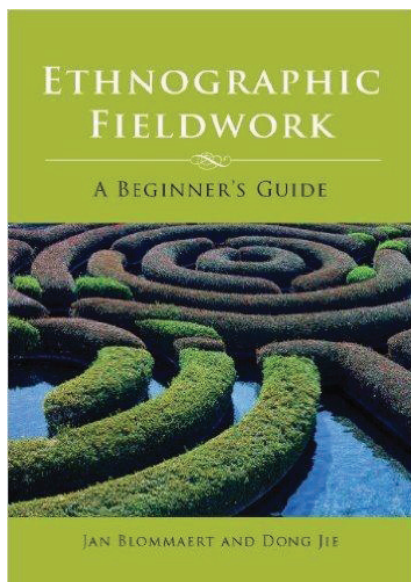


Book Review



JAN BLOMMAERT and DONG JIE,

Ethnographic Fieldwork: A Beginner's Guide,

Multilingual Matters,

2010, 92 pages,

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By

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This slim yet information-dense book offers an accessible and practical guide for beginners who want to embark on ethnographic fieldwork. Penned in an informal and straightforward style, the book draws together the theoretical underpinnings of ethnography with the authors' insightful reflections and anecdotal accounts gleaned from Jie's observations in migrant schools in China and Blommaert's interviews with African asylum seekers in Belgium. The book comprises six chapters but the authors clearly dedicate most of its pages to three in the middle (Chapters 3, 4 and 5), featuring the three sequential stages of fieldwork: prior to fieldwork; in the field; and after fieldwork.

The first chapter contains the authors' introductory remarks, noting that much of the discussion herein draws on the foundational work of two methodologists in contemporary ethnography, Johannes Fabian and Dell Hymes. The book is intended to provide practical guidelines about fieldwork, but not with "dos and don'ts" type of directives; they express views on ethnography which have roots in their firsthand field experiences gained as linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists. Finally, in quoting Dell Hymes, they reaffirm that ethnographers should focus not only on voices from interviews but also "behavioral repertoires" from observations as they make explicit the tacit structures of people's lives.

In the second chapter, the authors discuss what they believe to be the crucial elements of ethnography, while framing their arguments within the context of

language study. They argue that ethnography is not mere description but has to do with ontology and epistemology, that it is grounded in the view of language as resource, performance, situatedness and symbolic value, and that it is an inductive science with the capacity of challenging hegemonies.

The third chapter, captured under preparation and documentation, focuses its discussion largely on how to conceptualize the research contexts, micro and macro, and how to situate the objects of investigation (e.g., time, places, participants, weather) to determine the feasibility of our topics. The authors also remind us of the unpredictability and dynamicity of the research contexts, both temporal and spatial, and thus recommend that our preparation work be vigorous and a Plan B be created in case the original plan no longer holds promise.

The next chapter takes the readers into the field. It begins with the authors reminding us of the importance of always assuming that fieldwork is “chaotic” and “hugely complex.” It also shows how an array of issues may arise with the key research instruments (i.e., observations, interviews, fieldnotes, digital recordings and artifacts) and how fieldwork is essentially a “learning process” for both the researchers and the researched. More than anything, this chapter provides insightful narratives from Jie’s field experiences in Beijing migrant schools through which we can learn from her slipups as well as her feats in the process of data collection.

Chapter 5, *After Fieldwork*, centers on certain aspects of data analysis. Using Blommaert’s data from interviews with African asylum seekers as examples, the authors discuss how our “messy” data should be treated, how researcher subjectivity influences what is observed, and how the politics of transcription can impact transcripts. The rest of the chapter delineates how textual data should be analyzed and how meanings people produce should not just be “read off” but “extracted” and “excavated.”

The book ends with Chapter 6 which contains only one and a half pages outlining the authors’ expectations of what the readers should at least gain from this book.

Despite its compact size, this book is dense with concrete examples, insights, suggestions and caveats often not addressed in other sources. It achieves its purpose of appealing to neophyte ethnographers, especially with the use of nontechnical terminologies and jazzy metaphors (i.e., fieldwork as chaos, documents and artifacts as rubbish, and data as a kaleidoscope and a Coke can) to make its content easily graspable, as well as the use of the second person

pronoun to always address its readers, making them feel as if being directly spoken to.

The book however contains areas that beg improvement. In Chapter 3, the authors say nothing about “documentation” though this is indicated in its subheading, and Chapter 4 is clearly short of practical details on how to gain access to the field, known as one of the most problematic and time-consuming stages in the ethnographic process. Additionally, besides a few typos that can be spotted on certain pages, the book should provide a much more elaborate conclusion in the final chapter instead of wrapping up in just over a page.

All things considered, *Ethnographic Fieldwork: A Beginner’s Guide* is still a must-read and can serve as a very resource-filled text for qualitative research courses. However, a revised and expanded second edition of this book, if considered, would be much-welcomed and well worth the wait if its few shortcomings were addressed by its authors.