

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011, 289 pp. \$19.00 paper (978-0-226-20683-7).

Since its first publication in 1995, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* has become one of the seminal texts for those teaching social science students the intricacies of creating, developing, organizing, and processing fieldnotes and writing ethnographies. Written during the surge of interest in ethnographic writing during the 1980s and 90s, the authors made a valuable contribution by filling a long-standing gap in the literature of ethnographic methods training and providing beginners with an intimate understanding of how to take, organize, and develop fieldnotes.

While ethnographic research itself has since receded somewhat, nonetheless, the authors were motivated to write a second edition for two fundamental reasons. First, there has been a significant increase in the publication of articles and chapters concerned with the process of writing fieldnotes which consider and incorporate reflexive insights. Second, and, more importantly, the experience of teaching another generation of students made the limitations of their original work more obvious to the authors. As such, to aid comprehension, the authors have substantially reorganized the contents of some chapters and have provided a more detailed discussion of the issues of race, class, and gender.

Despite these changes, the authors' central focus remains the same: how to effectively take and maintain rigorous fieldnotes so as to turn fieldwork experiences and observations into a finished ethnography. As such, they explain how to balance observing with writing and effectively demonstrate that the recording of fieldnotes is equally as important as what is written in the text. Throughout, the authors stress that the ethnographic researcher is not just observing and recording some objective reality but, rather, is always subjectively implicated in the observations and interpretations. It comes to no surprise that the authors draw heavily from an interactionist, interpretive perspective that borrows much from the traditions of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and interpretive anthropology. Taking the position that writing fieldnotes is not an innate ability but rather a skill that can be learned, honed, and sharpened through study and practice, the authors demystify the process,

making it very explicit by relying on numerous examples drawn from their students' actual fieldnotes, as well as their own.

Following a comprehensive introductory discussion of the pivotal role of fieldnotes in conducting ethnographic research, the authors examine the complementary process of participating and observing the lived experiences of real people in natural settings and how one decides what events and interactions are deserving of attention. Here, the authors provide a detailed explanation of how these observations are transformed from mere "headnotes" into "jottings" that will serve to jog the researcher's memory when it comes to constructing more vivid descriptions of events and interactions. It is here where the how, where, and when of jottings are discussed, including the benefits and risks associated with overt and covert procedures.

This discussion is followed by two chapters on strategies and tactics for writing fieldnotes that have been substantially reorganized to more closely follow the stages through which novice ethnographers pass as they learn to write their own fieldnotes. Chapter three explores the relations between an ethnographer's attention to people's interactions, processes for recalling these encounters, and writing options for presenting and analyzing them. As such, attention is given to how ethnographers remember, elaborate, and comment upon fieldnotes so as to produce a detailed written account of what they have observed in their social setting. This includes instructions for writing up fieldnotes from mental and jotted notes, as well as narrative writing strategies, including description, dialogue, and characterization that enable an ethnographer to accurately construct detailed accounts of social worlds based on their own unique observations and experiences. In addition, the authors provide insight on how to record asides and commentaries that will serve to help focus the analytical interpretation of what transpires in the field. Recognizing that researchers make many decisions of what to include and what not to include when writing up their observations, the authors devote chapter four to exploring various writing styles and conventions and encourages researchers to be sensitive to how their particular experiences, outlooks, and assumptions of audience, influence their writing. In addition, in discussing the construction of narratives, they discourage using the omniscient point of view and instead make a convincing argument for writing in first person, third person, or focused third person points of view, detailing the various strengths of each.

Since fieldnotes are a major tool for beginning to capture local knowledge and indigenous understandings, an entire chapter is devoted to explaining how to unearth the meanings employed by actors in the field and develop analytic typologies based on them. The authors stress, quite

rightly, that while interviews are helpful in this regard, observing and recording naturally occurring verbal interaction is far more useful for representing community members' voices and understanding the actual situated use and meaning of local terms and phrases. It is here where the authors devote particular attention to the importance of exploring the significance gender, race/ethnicity and class has for those being studied, while simultaneously being sensitive to how a researcher's own social location influences their interpretations of participants' interactions.

The final chapters of *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* are devoted to analysis of fieldnotes and how to transform them into a finished ethnography. A grounded theory approach that encourages researchers to read, sort, write memos, and code notes, is seen as crucial to the process of analysis. While these are discussed as discrete steps, in practice the authors suggest that the researcher moves from a general reading to a close coding to writing intensive analyses and then back again to help refine the analytic process. Recognizing the tension between analytic propositions and local meanings, the authors advocate writing ethnographies as fieldnote-centred thematic narratives. As such, in identifying key themes, choosing and editing representative excerpts, and interspersing analytical commentary with fieldnote examples, ethnographers exercise an authorial privilege that clearly demonstrates that the finished ethnography constitutes their own personal understanding of the social setting.

From start to finish, the authors convincingly demonstrate how a finished ethnography is only as good as its fieldnotes. Although slightly redundant at times, this is a well-written book that is readily accessible to the undergraduate student, but sophisticated and rich enough to be a valuable resource for even the most experienced ethnographer. It should be noted that the authors intentionally omitted some of the key stages of doing fieldwork, such as gaining access to the setting, maintaining relations in the field, conducting interviews, or strategies for leaving the field. Nevertheless, this book is highly recommended for those in the social sciences studying, teaching, or practicing ethnographic methods or for anyone simply interested in better understanding and evaluating published ethnographies.

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