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Recognizable Continuity

A Defense of Multiple Methods

Geoffrey Walford

The Nature of Ethnography

This chapter promotes what might be called a traditional form of ethnography. It recognizes that all traditions change, but puts forward a view that, for an activity or product to be regarded as ethnographic, there is a need for some strong and recognizable continuity with what was regarded as ethnography for most of the last century. This is not straightforward as the term has broadened in usage in the last few decades. For some researchers, the term has now become almost synonymous with all forms of qualitative research, but this shears it of any independent meaning. Indeed, it actually misrepresents traditional ethnography as early practitioners hardly recognized any distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods. While ethnographers were unlikely to use sophisticated statistical analysis, they often generated quantitative data as well as qualitative field notes and descriptions. Some of the classic educational ethnographies (such as Becker et al. 1961; Hargreaves 1967; Lacey 1970; Ball 1981) presented a considerable amount of quantitative data to support their arguments.

Quantitative claims, which are frequently made in ethnographies, require quantitative data, so the use of structured observation, time sampling, and even surveys may be required in addition to more open-ended participant observation and interviewing. The methods used depend upon the research questions that the study eventually tries to answer. Thus, one very noticeable feature of early sociology of education such as Ball's (1981) study of a comprehensive school is the diversity of different ways of generating data that were used. Observations were made in a multitude of contexts: in classrooms, while accompanying groups on school visits, during invigilation of examinations, while playing cricket, in the wider community, and so on. Interviews were conducted with pupils and teachers, small-scale questionnaires were circulated including sociometric questionnaires, pupil diaries were kept, school records and registers were examined. The results of the research were presented in a similar variety of ways with figures, diagrams, and charts alongside quotations from interviews and observed naturally occurring conversations.

There have been many attempts to describe the nature of ethnography. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 3), for example, start their discussion in the following way:

In terms of data collection, ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.

Another description is that by Fetterman (1998: 1) who states:

Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture. The description may be of a small tribal group in an exotic land or a classroom in middle-class suburbia. The task is much like the one taken on by an investigative reporter, who interviews relevant people, reviews records, weighs the credibility of one person's opinions against another's, looks for ties to special interests and organizations, and writes the story for a concerned public and for professional colleagues. A key difference between the investigative reporter and the ethnographer, however, is that whereas the journalist seeks the unusual – the murder, the plane crash, or the bank robbery – the ethnographer writes about the routine, daily lives of people. The more predictable patterns of human life and behaviour are the focus of inquiry.

Alternatively, some writers favor lists. One example, with which I was involved, was put forward by the editors of *Ethnography and Education* who listed in the first issue what they saw as the seven main features of ethnography.

The key elements of ethnographic research applied to the study of education contexts are:

- the focus on the study of cultural formation and maintenance;
- the use of multiple methods and thus the generation of rich and diverse forms of data;
- the direct involvement and long-term engagement of the researcher(s);
- the recognition that the researcher is the main research instrument;
- the high status given to the accounts of participants' perspectives and understandings;
- the engagement in a spiral of data collection, hypothesis building and theory testing – leading to further data collection; and
- the focus on a particular case in depth, but providing the basis for theoretical generalization. (Troman et al. 2006: 1)

While there are some differences between the descriptions and lists provided, the writers above claim that there is a set of specific criteria that have to be met before a study can be considered to be ethnographic. There needs to be long-term engagement, the use of multiple research methods, and the generation of rich data. The research process also needs to be theory led and systematic. Understanding is not achieved through chaotic or biased processes, but by systematic and well-ordered generation of data appropriate to the task.

There are several analogies that are commonly used for the task of doing ethnography. One is of the ethnographer as spy – someone who “hangs around” and makes notes on what is seen and heard. There are certainly similarities between the ethnographer and the spy (except that few ethnographies are now conducted covertly). The ethnographer takes great care with the selection of case study sites in which to “hang around.” Sites need to be appropriate for the particular theoretical and empirical tasks, and chosen for particular purposes rather than just convenience of access (Walford 2008). Once in the site, she or he will take care with presentation of self and will adopt a particular role, or a series of roles, that will enable relevant and reliable data to be generated. This means not simply observing those members of the culture who are conveniently available or seem to be “interesting,” but searching out those who are difficult to find and who may seem unpleasant or unlikeable. Observation does not occur just once; activities are observed at different times of the day, week, and year. Where interviews are conducted, the informants are chosen purposely to test or extend particular growing hunches or understandings. Care is taken about who to associate with, and time is taken to listen to everyone within any hierarchy of power or prestige. Different views are sought and a variety of different forms of data are generated.

A second analogy is that of the news reporter. Again, there are some similarities, but a news reporter will look for the unusual, the scandalous, the “newsworthy.” People involved will be named and what they say attributed to them. The more well known the people involved, the more likely it is that their activities and statements will be reported. In contrast, ethnographers are often more interested in the mundane than the unusual. The identity of the individuals involved does not usually matter. What matters is a greater understanding of how this particular culture works – how it maintains itself and adapts to changing circumstances. News reporters care greatly about topicality. Their work has to be reported fast to qualify as news; better to get a slightly inaccurate article out today than a more accurate one tomorrow. Ethnographers are far more interested in accuracy of descriptions and analysis than the rapidity of publication. They take pains to ensure that they have sufficient evidence for all the claims that are made (Hammersley 1990).

A third, and persuasive, analogy is that ethnographers are simply doing what everyone does when they enter a new situation. It is certainly correct that when anyone enters a new culture they have to learn the formal and informal rules about “the way we do things around here” (Deal 1985). But the ethnographer works much harder at the process. She or he tries to suspend any judgment until there is sufficient evidence to make one, and self-consciously looks for potentially contradictory evidence before accepting initial guesses. Most importantly, an ethnographer systematically generates data and records those data for future analysis. When involved in analysis and writing they do not rely on memory of events that may have occurred many months before, but refer to field notes that were written as soon after the events as possible. A teacher joining a new school will make many assumptions about the similarity of this workplace to others she has been in. Different people might see these assumptions as using intuition, experience, or prejudice. The ethnographer tries to make as few assumptions as possible and is only ready to describe and make claims about what goes on after months of observation, interviewing, document gathering, systematic recording, and systematic analysis of all the data generated.

The Pervasiveness of Interviewing

What is very clear from all of these discussions is that multiple methods are at the center of ethnography, and that ethnography involves more than just interviewing. Yet, as Atkinson (2015) has recently reminded us, there are now many studies that call themselves ethnographic that rely on interviews alone. Even within studies that are based on a wider range of ways of generating data, the interview often predominates and the use of quantitative data and analysis based on field notes of observations of naturally occurring incidents has declined. It is worth considering why this may have happened, and why so many current ethnographic studies are so limited in their methodological focus.

There are, of course, several reasons for the change, including perceived increased time pressures on researchers which lead to ethnographies being conducted in shorter periods of time. But one of the main reasons for the change is changes in technology. The traditional anthropologists of the early twentieth century simply could not record interviews word for word. They had to rely on notes taken at the time of the interview and then amplified after the event. Although sound recording machines were available as early as the 1870s, magnetic tape recording only developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. These machines were bulky and expensive. The cassette tape recorder was first put into production in the mid-1960s. Expensive at first, it was soon to become the most convenient way of listening to music on the move, with the Sony Walkman, introduced as late as 1979, becoming a generational status symbol. It also became a “must have” for many researchers in the social sciences and social history who quickly saw the potential of the new machines. Social historians recognized that it was now far easier to collect oral records of past events. The generation of those who had been involved in and survived World War I was beginning to decline due to natural deaths, and oral history and life history developed rapidly in local social history. It was not that oral history was entirely new, but the cassette recorder made the process much easier and opened it to local social history groups. The work of Thompson (1978) was central to this early historical work, which grew rapidly. Similar developments occurred in sociology where the work of such researchers as Plummer (1983) and Bertaux (1980) was crucial.

Researchers in the sociology of education were even quicker to adopt the new technology. Until the end of the 1960s, sociology of education in Britain was dominated by the highly statistical, survey-based, political arithmetic tradition. Although there are actually several sources, the publication of Michael Young's (1971) edited *Knowledge and Control* is often thought of as marking the start of the rise of more qualitative research methods in British sociology of education. Just as important, *Knowledge and Control* was one of the first books to include reports that reproduced tape-recorded speech and to present this as *evidence* rather than use quotations or elaborations from field notes. The very well known chapter by Keddie (1971) reproduced transcripts of tape recordings of what people had said both in naturally occurring classroom talk and in interviews. Long quotations from the transcripts were presented as an essential part of the descriptive claims made in the chapter. The influence of this particular study was considerable, because this form of classroom-based research was seen as highly appropriate and relevant for the many teachers without degrees who joined the newly established Open University in order to obtain one. The School of Education at the Open University developed several courses, in particular *School and Society*

(Open University 1972) and later *Schooling and Society* (Hammersley and Woods 1976), which encouraged the spread and growth of studies based on observation and interviews in classrooms, and where classroom discourse was a central focus. Recording of interviews and naturally occurring speech soon became standard practice. Peter Woods and Martyn Hammersley were particularly important in the development of classroom research as they were on several related course teams and also initiated a series of annual conferences which had a general focus on the classroom, which became the St. Hilda's Conference and then the Oxford Ethnography Conference (Walford 2011). A stream of edited volumes and eventually the journal *Ethnography and Education* followed. Crucially, however, those involved in these conferences and resulting publications stressed the need for multiple methods and Woods conducted no formal interviews at all for his major ethnography *The Divided School* (1979) – let alone recorded them.

Legitimizing ethnographic work in the 1970s was far from easy. Social science in general, and funders in particular, were dominated by a belief in the efficacy of quantitative methods. Classroom studies were seen as a challenge to the quantitative political arithmetic tradition then dominant in British sociology of education. But the “paradigm war” that flared during the 1970s perhaps had the strange effect of encouraging qualitative researchers to provide “harder” soft data. Voice recording allowed an element of the “scientific” paradigm of research to be emulated. Recorded conversations were seen as being a highly reliable record that could be presented as evidence in academic work. The fact that someone had said whatever was quoted was seemingly irrefutable – the “hard” evidence was available for others to check.

I have argued elsewhere (Walford 2001: 83 ff.) that the cassette tape recorder changed the nature of sociology of education. The tape recorder, and subsequently the digital recorder, quickly became the major piece of equipment used in most qualitative educational research. Researchers were seduced by what it could do, and the use of extensive voice recording became the orthodoxy without full recognition of any deleterious effects that this might have on ethnographic research.

This change occurred between the times of my first two ethnographic research studies. My study of postgraduate natural science research students and their role in the research output of university departments (Walford 1980, 1981) was conducted in 1977–1978. The study was based on observation, documents, and interviews, but none of the interviews were recorded. At that time it was still thought sufficient to interview using a schedule and write the replies on the schedule as the interview proceeded. At the time, it was still perfectly acceptable for the published papers derived from that research to contain “quotations” from research students and academics that were based upon these amplified notes of conversations. Several such quotations were presented, but they are contained within a broader description derived from many such interviews and observation.

However, by the time I conducted my study of private boarding schools in 1981, voice recording of interviews was simply “the way it was done.” In that research, I conducted 80 taped semi-structured interviews with academic staff as well as observing lessons, chapel, meals, sports, and meetings of masters, parents, and prefects. I also used self-completion questionnaires with about 200 of the younger boys. My methods were thus mixed, but on re-examining the book I am struck by the number of quotes that are used in the various reports (Walford 1984, 1986a, 1986b). The chapter on “the changing professionalism of public school teachers,” in particular, has many long quotes from the

various masters that I interviewed. This time they are taken from transcriptions of recorded interviews. They are presented as if they are “hard” evidence that cannot be contradicted.

A similar change can be seen in Ronald King’s ethnographic work. For his study of infant classrooms, conducted in 1972–1975, King (1978: 4–5) “filled 32 notebooks with about a half a million words of notes.” These notes were then added to later and “form the core of the research reported here.” He did tape record some sessions where the teacher was doing whole class teaching, and some of it is presented as evidence (1978: 44), but any interviews were informal and not recorded. By 1983–1984, when he conducted a study of junior middle schools, King (1989) was still using field notes as his major source, but he had added tape-recorded discussions with groups of children and recorded interviews with head teachers which are presented as evidence in his argument.

In all of these cases, interviews were only one of several ways of generating data. This problem of limited and sometimes inaccurate information generated in interviews, which is discussed in the next section, is at least partially dealt with through the process of triangulation. While there are severe doubts about whether triangulation is theoretically possible (see Massey 1999), generating data through several different methods does at least give the possibility of eliminating gross errors. What is concerning, however, is that there are now so many so-called ethnographic studies where interviews are the sole method by which data are generated. I would argue that this concentration on the spoken word – usually spoken in non-natural situations – actually distort understanding of the cultures that researchers seek to describe.

The Nature of Interviews

There is a strong irony in the way that so much recent ethnographic research relies on recorded interviews as a main source of data, for ethnographic research grew in part as a reaction to the positivistic and experimental research that once held sway. Experimental methods were castigated as setting up unreal situations such that the results could not be expected to be valid. Ethnography, on the other hand, was thought to bring greater validity, as the everyday activities being investigated would be disturbed as little as possible. Yet, within ethnography, many researchers (including myself) construct these very strange and artificial situations called “interviews” and use the results of these situations as the core of our writing.

It is worth remembering what a strange situation an interview is. In particular, the socially accepted rules of conversation and reciprocity between people are suspended. One person takes the lead and asks a series of questions of the other. The other has agreed that this is to be a special form of conversation and is prepared for his or her views to be continuously questioned without the usual ability to be able to return the question. The topics to be covered are under the control of the “interviewer” and the “interviewee” is expected to have opinions or information about each of the questions asked. Moreover, what the interviewee says is taken to have lasting importance – it is recorded for future analysis. This is not a transitory conversation, but one that is invested with future significance.

Moreover, every person who is interviewed carries their own construction of what “an interview” actually is. Most have sat through hundreds of interviews on the

television. These include “talk show” interviews where the “host” gradually encourages the “guests” to tell interesting, and often slightly risqué or scandalous, stories about themselves or their friends and acquaintances. Some of my potential interviewees probably have this sort of interview in mind when they explain to me that “they have nothing interesting to say,” perhaps thinking that their own lives and opinions do not match those of the “stars” they see on television. Alternatively, potential interviewees may think of interviews on political or news programs, where guests are continually badgered into giving an answer to a question, and forced to clarify exactly what they mean. In such interviews the exact words used by politicians are dissected and may appear later in newspaper articles. Other potential interviewees may think back to interviews that they have been through for a mortgage application, or for social security benefit, or to gain employment, or entry into a course or higher education. All of these are likely to be unhelpful memories. In short, everyone has an idea of what an interview is, but few of these conceptualizations coincide with the relationship that most ethnographers would wish to establish.

In passing, it is worth noting that problems can develop from interviewees having “inappropriate” ideas of what to expect in research interviews. Two of the most difficult interviews I have ever conducted were separate interviews with nuns who were head teachers of schools. Both were, in their different ways, inspiring people, but they acted as if they had little idea of what a research interview entailed. Both of these interviews were conducted as part of a study where I had no previous contact with the head teachers. Both had a great deal of experience of interviewing others – in particular prospective parents and teachers – and neither would allow me to take the lead in the interview. Both had their own tales to tell, and these were what I was going to hear no matter what I wanted. I was questioned by them as well as they by me. Their position was such that almost everyone they met listened to what they had to say, and I was cast in this same role. Eventually, both interviews took over 2.5 hours each, and what they had to tell me was important, but I was forced to battle my way through this initial situation, and eventually ask specific questions to which I wanted answers. I had to almost “teach” them the role I expected them to occupy.

Of course, most ethnographers will make efforts to reduce the pressure that interviewees may feel. They will try to explain the nature of the interview and, hopefully, the interview is only conducted once some previous relationship has been established. An unthreatening location will be chosen, and the interviewer will be prepared to respond to some of the questions that the interviewee wants to ask. The word “interview” may not even be used, and the process might be seen as more of a “guided conversation,” but people are not fooled. One person takes away a recording of the interview and will dissect it later, while the other has told perhaps a little more than he or she intended, or has constructed an image of themselves that they feel best suits their own agendas in the particular situation.

The Validity of Interviews

Questioning the validity of interviews is far from new. Quantitative survey interviewers have long been well aware of the possible effects that the interviewer might have on what interviewees say. The time of day or year, the weather, and external events have all

been shown to have an effect, as has the appearance, gender, ethnicity, clothing, accent, tone, and other variables associated directly with the interviewer. Their “solution” is either to standardize as many of these variables as possible, or to have a range of each and hope that the differences cancel out with a sufficiently high number of interviewers. Both of these are rarely done with qualitative interviewing – and indeed both “solutions” are highly suspect. However, the problems are deeper than this.

We know that interviewers and interviewees co-construct the interview and that the replies to questions are produced for that particular occasion and circumstance. Interviewees will select their words with care (as in other formal occasions) and will moderate what they have to say to the particular circumstances. If we put to one side the epistemological question of whether or not there is any ultimate “reality” to be communicated, the interviewee may have incomplete knowledge or faulty memory. They will always have subjective perception which will be related to their own past experiences and current conditions. At best, interviewees will only give what they are prepared to reveal about their subjective perceptions of events and opinions. These perceptions and opinions will change over time, and according to circumstance. They may be at some considerable distance from any “reality” as others might see it.

One old – and largely forgotten – book that considers this area is that by Jack D. Douglas (1976), who proposes that researchers need to move beyond the traditional cooperative paradigm and recognize the underlying conflictual nature of society. In his typical colorful language Douglas argues that:

In its most extreme form ... the cooperative paradigm of society assumed it is possible to ask members what is going on and they will tell. Yet everyone knows when he [*sic*] thinks about it that only the naive, the innocent, the dupe takes this position all the time in everyday life. Rather, all competent adults are assumed to know that there are at least four major problems lying in the way of getting at social reality by asking people what is going on and that these problems must be dealt with if one is to avoid being taken in, duped, deceived, used, put on, fooled, suckered, made a patsy, left holding the bag, fronted and so on. (Douglas 1976: 57)

Douglas argues that the researcher should assume that people and groups are in conflict with one another, and that their aims and objectives often clash. He describes the problems that we encounter in interviews in terms of misinformation, evasion, lies, and fronts and follows this with a detailed exposition of the problems of taken-for-granted meanings, problematic meanings, and self-deception. In places, the book reads more like a guide to becoming a spy than one designed for academic researchers, and ethical questions are not always at the forefront of his suggested strategies, but the overall point is well made: what people tell us in interviews is often not to be taken at face value. He argues that this is particularly true when the interviewer asks about aspects of experience that are of special importance to the person being interviewed – for example, issues of sex, money, and power.

“Misinformation” is used by Douglas to describe the type of information that people may give that is incorrect, but which they do not recognize as incorrect. Teachers’ experiences of the ways of working in one school, for example, may lead them to assume that these rules will be the same in a new school. Teachers asked about the home life of children may believe that they know more than they do as they extrapolate from limited

contacts with parents. Teachers often live some way away from the community their school serves, yet may still honestly believe that they know a great deal about that community. “Evasions” are intentional acts of hiding information. Teachers may feel that they should not give certain information on children for legal, practical, or professional reasons, or simply because they do not believe the information to be relevant to the researcher’s purposes. Children will often hide information about their own and others’ activities if they feel they may be punished or treated differently if they disclose. Indeed, as Atkinson (2015: 88) argues, “human competence includes the ability to dissemble.” An everyday part of human interaction is to be careful about what we say so that we do not anger, frighten, or belittle others. Tact demands that we often avoid answering all the questions that we are asked or, at last, avoid answering them fully. “The maintenance of others’ sense of worth is partly dependent on mutual tact” (Atkinson 2015: 88), so we often avoid saying exactly what we think. We do not express all of our opinions and personal judgments about others and frequently pretend to agree (or not disagree) with the ideas of others in order to ease interaction.

Interviewees also lie. Experienced teachers expect children to lie. From a very early age children claim that “It wasn’t me,” when it can’t have been anyone else. They get better at lying as they get older, and schools are an arena where children are frequently forced to lie in order to protect themselves from the arbitrary authority that teachers have over them. They lie to protect their friends, to protect their privacy, and to survive on a minute-by-minute basis in situations where teachers have power over everything they do and say. Every child recognizes that it is foolish say to a teacher that they were telling their neighbor that they were bored and were counting the minutes until the end of the lesson. Some of these lies might be seen as just “white lies” and to have little consequence, but we must expect there to be situations when people lie about subjects and events that are of central importance to them. Interviewees have little to gain from telling an interviewer their innermost secrets. Indeed, researchers need be most suspicious of anyone who “reveals” aspects of their own lives that appear to reflect badly on them. What might their purpose be in doing so?

Finally, Douglas identifies fronts as being different from lies. He argues that in most settings there are lies that are shared and learned about the setting itself. While, in some cases, these fronts will be conspiratorial and agreed upon explicitly in order to fool outsiders, most will simply develop as the “way we do things around here” (Deal 1985). Most teachers will adopt a shared front for students that there is broad agreement between teachers on most aspects of the school. Indeed, it would probably be seen as unprofessional to discuss with students the disputes and rows that exist between staff. In most schools, the teachers and students together develop fronts for external consumption about what is “special” about their school. This may be voiced in terms of the school being friendly, trusting its students, or being caring. The front is maintained even though individuals know that there will be many cases where it is evidently not true.

But misinformation, evasion, lies, and fronts are only part of the problem. These are the more explicit and conscious ways in which researchers may be misled. There are also taken-for-granted meanings, problematic meanings, and self-deception. Convery’s (1999) article is specifically concerned with life histories and he raises many questions about the nature of such accounts. By presenting a form of his own life history as a teacher, he exposes the variety of narrative strategies that he has used to present an

individuality that is morally consistent. He states: “in offering to reveal the truth of my experiences, I unconsciously took the opportunity to reconstruct a desirable, or preferred identity.” And, of course, this is what most people do when asked questions about themselves. Lives are not inherently coherent. We do not have full control over our lives. They are the result of chance and circumstance as much as our own activities and plans. The unexpected happens; the expected does not. We act as if we will live forever (or, at least, for a long time yet), but we may be dead tomorrow. In this uncertainty we all try to make sense of our own worlds, and the interview is one occasion when we try to do so in a semi-public forum. We try to present a reasonably rational image of our own uncertainty. People construct accounts about themselves, their activities, and their beliefs that are far more coherent than the lived reality.

Yet, in interviews, and in particular in the transcribed versions of interviews, a coherent and constructed account gives the impression of permanence to something that is inherently transitory. It becomes a text that can be edited, copied, and recontextualized. The original event becomes data to be entered into a qualitative analysis package and segments become examples drawn from the data bank at the touch of a key. In short, the transcribed interview encourages the possibility of the spoken word being taken too seriously. The phrase that someone happened to have used on a hot Monday afternoon following a double mathematics class gets wrenched out of its context and presented as if it represented the “truth” about one person’s views or understandings.

How Is High Status Given to the Accounts of Participants’ Perspectives and Understandings?

This chapter has argued that for research to be recognized as ethnographic there should be continuities with past practices in ethnography. In particular, the work needs to be based on more than interviews alone. It has further been argued that, even where ethnographies do use multiple methods, most studies now rely on interviews much more than before and often present transcriptions of interviews as data. This growing dependence on interviews is particularly strange given that the growth of ethnographic studies in education was originally driven by a desire to break away from generating data in atypical, researcher-constructed situations.

Further, the validity of information given in interviews is often suspect, particularly if it relates to areas of the interviewee’s life that are of importance to them. But this does not mean that interviews need be abandoned. Indeed, interviews remain a major tool enabling ethnographers to generate information on one of the key aspects of ethnography.

In the list of the seven main features of ethnography by Troman et al. (2006: 1), there is:

- the high status given to the accounts of participants’ perspectives and understandings.

At first sight, this feature seems to be in conflict with any desire to reduce reliance on interviews. Indeed, a recurring theme in Atkinson’s (2015: 12–13) book is his belief that there is an unwarranted emphasis on the collection and interpretation of personal accounts of participants’ own experiences, recollections, and views. He argues that the overall purpose of ethnographic research is not simply to understand the informants’ social world from their own point of view and to present that to readers, but to

understand the social worlds that they occupy. He argues that social organization and social action are at the heart of ethnography, and that the aim is to understand the “socially shared practices that make everyday life possible, the shared conventions that render culture comprehensible and socially distributed competences that enable actors to create everyday life.” This view would appear to contradict the idea that ethnography gives high status to the accounts of participants’ perspectives and understandings, but I do not believe that it does. Social organization and social action can only be understood if attempts are made to uncover participants’ perspectives and understandings, but this is certainly not all that is necessary. Neither can we gain those perspectives and understandings through a simplistic presentation of what happened to be said in a particular interview.

There is a need to focus on the word “accounts.” Interviews do not provide participants’ perspectives and understandings; they provide accounts of them. When we are asked to “give an account of ourselves” or are “called to account” we construct a particular account for each situation – and we justify what we have done. The account given by a child to a teacher about what they did is likely to be very different from the account of the same incident given to their friends. To give an account is to construct an account. Within an ethnography individuals will give multiple accounts about themselves to the researcher and to others. Each account will be influenced by myriad factors – in particular, the current relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the particular situation that both are in.

Accounts also may not be based on interviews. Observation of naturally occurring events, in classrooms for example, can form a written account in field notes and provide an alternative account of participants’ perspectives and understandings. What people do is sometimes very different from what they say they do, and it is part of ethnography that these disjunctures are noted.

Conclusion

So, the problems associated with interviews do not necessarily mean that they should be abandoned within ethnography. Interviews can provide important data, and it is often worthwhile conducting them. At the very least, they can inform us of what the person interviewed is prepared to say about a topic in the social context, time, and place of that particular interview. But we need to recognize that what is said will be co-constructed in that interview, and will be limited by perception, memory, evasions, self-deception, and more on the part of both interviewee and interviewer, and researchers certainly cannot uncritically take what is said in any particular interview as “the truth” for all times. Interviews have to be treated as generated accounts and performances (Atkinson 2015: 96) and the interviewer should recognize that interviews are occasions when those interviewed will construct themselves as particular types of people.

It also needs to be recognized that the effects of the problems of interviews are likely to be related to the nature of the topics under consideration. The nature of information generated about events with which the interviewee has no direct investment is likely to be different from that about personal lifestyle decisions and other areas which have a greater potential impact. This means that ethnographers need to analyze interviews

with much more care than is often given to them. We need to focus on what is not said as much as what is said. We need to be cautious in interpreting the words produced in interviews, and try to generate further data about the same topics in a variety of different ways and in different circumstances. This means that we need to search for misinformation, evasion, lies, and fronts, and also to look for taken-for-granted meanings, problematic meanings, and self-deception. We need to interrogate the interviews and compare what is said in one account with what is indicated by another.

But more centrally, ethnographic research would benefit from greater time being spent in observing the activities of others and recording these observations in field notes and less time being spent in trying to construct “hard” data from ephemeral conversations. The details of social organization and social action can be uncovered through observation as well as through talk. A greater emphasis on observation in all its many forms, using all of the five senses, may improve the quality of ethnographies immeasurably.

Acknowledgments

As with much of my writing, this chapter draws upon and develops some previous work, in particular, Walford (2001, 2008, 2009).

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