Ethnography and scientific realism - a match made in heaven

OR The poor student then discovers that philosophy is a country for grumpy old men and gruff old women

Rebecca Hardwick  
NIHR CLAHRC for the South West Peninsula Institute of Health Research, University of Exeter

Supervisory Team: Prof Ken Stein, Dr Mark Pearson, and Dr Iain Lang

Rebecca Hardwick  
r.j.l.Hardwick@exeter.ac.uk  
@rjlhardwick  
http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/realisthive/
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To Start
An inherent tension in ethnographic work

To Follow
Subtle realism and its coherence with a modest, middle range kind of realism

To Finish
Discussion of the application of realist thought in ethnographic work
Ethnographic approaches

Commitment to “naturalism” – respect and appreciation
Progressive focussing
Discovery and generation of knowledge
Rich data to enable interpretation – not just what people do, but what they say
Deep understanding of context and culture and their influence
Open system?
Realism

Ontological depth
Mind-independent reality
Generative causation
Retroductive theorising
My realism
A modest, practical kind of realism (CMO)
“If you’re talking about programme theory and you’re testing mechanisms, its realist”
The inherent contradiction in ethnography
Social World

Realism

Constructivism

One story amongst many.

- What value of ethno?

- Where does problem of constructed nature of reality lie? Is resolved?

- ? Subtle realism is not the answer?

-is Hammerly diagnosis of the 'construction' of social world covering enough.
Subtle realism

The definition of knowledge as beliefs whose validity is know with certainty is misconceived – there is no such thing as a ‘final’ knowledge of a thing. (in objection to both naïve realism and constructivism, who claim there is certainty, whether it be independently real, or constructed)

Instead, knowledge is seen as beliefs about whose validity we are ‘reasonably confident’. We do not have ‘direct’ knowledge of a thing, but instead rely on our cultural bias etc (interpretativism) to understand it. And this does not need to lead to abandonment of the realist ideal of independent knowledge.

There are phenomena independent of our claims about them, which our claims represent more or less accurately.

The aim of social research is to represent reality, but not necessarily to ‘reproduce’ it in its own terms. Representation comes from a point of view, a “slice”, making it possible to have multiple, non-contradictory and valid descriptions of the same (independent) phenomenon. [taken from Hammersley, M. (1992) What’s wrong with ethnography? Ch3. Oxford: Routledge]
Subtle realism

We cannot escape the inferences and interpretations we make of the phenomena under study, so this is why our truths, such as they are, are partial, and open to further refinement....

We only know reality through our own perspective...to claim otherwise is to position ourselves in judgement over others

...... which isn’t to say there isn’t an independent reality, but rather, to say it is necessary to compare, contrast, dispute and so on our brave conjectures about it, in the hopes of getting closer to it, whilst also acknowledging we can never ‘get there’.... But can ‘get near’

• Sound familiar?
Realism and Ethnography

Ontological depth .................. ? From how the world is to why the world is

Mind-independent reality ............ ? Commitment to realism

Generative causation ............... ? Interpretavism & morphogenesis

Retroductive theorising ............? “Foreshadowed problems”
So how to apply it?

• Do I ‘just’ do a trad inductive ethnographic analysis, paying heed to these things, and then after I’ve done my ‘discovery’, look back to my programme theories, with fingers crossed in the hopes of having learnt something useful?

• Or do I ‘only’ go looking for data that is related to my programme theory, and remain ‘blind’ to other emerging themes and data?
So how to apply it?

• Being practical – ethnographic methods are great for getting the contextual details and in depth understanding of a phenomena

• Don’t sweat it – I’d suggest its actually much easier for realists to move in ethnographic spheres than for other kinds of methodologists, because this way of both “doing” ethnography and “thinking of” ethnography is familiar

• Remember that at the end of the day, we are not here to slay once and for all the ontological and epistemological dragons before proceeding with our work. Instead, with a sense of purpose and direction, we set forth, and in the “doing” we provide knowledge of the “thinking”.

• (I have yet to sufficiently achieve this, having only really got the hang of this argument in the last two weeks....but watch this space)
Over to you then... How may this then influence our practice of ethnography?