

Public Ethnography; Ethnography as Public Sociology

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Published online: 18 December 2009
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Abstract Since ethnography is arguably the kind of sociology of most appeal to the lay public, public ethnography, particularly participant observation research, should be a major form of public sociology. Public ethnography differs from academic ethnography when its sites and subjects are relevant to what the lay public wants and needs to know, and when it is written in non technical English. This article spells out the requirements, conditions and processes involved in making relevant ethnography acceptable to the lay public and thus turning it into public ethnography.

Keywords Public sociology · Public ethnography · Participant observation · Relevance · Gatekeepers · Lay public

Five years have now passed since Michael Burawoy reintroduced the idea of public sociology to the discipline at the 2004 Annual Meeting (Burawoy 2005). Since then, much disciplinary activity *about* public sociology has taken place. Several books (Blau and Smith 2006; Clawson et al. 2007; Nichols 2007; Jacobsen 2008; Jeffries 2009) and special journal issues as well as many other articles have appeared, and an ASA section on public sociology has been organized.

The time is now very ripe for a second stage: to concentrate on *doing* more public sociology that can reach and attract the lay or non-sociological public. This requires more sociological research and other writing of relevance to the larger world beyond sociology and in all the corners of the discipline.

For example, quantitative sociologists need to learn how their sociological analyses can catch the attention of the lay public. They will also have to help educate lay people to understand statistical reasoning, including the difference between correlational and causal analyses.

This paper proposes a similar task for ethnography: to develop a *public* ethnography that is first and foremost about what interests and what should interest non-sociologists.¹ Ethnography for me is primarily the kind of participant-observation in which the researcher can observe

¹This paper began as the keynote address to the 2009 meeting of the annual SUNY Stony Brook Graduate Student Ethnography Conference. I thought originally that I was the first to talk about public ethnography but later discovered that Michael Burawoy had made it the title of his keynote address to the 2008 meeting of the same conference. Googling indicated that anthropologists had already used the term in the late 1990s, but applied it to social anthropology in general (Tedlock 1998).

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people's actions and interactions as well as the larger contexts within which these take place, and then talking with people about them. Face-to-face interview studies which enable the researcher to probe intensively into people's activities can also fit under the ethnographic tent.²

Public ethnography must meet the same research standards as the academic variety and must be written in a non-technical language so that it can be understood by the lay public. More important, it must be relevant to and be accepted by a significant part of the lay public. Some researchers may intend to write public ethnography, but whether it becomes public ethnography is up to the public, not the researcher.³

Public ethnography's prime audience is the educated (read: college educated) public, which is distinguished from the general public. The college students we teach are an important part of this audience, partly because they are in training to become the educated public.⁴ Although ethnography for the general public, which might be called popular ethnography, is a logical possibility, scholars are generally not equipped to satisfy the general public's substantive and stylistic requirements.

No agreed-upon indicators for when an ethnography becomes a public one have yet been formulated, but they should include audience size and influence, which might be measured by an appropriate kind of citation index. Still, some past book titles that seem to me to have become public ethnography can be identified: *The Philadelphia Negro* (DuBois 1899), *Middletown* (Lynd and Lynd 1929); *The Unemployed Man and his Family* (Komarovsky 1940), *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman et al. 1950) and *Tally's Corner* (Liebow 1967) to mention just a few.⁵ Many recent ethnographies could be added to the list if data on their non-academic sales and reviews by and citations in non-academic print and other media were available.

Why public ethnography?

Public sociology's most general purpose is to make the discipline more useful socially, and public ethnography is particularly suited to achieve this purpose. Of all sociological genres, ethnography has been most successful in reaching the lay public. Thus, of the 56 bestselling books by sociologists written between the 1940s and 1990s, about a third were ethnographies or made heavy use of ethnographic data (Gans 1998).

This should not be surprising, for ethnography can appeal to the lay public more effectively than other ways of doing sociology at least when it reports on topics and sites of general interest. In fact, many public ethnographies are community or neighborhood studies. In addition, ethnographic research is generally reported in narrative form and uses quotations and anecdotes as illustrative evidence, thereby making it a better "read" than other sociological studies.

Moreover, ethnographic research brings out several of what I consider sociology's distinctive virtues. The discipline can be distinguished from other social sciences because

² Studying people in action becomes ever more necessary as we discover how much what people say, including to us, consists of stories, in both senses of the term. For that reason alone, digital and other types of interviewing which make probing difficult cannot not usually produce reliable ethnography.

³ I see public ethnography (and public sociology) as being mostly written or filmed. Burawoy (2005) adds an organic type, describing the research sociologists undertake for and with social movements, community organizations and the like.

⁴ From a practical point of view, college students, being a mostly captive audience, must automatically attend to the titles in their reading lists, although presumably instructors try to choose ethnographies that their students are likely to read.

⁵ Articles can also become public ethnography, and a study of general magazines as well as college composition texts and anthologies would identify at least some major ones.

so much of its research is about the lives and problems of ordinary people, and because it obtains much of its data directly from such people.

Sociology is also the discipline that most often goes backstage to report on how “society” and its principal institutions work—and ethnographers head backstage almost automatically. Being backstage they can also study when society fails to work and why, and they can identify the forces and agents of malfunction and malfeasance.

Finally, ethnography, especially participant observation, is the most scientific of sociology’s methods because it gets closest to the people it is studying.⁶

I praise ethnography’s special virtues because when well researched and clearly written, public ethnography can help to give sociology a much needed boost in intellectual quality, status and reputation. In addition, it can help the discipline deal with what I believe to be increasing competition from the other social sciences.

Some branches of psychology have always sought to preempt sociology, but because this discipline is especially popular with journalists, the number of publicly reported preemptive studies seem to me to be increasing. Political scientists are now regularly exploring authority and power relations outside the governmental and other political institutions to which they once limited themselves.

At the moment, behavioral and other economists are undertaking and reporting experimental and other empirical studies on topics that were in the past mostly studied by sociologists. Several natural science disciplines are using genes, brain waves and other physiological concepts to explain behavior patterns and social processes that were once sociological turf. Eventually, anthropologists will do more fieldwork in America and will then give sociologists, and ethnographers particularly, a run for their money, literally and figuratively.

However, in some respects, sociology’s most powerful competition comes from journalistic ethnographers, notably book writers, who may not have ever taken a sociology course but are trained or self-trained in fieldwork and intensive interviewing. They are also trained to be topical and to focus on subjects and issues that currently interest the educated and sometimes also the general public. Several of the muckrakers from the early 20th century were journalistic ethnographers, as was William H. Whyte (1956) who later wrote *Organization Man*.

Journalistic ethnographers write more clearly and often more quickly, and in fact their books frequently show up in sociological syllabi (e.g. Kotlowitz (1991), Simon and Burns (1997) and LeBlanc (2003)).⁷ Barbara Ehrenreich’s (2001) superb *Nickel and Dimed* is arguably the most widely read ethnographic study of American poverty ever done.

An ontology of public ethnography

Operationally, public ethnography must be *relevant to* and *accepted by* the lay public. Relevance is up to the researcher, at least in part; he or she can, through the choice of topics and sites seek to be relevant to the lay public. However, as already noted, acceptance is up to the members of that public, for they can choose to ignore or reject the ethnographers’ works.

⁶ Admittedly, anthropological fieldwork is not significantly different from participant observation, but anthropologists still do most of their work in preindustrial and other endangered sites, and too often report it in an even more technical language than sociologists.

⁷ Katherine Boo, a *New Yorker* staff writer, specializes in ethnographic research that appears in article form (e.g. Boo 2009).

Relevance

Elsewhere (Gans 2009) I have suggested that academic sociological research can be either theory-driven or topic-driven. Although the dichotomy oversimplifies, a good deal of ethnography is theory-driven, researchers using a site to explore, illustrate or debunk a theory—or sometimes a conceptual scheme. However, lay publics are only rarely interested in the issues that drive theorists, and public ethnography needs to be topic-driven, shedding sociological light—and if possible new information—on topics relevant to the public.⁸

Relevance entered the intellectual vocabulary as a political term in the 1960s, but I use it in its more general common sense meaning. With a few important exceptions, notably Lynd (1939) the discipline has not thought hard enough about relevance and how to achieve it. For me, ethnography becomes relevant if it seeks to help people learn what they want or need to know, about their own lives and their society, especially the institutions which significantly affect their lives. The research should also add findings and ideas beyond what the various informational and news media already offer. Ethnography would be particularly useful, for example, by describing and analyzing the structural contexts of everyday life that people do not see, and those lurking behind the personalistic analyses that are foregrounded by the news media.

Still, if ethnography is to have any chance of becoming public ethnography, we also need to find out what the publics we are trying to reach actually consider relevant. One way is to ask them directly, by interview or as part of a larger ethnography; another is to examine what informational sources they now consult and what else they believe they need or want to know.

Researchers should add their own ideas about what they think is relevant, but they must be careful not to confuse their personal agendas with what the public needs to know. Conversely, the concern with relevance should not be used to justify pandering to that public.⁹

Journalists *must* be relevant; it is almost part of their job description. Consequently, relevance-seeking ethnographers should draw on and relate to journalists' work. Public ethnography could make itself useful by expanding on what journalists, who have little research time, can only begin to report, or what they fail to report because the topic is not newsworthy or not visible to them. Ethnography can also become relevant by explaining phenomena and events journalists have only described, and by correcting or debunking journalistic concepts and findings, particularly when journalists perpetuate inaccurate conventional wisdoms or unjustifiable stereotypes.

Relevant public ethnography does not need to be invented; American sociologists have been doing it for a long time. One of the first public ethnographies: Middletown (Lynd and Lynd 1929) told Americans about the role of class in everyday life at a time when class was an almost taboo term. Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1968) informed white America about the life and problems of poor black ghetto males at a time when they just becoming socially visible.¹⁰

In fact, ethnographers are still undertaking ghetto studies as well as other studies of racial, ethnic and economic minorities. However, ethnographers would have a better chance of becoming public ethnographers if they conducted more research among majority populations and the institutions that serve, service and control them.

⁸ Lay publics will not usually hold still for lengthy texts that report many subsidiary details about something they already know. Nor are these publics turned on by the common practice, in all social sciences, of restating the well known in technical language.

⁹ Needless to say, researchers must always retain the right to explore topics and sites that interest them, and that are relevant to the researcher's scholarly reference groups, including funders.

¹⁰ The book would have been even more relevant for poor ghetto residents, had they been able to get access to it.

There are too few recent ethnographic studies, except for scattered articles, about middle class communities, especially in the suburbs, as well as about the offices and factories in which most Americans work and the firms, especially the large corporations that run them. Despite the complaints, from pundits and others about American consumerism, overconsumption and commodity fetishism, there are too few ethnographies of shopping malls, department stores, supermarkets and the like that shed light on what and how people buy.¹¹

City halls, major state and federal agencies, as well as movie and TV studios deserve to be studied. So do educational institutions, from all the varieties of public schools and colleges to research universities. A list of nationally relevant sites that have not been studied sufficiently would be very long and it is fair to say that ethnographers have neglected to study mainstream society.

Acceptance

The acceptance process consists of two stages. The first is in the hands of gatekeepers who decide whether an ethnography reaches the publics behind their gates. Ethnography's (and sociology's) main gatekeepers are the publishers, editors, producers and others who decide that a study will be presented to a lay public. Reviewers, columnists, commentators, op ed writers, talk show hosts—Oprah Winfrey above all—prominent bloggers and the like are secondary gatekeepers. Their praise may give an academic ethnography a headstart toward becoming public ethnography.¹²

In the case of books, the major gatekeepers are book editors and their advisers and reviewers.¹³ Publishers' sales departments play ancillary roles, for if their salespeople are enthusiastic about a book, it is more likely to be acceptable to bookstores. Book reviewers have traditionally been the last formal gatekeepers standing between a book and the public, but book reviews and reviewers are declining in number and are being replaced by bloggers and internet blurbers.

Editors and their assistants review a lot of manuscripts before opening their gates to one or more of them. Consequently, a book must probably be distinctive in some respect to engage their attention, and original or otherwise provocative to evoke their enthusiasm.¹⁴

“Trade” publishers who serve the lay public rarely consider publishing academic books, but they might accept an ethnography if it obtains enthusiastic support from widely recognized public intellectuals. This is one reason why a highly regarded academic ethnography normally has the best chance of becoming a public one, all other things being equal.

Nonetheless, even the most enthusiastic gatekeepers will have to keep commercial considerations in mind. If they doubt that a book will sell enough copies on paper or in Kindles, they will probably not be able to publish it, especially at times like the present, when the publishing industry is in serious economic difficulty.

The role of the lay public

The second stage of the acceptance process is in the hands of the lay public. Gatekeepers may be enthusiastic and hope that an ethnography will sell sufficient copies to satisfy the

¹¹ At this writing, however, studies of the victims of the recession and their involuntary underconsumption should have research priority.

¹² Cable TV news and talk shows use a lot of their time to enable authors to plug their books, but they choose books that are already gaining some attention from the lay public.

¹³ Magazine articles, radio and TV documentaries and their digital equivalents go through a roughly similar gatekeeping process.

¹⁴ If academics were economically rational, we should by now have many empirical studies of how gatekeepers for the lay public make their decisions.

business side of their enterprise, but ultimately, the educated sector of the lay public will decide whether an ethnography becomes a public one.

The first purchasers are themselves gatekeepers but informal and unpaid ones who also function as the public's lay reviewers. If they are favorable, they initiate the word of mouth that still plays a major role in the acceptance process, whatever the product or the medium.

Today word of mouth may not be communicated face-to-face or over the telephone as much as in the past; for ever larger numbers of at least younger readers, the thumbs on their favorite digital media replace the mouth. If the word of mouth is communicated publicly, for example via blogs, tweets or other forms of public media, the process by which an ethnography goes public may be speedier and sales may sometimes be higher than would otherwise be the case. Favorable book reviews in the major review media sometimes provide additional ammunition for word of mouth.

Still, ethnographic studies that reach public ethnography status will become bestsellers only by academic standards.¹⁵ In fact, the largest numerical audience will probably be undergraduates and enthusiastic ones may recommend it to their families and friends. When the study is assigned in required undergraduate courses beyond sociology in enough schools nationwide, especially in introductory and high enrollment courses in English, American Studies and other liberal arts disciplines, the instructors who assign the book and the students who purchase occasionally turn an ethnography into a public one.¹⁶

Once in a while, an ethnography can go public because an important occurrence, for example a natural or manmade disaster, suddenly makes it relevant. Journalists covering the occurrence may discover it, seek out the author and give the study sufficient visibility so that it becomes a public ethnography.¹⁷

When an ethnography becomes a public one is in part an empirical question, although one that probably should not be studied until the number of candidates for public ethnography designation increases significantly. Factors such as audience size, frequency of citation in the media and other organs of public discourse as well as impact on and influence among elites and others will have to be considered.

Toward public ethnography

I have written this article to persuade current and prospective ethnographers to conduct and report ethnographic research that is relevant enough to become public ethnography.

Individual initiative is not enough, however; relevance must also be institutionalized. Ethnographers must be encouraged and trained to be relevant and rewarded for writing relevant studies. They must want to contribute to "society" rather than to "the literature."

Ethnography can become relevant by recruiting students with already developed interests in and curiosity about contemporary issues and problems, and often these are

¹⁵ The large number of copies taken out of the library or acquired as used books are not counted, although presumably those downloaded from the internet will be.

¹⁶ The prime example from my study of sociological bestselling books (Gans 1998) is *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman et al 1950) which sold 1.4 million copies between 1951 and 1995, probably many of them to liberal arts students. To be sure, it was read by adults as well; the book and its principal author were the subject of a *Time* magazine cover story in 1954.

¹⁷ A notable instance followed Diane Vaughan's consultancy for NASA after the Columbia shuttle disaster (Vaughan 2006). That work generated a renewed interest in her book about the Challenger disaster (Vaughan 1996), turning it into a public ethnography.

young people seeking to participate in bettering or changing society. However, graduate education would need to include appropriate training, and universities as well as the discipline would have to offer appropriate rewards.

A relevance-oriented curriculum would include course work on defining and seeking relevance and practice in conducting relevant ethnography. Students should learn to think sociologically about “current events,” which might be accomplished in part by courses in economics, political science and other disciplines. However, they would have to be courses about the “real” world rather than the “theorized one” from theories and concepts that is now too often the subject of sociological study.

In addition, the curriculum should include a course that teaches students how to write clearly, avoid unnecessary technical language and additional neologisms, and aim for a work that blurbers and reviewers will praise as a good read. The same course should help students understand the gatekeeping institutions that influence and sometimes determine which ethnographies actually become public ones.

Needless to say, the curriculum would need to be embedded in a discipline-wide infrastructure that encourages and supports the development of public ethnography. For example, it would initiate conferences, journals and websites—and subsidize publishers—that specialize in relevant ethnographies presented in non-technical English, offer prizes for them, and hold special ceremonies for ethnographers whose work results in a Pulitzer Prize or a MacArthur Genius Award.

Ethnography’s primary existential problem has always been money; it is a time consuming and labor intensive research method. Students need grants to do fieldwork for their dissertations and post docs to turn dissertations into publications.

Because the method is costly to support, standard sociological funding sources have been able to pay for only for a limited amount of ethnographic work. However, funders with an interest in specific topics and sites might be willing to support relevant ethnography. Indeed, the larger the number of such ethnographies, the more likely that new funding sources will become available.

An increase in high quality relevant ethnography would evoke interest from gatekeepers and eventually, the proportion of relevant ethnography that becomes public ethnography should increase. Magazines like the *New Yorker* that publish long essays, as well as their internet equivalents or replacements, might then publish ethnographies.

Conclusion: For a relevance turn

In an era when sociology seems to gravitate toward new turns, it is high time for a relevance turn. If more ethnographers aim to study relevant topics and sites that supply lay publics with information and analysis they cannot now find elsewhere, more gatekeepers will offer their publications to lay publics. When enough relevant research makes it through their gates, more researchers will be persuaded to do relevant research and more of it will turn into public ethnography. But even if this scenario is never realized, a relevance turn will produce new ideas and a new vitality for sociology.¹⁸

¹⁸ For sociology, also read anthropology. Most of this article applies as much to social anthropology as to sociology—and to any other discipline doing ethnographic work.

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