

Heath, S.B. & Street, B. (2008). *On ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research*. Teachers College Press, Columbia University (New York).

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Graduate students and more experienced researchers looking to delve deeper into the process of ethnography will be pleased to learn about this insightful and accessible volume. Drawing largely on the extensive international fieldwork of two of language and literacy education's most respected researcher-authors, the text also features instructive narrative accounts of the ethnographic journey of a novice researcher, whose inquiry into the world of "juggling" provides a powerful metaphor for understanding the veritable balancing act that is ethnography. The result is an inviting, reflexive text in which all three authors share their insights into the theoretical and practical dimensions of approaching culture, language, and literacy from an ethnographic perspective.

Content summary

In terms of content layout, the text is divided into six general sections, any one of which could be referenced separately for its theme-based content. Included throughout the various chapters are discussions of some of the more theoretically relevant aspects of social science research. Chapter 1 begins by establishing the book's ethnographic focus in terms of three specific contextual frames (p. 3): 1) Individuals striving to become expert in something; 2) Groups in identity-making; and 3) Institutions in formal education. What follows is a generous discussion of the theoretical dimensions of the book's key themes: culture, language, literacies, and ethnography. Heath and Street begin by situating their discussion within the context of an actual ethnographic study conducted by novice researcher Molly Mills. Working from narrative descriptions of Molly's ethnographic journey, the authors introduce her focal subject, "Roger", a juggler, thereby establish "juggling" as an overriding metaphor from which to better understand the *process* of conducting ethnography. As details of Molly's ethnographic process are revealed, demands are increasingly placed on her to juggle various aspects of her research.

In terms of overall approach, the book's novel incorporation of concrete, "messy" field research provides an important experiential backdrop from which to better understand and apply the text's key themes. For example, and once again referring to Chapter 1, the authors begin by underscoring the need to reconsider essentialist notions of general *culture*. In its place, a more dynamic, social constructivist view of culture "as a verb" compels us to imagine an "ever-shifting active process of meaning-making" (p. 7); *language* as a symbolic system is characterized in terms of its "semiotic potential"; the term "literacies" is much expanded in favour of *multimodal literacies*; finally, *multimodalities* is introduced in general reference to the combination of semiotic resources (e.g., linguistic, gestural, kinaesthetic, visual).

Chapters 2-5 cover the various stages of "doing ethnography". Beginning with *The*

ethnographer's field entry and tools of practice, Chapter 2 characterizes ethnography in terms of its inherent recursiveness; the authors refer to the “constant comparative” process of continually evaluating field observations and data against the researcher’s own intuitions, as well as relevant theories and concepts from the literature. Referring back to the juggling metaphor, the authors trace Molly’s first steps in the field to demonstrate how researchers must continually balance their changing intuitions against the established literature.

Chapter 3, *Setting decision rules for fieldwork*, underscores the practical utility of establishing the research parameters of one’s study, beginning with the literature review. Within the context of Molly’s study, for example, the authors discuss how initial understandings of relevant literatures combine with the researcher’s field experiences to produce a deeper, more transformative knowledge;

In Chapter 4, *Research questions and field notes*, the authors discuss the intricacies of formulating research questions, and offer strategies for managing the field notes and other data typically generated by ethnographic approaches. Of particular interest and value is a data management strategy which Heath and Street refer to as “conceptual memos”—multi-page summary memos periodically put together in order to consolidate general ideas, reflections, and questions generated from field-related events.

In Chapter 5, *Analysis and coming home from the field*, the authors resume their discussion of the more theoretical dimensions of ethnography as these relate to data analysis. Taking up the book’s key research themes (language, multi-literacies, culture, ethnography), data analysis is characterized as a continuation of the proverbial juggling act, whereby the combination of the researcher’s own field data and ideas taken from the literature must be balanced along with the ethnographer’s own convictions. Besides offering the reader additional insights into various theoretical and methodological approaches to field data, the chapter includes a generous and accessible discussion of related theoretical frameworks once again interspersed with instructive examples taken from the authors’ own research.

Chapter 6, *Taking note of history and writing ethnography*, takes an historical look at how ethnography emerged as a written genre from its origins in British and American anthropology. Although lacking in terms of any explicitly critical perspectives on ethnography, the chapter does touch on the potential emancipatory value of ethnographic work, as well as the role of *reflexivity* in checking the various asymmetries which naturally result from the conduct of human inquiry.

Critical appreciation

As an introductory book on ethnography, the volume distinguishes itself from other how-to-ethnography textbooks mainly through a) its decidedly creative, reflexive treatment of ethnography as a *process*, b) its instructive incorporation of novice as well as more “seasoned” accounts of ethnographic inquiry, and c) its informal, narrative style. From the text’s opening pages, Street’s conversational, self-referencing use of “we”, combined with continual references to “Molly” and “Shirley”, invite the reader to explore the curiosity-driven world of ethnography through a quasi-mentoring dialogue with the authors. Indeed, for those interested in deepening their understanding of the uniquely recursive nature of ethnographic work—especially as it

involves multimodal aspects of language and literacy, the text delivers; its particular emphasis on the “constant comparison perspective” (p. 32)—this simultaneous, back-and-forth juggling of initial research questions, literature reviews, intuition, and data analysis—provides the reader with an intimate look at some of the more challenging yet decidedly creative aspects of ethnography. At a mere 153 pages of generously-fonted script, however, the text’s relatively light treatment of several key aspects of the topic may lead more novice researchers to reach for the structure of more substantial, comprehensive texts. Alas, in this regard, “ethnography-by-numbers” the book is not; but for those looking to better understand the creative act of juggling that is ethnographic research, Heath and Street offer a ring-side seat.

References

- Heath, S. B., and Street, B. V. (2008). *On ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press (Columbia University).
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. New York: Zed Books.