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Abstract

This book review provides a summary of the content of the book "Mobile Work, Mobile Lives: Cultural Accounts of Lived Experiences" and a critical review of the methodological strengths of the articles included in the book. It also points out one structural weakness of the book. The appropriate readership is recommended as well.

Keywords

Mobile Work, Mobile Lives, Narrative Research

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Narrative Research Methodology in Mobile Work Research

Li Jin

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This book review provides a summary of the content of the book “Mobile Work, Mobile Lives: Cultural Accounts of Lived Experiences” and a critical review of the methodological strengths of the articles included in the book. It also points out one structural weakness of the book. The appropriate readership is recommended as well. Keywords: Mobile Work, Mobile Lives, Narrative Research

Mobile Work, Mobile Lives: Cultural Accounts of Lived Experiences (Meerwarth, Gluesing, & Jordan, 2008) is one volume of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin. The editors aim to unfold—by adopting a narrative research approach—what changes mobile workers face in their work and personal life and how they employ various strategies to handle all the emerging issues such as changed work environment, relationships and identities. The volume is comprised of a total of eight chapters. It starts with an introduction from the volume editors, explaining the purpose of the volume and briefly describing the focus of each chapter.

In the first article, Michael Youngblood (2008) investigates what challenges remote workers face and how they use various strategies to manage them. The second article contributed by Brigitte Jordan (2008) depicts how the author maintains her multilocalized lifestyle. In the third article, Loril Gossett (2008) explores how some websites provide various support and resources to help separated workers develop, sustain, and participate in online temporary worker communities. Both the fourth and fifth articles contributed respectively by Julia Gluesing (2008) and Perri Strawn (2008) focus on how the authors’ professional and personal identities are shaped and reshaped by the new work style, particularly by various technologies. In the sixth article, Tracy Meerwarth (2008) introduces the term “nomadic” to describe mobile workers’ lifestyle and identifies the strategies she uses to adapt to the physical and social relationships in her mobile life. In the seventh article, Amy Goldmacher (2008) recounts how she employs personal, social, and emotional flexibility to handle issues in her mobile life. The last article, contributed by Patricia Lange (2008), presents the author’s self-reflection of the challenges a distributed worker faced and suggestions for how distributed projects can be designed and processed to accommodate different attitudes towards intertasking. The volume concludes with the volume editors’ summative article on the four patterns prevalent in the eight articles in this volume.

This review will focus on the narrative research approach employed in the articles in the volume. In terms of research methodology, the strengths of the volume lie in three aspects. First, the narrative research approach is a very suitable research methodology for the research focus in this volume. The volume is aimed to unpack mobile workers’ non-traditional work and personal life and to provide a better understanding of the challenges mobile workers face and possible strategies to manage the challenges. To recount life experiences, a narrative research approach is an appropriate research methodology as it focuses on the social context and the relationship between the research

subject and the context by giving voices to the research subjects (Moen, 2006). Most authors in this volume investigate their topics by reflecting on their personal experiences, which enables a reliable and accountable data source. Second, the narrative research methodology is employed rigorously in the articles. The authors narrate their own mobile work/life experience with focused details, some with illustrative pictures, which provides necessary information for readers to understand the social, cultural and relational context in which each study was conducted or each story took place. In addition, the author of each study thoughtfully organizes his or her narrated story around distinct themes, which helps readers understand the theoretical underpinnings behind the stories. The third strength of this volume relates to its organization rather than the research methodology. But it is necessary to highlight the efforts the editors took by concluding the whole volume with a summary of the patterns reflected in all the studies included in the volume. Due to the focus of narrative research on individual experience, it is inevitable for each study to have a distinctive focus and reach non-generalized findings. The editors' summary helps weld the whole volume and provides readers a focused yet generalizable understanding of mobile life experienced by mobile workers from different professions.

The volume is not without a limitation, although it is not related to its methodology. For this reviewer, the one weakness is the book's structure. The focus of the book centers on the challenges faced by mobile workers (e.g. the relationship with their changing sociocultural environment and redefined identity) and the strategies they employ to manage them (e.g. using supporting websites, technologies, intertasking). The structure might be easier for readers to follow if the editors had organized the articles based on their respective focus, e.g. redefining work and personal life, remote work demands, relationships with co-workers, and identity, then how technologies play a role in these conundrums.

In all, this volume provides exemplary accounts of mobile work and life through a narrative research methodology. In addition to its contribution to the field of anthropology for its investigation of mobility in modern society, it can be recommended as an important reference book for researchers interested in adopting narrative research methodology, particularly autobiographical narrative methodology.

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