intellectual longevity. [12]

Furthermore, differently from philosophers and novelists, ethnographers have to face the perils of institutional resistances—first of all that of their own institutions ("IRB"s—Institutional Review Boards—"human subjects" or "human ethics" committees in U.S. research contexts—see CECI, PETERS, & PLOTKIN, 1985), as well as of the institutional needs of the contexts which they study. Vicki SMITH (Chapter 15, especially p.226) provides a thoughtful example of the complexities of the study of work contexts. The ethnographer is, first of all, a negotiator of access—often working at the mercy of the powerful social role keepers of the given institution. [13]

New technologies of visual reproduction of events allow for the development of new genre in ethnography ("visual ethnography"—Chapter 21 by Mike BALL and Greg SMITH)—which widens the question of ethnographers becoming novelists into that of ethnographers-as-film-makers. Would something as pervasive as the Jurassic Park become (one day) an ethnography—after being a reasonable object of investigation for ethnographers? The dangers of the researcher's "merging with the field" entail their being appropriated by the "field"—and the result may be that of an ethnographer-activist, ethnographer-terrorist, or ethnographer-Cannes' laureate. The latter may be most effective and enjoyable for the viewers. Still—the knowledge that emerges in the process becomes as ephemeral as the images on the screen, and the social sciences may abandon their quest for knowledge for the sake of immediate socialized feelings about the viewed account. [14]

Part Three of the Handbook trades in the area's futures. While the editors have oriented the authors against providing recipes of "how to do" kind, the expectations by the army of eager researchers looking for ready guidelines may have been too strong to resist the temptations and rewards (of becoming repeatedly cited). Despite these—understandable, yet trivial—undertones, Part Three provides a number of remarkable insights that need to be in the center of attention for social scientists. For example, bureaucratization of academic world has its basic guiding influence on keeping social scientists in control (see BOURDIEU, 1988 for an account of how this happens). The immediacy of the ethnographers' work creates potential dangers for the social powers that govern their "field", and the implications of ethnographic orientations are a prime object of danger for political institutions. Hence it becomes controlled—in a sophisticated way of delegating its regulation to academics themselves. The Handbook includes an explicit depiction of how such control happens (Chapter 22

by Christopher WELLIN and Gary Alan FINE, especially pp.329-330) which should bring any serious scientist to one's senses about not looking down at the supposedly "soft" methods of ethnographers (and their relatively low numbers of journal publications). The large numbers of publications of researchers using "quantitative approaches" does not mean that their research productivity is higher. Rather, it may show a higher level of pre-packaging of their research results than is feasible in ethnographic efforts. [15]

The other side of the future of ethnography is its increasingly researcher-based introspective style. Together with the focus on narratives (of the informants) comes the reflexivity upon one's own narrative (about the narratives of the informant). From there is just one step towards narrating one's own adaptations to the contexts within which one conducts the study. And, finally, the ethnographer's final act of narrative striptease is the discussion of one's own sexuality in the field. It is to the credit to the Handbook that this topic gets good coverage (Chapter 28—by Deborah REED-DANAHAY). Yet the theme—brought out within the socio-moral contexts of Anglo-American social sciences—opens rather complex prospects for the discipline's future. Given the tendency towards increasing bureaucratization of academic worlds—and the proliferation of that across the World under the appealing label of "globalization"—I would not be surprised if the gendered anxieties of the contemporary European and North American societies become carried out to "the field" where ethnography is done in the form of "sexual harassment policies" and "consent forms". Then it would be necessary to find a whistle-blower of Mark TWAIN's sarcasm to point to the absurdities of repression of humanity through regulatory practices. Ethnography becomes, then, performance that is bureaucratically needed and supported (see "public performance ethnography"—Chapter 32 by Jim MIENCZAKOWSKI), while without such social demand it becomes restricted even in the privacy of the ethnographers' minds. [16]

3. The Cultural Geography of the *Handbook*

There are 46 authors of the contributions to the Handbook—mostly from the UK (21) and U.S. (18), with Australia (2) Finland (2) and the Netherlands (3) representing the cultural diversity (or lack of it) of the scope of ideas covered. Surely contributions representing German ethnological traditions, or those of Brazilian or Mexican socio-cultural perspectives where ethnographic methodology is widely developed, as well as contributions from Indian sociology, would have made the Handbook truly representative of the wide world of ethnographic perspectives. The editors counter that possible challenge (Editorial Introduction, p.5) by pointing to the international nature of the Handbook's Advisory Board—yet the same pattern is repeated (of 27 Board members, only 2 are from outside of the UK/USA axis—Belgium and Germany). The claim that all chapters were reviewed by specialists from other countries hardly changes the basic Anglo-American discourse in the Handbook. Possibly this reflects the contemporary fight to capture the markets—mostly North-American and European—which can lead to a pattern of publishing volumes of limited coverage of different culturally-textured perspectives. [17]

Of course there are other ways of gaining the coverage of the international and interdisciplinary nominal presence on boards or registers of authors. In all fairness to the editors, their goal was not to work towards such coverage. Instead, they explained the focus of the Handbook in the following way:

> "This volume is not definitive in the sense of defining its subject matter, nor in the sense of excluding other interpretations. It is, however, *authoritative* in that we chose contributors who are leading. We encouraged our contributors to interpret the topics we assigned to them with some degree of latitude. We certainly did not set them the task of mechanistically 'reviewing the literature'. ... There are few if any genres of scholarly writing that are less life-enhancing than the literature review. Of course we have asked our authors to provide adequate guidance to our readers about the range of published literature, but we have not judged the authors or chapters, and do not want them to be judged by others, as if they were sterile exercises in reviewing the literature." (Editorial Introduction, p.1) [18]

This focus is more than commendable, as our contemporary social sciences suffer from the overproduction of intellectually mediocre but (sometimes) technically excellent empirical reports. Most of those belong to the genre of "quantitative approaches" where the quality of the intricate phenomena is habitually sacrificed to the glory of the use of the most recent statistical data analysis packages. Yet a similar danger may face the researchers who emphasize "qualitative methods" in the future—the pressures of administrative officials to count the numbers of empirical publications in peer-reviewed journals creates a social pressure system that would suffocate new ideas for the sake of "solid data". What these latter data are like is usually determined by social consensus, rather than by adequacy to the phenomena. [19]

4. Conclusion: Towards Generality of Knowledge

It seems that the avalanche of many publications aimed at wide audiences creates the need for systematic sieving through of the real knowledge by publishing handbooks. The present *Handbook of Ethnography* is a thorough job, put together with the appreciation of the various theoretical perspectives that have been linked with ethnography. As a result, the reader gets a substantive, thoughtful, and at times witty overview of the whole of that part of the social sciences that are currently related with ethnography. [20]

The book does more than merely provide a "state of the art" overview. It charts out some implicit pitfalls of the whole future of qualitative methodology. Surely it is nice that such methodology becomes used for the study of very varied social "organisms"—ranging from researchers themselves to the "communities", countries, complex events, and—ultimately—humankind. Yet it is the theoretical frameworks that guide the usefulness (or uselessness) of any methodological perspective—qualitative or quantitative alike. The contributions to the Handbook, taken together, show that ethnography often becomes practices for the sake of the nicety of its "rich description" itself. This is nothing new—it is a kind of "qualitative empiricism" (that may fight against the dominance of "quantitative

empiricism") in our contemporary social sciences. Neither will solve any problems of basic human kind—because problems are not defined, or if they are defined—that is done socio-politically, rather than scientifically. The latter entails healthy autonomy of the theoretical thought from the immediate social, moral, and political agendas. That has been achieved by the best of novelists thanks to their intuitive grasp of humanity as a whole. Social scientists may need to perform on the stage of their personal life philosophies' theater to make their ethnography generate basic knowledge. Yet it is the latter—and not one more case of "rich description" of a local context—which our increasingly fragmented knowledge clearly needs. [21]

References

Boesch, Ernst Edouard (1998).*Sehnsucht*. Bern: Hans Huber.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1988). *Homo academicus*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ceci, Steven J.; Peters, Douglas & Plotkin, Jonathan (1985). Human subjects review, personal values, and the regulation of social science research. *American Psychologist, 40*, 9, 994-1002.

Carrier, James G. (Ed.) (1995). *Occidentalism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Jahoda, Gustav (2001). Beyond stereotypes. *Culture & Psychology, 7*(2), 181-197.

Knorr Cetina, Karin (1999). *Epistemic cultures: How the sciences make knowledge*. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.

Mead, George H. (2001). The philosophies of Royce, James, and Dewey in their American setting. *Culture & Psychology, 7*(1), 49-64. [Originally published in 1930].

Morgan, C. Lloyd (1894). Other minds than ours. In C. Lloyd Morgan, *An introduction to comparative psychology* (pp.36-59). London: Walter Scott.

Valsiner, Jaan (2000). Social consumption of cannibals. *Culture & Psychology, 6*(1), 88-96.

Author

Jaan VALSINER is interested in the ways in which human psychological systems regulate themselves through constructing and reconstructing sign hierarchies. His work unites anthropological, sociological, and psychological ideas into a framework of cultural development of persons (e.g. *The Guided Mind*, Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1998). He edits (with Kevin Connolly) the *Handbook of Developmental Psychology* (London: Sage, forthcoming) and looks for intellectual excitement in contemporary social sciences—even finding it at times. Jaan Valsiner wrote in a former issue of *FQS* a Review Essay The Games of Gods and Man: Essays in Play and Performance.

Contact:

Jaan Valsiner

Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology
Clark University
950 Main Street
Worcester, Ma. 01610-1477, USA

E-mail: jvalsiner@clarku.edu

Citation

Valsiner, Jaan (2002). Ethnography Lost and Found: Qualitative Methodology Between Science, Art, and Social Powers. Review Essay: Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland & Lyn Lofland (Eds.) (2001). Handbook of Ethnography [21 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *3*(2), Art. 29, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0202297.

Revised 2/2007