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## Elizabeth Campbell and Luke Eric-Lassiter: *Doing Ethnography Today: Theories, Methods, Exercises*

West Sussex: Wiley. 2015. 160 pp. ISBN 978-1-4051-8648-3

“We continue to view the craft of ethnography as an artful, humanistic form in search of meaning, connection, and, above all, change” – so summarize Campbell and Lassiter their views on ethnography in the preface of the book. The authors consider the book as a development of a conversation of between the authors, who were graduate students together twenty years before its publication.

The book consists of six chapters. The title of the introduction, Chapter 1, encapsulates the authors’ main arguments: “Ethnography is as Personal as it Gets”. For the authors, ethnography is not simply a method of inquiring; rather, the emphasis is put on its humanistic, collaborative, hermeneutic, creative and constitutive, and artistic character (pp. 4–10). Being sceptical about objectivity and insisting that ethnographers should frankly reflect their positions and biases, Campbell and Lassiter argue that quality ethnographic work is possible only in ongoing collaboration with informants at all levels and even in the writing process. The authors advocate for giving the research participant authority and control in what they call “co-learning process” (p. 6).

“Collaboration” is specifically elaborated in Chapter 2 through the example of the involvement the students, community groups, and different departments at the university in the authors’ ethnographic project, *the Other Side of Middletown*, which took place between 1996 and 2004. The purpose of the research was “to address the absence of African American history and experience in the scholarly and popular literature on Muncie, Indiana” (p. 15). The authors put forward the difficulties of working together in the subchapter “On the actual complexities of collaboration”, by pointing to the discrepancy between “perceived” and “actual” practice in a lengthy ethnographic research project (p. 21). In short, this chapter stresses the transformed role of the ethnographer and warns that participants have begun to expect to be actively involved.

Chapter 3, “Emergent Design”, focuses on the necessity of flexibility during the research process. As research projects usually develop in a way that is hard to predict, Campbell and Lassiter suggest that ethnographers should be ready to alter schedules, prospects, and aims because while the project develops a previously formulated hypothesis, assumptions and issues become less relevant (p. 32). For a deep understanding, researchers must develop meaningful participation of their own participation, cultivate reciprocal relationships with participants, and establish genuine connections (p. 33). In fact, the authors make a crucial

contribution to the field by introducing new roles for the ethnographer and the research participant: those of being a “facilitator” and of being a “counterpart”, respectively. The authors suggest that the ethnographer should refrain from acting as an “authoritative expert” and instead be modest in conduct. On the other hand, the participant should be treated as the “counterpart” because the division between the “researcher” and the “researched” should be transcended (p. 44–46).

Chapter 4 continues to highlight the “direct participation” and “genuine participation” required of the ethnographer (p. 56), the subchapter “Participation” problematizes Malinowski’s idea of “participant observation” (p. 57). The authors assert that ethnography today is still based on a model inspired by Malinowski’s ideas. This means spending a long time in the field, usually in a “non-White” location and “far away from the comforts of home”. The authors assert that it was Malinowski himself who accentuated the need for a “systematic, direct, daily, long-term participation and observation”. They inform the reader that by the 1950’s, “participant observation” had been widely accepted among ethnographers (p. 58). Campbell and Lassiter argue that the traditional way of doing ethnography has been transcended with the abandonment of “isolated” and “bounded” research of communities, as researchers can do fieldwork in “multiple” sites due to faster modes of transportation. The authors propose that the ethnographer switch from “participant observation” to “observant participation”, drawing from Barbara Tedlock (p. 64–66). The main problem with participant observation according to the authors is that ethnographers write “their ‘official’ ethnographic reports in distanced, objective, and scientific frameworks” (p. 65) that undermine real connections, involvements, and experiences in the field. Instead, the authors suggest including all these into the story.

Chapter 5 focuses on interviews which, the authors suggest, ethnographers should take as “conversations”. The authors are of the opinion that interviews constitute only a small, though crucial, part in ethnography, and ethnography would be unfinished without speech (p. 87). They point out that both the interviewer and the interviewed create the outcome, based on their subjectivities (p. 89). They also highlight the inevitability in the change of the course of interviews. The reason is that the subjectivities of the interviewer and the interviewed create an “event” that is “tied to historical, cultural, political, and other social processes far beyond our control” (p. 96). Besides, the authors remind ethnographers that they should take their interviews not as data, “but” as “creative collaborations” and “conversations” that should not be directed as if they aim to “discover” something, but rather to create genuine “interactions” (p. 97).

Chapter 6 acknowledges that there is no single way to write ethnography. The authors make it clear that the definition of ethnography has varied in different eras. After mentioning Malinowski, they name Clifford Geertz, who shifted the direction of ethnography to “interpretation” and “meaning” (p. 122). A significant stress is on the efforts to “de-colonize” ethnography by “feminists, postmodernists, and other critical theorists” from the 1970s until the turn of the century. The authors repeat Clifford’s ideas that ethnography is “partial, tentative, and emergent” (p. 123) and mention “multi-sited” ethnography, as well (p. 116); however, they do not elaborate on this genre, which is a deficiency of this chapter.

The book includes many original suggestions. For instance, it problematizes Clifford Geertz's term "thick description", which is usually never challenged, yet it reduces the texts that are composed in "diverse and various ways" (p. 72). This is related with the fact that that "field notes" are now not seen as "innocuous collections of raw, unbiased, or unmediated 'data' to be simply translated into detailed, thick description" (pp. 72–73). The authors imply that there are certain weaknesses in the commonly used term "thick description". Campbell and Lassiter make a critique of Geertz through James Clifford's analysis of fieldwork that contains "inscription", "transcription", and "description" (p. 72). They give reference to Clifford's "Notes on (Field)notes", and perhaps the critique of Geertz by Clifford could have been made more explicit with regard to "description". As we know from Clifford, "Ethnography cannot, in practice, maintain a constant descriptive relationship to cultural phenomena" (Clifford 1990: 68).

This book transcends the old definitions of what ethnography is. There is a stark contrast between Campbell and Lassiter's work and Hammersley and Atkinson's *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (1997), which is still a major reference book in this field. For instance, in the latter, participant observation or interviews are presented as valid methods, and the authors do not question these procedures (1995: 139–151), unlike Campbell and Lassiter. For them, building rapport is again a goal for the successful completion of research; however, for Hammersley and Atkinson this is part of a process of "writing together", and the aim is to "write with rather than about others" in a "collaborative" way (p. 98) which necessitates truthful relationships. Campbell and Lassiter are involved in an ongoing project of writing with the research participants (p. 130), which is quite ambitious. However, at the same time, they run the risk of losing the sense of being a researcher in the field while the authors attempt to "produce, share, and negotiate texts with or alongside participants" (p. 130).

What is more plausible than their idea of writing together is the authors' regard for ethnography as an *art form*. Their book significantly broadens what is expected from ethnography. In the authors' view, ethnography is not "distant", "objective" or "scientific" (p. 65). The book makes a fresh contribution into the field by stressing that ethnography is an "artful" process instead of a scientific one. In this sense, it is similar to yet different from a book by Fetterman (1998) that stated: "Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture" (p. 1). Campbell and Lassiter regard ethnography as "engagement with a particular kind of storytelling informed by ethnographic theory and method (which is always ongoing and emergent, of course)" (p. 120). Thus, the authors extend the borders of ethnography and place emphasis on the narrative power of ethnography.

Additionally, each chapter ends with an exercise that, although formulated in a rather mechanical way, is nevertheless useful for students. Through exercises, students can reflect on themselves and the entire research process, as well as gain significant experiences and skills. The exercises include writing about one's background and biases, creating research questions, and developing intentional reciprocity and a project code of ethics.

To conclude, this book is an excellent resource for the beginners in ethnography. It informs students about challenges they may encounter in the field but does not give strict instructions. In particular, the messages conveyed that the practice of ethnography means getting to know and to understand oneself (p. 5) and that it transforms a researcher, are important

for students. Also, this book teaches beginners in ethnography how important it is to respect the participants while continuously problematizing the role of ethnographer as an expert and questioning the position of authority. Finally, the book suggests that even advanced scholars should bear in mind that a good ethnographer must be self-reflexive, open towards others, creative, and always reading extensively.

## References

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