

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

KAREN O'REILLY, *Ethnographic Methods*. London: Routledge, 2005, vi + 242 p + index.

Although ethnographic research is a significant modality of practice throughout the social sciences, students must often jump into their first research projects or jobs as research assistants with little training. Karen O'Reilly's introduction to ethnographic methods offers a quick and comprehensive overview of central issues in data collection and analysis that would be beneficial for those at the beginning of their research careers as well as seasoned ethnographers looking to brush up on key debates in the literature. Situating the development of ethnographic methods in pioneering anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, O'Reilly also offers brief exegeses of William Foote Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society* and Laud Humphreys' (1970) *Tea-Room Trade*. A careful tracing of the development of ethnographic methods from the dominance of positivism through the influence of the Chicago School and beyond early in the book grounds the later discussions of ethics, participating and observing, interviewing, visual data, analysis, reflexivity and autobiography in an annotated history of actual research conducted by sociologists and anthropologists. This makes the book more coherent than strictly technical methods texts allow.

Each chapter is infused with examples from O'Reilly's own research experiences and the experiences of her colleagues and graduate students, giving the book a practical feel and greater level of accessibility. In the chapter on ethics, O'Reilly inventively includes a focus group discussion of ethics she held with her graduate students. The end of each chapter recommends further, more advanced readings on substantive topics. O'Reilly's book would be an outstanding text to include as core reading in undergraduate sociology and anthropology methods courses.

Throughout her book, O'Reilly argues that ethnographic methods are a form of iterative-inductive research. Rather than starting from an hypothesis about the world and testing its truth or falsity, iterative-inductive research tries to start from as few preconceptions as possible, "allowing the data to speak for themselves" (p. 27). Ethnographic research design remains flexible, open to the happening of significant events and leads of key informants. Her discussion of what different styles of interviewing can achieve would be a great aid for junior researchers who are thinking about what sort of data they want to collect for their own projects or heading into the field for the first time. O'Reilly differentiates

between a “planned” and an “opportunistic” discussion group, advocating that the researcher must stay open to the possibilities of impromptu research encounters when in the field. Her discussions of overt and covert research and different permutations of participation/observation are concise and clear. One innovative feature of this book is the chapter on the collection and use of visual data. There is a longstanding social scientific practice of focusing on verbal and written accounts as forms of data to the neglect of visual materials, and *Ethnographic Methods* is a corrective to prior texts that gloss over the possible (re)uses of visual materials as data. Though it may seem trivial, one of O’Reilly’s greatest pieces of research advice is that if students are interested in how to conduct research, they must read research. Reading, learning, flexibility, openness and commitment constitute the habituses of those engrossed in iterative-inductive research.

Social inquiry is productive. Our methods enact, interfere with, the social, as do our writings about methods. In this vein, I offer below a few critical comments on O’Reilly’s book. In the chapter on data analysis, O’Reilly argues that ethnographers have few systematic procedures for the analysis of data. She does not seem to think that there is a need for such procedures. This is misleading and also mistaken. Though there is a widespread neglect of data analysis in comparison to other components of qualitative research, it is important to be systematic about data analysis because analysis is productive of the “findings” of research. Since data analysis and data collection are concomitant in qualitative research, it is important for researchers to be explicit and upfront about their ontological claims and epistemological standpoints, acknowledging how they have effectivity in analysis. Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet are two feminist-qualitative methodologists who have contributed much to our understanding of the importance of data analysis, and their voice-centered relational or “listening guide” method for analyzing transcripts is uniquely rigorous. Moreover, O’Reilly seems to think that computer software is a vital tool for analysis, whereas there is a growing consensus that programs like NVivo and N6 are strategic management tools but that the most thorough analysis still happens by hand.

Second, and related, full discussions of the importance of triangulation and the different forms of triangulation are missing from this text. As Norman Denzin (1978) shows in *The Research Act*, the pragmatic use of two or more data collection procedures by necessity triangulates data, building a coherent justification of the analytic framework, increasing the confirmability of the findings. Third, O’Reilly (p. 120) argues that the danger of closed-ended questions in interviews is that they impose the researcher’s frame on the responses of the participant. The concept “frame” comes from Erving Goffman’s (1974) attempts in *Frame Analysis* to explain the invisible and governing structures behind everyday speech acts. I would argue that the potentiality for researchers to impose their frame on participant responses exists equally in open-ended interviews. In free association and other “looser” forms of interviewing, researchers can still be culpable of conditioning the responses of participants towards the

satisfaction of particular theoretical frameworks – an issue all interviewers should be aware of.

Discussion of more specialized ethnographic methods such as institutional ethnography and global ethnography are strangely absent. Institutional ethnography, put forth in Dorothy Smith's (1987) *Everyday World as Problematic*, is a method of inquiry that problematizes social relations at the site of lived experience and examines how textual sequences coordinate consciousness, actions, and ruling relations. Global ethnography investigates the linkages between particular situations and wider social contexts. Supporting the value of ethnography within a Marxist framework, both institutional ethnography and global ethnography investigate the extra-local through the ethnographic locale, and thus are different from most forms of ethnographic research which are simply interested in the locale. Comparing the forms contemporary ethnographic methods have taken would give O'Reilly's book a broader appeal.

O'Reilly mentions reflexivity and the reflexive turn several times throughout her book but never offers any accurate definition of reflexivity or how to "do reflexivity." Reflexivity can be thought of as efforts to foreground the place of the researcher in the process of conducting research and writing scholarly texts in order to disrupt authority and misrepresentation. There is a tendency in qualitative sociology especially to argue reflexivity is anti-positivist or anti-objectivist, and O'Reilly's treatment of the reflexivity debate does nothing to dispel the regulation vs. emancipation binary in which reflexivity is currently being constructed in the literature. It may be more fruitful to conceptualize reflexivity not as the opposite of objectification but integrally related to it. When we talk about degrees of reflexivity and degrees of objectification, we understand that reflexivity may decrease objectification to a certain extent, but that methods cannot be liberated from objectification. Objectification is a necessary condition for research relations to exist. Many of the limits of the reflexive turn have recently been acknowledged in journals such as *Sociology* and *Qualitative Inquiry*.

The shortcomings of this text are few, however, and O'Reilly's *Ethnographic Methods* should serve as an important resource in undergraduate methods courses for years to come.

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