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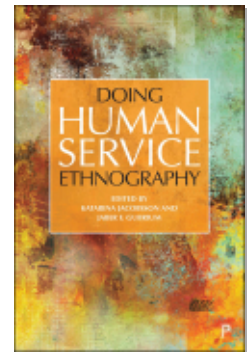
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Introduction: What is human service ethnography?

Jaber F. Gubrium and Katarina Jacobsson

Once the exclusive method of sociologists and anthropologists, the use of ethnography in social research—broadly *in situ* participant observation—has expanded across disciplines and settings. Ethnography now appears prominently in social work, public health, management, nursing and criminology, among other disciplines, with settings of interest across the board. Ethnography now tends to be less about societies as a whole and more about specific characteristics *of* the whole, such as language variation, narrative structures, migration, gender, race, class, age organization, power differentials and diverse human needs. From the start, its findings have proven to be enormously important in challenging prejudicial beliefs, unjust social arrangements and biased public policies. *Doing Human Service Ethnography* takes some of its significance from this research context.

Additional significance stems from the specific purpose of the book, which is to recognize that ethnography, despite having general features that apply in all disciplines, has substantive and procedural characteristics specific to particular fields of application. The field of human service provision is no exception. Being field specific, we refer to it as 'human service ethnography'. The goal of human service ethnography is to make visible forms of service-related personal experience and social organization that are either unrecognized, misunderstood or otherwise hidden from view. This relates in particular to areas of service provider and recipient experiences and complexities otherwise taken for granted or trivialized in the simplifying practices of accountability. This is especially pertinent in the current public policy environment where trends for evaluating human service work are decidedly non-ethnographic, favouring rampant quantification.

Preliminary matters

Three preliminary matters should be noted that apply to the following chapters. One is disciplinary and relates to the difference between general ethnography and field-specific ethnography. General ethnography is a prominent and time-honoured method of procedure for researching fields of social interaction (Atkinson, 2017; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Field-specific ethnography focuses on particular interactional fields such as hospitalization, schooling and policing. Emblematic across the board is theory-based participant observation. The perspective of this book is that in an increasingly complex organizational environment and with the multi-sitedness of so many services, it is fruitful to consider how the general is shaped substantively and procedurally by the living and working conditions of specific fields.

The second matter is conceptual and pertains to different uses of the term 'practice'. One usage draws from the distinction commonly made between social policy and policy application, which is well worn in human service intervention. This hinges on the tension between what social policy formally designates as opposed to what transpires on the ground in practice. A different usage refers to the focus of the form of social theorizing that informs the perspective of this book. It conceptualizes and studies what are termed 'everyday' constructive practices regardless of the field (Goffman, 1959; Douglas et al, 1980; Smith, 1987; Shotter, 1993). In the human service area, this would include both social policy and policy application. This is sometimes referred to as 'praxis', the everyday sense of practice. Both usages are evident in the book.

The third preliminary matter relates to empirical scope. The chapters present ethnographic research sited either within or in connection with *formal* human service provision. While it can be convincingly argued that informal acts of service and care occur in all places where people helpfully relate to each other, all sites in view here are in some fashion officially designated. In that regard, as organizational operations and professional accountabilities are inevitably in place, service provision is continually subject to administrative hurdles and documentary red tape. Often raised in frustration, the existential question 'What is this all about, really?' doggedly lurks in the background of decision-making and intervention.

The general and the specific

Following decades of studies of providers and recipients within and outside of human service organizations, *Doing Human Service Ethnography*

joins a growing literature packaged as the ethnography of specific fields of practice. Long the subject of education and publication, the idea and method of ethnography in and of itself as a general undertaking short-changes the associated procedural diversity of today's applicable environments. There is a realization that ethnography can no longer be understood and properly applied as a method of procedure without due consideration for what the ethnography is about. Conditions on the ground are sufficiently varied in their operational logics to warrant separate research statuses, and are referenced accordingly in field-specific terms such as 'street ethnography', 'school ethnography', 'business ethnography' and now 'human service ethnography'.

What makes field-specific ethnography such as the human service variety different from others? Much of the difference, of course, stems from what is being substantively observed. Substance matters, grossly at times. It differentially affects ethnographers' thoughts, sentiments and research questions about the subject matter. Some of it relates to the personal stakes and risks, the worries and the cautions of being ethnographically present in particular sites as opposed to others, navigating entry, establishing rapport and managing ongoing participation, even exiting. The local operational contingencies of participant observation in prisons are not the same as those in nursing homes or on street corners. The everyday thoughts, sentiments and actions of the ethnographer regarding rapport, personal danger, secrecy, violence, succour, care, sympathy and collaboration combine in distinct ways to facilitate or threaten what it means to effectively 'be there' as a participant observer in various fieldsites. These weigh heavily on the method and, of course, on the researcher engaging in it. Still, not everything is field specific, some elements being rather general to ethnographic presence. Regardless of the field, there is still observational work undertaken (for example Atkinson, 2017), still the matter of writing ethnographic field notes (for instance Emerson et al, 1995; Atkinson, 2019) and still the business of completing ethnographic reports and publication (Van Maanen, 1988, Emerson, 1995; Goodall, 2000, for example), let alone the issue of conceptualization.

Like other field-specific ethnographies, human service ethnography has been influenced by social theorists who have dealt with the general question of what a field is in the first place, regardless of field particulars. In that regard, field-specific ethnographies have much in common. Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990), for one, conceives of fields as being constructively sited in both the varied substances and operational logics of everyday life. For Bourdieu, fields are not 'just there', separate from the constructive practices that bring

into being what is there. While 'being' has a gigantic philosophical heritage, it is firmly settled in everyday life (Heidegger, 1962; Wittgenstein, 2009 [1953]). Michel Foucault (1995) has formulated discursive histories, among them one centred on incarceration, for example; the formulation encourages us to think of the meanings and consequences of incarceration as working discourses set in time. The 'present' relevancies and urgencies of one discourse can be radically different from another. Incarceration in this case is not 'just there' as a continuous configuration of being, but is brought to life in discursive formations in practice (compare Mol, 2008).

The continuing significance of the general also relates to groundbreaking conceptual changes, leading the units of analysis away from broad nebulous forms towards smaller units closer to the scale of everyday life. Here, ironically, the significance of the general relates existentially—and in practice, rhetorically—to the specific. The concept of culture has been rethought as being too experientially grand, if not too globally parochial, not adequately attuned to local categorical understandings and practices (see Geertz, 1973; Said, 1978; Bauman, 1986; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fox, 1991). Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) has suggested that it is important to 'write against culture' as much as about it, locating culture as much in myriad configurations of references to it as in general patterns of conduct. The sociological concept of society has been similarly reconditioned on many fronts, fuelled by the idea that society is a diverse set of social constructions and associated material conditions. It is as much a fluid body of representational opportunities and performative occasions as it is a coherent structure of social relationships (see Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1959, 1974; Smith, 1987, 2005). New terms of reference for what society is and what social structures are in practice converge on a reimagined understanding of human service provision (Gubrium et al, 2016).

The shift in emphasis away from broad wholes and more towards everyday particulars affects ethnographic focus. The outcome is a flourishing critical consciousness that takes account of the range of what it means existentially to be, say, a patient and an aide in a nursing home as opposed to what it means to be an inmate and a guard in a prison (see Fox, 1991; Wortham, 2001; Puddephatt et al, 2009). This has vivid narrative resonances, turning ethnographers away from purely geographic senses of fields and fieldwork towards the everyday narrative spaces of articulation (see Schuman, 1986; Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 2000; Langellier and Peterson, 2004; Riessman, 2008; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Plummer, 2019).

Problematizing everyday life

The chapters of this book focus on everyday life in relation to the formal content and quality of providers' or recipients' activities. Neither the nature of professional services provided as such nor the extent and quality of provider/recipient relations is the primary subject matter. The latter, especially, has received enormous attention in an era of service accountability saturated by quality indicators, the priority of enumeration and statistical representation, best-practice manuals and the like, which, of course, diverts attention from the complex lived experiences and social relations of service provision, away from what Dorothy E. Smith (1990) calls 'the relations of ruling'. The aim is to make visible, within areas of service provider and recipient experiences, complexities otherwise taken for granted, rendered invisible or trivialized in the simplifying practices of accountability, as noted earlier (see Gregor and Campbell 2002).

One procedural step of problematizing everyday life consists in tentatively suspending belief in the presumed or official realities in place, shifting the angle of vision to how those realities are constructed, managed and sustained in everyday practice. For example, ethnographic research can be conducted on the practice of what is called 'documentation' in human service (for instance, Gubrium et al, 1989; Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed, 2019; Jacobsson, 2021), which is a key concern of Chapters 5 and 8. This requires some form of belief suspension, not taking documents at face value in order to discover their social construction, how they come into being as applicable facts of human service for all practical purposes.

The procedural step is sometimes called 'bracketing', and has phenomenological sources (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gubrium and Holstein 1997). The authors of all chapters have engaged in a form of this in fieldwork. Fieldwork is not just a process of detailing the everyday *whats* or substance of human service provision, such as contending discourses and fragmented services, but is undertaken in tandem with a view to uncovering the constructed *hows* entailed (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). This serves to reveal the way in which what is presumed to be real or taken for granted exists or is accomplished in place and time, which may be strikingly varied. Some researchers simply incorporate a healthy scepticism into their field observations. Others come at it more deliberately, with the decided aim of making 'facting' visible in unfolding detail, such as in Lucy Sheehan's case of a concealed pregnancy discussed in Chapter 8. In Chapter 11, David Sausdal takes the perspective of 'looking beyond' the

dominant police-as-control narrative as a way of reimagining policing as a service profession.

A second procedural step of problematizing everyday life is what anthropologists refer to as being 'experience-near' in fieldwork. This means being bodily present in the field of interest, not applying 'experience-distant' tools such as office interviews as a substitute for what could be directly observed and recorded. Ironically, even in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains utterly clear that 'one profound truth about ethnography…is that intimacy, and not distancing, is crucial' (Fine and Abramson, 2020). The timing of the first step and this second procedural step need not be sequential. The reverse might be the case, as when one already is close up to service provision of some kind and then, even inadvertently, temporarily suspends belief in what is ostensibly in view in order to, say, study the 'social life of documents', as Emilie Morwenna Whitaker does in Chapter 5. There also is the option of proceeding with the first and second steps shuffle-like, moving back and forth reflexively throughout fieldwork, alternately attending to the *whats* and *hows* of the matter in view.

A third procedural step of problematizing everyday life is to critically present the value of ethnographic research results. Ethnography always has had a critical consciousness. Even early and mid-20th-century ethnographers who carefully documented the substance and moral contours of distant cultures as well as unknown nearby communities were critical in a fashion. If not explicitly, they were informing us that there is value in recognizing diverse ways of constructing experience—of being—and presenting empirical proof of that. There is no universally correct way of living, they were telling us. Ways of being human need to be understood in and on their own terms. The significance of Christel Avendal's portrayal of the daily lives and sentiments of small village youth in Chapter 2 emerges in this context, in which the youths' allegedly trouble-ridden world appears on its own to be completely bereft of this understanding.

Some ethnographers have been rather blunt about this, as the following extended extract shows. It is taken from the introduction to American sociologist William Foote Whyte's (1943) classic ethnography *Street Corner Society*. Whyte casts clear judgment on depictions to the contrary, forcefully stating that 'no human beings are in [them].'

> In the heart of 'Eastern City' there is a slum district known as Cornerville, which is inhabited almost exclusively by Italian immigrants and their children. To the rest of the city it is a mysterious, dangerous, and depressing area.

Cornerville is only a few minutes' walk from fashionable High Street, but the High Street inhabitant who takes that walk passes from the familiar to the unknown.

For years Cornerville has been known as a problem area, and, while we were at war with Italy, outsiders became increasingly concerned with that problem. …They have long felt that Cornerville was at odds with the rest of the community. They think of it as the home of racketeers and corrupt politicians, of poverty and crime, of subversive beliefs and activities.

Respectable people have access to a limited body of information upon Cornerville. …In [their] view, Cornerville people appear as social work clients, as defendants in criminal cases, or as undifferentiated members of 'the masses.' There is one thing wrong with such a picture: no human beings are in it. Those who are concerned with Cornerville seek through a general survey to answer questions that require the most intimate knowledge of local life. The only way to gain such knowledge is to live in Cornerville and participate in the activities of its people. (Whyte, 1943, p xv)

Human service ethnography

The importance of field specificity warrants further contrast. While ethnographic fieldwork in general has had a very broad and useful empirical remit, the breadth overlooks significant differences. Doing human service ethnography is not the same, say, as doing ethnographic fieldwork on city street corners (for example, Anderson, 1999; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011; Goffman, 2014). Monographic subtitles can be quite telling in this regard. As the subtitle of Elijah Anderson's (1999) urban ethnography *Code of the Street* indicates, the field-specific language of ethnography in that field was ridden with the conduct and concerns of *decency*, *violence*, and the *moral life of the inner city*. Doing human service ethnography is not the same, for instance, as doing fieldwork within what David Grazian (2008) calls *the hustle of urban nightlife*, the subtitle of his book *On the Make*. Both ethnographies contrast with the conduct and concerns of the organizational ethnography reported in Robert M. Emerson's (1969) book *Judging Delinquents*, for example, the subtitle of which is *Context and process in juvenile court*. Or the conduct and concerns of the ethnographic account by Robert Dingwall, John Eekelaar and Topsy Murray (1983) titled *The Protection of Children* and subtitled

State intervention and family life. As important ethnographically as street corner and nightlife sites are, they are largely bereft of the organizational bearings, the officially designated professional rules and responsibilities, and the documentary responsibilities of concern in the following chapters of this book.

The four-part division of *Doing Human Service Ethnography* reflects a spectrum of field-specific conditions and issues centred in a distinct social world that range from the everyday professional relevance of human service practices to the mundane logics of need and care, and to the everyday relational challenges of fragmented and multi-sited human service intervention. What is general to ethnography is shaped substantively and procedurally by these specific conditions of the field, converging here on need, suffering, care, help, healing and recovery in professional application. Part I of the book, 'Capturing professional relevance', brackets the assumption that applications of service provision ideally coincide with professional understanding. Chapters rather seek to capture the everyday *wheres* and *whens* of professional intervention. The resulting ethnographic lesson is that what is officially assigned can have different working borders than what is organizationally designated or professionally articulated in practice.

Chapter 1, by Doris Lydahl, is titled 'Shadowing care workers when they're "doing nothing"'. Lydahl seeks to observe the *wheres* and *whens* of caregiving in practice, both in and around formally designated work times. In the process, she opens up to view a world of care that falls outside the bounds of what is organizationally recognized as caregiving. From two empirical cases she concludes that some essential everyday practices of care were rendered invisible as they were not easily captured in quality assessment forms or accounted for by evidence-based methods. Chapter 2, 'Two worlds of professional relevance in a small village', presents the findings of Christel Avendal's field observations. She reports initially being surprised by the degree to which village adults, both professional service providers and nonprofessionals, are on the proverbial same page regarding troubled youth. Avendal is amazed by how far the language of social problems and service intervention for ostensibly troubled youngsters has penetrated one of the smallest corners of society. It is only when Avendal starts to observe and listen to youngsters themselves on their own turf that she captures something else, retrospectively, *then* seen as the separate and seemingly self-generating and problematized world of youth service provision she began with. In Chapter 3, titled 'Capturing the organization of emotions in child welfare decision-making', Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson asks herself, during fieldwork, why it is that the service providers she is

observing become so emotional at times in making welfare decisions. Is it because the matters they are required to make decisions about are so heartbreaking? In which case, they might be continually emotional, as service intervention is often conducted for heartbreaking reasons. Conducting field observation with this question in mind, she captures a world of emotion related to organizational accountability. The emotions appear to be integral components of social organization, in other words, rooted in the frustrations that accompany wanting to do the right thing when thwarted by organizational hurdles or red tape. Service providers can literally scream with rage over demands that divert them from what they consider to be more desirable actions. The 'organizational embeddedness' of everyday life has rhythms of its own that mediate individual attitudes and sensibilities (compare Gubrium, 1992; Gubrium and Holstein, 1993).

Part II of the book is titled 'Grasping empirical complexity'. Its chapters seek to grasp an understanding of the complex practices in place that generate inconsistencies and contradictions in the meaning of service provision. Bracketed is the assumption that terms of reference such as homelessness, disability and dementia and their documentation have reliably consistent meanings across space and time. The resulting ethnographic lesson is that meaning is constructively contingent on the related working issues, the immediate relations of ruling, that arise in the circumstances of consideration.

Chapter 4, by Nanna Mik-Meyer, is titled 'Sensitizing concepts in studies of homelessness and disability'. It brings to light the dynamics of unintentional problematization in two service populations. Mik-Meyer compares the differential challenges to a coherent understanding of homelessness and disability. In one case, there appears to be an attribution of contradictory agency to homeless clients, who are constructed as both helpless individuals and active agents capable of making decisions on their own. The other case is a study of 'othering', illustrating how, in practice, able-bodied workers and managers at a research site who viewed themselves as avoiding the othering of disabled colleagues wound up unintentionally marginalizing them. Chapter 5, titled 'Grasping the social life of documents in human service practice', is by Emilie Morwenna Whitaker. It opens up to analysis what is called 'the social life of documents'. The gaps in and contradictions of documented information are traced and their resolutions made visible as the paperwork undertaken traverses the shoals of demands for effective and coherent care, on the one hand, and the complex and often emotional practices of caregiving on the other. Finally, in Chapter 6, which is titled 'Debating dementia care logics',

authors Cíntia Engel, Janaína Aredes and Annette Leibing compare two ethnographies of dementia care, one where care is carried out at home, and one situated in a geriatric outpatient clinic. They describe the competing everyday logics within sites of care attendant to what is otherwise understood as a single disease entity with identifiable needs unbound by care context.

Part III of the book addresses the 'Challenges of multi-sitedness'. Its chapters open to ethnographic consideration the everyday consequences of human service provision constructed across the borders of different operational and interpretive sites of service. Bracketed in this part of the book is the idea that the coherence of social policy and the consistency of service interventions can be understood in principle as independent of the contexts of application. The ethnographic lesson here is akin to the lessons of what Janet Newman (2016) calls 'border work', in which the meaning and coherence of social policy and human service provision are better understood as the border crossings of multiple sites of translation.

Chapter 7, titled 'Social worlds of person-centred, multi-sited ethnography', is authored by Aleksandra Bartoszko. She describes her decision in fieldwork to turn one of her respondents, named Siv, into a kind of ethnographic assistant she calls a 'seed patient'. The expectation is that Siv, in time, will grow into a co-ethnographer, helping Bartoszko to understand from a client's perspective the constructive work of meaning-making and coherence-building as they move along together crossing the multiple sites of service provision. Chapter 8 by Lucy Sheehan is titled ' "Facting" in a case of concealed pregnancy'. Referring to the interpretive processes in question, or 'facting', the leading idea is that matters of fact are not as solid or rational as they might appear to be (see Raffel, 1979). Rather, they are artefacts, so to speak, products of the varied interpretive actions that enter into concealment in the case under consideration. Chapter 9 by Tarja Pösö is titled 'Ethnographic challenges of fragmented human services', and builds on several empirical studies of child protection that nowadays takes place in many locations such as family homes, courts, social work offices or even on social media sites. As Pösö explains, there is a need to pay ethnographic attention to 'fragments, multiple locations and moments of human services' and the ways providers combine their influences into site-adequate coherences in formulating service plans.

Part IV, titled 'Noticings from ethnographic distance', shifts gears by stepping outside of participant observation per se to feature the ways that the reconceptualization of field understandings can alter the empirical substance in view. Explored here are questions of what field

notes are telling us, what looking beyond established understandings offers in terms of what is ethnographically noticed, what a comparative ethnography can provide by marking the content and borders of field specifics and even what the unschooled, ordinary ethnographic musings of members of the fields we study can teach us. The lesson is that what is noticed ethnographically, even in the most careful fieldwork, is intimately tied to views, even metaphors, of what is there in the first place.

Chapter 10, authored by Malin Åkerström and David Wästerfors, is titled 'Ethnographic discovery *after* fieldwork on troubled youth'. 'After' refers to the stepping outside of participant observation by rereading field notes well after fieldwork has been completed or by reading field notes taken by a co-researcher. In the process, the authors learn through 'key readings' how central the social world of meetings is to organizational accountability. Initially, meetings were taken to be merely the locations for focal descriptions of everyday decision-making. The later reading found that meetings in practice were places for (re)constructing, if not laundering, representations of care for a variety of administrative purposes (compare Schwartzman, 1989). In Chapter 11, titled 'Looking beyond the police-as-control narrative', David Sausdal, when doing so, finds a narrative that brings on board a conception of policing as service provision. Sausdal asks what might be noticed ethnographically if the perspective were shifted accordingly. Sausdal's findings, indicating that police officers are often caring and considerate, do not correspond well with the police-as-control image. Yet, he argues, they are important to a profession that would benefit from a more nuanced police narrative. Finally, Chapter 12, by Andrew M. Jefferson and titled 'Embracing lessons from ethnography in non-Western prisons', details what can be learned about the concept of imprisonment from conducting ethnography in a non-Western context. From the distance of non-Western ethnographic findings, he brings back home the usefulness of an approach that bridges the institutional on one side with the concrete situatedness of everyday life on the other. This can result in the noticing of striking parallels in matters of confinement and control between the lived experience of prisoners and prisoners-of-life in human service institutions such as nursing homes. It is no wonder that residents of confining institutions of all kinds use metaphors and common narratives of 'imprisonment' in their own ethnographic musings to describe, rightly or wrongly, what 'they live by' day in and day out (see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Gubrium, 1993; McAdams, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1994).

Taken together

Empirically focused on a specific field of interest—human service provision—the working contours and challenges of participant observation are presented in ethnographic detail in this book's individual chapters. Case material is discussed by seasoned human service ethnographers, collected from service activities in fields ranging from child welfare to nursing homes, from homelessness and home care to imprisonment and from hands-on service provision to administrative paperwork. Taken together within a human service landscape that has changed enormously from the early years of one-on-one service encounters with individual nurses, social workers, community police officers, counsellors and disability workers, the chapters offer exemplary observational studies of organizationally embedded, field-specific human service work.

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