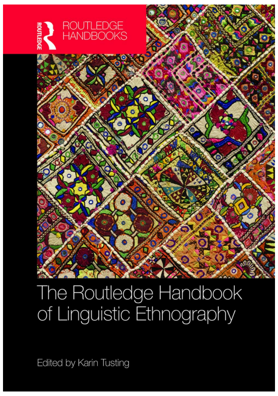

The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Ethnography

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Participant observation and field notes

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Participant observation and field notes

Uta Papen

Introduction and definitions

Ethnographers are known as the researchers who 'hang out' with others. The scholarly term for this hanging out, shadowing, talking to and taking part in the lives of others is participant observation. Being an ethnographer means to engage in participant observation. Linguistic ethnographers too use participant observation as one way (amongst others) to understand the role of language in shaping social practices and institutional processes. Linguistic ethnographers who engage in participant observation also write field notes: accounts of what they observed and took part in.

Participant observation is, as Creese et al. (2008, p. 198) suggest, a "core element of ethnography". It is often regarded as the approach that distinguishes ethnography from other forms of qualitative research such as interview-based studies (Davies, 2008; Atkinson, 2015; Hammersley, 2017). The reasons for this particular status and near-emblematic meaning of participant observation are to be found in the history of ethnography and social anthropology (see further below).

Field notes are inseparable from participant observation and, in much the same way, they have come to represent a distinctive trait of ethnography and of social anthropology. Field notes are a form of 'representation' (Emerson et al., 2011) of participant observation: an account of observed events, persons and places, written down by the ethnographer during or after participant observation. Observations and the researcher's accounts of these are crucial for ethnographers and linguistic ethnographers, because they are "primary data in ethnographic study and they are central in producing constructions of research participants" (Creese et al., 2008, p. 198). However, *what* exactly is to be observed, *how* the ethnographer represents what they observed and whether representation is indeed the best term to use here is much debated and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. A related question, centrally important to linguistic ethnographers, concerns how data from participant observation is brought together with other data sources, for example recordings of conversations.

Much has been written about participant observation and ethnography. Publications include chapters in qualitative research methods textbooks (see, for example, Tracy, 2013), textbooks on ethnography (Madden, 2010; Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Gobo & Molle, 2017), collections of experiences by ethnographers (Hume & Mulcock, 2004; Jones & Watt, 2010) and papers in methodology journals discussing specific aspects of participant observation (McCurdy & Uldam, 2013). Useful discussions of participant observation and field notes in linguistic ethnography can be found in Creese (2015).

Field notes are also discussed in methodology textbooks, but these sections are often short and focussed on technical and pragmatic issues (e.g. does shorthand help?). There is only one monograph-length book about field notes (Emerson et al., 2011). Within linguistic ethnography, several book chapters (see Copland & Creese, 2015b; Snell et al., 2015) present extracts of field notes and discuss how the authors analysed these data to generate insights about the situations and events they had set out to understand. Creese et al.'s (2008, 2015) discussion of the role of field notes in team ethnographies is also very insightful.

Historical perspectives

The origins of participant observation can be found in the late 19th-century/early 20th-century practices of social anthropologists and sociologists. Bronislaw Malinowski is often cited as the forefather of participant observation and fieldwork (Jones, 2010). But others, including Franz Boas in North America, should also be credited for moving anthropology away from its earlier status as a discipline conducted from the comfort of the anthropologist's armchair to a subject that demanded that the researcher leave their home to enter the 'field' and plunge into the way of life of 'others', expecting to experience a degree of hardship while hoping to come upon 'scientific' discovery. At about the same time as Malinowski became an influential figure at the LSE in London, the Chicago School of Sociology became known for its brand of urban ethnography in cities close to home. In 1927, R.E. Park, one of its founding members, invited his students to get out there 'to get the seat of their pants dirty' (Becker, 1999, p. 4). Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1993), an ethnography of first- and second-generation Italian immigrants in Chicago, is probably the most well-known of the Chicago School's outputs. Hidden in the appendix, Whyte offers a candid and detailed account of what participant observation is like.

My use of quotation marks around the words 'scientific', 'others' and 'field' requires some explaining. In its origins and classical phase ethnography was regarded as a science. It was believed that when executed in full faith with the principles set out by Malinowski, ethnographers could develop an accurate picture of the culture they had set out to understand. Needless to say, for many decades now anthropologists and other social scientists using participant observation have forsaken the idea of an easily accessible true picture of a different culture and way of life. There are no explicit and commonly shared ontological positions amongst social scientists (and linguistic ethnographers) using participant observation. Many agree though that the social world which they study is 'real' insofar as it exists outside our perceptions. But they also assert that this social world is not a stable and agreed system or framework, but a complex entity, the product of social interactions and people's agency (Atkinson, 2015). Furthermore, ethnographers accept that what they perceive and therefore understand is never independent of who they are, how they are placed, what they see and how they speak. Participant observation is carried out with the intention of both understanding and rendering intelligible the complexity of social life, while carefully examining the processes by which the researcher develops such understanding. The latter, known as reflexivity, is a core tenet of participant observation and ethnography (Davies, 2008; see also Patiño-Santos, this volume). Reflexivity is, however, a fairly recent addition to the ethnographer's methodological consciousness. Malinowski and his followers, it is fair to say, believed in the possibility of a gaze untainted by the researcher's personality and background.

The idea of the 'other' as object of study has also been widely challenged, and for quite some time now ethnography has established itself as an approach to use for study 'at home' and amongst the researcher's own people. Nowadays, participant observation is often used as an approach to study specific settings, e.g. workplaces or schools, and overall the research aims are much more specific and focussed than in Malinowski's time. Linguistic ethnographers use participant observation as a tool in the context of examining clearly defined topics which require them to work in one or more physical settings. However, unlike in Malinowski's times where the 'field' was primarily a physical place, i.e. the island Malinowski lived on, nowadays ethnographers conceive of their 'field' as a metaphor for the topic or area of investigation, its borders established by the research questions.

Methods

Participant observation

Participant observation can be defined as

> a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and culture.
>
> *(DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 1)*

The above implies that participant observation is a process of learning from and with others. All social environments work on the basis of a lot of tacit knowledge, unspoken values, routines and shared experiences – these, the ethnographer has to uncover and learn about. People who customarily act in these environments take a lot for granted, acting without constant awareness of the rules and customs they follow. The ethnographer has to ask about some of these often unconscious assumptions (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). In the process, they are likely to learn not only about others but also about themselves. Participant observation requires researchers to rethink their assumptions and any views that may derive from their own cultural background (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). This learning process, which can be described as a reflexive activity (see further below), is likely not to be an easy one and not one that can be accomplished in a brief course of participant observation. Although forms of more time-bound ethnography are being considered by some scholars (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004), there is a widely shared understanding that participant observation requires time and that regular and repeated observations are best (Hammersley, 2017).

In linguistic ethnography, participant observation is usually one amongst several data collection strategies. Projects typically also include recording conversations and filming actions as well as collecting written documents such as policy texts. There are variations in the scope, duration and significance of participant observation as part of a linguistic ethnography project. In some studies, participant observation is bound to a specific stage in the research, to gain an insight into the setting with its routines and norms before recordings are made and interactions analysed (Swinglehurst, 2015). In other studies, participant observation extends over several months and is conducted in parallel to recordings being taken and documents collected (see, for example, Snell, 2015).

But how does one do participant observation? As an example, I draw on my own recent ethnography of literacy teaching in a primary (elementary) school. From October 2013 to

June 2014, once a week, I was a participant observer in a year 1 class (five- and six-year-olds). My goal had been to understand how reading and writing are being taught, looking in particular at the role of phonics, and to compare policy guidelines and expectations with practice on the ground (Papen, 2016, 2019). The project relied centrally on my experience of long-term participation in the lessons. Field notes were my core data and the key source out of which my insights were developed.

Participant observation begins with the need to gain access. In my case, access was negotiated through existing contacts with schools in the area. Once access has been obtained and participant observation starts, acceptability is crucial. This is about the ongoing process of the researcher fitting in, of being not only tolerated but gradually moving towards a more or less established position in the setting. This does not mean that the researcher should become a full member or insider. Rather, the aim is to occupy a role that becomes a customary part of that setting. In my case this was the role of the parent helper, an established position both teachers and children were familiar with.

Access and acceptability achieved, what do ethnographers do? First of all, they observe. Additionally, they talk and they listen (Forsey, 2010). During my weekly visits to St. Hilda's (the name I gave the school), I observed many lessons (sitting at the back of the class watching the teacher and children engage in a whole class activity), I took part in many activities (e.g. working with a small group of children on a writing exercise) and I often listened to the children practising their reading or telling me about what they liked and did not like about their phonics lessons or sharing a story with me. I regularly talked to the teacher and teaching assistants about their teaching of phonics and their concerns about the constraints of the curriculum. What I learned about literacy teaching in this school heavily relies on the combination of what I saw and listened to. I also collected and analysed many documents (exercise sheets, policy guidelines, test papers, phonics posters) and recorded short phonics lessons. All these fed into my understanding of how literacy teaching is accomplished.

Much textbook advice on participant observation focusses on what to observe and how comprehensive observations should be (Hennink et al., 2011; Levon, 2013). The consensus appears to be that while observations are, of course, framed by the research questions, concomitant with the inductive approach of ethnography and the goal to identify the insider's perspective, in the initial stages of participant observation, the researcher's best bet is to be open and to record anything and everything that catches their eye (Watt & Jones, 2010). In later stages, observations are likely to become more focussed, in parallel with emerging interpretations.

In terms of skills required for participant observation, what the literature has to say on this is notably sparse. This may be because participant observation is "intensely practical", "unpredictable" and "a matter of 'craft' knowledge" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 10). That language skills are needed is obvious and of particular relevance to linguistic ethnographers, even if these often work in contexts and settings close to home. Bezemer (2015) had to acquaint himself with the language of surgical instruments and procedures. Snell (2015) had grown up in the same dialect environment as the children in the school she worked in, so was able to blend in and benefit from her fluency in the local form of speech. As far as wider skills are concerned, the only other point frequently mentioned is that participant observers need well-developed interpersonal skills (Watt & Jones, 2010, p. 115). They need to be good listeners and have the ability to tune in to others, revealing to them that they are genuinely interested in their experiences and point of view.

As the phrase suggests, in participant observation, your aspiration is to both take part in and observe events and activities. This may sound like an impossible task to you. Thinking about everyday events such as attending a dinner party, the task becomes less impossible: surely, in such a context, you are both observer and participant. When doing fieldwork, you can and will bring together both aspects of participant observation. You are likely to frequently move between different positions, more or less involved, making a more distanced observer's gaze more or less easy to adopt.

In my classroom ethnography, the question of how closely to take part was both a matter of methodology and of ethics. It had seemed ethically questionable to me to spend my time leisurely placed at the back of the class, watching from a distance while the teacher and teaching assistants worked hard to make lessons productive for everybody. How could I have justified my presence without any offer to help? I also anticipated that greater involvement would get me closer to understanding the teachers and their actions. This was indeed the case. Assisting in the many recurrent jobs, from making photocopies to supporting the teacher with the individual assessments that had to take place once a term, allowed me to understand how complex a teacher's job is. These insights invited much critical reflection on the way teachers were positioned in policy documents, where emphasis was placed on the teaching method (i.e. phonics) while downplaying the central role of the teacher as interpreter and implementer of any teaching approach (Papen, 2016).

In other research contexts, participant observation is more clearly defined by the activities and settings the researcher has access to. In Bezemer's work on communication and learning during surgical operations (Bezemer, 2015, Bezemer et al., 2016), participant observation was clearly bound by the positions he could take on in that setting. Unlike me, who was able – to a degree – to learn parts of the role of a teacher or teaching assistant, Bezemer could not have become involved in actual surgical operations or even have taken on the role of a theatre nurse and handed an instrument to the surgeon (though see discussion in Budach, this volume, of the importance of collaboration with participants in addressing this limitation). In other studies too, the parameters of participant observation are set by the focus on a specific role or occupation and participant observation may take the form of shadowing a person (Copland & Creese, 2015a; Watt & Jones, 2010).

Importantly, all periods and forms of participant observation, including the more and the less involved moments, lead to experiences that, once the activity is over and the setting left behind, the researcher needs to reflect on and turn into accounts of what they observed and took part in. In other words, the ethnographer's observations always have to entail "reflexive observation" (Davies, 2008, p. 83) or what I would describe as 'observing the observer': the researcher needs to become aware of their experiences and of how the conditions of their participation, including their relationships with their research participants, shape their own developing understanding of what they take part in. In researcher reflexivity, the focus has to be on "how one's own experiences shape one's interpretation of others" (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 64). Seen in this light, reflexivity means that the ethnographer is not so much a participant observer but an "observant participant" (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 64), noticing both others' and their own actions and ideas. This entails in particular that the researcher has to think about those moments where their own views and ideas differ from those they work with in the field. The goal of this intellectual process is to develop insights based on the awareness of different subjectivities and, on that basis, to create "*understanding* between and among people" (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 64, their emphasis), or what can also be called "co-understanding" (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 65). A second aim of reflexivity then is to describe and account for these processes of knowledge creation.

Field notes

Participant observers write field notes. These field notes are core data for the ethnographer. They are "the basis on which ethnographies are constructed" (Walford, 2009, p. 117). Field notes cover *what* you observe (events, people, actions, etc.) and *how* you observe: your reflections on the process of recording these events. Thus, producing field notes is an epistemic process, that is, a process that involves knowledge creation (Heath & Street, 2008; Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 36). It helps to think about this as a two-step process. In the field, more often than not, opportunities for extended writing are limited. The ethnographer is likely to produce brief jottings or even just write down key words (Emerson et al., 2011; Creese, 2015). In St Hilda's, I often did this in between lessons or in the brief periods between activities that were part of a lesson, when the children tidied up their exercise sheets or moved from the carpet to their group tables.

Even if it is possible to take more extended notes, once back home you will want to work on these, type them up and add detail or reconstruct events and activities based on your jottings and key words. Emerson et al. (2011, p. 85) distinguish between these two aspects of field notes, as being the "writing mode" and the "reading mode". In writing mode, the goal is to recall and describe as best as you can what you have experienced. In reading mode, you look at these notes, flesh them out, reorganise and annotate them. Crucially, reading mode is the space where much of the reflexivity that I discussed in the previous section typically emerges.

As with participant observation, there are practical and ethical issues relating to field notes. Whether you can and will take field notes while observing does not only depend on the degree of your participation but also on the appropriateness of writing in the situation or event you take part in. While I regularly took brief notes during the lessons in St Hilda's, I kept my notebook closed during worship or Mass. Since field notes are usually taken in the presence of the research participants, they may provoke reactions. From time to time in St. Hilda's, a child would peek over my shoulder to look at what I was writing. When Creese (2015) found that the teachers in the complementary schools she observed were uncomfortable with her note taking, she made sure to explain to them that her notes were unlike those of a school inspector's. To appease any concerns, she showed her notes to the teachers.

Field notes are often regarded as somewhat private texts. This is the case in particular for the notes and jottings taken during fieldwork. Most ethnographers, at this stage, handwrite and they may use various forms of shorthand (see examples in Wolford, 2009; Creese, 2015). Ethnographers may also include in their notes their own reactions to what they experience. This may involve the researcher's "misapprehensions" and "feelings of vulnerability" (Levon, 2013, p. 206). This is partly what gives the notes a private character making the author reluctant to share these with others. Other researchers use a research diary for their more private reactions and reflections. In team ethnographies, field notes can become shared documents and, as Creese et al. (2008, 2015) explain, reading each other's field notes can trigger important discussions about analysis. In a collaborative study of language and identity in complementary schools in Leicester, the team members' field notes became focal points around which the team negotiated and developed interpretations of what they had observed. The discussions of their notes prepared the ground for what developed into key findings of the project.

As the above suggests, working on your field notes is an important tool to support reflexivity, whether as a lone researcher or in a team. I have often found that reading my notes, expanding from jottings and key words to more extended accounts, and typing these up, far from being a mechanical process, involves a lot of thinking and reflecting, while reliving and remembering the experience that is described. In the process, you are likely to add commentary on what it was like and how to interpret specific actions or reactions. You may remember other studies you read about or ponder over the suitability of a theoretical concept that you wish to apply. The process brings to the fore the "ethnographer's internal dialogue" (Madden, 2010, p. 120).

Given the core role field notes play in ethnography it is surprising that very little has been written about what happens in between initial field notes and the published paper or book. There are no common rules or practices on how to move from the initial notes to the often stylistically appealing narrative accounts and field note extracts that we find in published ethnographies. Coles and Thomson (2016) suggest that various forms of "in between writing" take place. These can include annotations of field notes (see examples in Heath & Street, 2008), the production of conceptual memos and various other forms of summarising and commenting on what has been observed. Coles and Thomson (2016) describe how they worked through field notes, looking for the salient points in the repeated events they took part in. This is very similar to how I worked with my field notes. For example, as I looked through my notes on the regular phonics lessons, I searched for commonalities and salient features of these lessons. Working with field notes to produce and consolidate interpretations involved much reading and re-reading of my notes. This happened concomitantly with my reading of relevant other studies and my search for analytical concepts to shed light on what I observed. The process is one of 'thinking-reading-writing'. In longer-term projects such as mine, field notes inform further periods of observations, thus allowing initial interpretations to shape the gaze of the observer returning to the field. Throughout this process and continuing after the end of the fieldwork, ongoing work on the field notes will also include some being written up in a comparative perspective, drawing on the ethnographer's repeated presence at similar events (e.g. a specific lesson), thus allowing a field note to be turned into a more polished illustration of a specific practice (in my case that could be the practice of teaching sounds in phonics lessons) (see also Coles & Thomson, 2016). In this form, field notes are inserted into publications where they illustrate findings and theoretical propositions.

Current contributions and research areas

Two recent books aptly illustrate the breadth of topics examined by linguistic ethnographers (Copland & Creese, 2015b; Snell et al., 2015). Themes range from the practices of business journalism and working-class children's speech to college tutors' experience of paperwork and communication and learning during surgical operations. Studies of workplaces and educational contexts (the latter understood broadly, beyond formal education) as well as healthcare contexts are prominent in linguistic ethnography and all of these include participant observation as a core data collection tool.

The studies published in these two collections show that participant observation is particularly relevant in terms of its contribution to "topic-oriented ethnographies" (Shaw et al., 2015, p. 7), allowing linguistic ethnographers to make substantive inroads into our understanding of language and communication in specific social settings and professional practices. To enable such understandings, linguistic ethnographers often spend substantial amounts of time in the setting. They use their ongoing observations and many informal conversations with the research participants to gain a deep understanding of the social context they study. These insights are particularly important in order to allow researchers to interpret specific language behaviours or conversations as 'situated' practices taking account not only of the immediate context of interaction, but examining the wider structures and ideologies shaping local contexts (Bezemer et al., 2016). Swinglehurst's work on the electronic patient record (EPR) further illustrates this. Her observations during consultations (supported by audio and video-recordings) allowed her to understand the computer's role in the immediate context of interaction between patient and nurse or doctor (Swinglehurst, 2014). Because she had researched the institutional policies surrounding the EPR, including its link with quality auditing of patient care, she was able to demonstrate that the EPR and the electronic templates connected with it served to "regiment" (2014, p. 102) the content of the consultations in ways that did not always reflect the GPs' and their patients' concerns. This is an example of the form of "transcontextual analysis" (Bezemer, 2015, p. 220) that is distinctive of linguistic ethnography and in which participant observation has a significant role. Collins's (2015) linguistic ethnography of head and neck cancer clinics reveals the central role space – in this case the different rooms and corridors of the clinic – plays in enabling and shaping different kinds of conversations between patients and healthcare providers. Collins's role as an observer in this space allowed her to identify and understand the geographical space of the clinic and its significance for patient care.

Recent studies in linguistic ethnography have also shown that participant observation is essential to linguists' ability to engage with practitioners and to contribute to tackling 'real world' (Shaw et al., 2015) issues of communication and language use, as illustrated, for example, in Bezemer's (2015) work: the real-world issue here is patient safety, in particular in the contexts of surgeons' training. Bezemer shows very clearly that without having spent extended time as an observer during surgery he would not have been able to understand the complex, often subtle and highly context-specific forms of communication essential to surgical operations. Without such in-depth understanding of the surgeon's work, he would not have been credible as a researcher seeking to offer insights to reform surgical training.

Snell's research is another case in point. Her study of working-class children's speech, in particular their use of features such as the first person singular 'us' (Snell, 2015), demonstrates how essential her long-term involvement with the girls whose speech she studied was. As a regular visitor and participant in their school lessons and play time, she was able to gain an insight into the shifting friendships and allegiances of a group of eight- and nine-year-old girls whose speech she recorded and then analysed. Against the background of the girls' changing relationships with each other, Snell could, for example, show how using 'us' and 'me' served a distinguishable function in alluding to solidarity and friendship on the side of a girl who had been temporarily excluded from her group. Non-standard pronoun use could thus be shown to be much more than simply a working-class speech pattern. (See also Snell, this volume.)

In my own study, it was only as a result of my long-term participation in the children's lessons that I was able to understand how literacy was taught in this year 1 class. When I began the observations, my focus had been on phonics. Extending my gaze beyond phonics lessons and experiencing entire school days were essential for my ability to understand how phonics operates as a component of a much wider literacy curriculum. This became the bedrock for my criticism of the misplaced claim made in policy and media texts about the power of phonics as the key to successful literacy teaching. I was able to show that phonics worked because of how it was combined with other strategies (e.g. story reading).

The above examples suggest that long-term participant observation is fundamental to much linguistic ethnography. At the same time these and other studies reveal that the strength of linguistic ethnography rests firmly on the combination of participant observation with other sources of data. In my study the insights gained from prolonged participation had to be coupled with my detailed analysis of the policies impinging on teaching in primary schools.

For Bezemer, the audio- and video-recordings of surgeries were essential, because 'one cannot record the details of interaction as it unfolds in on-the-spot note-taking' (Bezemer, 2015, p. 211). His transcripts render visible elements of the communication between a consultant surgeon and a registrar in training, for example how they used pointing as an important 'semiotic resource' (Bezemer, 2015, p. 216), which would have been impossible to capture in field notes.

Critical issues and debates

Ethnographic observation, as the previous sections have shown, is a fairly unstructured and flexible method and when describing how they did it, researchers often struggle to come up with much detail. It is also a highly idiosyncratic approach and this, together with the undeniable fact that the researcher herself is the central data collection tool in participant observation, can make it open to accusations of lacking in rigour and 'objectivity'. Researchers not familiar with participant observation, including linguists and applied linguists, may be uncomfortable with and critical of the approach. These tensions are visible in some linguistic ethnographies. Creese, working in a team, reports on how those trained as linguists may find the observations "fuzzy" and "not scientific enough" (Creese, 2015, p. 67).

Some linguistic ethnographers appear to be doubtful of the central role the researcher plays in participant observation. While they acknowledge the need for reflexivity, they appear to fear a descent into "self-indulgent idiosyncrasy" (Rampton et al., 2015, p. 16). In the same paragraph, however, these authors also assert that "the researcher's own cultural and interpretive capacities are crucial in making sense of the complex intricacies of situated everyday activity among the people being studied" (Rampton et al., 2015, p. 16). Rampton and colleagues' position suggests that there are some unresolved debates within linguistic ethnography. Looking back at what I said earlier about reflexivity, it should have become clear that at the heart of this intellectual endeavour is not the researcher but the *experiences* they have gone through, thus focussing reflexivity on understanding events and situations, not the researcher's self (although this is undoubtedly part of the process). Furthermore, what Rampton et al. describe as the researcher's "cultural and interpretive capacities" can be interpreted to designate the experiences, skills, aptitude and interests a researcher brings to their project. These, I suggest, are assets without which no research would be possible. Reflexivity therefore is about accounting for these capacities – as well as their limitations – and bringing to the fore the processes of knowledge creation in the research. This is not self-indulgent idiosyncrasy.

Copland (2012, p. 3) draws our attention to another issue for linguistic ethnography: it can be a "challenge" to decide "what data should be foregrounded and how should the analysis be made explicit". In the article this quote is taken from, discussing feedback conferences in teacher training, the linguistic data was the "primary unit of analysis with field notes and interviews playing a supporting role". At the heart of Copland's analysis, as presented in this paper, are the recorded and transcribed extracts of the feedback conferences. Interview data was drawn on from time to time to support Copland's interpretations of the recordings. Field notes were not alluded to in the analysis at all. Thus, we don't know what role Copland's observations of these conferences actually played in her analysis. All we can assume is that participant observation was not essential to underpinning the claims she made in this particular paper.

I detected a similar pattern in other publications by linguistic ethnographers (Swinglehurst, 2014). Participant observation and field notes were only briefly referred to. Even Collins (2015), whose insights into the workings of a cancer clinic rest on her understanding of the clinic's specific geographical lay-out, mostly presents interview data and transcripts of conversations to evidence her claims. Why do these authors not draw on their field notes in a more substantial way? Could this be a concern for the discipline they are part of, i.e. applied linguistics, and the shaky reputation participant observation may have in this field and amongst any journal editors and reviewers whose approval they depend on to get published? Bezemer's (2015) experience of seeking to publish his work in medical journals suggests that in some contexts, linguistic ethnographers may have to foreground their more 'scientific' methods to be able to offer some 'hard' data to readers and journal editors sceptical of the merits of ethnography. Another possible reason for researchers' reluctance to publish field notes and offer them as data extracts may be the earlier mentioned status of field notes as private or semi-private. In the team ethnographies that Creese and colleagues (2015) talk about, the researchers who work together appear to have overcome any diffidence about their notes, making the exchange and joint discussion of each other's field notes a central tool for data analysis, benefitting from the different researchers' personal and academic perspectives. Their work reveals the epistemic power of field notes as data and thus allows linguistic ethnographers to show the potency of their approach. A more selective use of participant observation as a source of insight, as I found in other papers, could, on the other hand, discredit participant observation or, at the very least, does not help support its reputation as an essential component of linguistic ethnography. Selective use of data from participant observation in published papers may also suggest that amongst linguistic ethnographers there is no agreement on the value and role of participant observation within their work.

Future directions

Future research in linguistic ethnography needs to address some of the challenges mentioned in the previous section. For example, the question of how central (or not) participant observation is as an approach requires linguistic ethnographers to engage in open and honest dialogue about the tools they use and the insights these allow them to gain. Currently, most linguistic ethnography publications focus on the presentations of findings, arguing for their relevance in producing insights into the role of language and communication in different workplaces and institutional settings. No doubt these studies are extremely useful and cogently make the case for linguistic ethnography as an important branch of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. But it is important for linguistic ethnography to also discuss its methodologies. We need a more in-depth discussion of how, in linguistic ethnography, we create knowledge and what role, in particular, participant observation and field notes play in this process. Creese et al.'s (2015) recent re-analysis of some of their field notes illustrates this. The present handbook is another crucial step to achieving this.

Future research would also do well to engage with some of the wider challenges participant observation and ethnography face in the current climate of research policy. In a recent positioning paper on the current state and future of ethnography, Hammersley (2017), widely known for his work in educational ethnography, lists a number of 'threats' to participant observation and ethnography as used across social science subjects. Amongst these Hammersley names the pressure to produce impact beyond academia. Linguistic ethnography appears to deal well with this challenge. Bezemer, for example, shows that his long-term engagement with the surgical process, through his extensive participations, was essential for his ability to develop a form of 'partnership' with practitioners that made him a credible partner in the reform of surgical practices. In their introductory chapter to a recent collection of linguistic ethnography papers, Shaw et al. (2015) nevertheless admit that more needs to be done to fulfil the linguistic ethnographers' aim to develop significant societal impact.

Hammersley also sees the fashion for 'big data' and evidence-based policies amongst politicians and governments as a substantial challenge to ethnography. For linguistic ethnographers who work in education or healthcare, the belief in randomised controlled trials as the gold standard of research is indeed a challenge. In relation to literacy policy, my own analysis of policies shows clearly how strongly the government's views on children's literacy draw on the results of randomised controlled trials, while ignoring qualitative and ethnographic research. There are no easy ways for linguistic ethnography to address these challenges. It appears to be the case though that when working closely with practitioners, seeking impact at the level of professional practice rather than wider policy, 'small' and close data, based on observations and recordings, is useful and well received. Following the example of Bezemer's (2015) recent chapter, such examples ought to be written up to make the case for linguistic ethnography to be established as an approach open to partnership with practitioners and seeking impact beyond academia, focussed less on high-level national policies but striving for influence at practitioner, management and local policy level.

Further reading

Campbell, E., & Lassiter, L.E. (2015). *Doing ethnography today: Theories, methods, exercises.* Chichester: Wiley Blackwell. (This book emphasises the importance of collaboration and interpretation in ethnographic research. Chapter 4 deals with participant observation and field notes.)

Copland, F. Creese, A. Rock, F., & Shaw, S. (Eds.) (2015). *Linguistic ethnography: Collecting, analysing and presenting data*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage. (Chapter 1 introduces readers to the use of participant observation as a data collection tool in linguistic ethnography and the role of field notes as data and evidence. Chapters 3–6 present examples of participant observation and field notes used in different studies.)

Walford, G. (2009). The practice of writing ethnographic fieldnotes. *Ethnography and Education, 4*, 117–130. (Based on interviews with well-known scholars, Walford discussed different practices of writing and analysis field notes.)

Related topics

Reflexivity, Ethics, Ethnographic interviews, Literacy studies.

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