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Abstract

"Harry Wolcott uses fifty years of experience to take the reader inside the process of constructing an ethnographic study, offering a wealth of lessons from one of the masters of the genre". This is indeed a concise description by the publisher. The text is constructed around the author's five major studies. Wolcott thus gives a unique contribution to the field of ethnography as he presents some critical components of ethnography in his desire to share with us readers the results of his career-long search for the essence of ethnography. The book is divided into eight chapters. I give a critical review of the book, attempting to present the subject matter to potential readers, while drawing on its strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords

Ethics, Ethnography, Qualitative Research, Serendipity

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The Fifty-Year Ethnographer: A Review of Harry Wolcott's *Ethnography Lessons: A Primer*

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"Harry Wolcott uses fifty years of experience to take the reader inside the process of constructing an ethnographic study, offering a wealth of lessons from one of the masters of the genre". This is indeed a concise description by the publisher. The text is constructed around the author's five major studies. Wolcott thus gives a unique contribution to the field of ethnography as he presents some critical components of ethnography in his desire to share with us readers the results of his career-long search for the essence of ethnography. The book is divided into eight chapters. I give a critical review of the book, attempting to present the subject matter to potential readers, while drawing on its strengths and weaknesses. Keywords: Ethics, Ethnography, Qualitative Research, Serendipity

"Harry Wolcott uses fifty years of experience to take the reader inside the process of constructing an ethnographic study, offering a wealth of lessons from one of the masters of the genre". This is indeed a concise description by the publisher which encapsulates the essence of the Wolcott's book, *Ethnography Lessons: A Primer*.

In the Introduction, Wolcott classifies his book as a "primer", providing us with the dictionary entry of this term while outlining his overall aim: "a primer intended to cover some of the basic elements of ethnography. It does not provide an undercoat intended to cover *all* the basic elements" (p. 7, original emphasis). We are immediately drawn in by his narrative, moreover, by the humble stance adopted when he refers to ethnography as "*a way of seeing, not the way*" (p. 7, original emphasis). He also sets out his intended audience "for those who have become serious about ethnography" (p. 7), although he also implies "old-timers" among his potential readers. The text is constructed around his five major studies. Wolcott, thus presents his book as giving a unique contribution to the field of ethnography: "a discussion of some critical components of ethnography *often mentioned but seldom written about ...* I also want to share with you the results of my career-long search for the essence of ethnography" (p. 8, emphasis added) – setting out the very personal and subjective nature of the text from the outset.

The book is divided into eight chapters. In Chapter One, *Ethnography Lesson*, Wolcott writes about his origins in ethnography and how he decided to start writing in order to "share" his lessons. Admitting to his lack of understanding as a novice ethnographer makes it very appealing to beginners. Wolcott gives practical advice from his own experience on how to write an ethnographic account, paying particular attention to making a choice about which parts of the ethnographic study to focus on and identifying themes to structure the report around, for: "Were ethnographers not able to reach some level of generalization, we would be doomed forever to report nothing but the details of behaviour, plodding stuff indeed" (p. 28). There are also details about refocusing on a new draft: "I take pride in the accomplishment in spite of the rocky road I had to travel to get there and my initial lack of appreciation for what ethnography can best accomplish" (p. 32).

In Chapter Two, *Minding the Ethnography Lesson*, the author delves into detail on issues that might have been "glossed over" in the introductory chapter. Wolcott discusses issues that might arise from the particularity and unique nature of a single ethnographic study, details

regarding method, boundedness, enlisting and acknowledging help, themes in anthropology accounts, assigning pseudonyms, graphics, and finally, time management. Chapter Three, *The Role of Serendipity in Ethnography* is a very particular chapter. Wolcott sets off with an explanation of the term “serendipity” in an anthropological context, adding that “you are always poised to *make the most of whatever opportunities happen to come your way*” (p. 45, original emphasis). The whole chapter is a narrative account of “how events over which I had little or no control have had a major part in my life as a fieldworker” (p. 46), concluding with a section in which Wolcott draws out the main issues from his incidents of serendipity in the anthropological and academic milieu.

Chapter Four, *Organizing an Ethnographic Account* focuses on the structure of the account, which Wolcott presents through the models used for four of his ethnographic projects, subsequently presenting a summary of the main points at the end. The flexibility of these models is indicated: “These are not intended as rigid templates ... there is really no end to how you might go about this” (p. 65). Chapter Five, *Searching for Ethnography’s Essence*, subtly hints at measures of accountability and performativity in ethnography – for Wolcott recounts how,

I have spent a good part of my life looking for the “essence” of ethnography, so that my students and I would have a standard against which we could assess efforts of our own, as well as judge the efforts of others... (p. 86)

Wolcott asks a series of questions about what renders a study “ethnographic,” outlining the twelve attributes of “good” ethnography while offering a critical examination of each criterion. Wolcott presents these criteria as an all-encompassing list, however stating that, “not one of these attributes appears to be indispensable” (p. 109). Wolcott is very realistic and draws us readers into his text, when he advises us that: “I think that the real work comes about through editing, revising, rewriting. And then editing, revising, and rewriting some more. Do you have the stamina for it?” (p. 111).

The rationale behind the writing of Chapter Six, *Ethics and Intimacy in Fieldwork*, is given in the introductory sentence: “The criterion of intimacy in my list of customary attributes of ethnography has become more problematic for me over the years and seems to warrant special attention” (p. 112). Wolcott speaks about ethical dilemmas from his own personal experience and that of students under his supervision, at times perhaps being too straightforward and presenting data that is uncomfortably revealing. An example of this is when he boldly and unashamedly admits to “intimate” involvement with one of his informants.

I have told the truth. But I have not told everything, even about myself. I am silent about some things, but what I have told is true ... that is about as close as I can come to defining the real lesson of ethics. (p. 124)

In Chapter Seven, *Education by Analogy*, Wolcott writes about the use of analogy in writing, exploring five analogies that he utilizes in his ethnographic work – “The intent is never to make things more complex, but to make comparisons with something presumed to be familiar or more readily understood” (p. 125). Chapter Eight, *Lessons End*, provides a conclusion to Wolcott’s text. He immediately connects to the Introduction, “measuring” what has been achieved: “It has turned out to be more like an undercoat, something that prepares a surface for the finish coat to follow. Supplying that finish coat will be up to you” (p. 136). Wolcott provides an overview of the “lessons” learned in the preceding chapters, which comes across as rather repetitive, I might add. There are additional end-notes accompanying every chapter, as well as a Reference List, Index and Author Biography.

Its easy-going, yet engaging style is intended to reach a widely encompassing audience – seasoned ethnographers, as well as those who are new to the field.

References

Wolcott, H. F. (2010). *Ethnography lessons: A primer*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Author Note

Dr. Denise Mifsud, a Deputy Head at a further education institution in Malta, has very recently been awarded her PhD by the University of Stirling. Research areas of interest include educational policy analysis, generation and implementation; leadership theories, with a particular interest in educational leadership; school networks and educational reforms; power relations; Foucauldian theory; Actor-Network theory, as well as qualitative research methods, with a particular focus on narrative, as well as creative and unconventional modes of data representation. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed directly to: Denise Mifsud at E-mail: dmenglishteacher@gmail.com

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