

"Improvising theory: Process and temporality in ethnographic fieldwork" by Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa H. Malkki, 2007, The university of Chicago.

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Ethnographic research methods are now widely used in social sciences. In fact, the ethnographic experience itself has become a focal point of some recent research (Kenny, 2008; Roberts & Sanders, 2005), including the book under the review. This book review especially focuses on challenges faced by more inexperienced researchers in the field. Many doctorate students in management disciplines, for example, choose the ethnographic approach as their principal mode of inquiry, yet management programs often do not fully prepare the students for fieldwork. Indeed, unlike their peers in anthropology departments, they rarely benefit from extensive preparatory courses dedicated to ethnographic research. While there are several excellent methodology text books which provide insight into ethnographic research, these are often inadequate in guiding novice researchers in the field. Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) particularly shed light on the difficulty of teaching 'how to do ethnography'. Their book offers an interesting account of the vulnerability of inexperienced ethnographers who find themselves 'alone' in the field in charge of important decisions which inevitably influence their research while lacking the subtle intuition and confidence of an experienced ethnographer. The authors reflect on their own first-hand experience when Cerwonka, at the time a PhD student, was doing an ethnographic research under the supervision of Malkki, to show how these problems can be approached. The book entails a short introductory chapter written by Cerwonka, and a final concluding chapter written by Malkki. The middle chapter, which forms the central part of the book (120 pages out of 187), includes the details of their year-long correspondence, reproduced in its original format, with a few notes from each author at the end of different sections of this correspondence.

In the introductory chapter, Cerwonka outlines the authors' objectives and motives for publishing their 'fieldwork correspondence'. She explains how the resulting book provides insights into the process of ethnographic research by highlighting its unpredictable nature and the vulnerability of the researcher in the field. While the main ideas of the book are presented in this chapter, the authors' real contribution to the practice of ethnography is buried in the central part of the book which contains the fieldwork correspondence between the two authors. These extensive and often rather long messages which are an amalgam of personal

feelings, life events, fieldwork related incidences, and empirical/theoretical discussions could easily bore a reader who is looking for an analytical discussion pointing to the main issues.

Yet, the same long and muddled messages are a distinguishing feature of this book. Unlike any other method text book, this record of correspondence captures the process of doing fieldwork diachronically. Existing text books focus on outlining different issues, or steps in doing fieldwork, such as gaining access, building field relations (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), or various techniques of ethnography, such as shadowing, following objects, and co-producing (e.g. Kostera & Latusek-Jurczak, 2007; Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009). While these contributions are of immense value in guiding fieldworkers by outlining the ‘rules of the game’, they often represent an idealistic and mechanistic depiction of fieldwork. In practice, fieldwork processes are much messier than can be outlined by a strict set of topics, theories, or methodological steps. There are also a number of well-crafted manuscripts which reflect on researchers’ experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. Behar, 1996; Warden, 2013), yet all of these manuscripts are written post hoc at the end of the fieldwork and are often written to underscore a particular issue encountered during fieldwork.

The email correspondence between Cerwonka and Malkki, in contrast, illustrates fieldwork in real-time as the research process unfolds. It demonstrates the nonlinear and unpredictable process of ethnographic research, highlighting various moments where the researcher was preoccupied by anxiety or overcome by euphoria. It depicts a rich exemplar of what happens on the ground over the course of the fieldwork, or as Cerwonka prefers to call it ‘a more realistic model of fieldwork’ (p. 5). In each message, Cerwonka outlines the difficulties she is faced with in the field, including ethical issues, emotional tumbles and research dilemmas. Some of the recurrent themes of correspondence are uncertainty about the ethnographer’s role and status in the fieldwork, the challenges of identifying what one wants to know and which particular fieldwork strategies will form that knowledge. Reading this real-time account of experiences is not only enlightening, but also could be extremely comforting for novice ethnographers who may face (or have faced) similar challenges. In addition, this correspondence captures the interpretive process of tacking between theory and empirical detail and shows how this hermeneutic process yields claims to knowledge through a “dialectic of guessing and validation” (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987, p. 13). In numerous parts of the book, Cerwonka artfully captures how the researcher moved between various levels of interpretation by means of on-going deduction and induction.

In the last chapter of the book, Malkki provides an excellent illustration of this dialectical process by drawing on the work of Malinowski, Geertz, and Willis. Ethnographic research, Malkki suggests, is not a matter of gradual accumulation of data into a stable structure, but is constituted of moment of puzzlements and sudden realisations, and of making and unmaking (p. 175). In other words, theory development in ethnographic research is a piece-meal process; it's a result of simultaneous theoretical and empirical exploration in response to puzzles, dilemmas and surprises that one encountered with over the fieldwork. As pointed out by van Maanen et al. (2007), the exact discovery process during which induction from data and deduction from theory meet to form a solution to the research puzzle is messy, idiosyncratic, and difficult to articulate. Malkki suggests that this process involves 'improvising' theory, building on previous theories and empirical research, guided by an ethnographer's sense or intuition (p.175). Improvising theory in the fieldwork, Malkki argues, relies on one's capacity to get "surprised", which requires an active imagination, an ability which may not be taught directly in class rooms. In an analogy with Jazz music, Malkki suggests that improvisation comes down from a tradition, and requires a life time of preparation and knowledge (p. 182). She argues, similar to young musicians who owe their professional development to informal study sessions and socialising, young ethnographers can learn much about methodological issues outside formal, preparatory "methods seminar". Oral communication thus plays an important role in helping junior ethnographers, in which the ambiguities, mistakes and intuitions can be discussed. Yet, Malkki asserts that the final and the most important learning spot is fieldwork itself. Many things that often go without saying cannot be taught before one has entered the field, as it is like trying to tell a musician how to improvise! (p. 185).

Cerwonka and Malkki's experience shows that learning 'how to do fieldwork' is on-going over the course of fieldwork. This brings us to the pedagogic value of email correspondence in this book as some sort of 'on the job' training for novice ethnographers. While authors do not take credit for it (as much as they should), their extensive email correspondence can serve as a model for the kind of pedagogical relationship that mentors and mentees should aim to develop in the course of an ethnographic project. This is particularly important due to the relatively loose nature of the ethnographic research method which makes it almost impossible to plan the details of ones' engagement in advance. While students and advisers are physically and psychologically apart over the course of fieldwork, their regular correspondence, exemplified in the email exchange between Cerwonka and Malkki, can

bridge the gap by providing an opportunity for novice ethnographers to benefit from the insights of an experienced ethnographer. The type of information which were exchanged between Cerwonka and Malkki is also interesting and worth paying attention to. Their emails appear long and bulky, full of phrase and questions that are not technical, and overtly dominated by a personal, often, emotional tone. The extensively personalized tone of the messages – highlighted by a critical commentator in a rather stereotypical manner as “talk of washing machine and babies” - may strike as a feminine mode of communication. Yet, such informal tone of correspondence could also be an aid for novice fieldworkers, allowing them to freely express their ideas, concerns and questions that otherwise may have appeared superficial. This could be especially important at the beginning of fieldwork when novice ethnographers, new to the craft and to the field, are often left with incoherent thoughts. As Cerwonka mentioned, she found herself, on occasion, incapable of writing a formal document, such as a report, and was inclined towards writing “a chatty sort of letter-thingie”(p. 44). This mode of conversation could allow inexperienced researchers to express their feelings, doubts, and tentative ideas, without feeling judged. Emotional outpourings could thus be an effective form of communication for novice ethnographers who find themselves “dazed and confused” at the beginning of the fieldwork (p.1).

In closing, this is a book that graduate students approaching, doing or having completed their first ethnographic research projects will enjoy. The correspondence might be long but well worth reading as one prepares him/herself for different stages of fieldwork. This book is also informative for experienced ethnographers who are to supervise graduate students in showing how mentors can create a collaborative learning experience with their mentee throughout fieldwork. It highlights the importance of mentors’ role in safe-guarding young ethnographers by reminding them about particular anthropological sensibilities that often go without saying.

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