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Ethnography and Craft Knowledge

Abstract   The paper has twin themes: the creative work of ethnographic interpretation, and the ethnographic interpretation of creative work. Illustrated with reference to recent and current fieldwork on craft, dance, and opera, it suggests some ways in which the ethnographer might creatively engage with her or his chosen fields. It criticizes the current view of "grounded theory," which is found to be far too procedurally driven, in favor of more creative explorations of data.

Keywords   Ethnography; Art; Aesthetics; Creativity; Grounded Theory

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In keeping with the theme of the conference, I want to reflect on creativity in and out of the field in the conduct of ethnographic research. I will illustrate it briefly with reference to some of my recent and current fieldwork. In essence, my argument is this: Too much emphasis is currently placed on techniques and procedures of data collection and data management, which too often passes for "analysis." The remarkable industry that has grown up around the ideas of grounded theory, or the almost equally large literature on the use of software for coding, are cases in point and their forms of textbook knowledge are in danger of swamping the global market in methodological work, and – more dangerously – in helping to stifle the essential creativity in ethnographic work. Equally, I want to resist the notion that this creativity is equivalent to serendipity. The latter suggests something fortuitous, whereas I want to suggest that a certain kind of creativity is at the very heart of the ethnographic enterprise.

I am fascinated by a constellation of phenomena: skill, aesthetics, art, and craft. I am studying those things in a small series of studios: a glassblowing studio, a printer's studio, and a potter's workshop. I aim to add a goldsmith in the near future. I have also been writing about operatic master classes for young singers (Atkinson forthcoming [a]; Atkinson, Delamont, and Watermeyer forthcoming). I have also written about Argentine tango classes (Atkinson n.d.). I confess that this research is almost completely curiosity-driven, reflecting the privilege that comes with seniority. I shall return to this current work later. Although my own interest is entirely personal and curiosity-driven, it should also be acknowledged that there is a growing literature in this general area: see, by way of example, Calhoun and Sennett (2007), Grasseni (2007), Buszek (2011), Taylor and Littleton (2012). My small-scale, detailed, and intensive observations recall one or two classics in the genre (e.g., Harper 1987).

In contrast to the somewhat procedural and formulaic approaches I have just alluded to, not enough thought and attention are given to the nature and generation of ideas. Productive ideas are not born of inspiration, but they are not derived from procedures of data sorting and inspection either. Rather, they come from multiple interactions: with the field rather than with decontextualized data; with other social settings; with other ideas; with other disciplines. In other words, *having* ideas and *using* ideas are themselves part of the craft of ethnography.

In my own case, ideas also come from desperation. Contrary to what one might glean from the methods literature, ethnographic data collection is rarely perfect, or even approximates to perfection. In discussing this with students I always like to use the analogy of Chicken Marengo. As you will recall, the dish subsequently known as Chicken Marengo was "invented" by Napoleon's cook on campaign. He had to try to concoct something out of whatever he had available under campaign conditions. He found a chicken and a crayfish, and lo-and-behold – Chicken Marengo! So, rather than a smooth transition from research design, to analysis, to theory-building, I experience much more frequently the silent cry of "How on earth do I *make* something out of this?," given that my data always seem incomplete, the analysis patchy, and the ideas sketchy. All being well, Chicken Marengo, or something like it, is the result. [Of course, complete failures are rarely visible.]

So, fear is one of the mothers of invention. And good ideas are not born simply from procedures of data manipulation. Unfortunately, a great deal of what is written and talked about research methods gives the wrong impression. In particular, that odd industry that flourishes in English-speaking literature – especially "grounded theory" – is potentially misleading. I suggest that not because there is anything very wrong with the basic idea of grounded theory. In essence, it conveys the cyclical, iterative character of sociological thought, the interactions between data and ideas, the emergent but purposeful nature of research design in fieldwork. But, the basic ideas, which are a very

good description of creativity in any kind of social research, have been turned into a series of formulae and procedures – which are more likely to be deadening rather than creative. [For examples of the now extensive secondary literature on grounded theory, see: Birks and Mills (2010); Bryant and Charmaz (2010); Charmaz (2012); Urquhart (2012).] Worst of all is the endless, repetitive emphasis on *coding* data. As if ideas were going to emerge from mechanistic trudging through one's data and repeatedly coding it. Now, do not get me wrong – coding can be a useful way of organizing one's thoughts. It is especially useful when sharing a data set among a research team – but it has very little to do with the real work of creative analysis. In previous publications, I have long linked this baleful tendency to the global influence of software for qualitative data analysis (see Atkinson, Coffey, and Holbrook 1996), and I remain convinced that the influence of such software has not been entirely benign. For recent examples, see Bazeley (2007); Friese (2011).

There is an abiding problem with a lot of work and pedagogy in the social sciences – textbook-knowledge. Now, I do not believe that fieldwork is dependent entirely on tacit skills. And, I do not believe that one cannot learn from all sorts of things and all sorts of people. But, there seems to be an over-reliance in contemporary methodological training and textbooks on dogmatic, simplified models. Too many writers, students, and researchers rely on crude versions of so-called "paradigms." These are invoked as matters of faith and unreflective loyalty. All too often the adherents of so-called paradigms display little understanding of the actual research traditions they claim to represent. The results tend to be textbook

knowledge, consisting of lists, typologies, and definitions that have little or no relationship with the real inspirations of social research. [This is a recurrent problem in the social sciences: theory and method taught in isolation, with little reference to the practicalities and exigencies of real-world research.]

Let me give just one example of the sort of thing I dislike. Tavory and Timmermans (2009) published a paper in the journal *Ethnography* entitled "Two Cases of Ethnography." They argue that, in essence, there are only two research strategies available to ethnographers – *grounded theory* and the *extended case method*. The proposition itself is clearly absurd, and so was the characterization of the two allegedly opposed paradigms. The extended case method was represented in terms of a theory-driven research strategy, while grounded theory was caricatured as entirely data-driven. The authors suggest that almost all sociological ethnography is informed by one or the other of these research strategies. This seems almost complete drivel to me.

In the world of real research, however, it is surely abundantly clear that it is by no means necessary to follow textbook knowledge of research methods. Did Clifford Geertz follow grounded theory or extended case method, to take just one example? Once posed, the question seems quite ridiculous. Indeed, have the most significant contributions to modern sociology or anthropology ever demonstrably been governed by such rule-governed research strategies? I think not. Think of the major studies you really admire and have been influenced by. Think of influential men and women whose ethnographies we repeatedly read. Were they constrained by grounded theory? Did

they celebrate the extended case study method? No. Moreover, although it is difficult to prove the negative, it is hard to think of many – if any – major studies that seem especially complex, subtle, or theoretically rich because the data were densely coded or sorted using qualitative data software.

What endures in sociological or anthropological literature is not governed by adherence to some set of procedures. The ethnographies that have had real significance over the years have, of course, been notable for the quality and density of their ideas, not because they have followed a particular set of procedures. So, are there strategies of generating ideas that are not based on obsessive coding of data? Yes. They are the sort of things that Howard Becker (1998) wrote about in his clever and witty book *Tricks of the Trade*. Let me illustrate a couple of them from my own work.

Inversions. Several years ago I conducted fieldwork in an opera company (Atkinson 2006). I spent months watching rehearsals and performances, hanging out in some of the opera company's departments (such as props and casting). My main preoccupation, however, was essentially dramaturgical: I focused on the day-to-day work of making an opera happen. One of my guiding principles was to take Erving Goffman and stand him on his head. Specifically, it was an attempt to take Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor seriously. Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor enjoins us to "study everyday life as if it were theatre," but in general we know rather little about how the theatre, acting, and directing are actually accomplished. So, Goffman's formulation is a classic example of *ignotum per ignotius* – studying what we do not know through something we know even

less well. So, my mantra was "study the theatre as everyday life," or "study the everyday life of the theatre."

Being literal. Let me illustrate this from my current fieldwork on craft workers, and in particular my fieldwork on glassblowing. I have taken classes on glassblowing myself, and I have also spent time watching and photographing in a major glassblowing studio in London. The conventional literature on craft writes about embodied knowledge, often about the trained *hand*. Likewise, Sudnow's (1978) remarkable phenomenological account of piano-playing is called *Ways of the Hand*. So, let us be really literal about this: What about the feet? Obviously, you do not make pieces of blown glass with your feet. But, of course, the hand is useless on its own, it has to be part of a bodily gestalt. So, balance, posture, choreography also need to be thought about. So, I think about posture, the angles of the body, the rhythms of the body, the co-ordination of different workers' bodies in the confined space of the studio. So, we can think about the studio as a site of choreography – how glassblowers' work is co-ordinated, how the workers move, and how they develop physical rhythms of movement. In themselves these remarks are not very profound, perhaps, but I find them productive and suggestive – pointing towards what Herbert Blumer called "sensitizing concepts," what he also called "directions along which to look" (see Atkinson forthcoming [b]).

Of course, we cannot have good ideas in a vacuum. So, there is always a need for awareness of literature, including as thorough a sense as possible of research traditions. Also, reading ethnographies is a discipline in its own right. I was brought up in the anthropological tradition as an

undergraduate student: it was assumed that one would always have a monograph as one's general reading – by the bed as it were. Without thorough reading one cannot hope to have the right repertoire of ideas for observations and insights to bounce off. Thinking creatively can also be nourished by reading creatively: especially reading widely, well beyond the confines of one's narrow specialism.

So, what is the difference? I think that in methodological literature, too much stress on procedures, and too much on principles of manipulating data, and not enough about *ideas*. I suppose another way of putting it might be that the original inspiration of grounded theory has got obscured. Indeed, a sensitive reader might well object that despite my earlier comments about the dead hand of grounded theory, the general thrust of my remarks – on creative thinking, and the dialogue between ideas and data – is precisely what Glaser and Strauss (1967) intended in their original formulation. And, that is quite right. What I am advocating here is a recognition that the true inspiration of Glaser and Strauss is not captured by methodological formulae, obsessive coding, and inductive reasoning.

So, let us see what I might mean. There is nothing original in these observations, incidentally – just some things that I think need to be reiterated, stated once again rather than discovered or stated for the first time.

In essence, I think we need to concentrate on turning small happenings into big ideas and big ideas into local phenomena. In other words: as ethnographers, we are always dealing with the local, the contingent, small-scale events. We need

always to be thinking how we can translate or transform those phenomena into bigger issues, wider theories, continuities with other strands of social-science, and so on. When I say "big" ideas, I do not mean that we should be constantly searching for the grand narratives of social theory. I certainly do not mean that we should only be thinking in terms of global social processes are sweeping cultural change. What I mean is *generic* ideas that transcend local, specific, contingent phenomena, and that generate analytic ideas, such as ideal-types.

As already outlined, I am studying various sites of performance and artistic production. I have written on opera rehearsals already, and have also written about master classes for young opera singers. I have been spending time in a glassblowing studio. I have also spent some time observing the work of a potter and a printer. I have learned to dance tango. I intend to do more work on tango, and to incorporate some fieldwork with goldsmith. Now, I don't need to wait on a grounded theory process of coding large volumes of data in order to know *why* I am working on these things. First, I am interested in aesthetics. I happen to believe that too few sociological or anthropological studies have taken serious account of the ethno-aesthetics art worlds and of artistic work. Like a lot of social science, sociological studies of art worlds tell you lots about the social world, but very little about the art. Equally, a great many sociologists today like to write about performance and performativity. Often what they have to say is rather vacuous. And it is not necessarily based on any detailed, concrete acquaintance with actual performers and performances.

So, my interest in these settings is not gratuitous. It is driven by a clear sense of sociological or anthropological ideas. Moreover, I do not need to pore over detailed data in a purely inductive way in order to find cross-fertilization. I have already talked about the choreography of the glass studio. And I suggested that that derives from taking the idea of the ways of the hand and transforming it with a sort of perverse logic. But, of course, it also comes from my thinking about tango. What is literally choreography in the dance studio becomes metaphorically choreography in the glass studio. In much the same way, the opera master class might make me think about the Italian concept of *sprezzatura* – the apparently effortless performance. And, in turn, that makes me think what *sprezzatura* might look like in the glassblowing studio (for example).

In tango, as in many such settings, there is a discourse of authenticity. This is not least focused on the authenticity of tango in and from Argentina, as opposed to its "ballroom" version. The former is an improvised dance, and a social one. It is grounded in the social obligations and etiquette of the *milonga* in Buenos Aires and beyond. [The *milonga* is the social event at which tango is danced, and it is a setting thoroughly governed by its own conventions.] Ballroom tango is highly contrived, a stereotyped exaggeration in competition style (see Savigliano [1995] on tango).

Likewise, the authenticity of "far away" can be invoked elsewhere. The printer I have observed works in the style of Japanese woodblock prints, using Japanese-made tools, and invokes the style of Japanese woodblock printing in her own

work. Potters frequently reference the Japanese tradition of pottery in their contemporary work, even when they are not consciously following Japanese models. So, the theme of authenticity, linked to practices and aesthetics of elsewhere, and of the past, link across my research sites. It furnishes a *topos* in the local discourse of aesthetics. As it does in the opera master classes I have observed – where there is a thread of reference to the tradition of *bel canto* singing, in which a tradition is preserved, as is the singing voice that produces a distinctively beautiful style. So, authenticity evokes the preservation of tradition – as do various other artist-makers. The glassblowing studio preserves and celebrates a tradition of glassblowing, and craft making that goes back centuries, uses the same equipment, and passes through the studios of the glass-makers of Murano.

Again, one does not necessarily make these linkages by inductive coding. You do not necessarily derive them by deductively working from grand narratives of sociological theory either. They do not emerge like hens hatching out from eggs. You cannot just sit on your data and hope that they will come out. They have to be worked at, reflected upon, played with, and modified.

I could go on. The figure of repetition is profoundly significant in all these settings. Craft making in glass, ceramics or in wood-block printing is thoroughly repetitious. It depends on the careful and controlled enactment of practices over and over again. In printing, the need is to ensure that the registration of each successive impression is accurate. That notion – of registration – serves as a metaphor for the repetitive need for accurate reproduction (but

not identical replication) across all my research sites. Rehearsals and master classes display the significance of repetition in the interests of artistic interpretation and performance, for instance.

Each studio or rehearsal space is a small place. Sometimes it holds just one maker with barely enough room for an assistant, another artist, or me. My task is to take those small spaces and make them bigger – conceptually bigger, as they can expand to create an ever wider and denser network of associations and linkages. The smallest, most local of phenomena can thus, be developed into a wide set of conceptual, formal ideas. I have used some ideas from my current work because they are so transparent that I do not need to lead you through densely detailed ethnographic materials. But, let me conclude by turning things back on the research process itself.

What I have hinted at for craft, art, and performance applies equally – and with considerable force – to the conduct of ethnographic research itself. It is creative work, dependent on improvisation that is in turn dependent on repetitive, disciplined work. The creative processes are dependent on that work: on careful, methodical, and repetitive activities. But, such work is never mechanical. It does not depend just on the precise replication of formulaic procedures. It depends on a creative, improvisatory engage-

ment with several things. Like the craft worker, the ethnographer engages directly with her or his materials, physically and imaginatively. Embodied skills and educated eyes – the gaze of the craft – interact. Aesthetic and intellectual imaginations, traditions, and innovations interact in the craft of ethnography, just as they do in the ethnography of craft.

Finally, the attentive reader may wish to raise the following objection. I began by criticizing unduly mechanistic and formulaic approaches to ethnographic analysis, and I linked that criticism in part to the influence of "grounded theory." Yet, it may be argued that much of what I have just outlined is in fact a version *of* grounded theory itself: the repeated interactions between ideas and data, the use of comparisons, the search for generic concepts that link and transcend local circumstances. Surely, one might suppose, these are among the inspirations of grounded theory, as originally formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Indeed they are. The original formulation of grounded theory was not a set of recipes and formulae. It was a general description of how any form of social inquiry can be conducted in the interests of generating new ideas, elaborating on existing ideas, and doing so through an attentive reading of data (of any sort). My overall intention, therefore, is to encourage a recovery of that initial inspiration.

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