

# The new ethnographer at work

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## Abstract

Building on observations from ethnography at the fin de siècle (Wellin and Fine, 2001), we address how ethnographers today approach their work tasks, incorporating new technology, emphasizing embodiment, sites of struggle, and increasing public engagement. We use the lens of the *sociology of work* to examine how ethnography has been shaped over the past 15 years, the lifespan of *Qualitative Research*. How do the challenges of occupational roles, places of research, and new forms of data gathering shape our collective work?

## Keywords

Career, embodiment, occupation, public sociology, sociology of work, technology

## Ethnography as work

Whatever else it may be, ethnography is a form of work. With this sentence Christopher Wellin and Gary Alan Fine (2001: 323) opened our chapter on ‘Ethnography as work’ in the canonical *Handbook of Ethnography*, edited by Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont, along with colleagues Amanda Coffey, John Lofland, and Lyn Lofland. Methodological choices are inevitably tied to occupational engagement. Fifteen years have passed since that text, and ethnography has expanded and transformed. As a result, we justify an essay that assays recent changes. This assessment provides a capstone on articles that honor this journal’s founding editors, both diligent workers and occupational icons.

Ethnography is – or can be – part of the job requirements in academic, business, administrative and social service organizations. Today, more than ever, ethnography may be central to the job description of practitioners. It may be an academic specialty or as an

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applied skill. Ethnographic writings receive increasing attention, witness the controversy surrounding Alice Goffman's (2014) *On the Run* or that Matthew Desmond's (2016) book *Evicted* captured a spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Further, it seems more evident today in the growing world of evaluation and applied research or contract work for governments, private foundations, or industrial employers that a place exists for ethnographers, fieldworkers, and qualitative researchers (Steele and Iutovitch 1997). Ethnographic skills are now routinely job requirements for applied research and NGO work, and no longer exemplify 'mere journalism.' Our methodological abilities are integral to the creation of public policy, even generating resentment from once dominant quantitative researchers (Cizek 1995).

We should not be surprised that, unlike academic employment, these employment opportunities require that ethnographers adjust their interests to those of sponsors, often embracing the sponsor's depiction of the problem, a timetable more compressed than desired, and control of published findings. This remains true, even if increased options exist for ethnography among NGOs and activist groups. These possibilities are increasingly important at a time in which tenure-track employment is becoming more precarious. Ethnographers require extended time to conduct research.

These employment options point to the division between academic and non-academic research, both in the public and private sector (and in domains that straddle the two). The label applied research implicitly references the status difference between this latter domain and traditionally valued academic research oriented to journal publication and theory building. Such work involves a fraught choice.

Ethnography has become notably more accepted within sociology and other social science disciplines over the past 15 years. This recognition is impressive and comforting as ethnographic methods have been integrated into the academic armature. Many sociology departments employ a group of fieldworkers, and the lone – and lonely – ethnographer is less often found. But it is not simply the number of ethnographers in a department. In addition, not all ethnographers are isolated cowboys. Team ethnographies (or dialogic duoethnographies [Sawyer and Norris, 2012]) are increasingly common.

Yet, all is not so well, as changes in demands made of the professorate reveal. Ethnographers recognize that status lines remain, particularly where large grants generate respect, resources, and privileges. In addition, the extended temporal engagement on which ethnography depends, no longer fits a university in which academic demands increasingly resemble other forms of bureaucratic labor.

Changes in the ecology of the discipline create a new temporality for ethnographic work. With professionalization, tenure requirements, competition in the discipline for scarce employment, more PhD's every year, and career expectations and trajectories, being successful as an ethnographic worker is challenging. As the number of journals expands (including those online), how can one establish a metric for good ethnographic work? How is productivity judged given the overwhelming competition in the academy? Here heightened demands to publish (added on to demands for teaching and service) create pressure for faster ethnographic work, but not necessarily better ethnographic work. Longer ethnographic observations – sometimes several years in length – may be replaced by 'ethnographic visits,' quick but vivid snapshots without the detailed and intense relationships that one finds in the classic studies, such as *Street Corner Society* (Whyte,

1943). Of course, we still read of lengthy engagements, but speed often trumps depth. Detailed observations are now largely found among privileged graduate students, as the smaller or less prestigious public universities typically have higher teaching loads, modest research budgets, and few sabbaticals. Finally, ethnographers face institutional demands, as they must comply with human subject committees (Institutional Review Boards). Given the biomedical emphasis of many boards and their cautious assessments of risk and legal liability, this process can strain academic freedom and hinder innovative ethnographic work.

The ethnographic challenge is to mediate among organizational structures, public problems and social theories, no easy task, given that succeeding at one may limit others. Ethnographers must negotiate the conflicts among best research practices and institutional pressures. One new form of undertaking ethnography under these conditions is what Paul Atkinson has spoken of as ‘an aliquot of ethnography’, in which a short ethnographic encounter provides just enough exposure to analyse and make sense of a specific world, so long as the limitations of the approach are recognized

Recognizing these macro-changes as the background to the specific changes to ethnographic work, our challenge is to update how ethnographic work has evolved. In this, we focus on four directions in which ethnography has developed. While we do not deny that these themes of ethnographic work existed 15 years ago, each has become increasingly salient in understanding ethnography as a form of work. Specifically, we examine the role of technology and new media in creating novel forms of ‘observation,’ even in the absence of face-to-face co-presence; the greater emphasis on the ethnographer’s body and the experience of that body as integral to the field experience; an increased attention to race, disadvantage, and inequality as central topics within what is now labelled ‘urban ethnography;’ and the way that public engagement links the researcher to policy and activist domains. While the challenges described in the earlier account remain, we focus on newer conditions of ethnography as work.

## The technological ethnographer

Technology marches ever on, and, as it evolves, work patterns are altered. Options are opened and shut. In time, technology filters into work worlds so profoundly that we forget that today’s taken-for-granted technology (tape recorders, typewriters, or telephones) was once novel, not part of the mundanity of work. Sometimes, as with photography, the incorporation of technology is slow, while in other cases, such as social media, we find a more rapid attempt at integration.

Some fieldworkers, following the lead of Howard Becker (2007) and Douglas Harper (2012), emphasize the analytic significance of visual imagery in ethnography, demonstrating and documenting what might be missed by eyes alone, while still leaving interpretation to human workers. The camera clarifies, captures, and conceals. Technological choices provide ethnographic opportunities and constraints, both in terms of access to the field and access to journals. The ethnographer is invited to join forces with the artist and the photojournalist.

Photographs, taken by the researcher, are now increasingly found in academic journals, inscribing ‘real people and places.’ Publications, such as the *American Sociological*

Association sponsored *Contexts*, regularly include photo essays. Today photographs do not require much advanced technology, but can come from low-tech cameras, including cell phones. Bolstering written claims, photographs also record places that no longer exist and reconstruct temporary settings (Wynn, 2015).

Other visual aids, such as GPS images and GIS maps have taken on new relevance, demonstrating that ethnographers can produce careful records of their research sites. No longer do they only have notebook in hand, returning to the sacred word processor. In contemporary ethnography new forms of knowledge are possible. For example, one can document changes in neighborhood populations, businesses, or markings that mere notating did not permit. The same might be said about digital recordings that, unlike the traditional tape recorder, permit information to be downloaded directly to the computer and make interviews usable as material can more easily be extracted by the researcher.

A third technology that has shaped ethnography is qualitative data analysis software. Although resisted at first, these programs provide multiple ways to annotate, code, and organize fieldwork data, altering the form of analysis. Key words permit easy access to themes that occur throughout the project, but that previously might have been forgotten or ignored. Of course, as is always the case, we must ask if today's ethnographic labor, augmented by new technologies, is more or less onerous than it once was, as the choices about what to include and exclude, as well as how the information is portrayed, remain challenging. Is there a danger from too much data captured by devices and not through the vision and the interpretation of the researcher? Do these technologies provide greater objectivity and validity, or perhaps in the illusion of objectivity, they lead us astray.

Finally, technology permits studying communities that exist not in space, but online. Increasingly ethnographers have ventured into the examination of cyber-communities and social media, relying on 'observations' in which community members cannot be visually or aurally monitored through face-to-face co-presence but through their textual representations of self. Websites, chatrooms, and Internet communities have radically altered the work that some ethnographers do, since they can gather information that is shared in a virtual community that may not be possible to access in other ways. In this, new possibilities are available, as the ethnographer can conduct research on groups that consist of a transnational or global network and are constituted by spatially dispersed relations. As a consequence, ethnography is not grounded in place, but in social relations. Furthermore, online sites provide opportunities to study modes of interaction that may not occur in physical spaces. For instance, groups that may be hostile (such as members of rival gangs) can anonymously express opinions that either attack the rival group or endorse them outside of the surveillance of their comrades.

Issues for ethnographic work in the virtual world may include how one establishes oneself as a participant when one is not engaging in face-to-face interaction, but only communicating with 'avatars' or 'text.' The new ethnographer must carefully consider this new frontier of field labor: How do we identify our subjects? What counts as data, when we are following links, posts, and threads? Indeed, sitting at our computer, are we even 'in the field'?

## The body in the field

Embodiment centers on how the ethnographer herself becomes the object of ethnographic inquiry (consider Wacquant (2003) as a boxer, Hancock (2013) or Delamont (Stephens and Delamont, 2013) as dancers, Mears (2011) as a fashion model, or Desmond (2007) as a firefighter). To be sure, this is not a wholly new style of research. Julius Roth (1963) wrote about being a TB patient and Fred Davis (1959) about being a taxi driver. However, the development of autoethnography (Ellis, 1995) has given greater legitimacy to embodied ethnography. This form of ethnography requires that researchers develop practical, experiential knowledge to appreciate the lifeworlds of their informants. Because embodied knowledge can be acquired only by placing oneself into the line of fire, detachment is not possible, an argument emphasized by Erving Goffman (1989) in asserting that the researcher must experience the affronts shown to the group being studied. Embodied ethnography demands a new mode of theorizing the body as a tool of inquiry central to what field labor entails. This approach requires one to be a practitioner of an art, craft, or occupation as well as being an ethnographer, unwilling or unable to separate the two.

This desire to immerse fully suggests that embodiment as ethnographic labor provides unique insight into social life. The body becomes a site of discipline, as one must transform one's material self into that of a boxer, dancer, model, or firefighter. As a result, what is new about embodied ethnography today is the phenomenological and interactionist aspects that are drawn out of using the body as a site of understanding, self-expression, and an instrument of interpretation.

While initially learning particular skills may be carefully considered, as knowledge become embodied it becomes more natural, transparent, and taken-for-granted. Embodied knowledge is not the product of conscious understanding; rather, it is painfully acquired through the training of the self within a world of action and of being. Embodiment can discipline the body viscerally, creating what Bourdieu (1992) speaks of as a 'feel for the game.' As a result, we start ethnographic work when we are closest to home: by using our own bodies as our research instrument. As we transform ourselves, we are challenged to rethink the relationship between bodies, the acquisition of emotive knowledge, and the place of self within the academic imagination.

## The professor in the hood

One of the most significant shifts in ethnography over the past 15 years has been the growth – perhaps the rebirth – of what is labeled urban ethnography. To be sure, for more than a century researchers have observed, described, and analyzed impoverished communities, often with the goal of political critique or social uplift (Hallett and Fine, 2000; Pittenger, 2012). However, these studies though well-intended could be patronizing and naïve, often focusing on revealing 'social disorganization.' Because of the critiques of the civil rights and Black power movements, scholars, privileged and from outside the community, were no longer welcomed and came to question their own standpoint. It was not until the late 1980s that William Julius Wilson started training a diverse cohort of students at the University of Chicago. After a few years, scholars like Mary Pattillo,

Reuben May, Loïc Wacquant, and Mitchell Duneier demonstrated that the streets and the corners of Chicago could provide a rich vein of insight. Perhaps this constitutes a Third Chicago School of Sociology. The approach has grown and expanded, and, as noted, Alice Goffman and Matthew Desmond have become important public intellectuals through their gritty accounts. Other ethnographers, emerging from similar communities to those that they study, have pushed the discipline to consider questions of power, privilege, reflexivity, and exploitation (Duck, 2014; Rios, 2011).

The point is ultimately about how this expanding research tradition affects the work life of ethnographers. Such work demands an embeddedness with which those who study middle-class groups are not burdened. The ethnographer must develop trust with those who have profound reasons not to confide in elites. While increasingly ethnographers have diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, it is hard to escape the class backgrounds on which academic life depends. Even if the field researcher might have come from modest circumstances, success in graduate school separates her from these roots and in the process creates barriers to community acceptance. Further, presence in impoverished communities may require delicate negotiations for those whose salaries or fellowships place them in a different economic strata. Observing conditions of distress or oppression can provoke despair or anger, and these emotions must be tempered to make one's research transcend pure emotion and become generalizable and publishable in disciplinary journals or periodicals appealing to an educated public. This emotion work may lead to a state of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) – a condition that may characterize some minority researchers – and reveal the contradictions and strains of ethnographic work.

## The new public sociology

Michael Burawoy's 2004 American Sociological Association presidential address mapped four interconnected realms of sociology: professional sociology, critical sociology, policy sociology, and, most influentially, public sociology. He argued for new models of sociological – and ethnographic – identity. Burawoy (2005) pointed to two types of public sociology, 'traditional' and 'organic'. Traditional public sociologists speak to larger publics through the mass media, whereas organic public sociologists engage in face-to-face interactions with a multiplicity of publics, such as community organizations, social movements, and trade unions. As a respected fieldworker, Burawoy describes how researchers can share the observations they have captured, often in collaboration with those they study.

As Burawoy has argued and as we noted above, universities are under strain, subject to market forces, knowledge commodification, and reduced state support, causing ethnographers to search for alternative funding. These dynamics have shifted the terrain on which field workers pursue their craft. We noted that ethnographers are now more likely to connect to organizations outside the university. However, in addition, these changes impact the demand for public sociology: the push for ethnographers to participate directly in civil society and issue-oriented politics.

As a result of the formality and the sluggishness of journal and book publishing, ethnographers who hope to have their work circulate in the world have turned to new social media such as blogs, internet sites, Facebook, and Twitter to share ideas, dialogue with

others, and implement their insights (Vannini, 2013). The speed and intensity of these dialogues provide ethnographers with greater social power. Given increasing job insecurity, social media also provide ethnographers with innovative ways of marketing and promoting themselves for greater visibility as well as linking with other social movements and community actors.

Further, perhaps as an outcome of Burawoy's presentation, non-academic, community-based publics have become more receptive to sociological analyses, linked, as we noted above, to increased research on inequality and impoverishment. The relationship between sociologists and publics has been strengthened and become more sophisticated over the last 15 years (Gans, 2010). As a result, undertaking public sociology, ethnographers must choose rhetorical and writing strategies that render their work accessible without undermining the integrity of the scholarship. In addition, the ethnographer must consider how to construct the frames through which some aspects of the social world under analysis are highlighted or downplayed. In this, the ethnographer must be vigilant in her modes of representation, so as not to exoticize, moralize, romanticize, or sanitize ways she represents the people and interactions under analysis. Finally, the ethnographer must write in ways that is relevant to public debate, and social problems in which she may seek to critique, reform, or try and transform. In this, fieldworkers must insure (or attempt to insure) that the complexity of their findings are not distorted or simplified by those who wish to use them for other purposes (Fassin, 2013). These are practical, political, and ethical choices that ethnographers face as they work within the public arena. If ethnographers are not public intellectuals in the European sense, their voices increasingly matter in setting the terms of public debate and providing evidence that may materially influence the understanding of social dilemmas.

## **Conclusion: working at ethnography**

As is the case with other work domains, ethnography is defined by principles as well as by drudgery. It depends on ideals and on self-serving deceptions (Fine, 1993). These help to preserve the fragile reputation of field researchers as well as to link them with those outside the in-group, including sponsors, coworkers, and publics, including policy makers or those who are informants or, today, collaborators. Like all workers, ethnographers are preoccupied by their workaday challenges. In contrast to 2001, researchers are more likely to have ethnographic colleagues. Still, as a function of their chosen methodology, ethnographers must cope with a labor-intensive form of research, even if, because such research is not capital-intensive, they can grimly smile at those colleagues who find their governmental grants disappearing. In addition to university pressures, the fieldworker must negotiate with funders, who have demands about timing and desires for outcomes. Add to this the fact that journals, even as they have become more open to ethnographic projects, increasingly demand revisions and university presses are deluged with competing manuscripts.

It remains true, as it was 15 years ago, that ethnographers struggle with their priorities. They negotiate work inside and outside the academy, and they have selected a realm of labor that demands acceptance of the unpredictable and the ambiguous. Further, the forms in which their conclusions are packaged require a choice of academic, applied, or popular audience.

Ethnography is not an occupation as strictly defined, but it requires identification with or even an embrace of the method. *Fieldwork* is a form of work, well recognized by Paul Atkinson (1990) and Sara Delamont (2016) in their methodological writings. We participate in a scholarly workforce, beset by demands from funders, suspicion from colleagues, skepticism from elites, and anxiety from informants. The issue remains, as it did 15 years ago, how can we foster careers that recognize the process, products, problems, and promise of field research? This is a task to which Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont, and this journal have heroically devoted themselves.

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**Black Hawk Hancock** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at DePaul University. He received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in Sociology. He is an ethnographer whose work focuses on issues of race and culture. His first ethnographic monograph is *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 2013). He is currently at work on his second book, *In-Between Worlds: Mexican Kitchen Workers in Chicago's Restaurant Industry*, which is currently under contract (University of Chicago Press).