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Putting Ethnography on the Witness Stand: Review of Interrogating Ethnography: Why Evidence Matters

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Abstract

Lawyer, historian and author Steven Lubet's *Interrogating Ethnography: Why Evidence Matters* puts several well-known urban ethnographies on the figurative witness stand and finds that some don't hold up to legal (and journalistic) scrutiny. The author encourages social science researchers to employ fact-checking techniques to increase the veracity of their work. While Lubet praises social science researchers for their altruistic missions and painstaking data collection in the field he finds follow-up research often lacking. He recognizes that ethnographers do not want to be the adversaries of marginalized subjects but believes that more rigorous vetting of data is crucial to the survival of ethnography as a respected research method. His book provides a blueprint to achieve what he says is needed credibility.

Keywords

Ethnography, Book Review, Fact-Checking, Law, Journalism

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Putting Ethnography on the Witness Stand: Review of Interrogating Ethnography: Why Evidence Matters

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Lawyer, historian, and author Steven Lubet's Interrogating Ethnography: Why Evidence Matters puts several well-known urban ethnographies on the figurative witness stand and finds that some don't hold up to legal (and journalistic) scrutiny. The author encourages social science researchers to employ fact-checking techniques to increase the veracity of their work. While Lubet praises social science researchers for their altruistic missions and painstaking data collection in the field, he finds follow-up research to be frequently lacking. He recognizes that ethnographers do not want to be the adversaries of marginalized subjects but believes that more rigorous vetting of data is crucial to the survival of ethnography as a respected research method. His book provides a blueprint to achieve what he says is needed credibility.

Keywords: Ethnography, Book Review, Fact-Checking, Law, Journalism

Lawyer, historian, and author Steven Lubet believes that skepticism and fact-checking are lacking in the ethnographer's toolkit. Grbch (2013) asserts that amplifying the voices of marginalized peoples is a hallmark of critical ethnography. But in his new book, *Interrogating Ethnography: Why Evidence Matters*, Lubet (2018) argues that researchers open their work to questions of validity when they don't fact-check data, but rather take whatever anyone says at face value. Social science researchers who tend toward ethnography to study the experiences of everyday people may bristle at this idea, but Lubet believes that more rigorous vetting of data is crucial to the survival of ethnography as a respected research method. He is not recommending that researchers become adversaries of their sources, but he does encourage uncompromising peer review to bring more quality to results.

In *Interrogating Ethnography: Why Evidence Matters*, Lubet scrutinizes several published urban ethnographies through a legal lens with an assist from journalism ethics. Cramer and McDevitt (2004) write that while journalists do not describe their work as ethnographic, they share a mission with social scientists to portray real life by giving voice to the voiceless. Where they deviate is that the journalist (and the lawyer, according to Lubet) relies on official sources to verify subject accounts. If a source says he witnessed a murder on a certain day in a certain area, police records, for instance, can verify that a murder actually happened. Lubet writes that social science researchers don't always take this extra step, portraying source accounts as facts when they sometimes aren't. He calls for ethnographers to be transparent when presenting data, making sure to identify second-hand reports and rumors or folklore. It is the researcher's responsibility, he writes, to explain to the audience why dubious or unchecked information is included and then why it is important.

Lubet puts several urban ethnographic works on the figurative witness stand and finds that some don't hold up under legal scrutiny. He embarked on his study of urban ethnographies by first reading Alice Goffman's *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, a 2015 book in which the author tells the story of her six-year immersion in a poor black community in Philadelphia. The book was widely praised in reviews in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*. After reading it, Lubet became skeptical of some of the stories and did what a lawyer or journalist would do; he scoured newspapers and public records for corroborating evidence

of parole violations, drug dealing arrests and hospital visits, among other accounts of contact with authority.

It seemed that Goffman's account of social reality had been influenced by her identification with her subjects, while her progressive agenda (which I happen to share) had compromised her objectivity. It made a riveting read, but was it valid social science? (Lubet, 2018, p. xii)

He finds similar inconsistencies in other research, specifically *\$2.00 A Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer, which he dissects with legal precision. Edin and Shaefer's 2016 book was named a *New York Times* notable book of the year and was reviewed favorably in the *Washington Post*. Lubet's attempts to fact-check some of the stories told by subjects in the book were thwarted by pseudonyms for people and businesses. Anecdotally, the stories are powerful, but he doesn't know if they actually occurred because they can't be corroborated; experts he consulted were also dubious. He writes that the ethnographer's heavy reliance on anonymous sources, though widely accepted in the field, risks false-positive findings. Rigorous scrutiny by a third-party reviewer with access to all data, including actual identities, would strengthen veracity. This approach could bring concern from university Institutional Review Board (IRB) committees, which focus heavily on protecting sources' identity to shield them from harm.

Lubet praises the dynamism that ethnographic research brings to the understanding of social phenomenon. At many points in the book, he gives kudos to ethnographers for the amount of time that they spend observing and listening to sources in the field. He understands the intensity of the work and also that one of the inherent characteristics of qualitative research is storytelling. Unlike quantitative research, he writes, it can't be replicated. But still, he asserts, ethnography should be rooted in the truth. "Ethnographers are not the only professionals who must wrestle with the credibility of their sources, but many have expressed reluctance to question their informants" (Lubet, 2018, p. 51). Some researchers might push back and ask Lubet whose version of the truth holds the most sway: the person on the street or the person in power?

Lubet's skepticism of ethnography mostly revolves around his belief that the audience only has the ethnographer's words to go by and that the researcher's dedication to protecting the anonymity of subjects supersedes fact-checking. Many ethnographers don't question their subjects' versions of stories, which could be easily done by looking at public records such as court documents and criminal records. Taking a page from the journalist's playbook could strengthen ethnography, he writes. The Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics urges journalists to "consider the motives before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources that may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted" (Society of Professional Journalists, 2004). Harrower (2012) finds that even when reporters use anonymous sources, their editors know the identity of them, and it is quite likely that the news organization's researchers have done background checks on the sources too. In ethnography, it appears only the researcher knows the identity of the sources. According to Lubet, this exposes the work to questions of validity.

Hammersley (2018) finds that the lack of a narrow definition of ethnography threatens the future of the research method. Hammersley does not address fact-checking and leans more toward accepting the meanings that participants give at face value about themselves and their environments. In essence, their stories are their stories and it is not the researcher's responsibility to be judge and jury. Lubet, not surprisingly, differs on that assessment. He writes that reforms in accuracy, candor and documentation will bring ethnography "in line with

other evidence-based disciplines” (Lubet, 2018, p. 136). In the candor category, he urges ethnographers to not report “second-hand accounts from informants as statements of fact” (Lubet, 2018, p. 136.) This can be problematic for ethnographers presenting data narratively in that their work can slip into fiction if subjects are not telling the truth.

Interrogating Ethnography brings uncomfortable arguments about ethnography to the surface; however, Lubet’s detailed parsing of published work shows how not only journalists and lawyers find distorted results, but also how academics and other readers may be getting a skewed look at reality. Because of this, Lubet maintains it is time for social science researchers to employ fact-checking procedures and use courtroom trial techniques to maintain the veracity of ethnographic work. This will strengthen their results in the eyes of the social scientific community.

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