

Special Forum

Lidia Gallego-Balsà*

Language(s), culture(s), ethnicity(-ies), social class and religious background: intersections in researcher's identity and ethnography

<https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2017-0122>

Table of contents

1. Introduction to special forum (Lidia Gallego-Balsà, University of Lleida)
2. Paper 1: Doing ethnography among *Latinos* in London and Barcelona: Languages, genders and ethnicities (Víctor Corona, University of Lleida and Sophie Kelsall, Independent Researcher, London)
3. Paper 2: 'Preparing the milk and honey': between ethnography and academia as a racially minoritised academic (Kamran Khan, University of Lleida)
4. Paper 3: Language choice and researcher's positionality in a multilingual ethnographic fieldwork (Lidia Gallego-Balsà, University of Lleida)

1 Introduction

Originating in the nineteenth century anthropology, ethnography is one of the oldest and the most widely used methods in qualitative research. As time has passed, ethnographic research has been faced with new challenges resulting from the philosophical reflections undertaken by its researchers and that respond to moments of “methodological creativity, interdisciplinary perspectives, reflexivity in representation, and shifts from positivistic to postmodern thinking” (Wall 2015). In general terms, ethnography, once characterised by full-time long-term participation in faraway foreign or even exotic cultures with researchers that were unfamiliar with the settings they explored and who had descriptive goals to develop knowledge, has become more focused (Knoblauch 2005; Mayan 2009). Today, ethnographers may spend shorter and more intense periods of time in the field as new technologies enable the recording of interactions at the same time as researchers undertake participant observation and

*Corresponding author: Lidia Gallego-Balsà, Anglès i Lingüística, Universitat de Lleida, Pl. Víctor Siurana 1, Lleida, Spain, E-mail: lgallegobalsa@dal.udl.cat

write fieldnotes. Also, they enter the field with specific research questions to address practical problems and have adopted a more critical orientation that tries to address injustice and give voice to marginalised groups. Examples of this trend can be found in linguistic ethnography (Rampton et al. 2004; Rampton et al. 2015; Creese 2008) and the development of subareas such as sociolinguistic ethnography (Heller 2006; Moyer 2012) and critical sociolinguistic ethnography (see, for instance, Codó and Pérez-Milans 2014; Garrido and Codó 2014; Sabatè and Dalmau 2014), which analyse discourses around the management of multilingualism in a variety of institutional contexts (education, health care, immigration services, call box businesses, etc.).

One of the major shifts that ethnographic research has recently faced is that the communities under research are no longer located in distant places. Culture is everywhere, dynamic and plural, and cannot be limited by ethnicity or geographical boundaries. The presence of diverse communities is tightly connected with global migration fluxes and the situation of ‘superdiversity’ that characterises urban settings in the Western world (Vertovec 2007). Due to the opportunities for social mobility that the members of new communities have found through education in their new home countries, an increasing number of ethnographers have been born and raised within the same communities that they research. This may imply an increase of diversity within higher education institutions and research centres in the next few years. In this regard, ethnography has traditionally considered that the researchers should ideally be outsiders of the communities under research to be able to distance themselves and look at them anew. However, researchers who are members of the researched communities have advantages in terms of accessing the field and creating a relationship of trust with the participants based on mutual understanding and a common feeling of belonging. Also, despite the fact that insiders may be biased in their own way, in the process of discussing and analysing the data, they may avoid making unconscious ethnocentric interpretations of the participants’ lives.

In response to these challenges, many research projects today in sociolinguistics use ‘team ethnography’. These projects include members of the communities under research for the purpose of data gathering (and data production), data treatment (transcription and translation), discussion and analysis. An excellent example of team ethnography is that by Creese et al. (2014). This study investigates how teachers and students in a Panjabi language classroom negotiate the authenticity and legitimacy of the ‘native speaker’ teacher. Despite participant observation was carried out by the three researchers, the article acknowledges that Takhi, who is the member of the researched community, conducted the majority of the interviews either bilingually or monolingually in English and/or Panjabi and transcribed and translated all the audio recordings. Without major

detail, the authors also recognise that age, family history, ethnicity, and bilingualism opened up and closed down relations in the field and that their social experiences shape the analysis of the data and the knowledge that they produce. Nevertheless, although team ethnography may probably be one of the most complete ways of conducting ethnographic research, this option is not always possible, especially in the case of Phd researchers.

The authors of the three papers in this special forum, who are at the beginning of their careers and come from different ethnic, linguistic, religious and sociocultural backgrounds, have reflected on who they are when they do research in relation to the society and their colleagues. This is achieved by bringing to the foreground how the researcher's language, ethnicity, religious background, race, gender and social class intersect with the research. This is inspired in the concept of 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959) which refers to moving beyond the "private orbits" (ibid: 3) where we live and reflecting upon history and biography and the relations between the two within society. Furthermore, such reflections are necessary for transparency, which, according to Moravcsik (2014: 49), is "a precondition for any other advances in social science method, theory and data collection". With this intention, the three papers in this special forum provide evidence about how our personal and research backgrounds affect the decisions that we make from the conceptualisation to the completion of the investigation and also they offer advice for other researchers who may be involved in similar experiences. In the first paper, Víctor Corona and Sophie Kelsall discuss the role of gender, language and ethnicity in the process of becoming a member of a community of Latin American descent in two metropolitan contexts, Barcelona and London. The paper offers contrasting views on accessing the field as a male member of the Latin American community or as a female outsider confronting sexual harassment from a male gatekeeper. The authors offer food for thought on the uneven distribution of power and the responsibility of academics in the face of sexual harassment that may occur in the field.

The second paper, authored by Kamran Khan, analyses how being a Muslim male researcher and an ethnic minority in academia comes with particular challenges. On one side, the author shows how his personal features open access to certain areas of the fieldwork that may not be accessible to all researchers. On the other, he adopts a critical stance towards the situation of ethnic minorities in academia and claims that researchers should engage in conversations about race that are largely ignored.

Finally, in the third paper, Lidia Gallego-Balsà shows that language choice is an essential lens through which to look at the researcher's positionality in a multilingual ethnographic fieldwork in Catalonia. The participants' interpretation

of the researcher's linguistic practices results into the creation of relations of affiliation and disaffiliation between the researcher and the participants and ultimately affects the type of data collected.

In conclusion, this special forum on intersections in ethnographers' identities offers food for thought for early and advanced career researchers dealing with issues around gender, race and language. The three cases are of particular significance in the current socio-political climate. Sexual harassment, discrimination against Muslims and debates about national identity in Catalonia are hot topics right now. For some researchers, these issues are not divorced from their professional and academic lives.

Funding: Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, Funder Id: 10.13039/501100003329, Grant Number: FFI2015-67769-P.

References

- Codó, E. & M. Pérez-Milans. 2014. Multilingual discursive practices and processes of social change in globalising institutional spaces: A critical ethnographic perspective. Special issue: Multilingual discursive practices and processes of social change in globalizing institutional spaces. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 11(4). 381–388.
- Creese, A. 2008. Linguistic ethnography. In K. A. King & N. H. Hornberger (eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education: Research methods in language and education*, 2nd vol. 10, 229–241.
- Creese, A., A. Blackledge & J. K. Takhi. 2014. The Ideal 'Native Speaker' Teacher: Negotiating Authenticity and Legitimacy in the Language Classroom. *The Modern Language Journal* 98(4). 937–951.
- Garrido, M.R. & E. Codó. 2014. Deskillling and delanguaging African migrants in Barcelona: Pathways of labor market incorporation and the value of global English *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. doi:10.1080/14767724.2014.944757
- Heller, M. 2006. *Linguistic minorities and modernity: A sociolinguistic ethnography*, 2nd. Continuum.
- Jaffe, A. 2009. Stance in a Corsican School: Institutional and Ideological Orders and the Production of Bilingual Subjects. In A. Jaffe (ed.), *Stance: Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, 119–145. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Knoblauch, H. 2005. Focused Ethnography. *FORUM: Qualitative Social Research – Sozialforschung* 6(3). art. 44. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/20/43>. Access date: 10th april 2018
- Mayan, Maria. 2009. *Essentials of qualitative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Mills, C.W. 1959/2000. *The sociological imagination. 40th anniversary edition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moravcsik, A. 2014. Transparency: The Revolution in Qualitative Research. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 47(1). 48–53.

- Moyer, M. 2012. Sociolinguistic perspectives on language and multilingualism in institutions. In S. Gardner & M. Martin-Jones (eds.), *Multilingualism, Discourse, and Ethnography*, London: Routledge.
- Rampton, B., J. Maybin & C. Roberts. 2015. Theory and Method in Linguistic Ethnography. In J. Snell, S. Shaw & F. Copland, *Linguistic Ethnography: Interdisciplinary Explorations*.
- Rampton, B., K. Tusting, J. Maybin, R. Barwell, A. Creese & V. Lytra (2004). UK Linguistic Ethnography: A Discussion Paper. Unpublished. http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fss/organisations/lingethn/documents/discussion_paper_jan_05.pdf. New access date: 10th april 2018.
- Sabaté, I & M. Dalmau. 2014. *Migrant Communication Enterprises: Regimentation and Resistance*. Multilingual Matters.
- Vertovec, S. 2007. Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Race Studies* 30(6). 1024–1054.
- Wall, S. 2015. Focused Ethnography: A Methodological Adaptation for Social Research in Emerging Contexts. *FORUM: Qualitative Social Research – Sozialforschung* 16(1). art. 1. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2182/3728>. Access date: 10th April 2018.