

11-28-2008

A Review of On Ethnography: Keeping Theory and Method in Balance

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Recommended APA Citation

Chenail, J. S. (2008). A Review of On Ethnography: Keeping Theory and Method in Balance. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 41-43. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol13/iss3/18>

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Abstract

On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research written by Shirley Brice Heath and Brian V. Street with Molly Mills is an overview of theory and practices of ethnography as used in language and literacy research. Drs. Heath and Street draw upon their extensive backgrounds as they explain how to plan, implement, and make public an ethnographic study. Ms. Mills, identified as a student ethnographer, provides the real-world example to the wider and more abstract ethnographic world of the authors. Illustrations and examples are concise and helpful to those new to ethnography, although the book will be informative to all students of ethnography.

Keywords

Ethnography and Literacy Research

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A Review of *On Ethnography: Keeping Theory and Method in Balance*

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On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research written by Shirley Brice Heath and Brian V. Street with Molly Mills is an overview of theory and practices of ethnography as used in language and literacy research. Drs. Heath and Street draw upon their extensive backgrounds as they explain how to plan, implement, and make public an ethnographic study. Ms. Mills, identified as a student ethnographer, provides the real-world example to the wider and more abstract ethnographic world of the authors. Illustrations and examples are concise and helpful to those new to ethnography, although the book will be informative to all students of ethnography. Key Words: Ethnography and Literacy Research

When I first considered this review, I mulled in my mind the idea that literacy and language are not always thought of in the same way by people who have studied in different disciplines. For example, my husband Ron Chenail has been trained in systemic family therapy and qualitative research and uses the terms “language” and “literacy” shaped by his various disciplines. On the other hand, I have been trained in secondary education, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and linguistics; my “language” and “literacy” have been shaped by those disciplines I know. While we share some common viewpoints, we can’t predict how our different lenses meet or diverge. Because the authors are well-known literacy researchers, what might “language” and “literacy” mean to them and how would that shape their ethnographic research?

Dr. Shirley Brice Heath and Dr. Brian Street co-authors of *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research* (2008), the fourth volume in the Language and Literacy Series by the National Conference in Language and Literacy Research, anticipate this question and provide the readers with definitions and clarification. Working with an anticipated readership interested in studying language and literacy in classrooms and communities, Heath and Street define *language* as “any symbol system whose grammar provides phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical structures and rules” (p. 4). In the singular, they refer to *literacy* as pertaining “only to written representations of oral (or gestural) language rendered in some script system that carries its own conventions and rules of usage” (p. 4). However, the authors frequently use the term *multimodal literacies* meaning “systems of representation that include written forms that are combined with oral, visual, or gestural modes” and note examples such as musical scores or computer programming languages. As they define these terms the authors introduce us to the basic tenets of ethnography so we can better appreciate how researchers interested in studying literacy and language can use ethnography as a method to explore the dynamic processes of identity and culture

construction. Now that the terms have been defined within this disciplinary context, how do we get to ethnography?

The organization of the book allows readers to approach the subject according to their interests. The authors suggest that readers who are most interested in methodologies to read chapters 2-5 and then read chapters 1 and 6. Chapters 1 and 6 contain the historical and theoretical distinctions of the methodologies. On the other hand, readers who prefer to let the authors serve as guides to ethnography through the world of language and multimodal literacies should find that the authors' views are gradually revealed by reading the book from beginning to end. I read beginning to end. To tie the theoretical and the methodological together, the authors use the recurring example of an ethnography student (Molly) who studies language, learning and culture by interviewing and observing a juggler. Not only do Drs. Heath and Street use juggling metaphors as they explain ethnography methodology but they also provide (non-juggling related) examples from their own ethnographic studies in a variety of settings and countries.

As someone who has little actual research experience and only a slight acquaintance with ethnography, I appreciate the variety of examples used by the authors. My favorite example demonstrating the breadth of experiences shared by the authors is Dr. Heath's study of skateboarders and how one group could tell time. She observed with amazement that a particular group of skateboarders would appear almost simultaneously on certain nights to skate. As a group, she found that they usually disregarded the concept of time. However, by consulting her field notes, observing the pattern of behavior, and carefully listening to their talk, she realized that they would meet just after a preferred television show would conclude and would skate in a favorite secluded area until the curfew time. Therefore, although the skateboarder group did not plan ahead for the event, they were able to maximize their skate time together: in ethnographic terms, it was a *pattern of co-occurrence* that became known through observance of seemingly unrelated details (pp. 38-40).

In another chapter the authors discuss the importance of literature reviews (the plural is intended); the authors note that it should be expected that a researcher does not complete a review. Instead as more subjects arise that need to be studied, a researcher does any number of reviews and may even proceed in a zigzag manner. This is reassuring to anyone who finds that study in one area leads to another and then another. You're not wasting time; you're making multiple literature reviews! I thought that the authors' diagram of the recursive process in doing ethnographic theory and practice (p. 34) was very clear and concise. Likewise, the advice to be concise and to address the central questions is on target. In addition, the sections on writing field notes and the importance of conceptual memo (pp. 76-81) are invaluable for the beginning ethnographer; a page of a field note by Dr. Street is included. A beginner can really understand what the difference is between the data collected as a field note and the reflection and internal musings of the researcher. Chapter 5 deals with techniques of analysis, organizing ideas from the data, and becoming insightful and confident in your own analysis.

The final chapter "Taking Note of History and Writing Ethnography" helps the readers to understand the role of ethnography in anthropology and in education and that ethnography informs both fields about organizations, institutions, and social change. The authors give suggestions about turning one's data into a public text. As a frequent reader of academic writing, their final suggestion (p. 128) could become an entire text itself. It

encourages the reader to write as much as possible before editing and correcting, to section ideas into chapters with titles and to make a table of contents early. As they exhort the reader, “The more we write, the more we think, and the more we read our own writing, the more both our thinking and our composition improve.”

On Ethnography is a brief overview of the field of ethnography as used in language and literacy research. Drs. Heath and Street use numerous examples from their international experiences that help the readers, particularly beginning researchers, understand both the theories of ethnography as well as the practical steps in creating a good ethnography study. Dr. Heath’s student, Ms. Mills, whose study is used as an ongoing example, demonstrates how a study is developed and how a young man explains how he learned to juggle. His comments to Ms. Mills, his education of juggling, his observations of other jugglers, and his interviews with Ms. Mills are summarized and recounted. Her development as an ethnographic researcher parallels the steps needed to create an ethnographic study. I can understand the logic behind the material provided by Ms. Mills; however, I don’t think it was required in order to understand the authors’ viewpoints. I believe that the examples from the authors’ experiences would be more beneficial. At times I felt that the juggling metaphor intruded into the flow of the book. On the other hand, the book is still a good guide for a brief study as the reader is able to sample the salient ingredients of ethnographic research. And, for the readers who want more than a sample, there is an annotated list for further reading which is an added bonus to the expected and lengthy list of references. As long as readers are not expecting to learn “everything about everything” in ethnography, they will likely be satisfied.

References

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Author Note

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Article Citation

Chenail, J. S. (2008). A review of *On Ethnography: Keeping theory and method in balance*. *The Weekly Qualitative Report*, 1(8), 41-43. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/WQR/heath.pdf>