APPROACHES TO FIELDWORK

VOLUME I

SAGE BENCHMARKS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

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VOLUME I

Theoretical Ideas and the Emergence of the Fieldwork Tradition

藏书章

Edited by

Sam Hillyard

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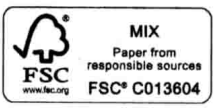

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Editor's Introduction: Approaches to Fieldwork

Sam Hillyard

The content of these four volumes is informed by an approach to fieldwork research that has roots in the anthropological tradition and most recently with sociological approaches to understanding micro social worlds. The first collection, *Fieldwork*, edited by Christopher Pole, is an important landmark showcasing how far the fieldwork approach to research had come in a relatively short time. These four volumes traced and demonstrated how fieldwork has metaphorically 'come of age', from the first use of innovative methods by the early pioneers, to the careful adaptation and methodological refinement of such techniques in late modernity.

Time has not stood still and what stands out most notably is the impact of mobilities upon our lives (Urry, 2010). To explore how we move through social worlds, at what pace and how we now interact with those different locales is now part of fieldwork's remit. As Soukup (2012:227) discusses from a cultural perspective in a vignette about Julie's social world, where is Julie? Is she online, in the coffeehouse or at work? The task of this collection is therefore to acknowledge the legacy and tradition from which fieldwork emerged, but to consider how best fieldwork can engage with the everyday life as it is lived now. Field researchers have not been complacent in this regard. They have begun to appreciate how the mobilities turn will impact upon the research resources available to us and what status they can command amongst our portfolio of existing research techniques. One of the questions this collection will therefore necessarily engage with is the whys, whats and hows of using 'new' digital data. However, and importantly, the generic task of fieldwork remains as it was – the challenge to 'get inside' and seek understanding about the social world. Therefore this collection inherits the measured approach of the original collection, to place current debates in context and to remain mindful that some visual and digital mediums are not new.

The collection is organised through the following structure: looking first to its origins and traditions (theory); then to methods and techniques; thirdly to issues of purpose, ambitions and ethics (power) and then finally fieldwork research outcomes (products). This approach therefore stresses that social research does not take place in a vacuum, but is embedded in a research tradition, uses techniques for particular ends, is not a neutral medium and as

a result yields a particular insight into the social world. Having said this, the volume necessarily reflects the rapid expansion – even explosion – in qualitative fieldwork since the first edition in 2005. This has not produced a consensus and the disparate arguments and competing positions need to be acknowledged and represented. This collection seeks to do so and more.

The core distinction from the first collection, in addition to the showcasing of new material, is its stance towards the problem of relativism. Whilst there is nothing wrong with eclecticism, there must be an underpinning logic to fieldwork if it is to be able to distinguish itself from journalism or fictional writing. From my own experience, this lies with the role of theory. The role, status and importance of theory throughout the fieldwork process are a strong orientation in many of the forms of fieldwork collated here. One form of theorising championed is that derived from the interactionist tradition of sociology, but this itself is a plural canon. In essence, it places importance on how actors themselves define their circumstances and then act on that basis – after the Thomas theorem. Married to this is the long-championed notion of being present 'in the field' (Burgess, 1984). This is the point at which issues become more complex in the contemporary era. New technologies mean that we interact in many ways and no longer purely through face-to-face encounters, but via co-presence rather than co-location. Hence social identities are constructed remotely and therefore can be studied in those remote locations. This does not render fieldwork redundant, but it does force us to think very carefully about why we are doing fieldwork and what kinds of insight it can yield. Therefore, in addition to symbolic interactionism, alternative theoretical stances and influences from actor–network theory, feminism, critical realism and postmodernism are included here.

Innovations in theoretical ideas also suggest that fieldwork's capacity to yield insight into the configurations of agents and their networks at the micro level is potentially *more* important and useful as capitalism reconfigures around us. Notably here is the work of Thrift (2012) and the attention he places upon land, affect and how our surroundings look to shape us – before we might know it ourselves. This 'expressive infrastructure' is more than the consumption of goods, but the creation of emotions and how our bodies interact and move through space and time. These are all aspects of our contemporary mobile social life that fieldwork has the ability to capture. So the challenge for us now is to look beyond the traditional social divisions and inequalities of class, ethnicity and gender in order to also attach agency to the actors, objects and mediums through which we live our lives. Thrift has not articulated an empirical agenda through which to apply his ideas, so various innovations in theoretical ideas are showcased. This includes discussions of the legacies of key figures whose work has been seminal in shaping the direction of fieldwork and also applied examples of how new theoretical ideas can work in the field itself.

This collection therefore champions the role of theory in fieldwork, whether consciously in the sense of driving to refine or cumulate theory, or

more unwittingly in a reflexive general awareness of how fieldwork creates sociological knowledge and to what end. A second aspect of fieldwork championed throughout is that it is a 'hands on', practical activity. Therefore, the collection will demonstrate and illustrate points through example and draw extensively upon fieldwork and methodological good practice. Pole and Morrison's (2003) notion of 'inclusive ethnography' and Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) appreciation of the centrality of reflexivity are two additional guiding principles. These principles recognise that fieldwork is not a linear process, but multi-faceted and reaches beyond time simply spend collecting data. Therefore, considerable thought and skill is demanded of the fieldworker across the many stages of their practice. This is less a celebration of serendipity, than of hard fieldwork craft (Atkinson, 2013).

These emphases and principles are adopted in an attempt to foil what, arguably, has resulted from fieldwork's recent popularity of late. It is my view that a little tiredness or complacency has crept into the fieldwork canon. That is, the principles of 'good fieldwork' are perceived to be so well-embedded that they require little explication. The collection tries to take issue with this in three ways. Firstly, by showcasing the role of theory as mentioned above. Second, by highlighting excellent examples of fieldwork practice that includes and celebrates the work of young, innovative ethnographers exploring new, diffuse and difficult social phenomena and that also reach inside the research process into neglected aspects not always commented upon. Hence issues such as teamwork analysis, innovation, restudies and multiple research-site synergies are included here and a few sacred cows (such as Hammersley's (1992) subtle realism) are wrestled with. The third approach involves *reflective* pieces where scholars have considered to what end field research can and should be conducted. The collection as a whole therefore celebrates and extends Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) useful distinction between principles and practice. The synergies between theory and method, an inclusive outlook and a reflexive imagination are as important for emerging as established fieldworker. These collectively provide an important counter to the attractions of all manner of digital information that beckon and prevent us, too, from settling into a stagnant complacency. Fieldwork is about reaping the benefits of insight that being in the field offers, but also about avoiding a haphazard opportunism that loses sight of its own task.

The collection is structured, as discussed, into four substantive parts.

I. Theoretical Ideas and the Emergence of the Fieldwork Tradition

The first part engages with the emergence of the fieldwork approach to social research. This stresses the theoretical focus of some of the earliest field researchers (Thomas [1928] and Park, 1973) and second-generation key contributors (Cohen, 2005 on Frankenberg; Brewer, 2005 on Mills). It

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