

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Antony J. Puddephatt, William Shaffir, and Steven W. Kleinknecht, eds., *Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field*. New York: Routledge, 2009, 276pp. \$US 44.95 paper (978-0-415-45221-2), \$US 140.00 hard-cover (978-0-415-452220-5).

Ethnographies Revisited sets out to explore and demonstrate how ethnographers generate and apply theory within the process of conducting ethnographic field research. The editors argue that there are numerous books on the “doing” of ethnographic research, particularly those that focus on what we could term “reflexivity.” Indeed, post-*Writing Culture*, it is *de rigueur* for ethnographers to engage in discussions of ethical, political, personal, and other reflexive and reflective concerns. Such reflexivity provides important insights for researchers, students, and other audiences. However, *Ethnographies Revisited* takes the view that in this focus on the reflexive, the theoretical has become even more hidden from view. The central aim of the book then is to explore how ethnographers generate their theoretical frameworks and develop theoretical concepts, particularly within the “field” context. The opening chapter reviews ethnography’s “problem” with theory, with a useful historical overview of topics such as grounded theory and reflexivity. The subsequent twenty-one chapters feature accounts by individual ethnographers on a variety of topics (for example, depression, tattooing, and competitive swimming) and field settings (for example, hotels and women’s shelters). In these accounts, each contributor was asked to “contribute original reflexive accounts about the conceptual decisions made in the midst of researching their major book-length ethnographies” (p. 3). The aim is to create accounts of “theory-in-practice.”

The editors argue that ethnography has always had a problem with theory, partly due to its historical roots as the lesser, “unscientific” methodology in contrast to the dominant quantitative approaches in sociology and psychology. It is also due to the nature of classical ethnography, which privileged an inductive model of data generation, emphasizing descriptive “insights” over grand theorizing. The editors are certainly accurate in this portrayal of ethnography’s unease with talking about and doing theory, and they rightly acknowledge that textbooks on ethnography usually have very little to say about where (and how) theory fits.

That said one might make two points. Firstly, social research methods books generally tend to gloss over how and where theory fits, leaving students to somehow put it all together between their research methods courses and their social theory courses. This is not just an ethnography problem. Secondly, the editors overstate their position that ethnography is theory-lite; see, for example, the important contributions of feminist ethnographers to contemporary gender theories. Part of the problem with the editors' approach is that they struggle to fully explain or define what they mean by "theory." Herein lies a problem for all of us who try to teach research methodology, in that there are the practical issues of techniques, access, consent, and so forth, which students readily understand and can apply on the one hand, and the more esoteric (and important) issues of theory, philosophy, ethics, politics, and so on, which shape and underpin the practical on the other. Again, the example of a feminist ethnographer shows that a theoretical stance is also a political (and personal?) one that influences and shapes all other field issues and practice.

Ethnographies Revisited seems to try too hard to tease out the "pure" theory from everything else; although there is a useful critique of grounded theory within Chapter 1, the editors seem to be attached to the naïve idea that all ethnographers generate theory *sui generis* from within their field data. This is an idealized version of ethnography and a major criticism of grounded theory. However, few ethnographers today would agree with this contention; by embracing reflexivity within the general late-modern "turn," most ethnographers (and social researchers generally) acknowledge that one enters the field with preconceptions, theoretical models and motivations, political stances, and so forth. These shape and orient us to the field and invariably influence how we interpret our data. This does not preclude the generation of new concepts or ideas, but the emphasis on reflexivity is partly about acknowledging that the encounter with the field setting is not separate and sterile. Instead it is embedded intrinsically within wider discourses, contexts, and so forth, surrounding the researcher. In the past, ethnographers might have been ambivalent towards theory, as exemplified by the descriptive accounts of classical ethnographies within social anthropology. Ethnography too often is still portrayed in mainstream social research textbooks as "just" about "description"; a point acknowledged by the editors. Part of this problem lies with the differing definitions of ethnography across and within disciplines, exacerbated as it becomes a more popular social science methodology. The editors do not engage with debates about disciplinary definitions; it might have been helpful to do so.

The strength of this book lies with its individual contributors (including some notable ethnographers such as Norman K. Denzin and

Loïc Wacquant) and its choice of topics. The chapters on health issues were particularly interesting, and demonstrate the power and potential of ethnographic work to make a difference. Each contributor has produced useful reflexive (and reflective) accounts of their work that students and fellow ethnographers will find interesting and helpful. The individual contributions expose the reader to issues of “theory-in-practice,” although perhaps not in the forthright manner suggested by the editors. One is left with the view that this collection is another addition to the growing (and necessary) body of literature on reflexivity within ethnographic research. This is not a bad thing, as there are few editions, particularly within sociology, that ask ethnographers to reflect back on a particular piece of research; most look at specific field issues or events. The value of this book is in demonstrating the power of reflexivity to gain theoretical (and other) insights, as well as in showing the potential of ethnography to shape our understanding of diverse social worlds.

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