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The Ethnographic Gaze

Why read this text...

Ethnography is a method in social and cultural anthropology (and beyond) referring both to gathering data through long-term (ethnographic) fieldwork and writing about it in the form of systematic in-depth descriptions and interpretations. An ethnography tries to describe and understand the coexistence, the social and political organization, way of life and worldview of a society, group or individual. You may find the concept of the ethnographic gaze useful for your work if you like to change perspectives and it seems interesting for you to deal with what is understood as the “self” and what as “the other”. If that is the case, dealing with the ethnographic gaze may provide valuable insights into how it is possible to make qualified statements about groups and individuals.

Origins of the term...

The ethnographic approach has emerged in early works of anthropology and sociology. The Polish-British anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) is considered the founder of long-term ethnographic fieldwork. His research on the Trobriand Islands established ethnographic accounts based on long-term immersion in a particular place or community as foundational to anthropological research and writing. Contemporaries (e.g. Franz Boas) and generations of anthropologists to follow have implemented, further developed and critically re-thought this method and thus the nature of what we call ‘ethnography’. Of particular importance are the “writing culture” and postcolonial debates of the 1980s (e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Fabian 1983), which criticized ethnographic accounts as both ethnocentric and colonial. They proposed new forms of ‘multivocal’ ethnographic writing that include different voices and perspectives. These debates extend have caused anthropologists to critically reassess ethnographic accounts as the foundation of anthropological knowledge (e.g. Jackson 2013; Ingold 2014).

In sociology, ethnographic approaches have been important in some research traditions, such as the so-called ‘Chicago school’ of the 1920s/1930s, in which scholars conducted ethnographic fieldwork in urban settings in order to grasp processes of urbanisation, migration, marginalization, etc.

Discussion

Ethnography is grounded in writing descriptive and analytical accounts of particular peoples and ways of life. It is centred around the question of “what is happening on the ground”, what are people actually doing, and saying. Heuristically, ethnographers strive to make the strange familiar, and vice versa – the familiar strange (e.g. Eriksen 2015). Strangeness and familiarity depend upon context (Schäffter 1991:12) and thus must always be reflexively explored, taking into account the relative position of the observer. The well-known anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup argues that reflexivity is essential for the ethnographic view,



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because the relationship between the self and the other is the basis for exoticization and othering (Hastrup 1993:177). The ethnographic gaze rests on a constant interplay of proximity and distance, in which the self also transforms.

While early ethnographers were faced with the task of understanding unfamiliar settings, events, daily routines and ways of life, in school ethnography there is often a problem of too much familiarity. Precisely because researchers have been socialized in the very institutions they are exploring, it is often extremely difficult to gain knowledge of schools as educational settings that move beyond ethnocentric conceptions of these institutions (Delamont and Atkinson 2018:71). An ethnographic approach that examines what is going on in these familiar setting as if it were unfamiliar thus provides an opportunity for reflection from a different perspective, and thus offers a distinct and valuable tool for educational research.

In order to visualize this reflexive reality, which surrounds both self and other like the water surrounds the fish, the anthropologist must refrain from getting used to her familiar knowledge, as Sara Delamont emphasizes in her introduction to the methods of educational ethnography (Delamont 2002). The ethnographic gaze offers a way to establish distance. Through this distance, the reflexivity of every social situation - that is, the way in which every social situation is determined by subjective attitudes but cannot be reduced to them - remains visible.

Sara Delamont and Paul Atkinson warn us that the very familiarity of many educational researchers with their research subject limits their view (Delamont and Atkinson 2018:71). To cast an ethnographic gaze on education does not mean to look for the "strange" and the spectacular (exotic) for the sake of itself, but to estrange the self-evident. This attitude, in turn, is open to everyone who is able to move between the role of the practitioner and the researcher, and thus to enter the role of the novice learner, "without prior experience, without any guidance" (Malinowski 2001:26).

Practical Example:

Sara Delamont (2018) gives various examples of how an ethnographic gaze that makes the familiar strange can be used in educational research. She recommends that one familiarizes oneself with older ethnographies to get to know unfamiliar forms of educational systems, incorporate minority views if they are part of the researcher's own identity, study in unusual schools, or look at unusual actors in ordinary schools, informal education, and experimentally interlace new theoretical concepts into one's own thinking. These strategies all encourage a hegemonic point of view to integrate unusual or unrepresentative elements into an overall picture.

Thinking further:

- Which aspects of everyday school life do I take for granted, as completely obvious and familiar?
- What might I learn by questioning ‚what is going on’ and trying to gain a new perspective on what I think I know, what I take as self-evident, what I take for granted, or what I know that must be kept silent?



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- What kind of behaviour seems „strange“ from this perspective and how can it become more familiar through a novel reflexion?
- Imagine you are an anthropologist from another continent/planet etc. coming to do ethnographic research in your (real) home countries education system. How would you describe what is going on here? Don't forget that the people on your home country have no preconceptions about your place of research and you will have to explain everything from the ground up.

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Othering, Funds of Knowledge, Reflexivity,

Sources

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