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How did I become an interpretive ethnographer?

Reflections on a methodological shift

In this paper, I would like to develop how doing ethnography helped me deconstructing my own theoretical and epistemological backgrounds and, thereby, the social phenomenon I am analysing. I propose a reflection on both how I constructed, on the way, ethnography as a key method in my research, and how ethnographic fieldwork and writings took me to an epistemological shift. I intend to describe and analyse the (chaotic) ways in which I moved from an unconscious positivist perspective to a grounded (Glaser and Strauss 2010 [1967]) and interpretive research. I will not examine all aspects of my life that I (think I) can link to me becoming an interpretive ethnographer (Ybema and al. 2009) although that could be very enlightening (as in, for example, Kunda 2013). Instead, I will focus on my investigation trajectory to enhance and analyse an epistemological shift.

This reflection is grounded on an on-going PhD investigation initially on French local policies toward High School pupil's mental health. It is based on a multi-sited ethnography led between June 2013 and July 2014: six semi-structured interviews with direction, education and social staff of a French High School (exploration fieldwork), a six week participant observation in an Educational Service of a French regional Government (Conseil Régional), the document analysis of 75 educational projects led in 70 public High Schools of the same French Region, and a five months discontinue observation in another High School of the Region.

In this paper, I will show how my recruitment as a PhD Student led me to formulate a research proposal on a consensual formatted deductive scientific design, that is: “articulate your hypothesis, define your concepts, operationalize these in the form of variables, establish the relationships among the latter, and then plan to test them in your research” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Basing myself on both scientific readings and a former professional experience in a very different professional field (a French public health administration), I designed my research on ungrounded hypothesis about the importance of mental suffering in High Schools as a new youth labelling and a form of social control (Fassin and Memmi 2004) in a context of organizational changes and of local competition between High Schools (Delveaux 2006).

I will then demonstrate how this theoretical and methodological construction was strongly tackled as I began the fieldwork. First, the methods were questioned because I couldn't get to understand High School's meaning-making processes with the tools I had. By developing that point basing myself on both the fieldwork confrontation and my circulation on the field, I will explain how I built Ethnography as a necessity in my investigation.
At last, I will show how I finally got to question the question, that is to say how I understood the problems I had in the field weren't just about methods: they were an epistemological matter that had concrete consequences on the construction of my research object. Continuing the fieldwork, participating to a summer school on the issues of policy and organizational ethnography, writing-up my first data analysis and confronting them to other researchers, are the elements that I will analyse in order to highlight and explain my epistemological shift.

Bibliography


Ybema, Sierk, Yanow, Dvora, Wels, Harry, Kamsteeg, Frans H.. 2009. Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life. SAGE.