

Review:

Jan Brace-Govan

Barry Glassner & Rosanna Hertz (Eds.) (1999). Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life. London: Sage, 272 pages, Cloth (0-7619-1368-8) £ 41.00, Paper (0-7619-1369-6) £ 18.99

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The intersection of daily experiences and the sociological imagination has been a rich source of inspiration and data for qualitative sociologists. "Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life", goes a step further and looks at the ways in which a sociologist might take an everyday occurrence and create a research project. Generalizing about events and experiences is necessary in order to make sense of our lives and make decisions about our actions, here sociologists show how these everyday processes intersect and interact with the research experience. Personal epiphanies, moral crises, curiosity, and passion combine to make insiders into outsiders, and vice versa, in combustible mixtures that emerge as research. [1]

"Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life" comprises four sections, "Public Places", "Family Space", "Interior Spaces", and "Workplaces". It deals with this broad spectrum of everyday life over 26, relatively short, chapters and many chapters are from recognized, leading authors in the field of qualitative sociology. The intention of the book, to show how sociology and everyday life reflexively inform each other, is accomplished by the writer's beginning on a very personal note, which draws the reader's interest, and then shifting into the theoretical or, from the everyday to the sociological. While this is a stronger focus in earlier chapters, overall the book is a good introduction to what is required by the sociological imagination in qualitative research. However, this book also offers more experienced students, or researchers, one source that covers the potential diversity in qualitative methods, and symbolic interactionism. [2]

The short chapters not only give it a marvelous breadth, but also create an eminently useful, and succinct, place from which to initiate discussions on a wide range of methodological issues. One such example is REINHARZ (Chapter 4) well-constructed piece that demonstrates the shifts in thinking processes required to turn an ordinary everyday experience into a qualitative sociological project, or question, that can be investigated from a theoretically supported position. Making the point that "ethnographic sensitivity allows sociologists to notice patterns in the mundane experiences of everyday life" (REINHARZ 1999, p.31) she goes on to build a picture of the steps involved. She gives a description of the widespread use of warnings: cancer warnings; fire drill warnings; health warnings; AIDS

warnings. They are everywhere: workplace; public toilets; elevators; newspapers; television. Warnings arrive in the mail and, they are passed on by colleagues and neighbors. Everything every where seems to be a risk or a threat, but how are these incessant warnings affecting our quality of life? She develops her sociological question: "can prevention become so overdone that it becomes deleterious in and of itself?" (REINHARZ 1999, p.36) From here she interrogates her everyday experience of warnings from a sociological position. She wonders is she too sensitive, is her response reasonable and she looks for the social structural factors that created many warnings: litigation; medicalization; political advocacy around social problems and respect for science. REINHARZ draws the piece to a close by considering the antithesis where the warnings increase people's feelings of stress because the underlying causes of the risky behavior remain unaddressed. In this way, REINHARZ demonstrates how "everyday life thus becomes a source of rich data for developing hypotheses about social problems, social structure and social change" (op cit). [3]

In a similar vein, KLEINMAN (Chapter 3) gives a practical demonstration of the difference between the personal story and the field work which would be useful for an introductory class. She tells the personal story of her attendance at a workshop on racism and the memories it stirs up of her mother's determination that she should have a nose job. Through her participation in the workshop she recognized that her nose, and its distinctive qualities, had played a crucial role in her racial identity and her sensitivity to the issues of race. The second part of her contribution uses this example to discuss the difference between storytelling and telling a story from the field. The personal essay has a different standard of accuracy, and fieldwork stories need to tell about others, not the author. Fieldwork stories need to show something about social organization or social categories. And SILVERMAN (Chapter 12) offers an interesting critique of (fast) contemporary society "not seeing" detail and the social sciences need for carefully planned, slowly executed study in order to regain the detail. [4]

The unusual breadth of the material includes some that is more often visited under other methodologies such as CHEATWOOD's chapter (20) on homicide policy issues and the role qualitative sociological data can play here. Others tackle topics that are rarely raised like CONRAD's (13) interesting discussion of boredom, which he astutely notes is a social construction (CONRAD 1999, p.126). Making use of quotes from his research on boredom, his explanation offers a good example of how to go about categorizing text from interviews, often a challenging task. These shifts into practical advice are spread through out the book. [5]

There are useful chapters on the impact of research on the individual which could be valuable not only for postgraduate students, but also for others about to enter the field. The intense emotional nature of such research work is often overlooked in texts that describe qualitative methods in more general terms and offer approaches to analysis of the data, but here SANDERS (Chapter 5) gives a fair account of the advantages and disadvantages of fieldwork and observation. Entering the field is often a scary experience and there is an honesty about the

difficulties of doing fieldwork without making them sound insurmountable. These reflections point out what needs to be considered before entering the field, as well as pointing out how, for one researcher, work and life flow together and how he moved past gatekeepers and pursued his own path. Other chapters give accounts of an individual's self-development as a researcher and the concomitant development of her research values. Again this particularly personal and internalized side to professional development is not always dealt with well in the more general books about qualitative methods. Here, for example, DANIELS (Chapter 17) reflects on her experiences with gatekeepers during several of her early projects and the professional skills and attitudes that were required to overcome the difficulties she, herself, was creating through her interactions in the field. Another rarely addressed issue that stood out, was SCHWARTZ' (Chapter 16) assertion of the need for balance and variety in living through "multiple identities". Although, "personal outcomes depend on a mix of luck, hard work, and the ability to figure out how the system works and what one need to do to please gatekeepers" (SCHWARTZ 1999, p.159), she concludes that "if we don't have multiple selves, we miss a lot, both insight and in experience" (SCHWARTZ 1999, p.167). [6]

The overlap of the personal, everyday experience and the outcomes of research and professional life is one of the themes addressed throughout the book and this is looked at from a variety of useful angles. For COLLINS (Chapter 19) this was the intersection of political activism and sociology. Her personal experience was closely interwoven with the shifting social trends on racism in America and she felt strongly the relationship of sociology and everyday life in the development of her research topics. BELL's discussion (Chapter 8) about her response as a parent to her child's allocation to a particular school class is a very good example of the intersection of power, action, the construction of knowledge, and agency. Their son was allocated to a class which they perceived as being of lower ability than they saw as appropriate and with a teacher whose reputation was poor. They went to the principal and argued the case to have their son moved. The principal agreed but the ensuing meeting of (new) classroom teacher and parents left them with the impression that they had acted inappropriately in the context of that school and they were treated as outsiders. The decision was also at odds with their own perceptions of public schooling and the politics of education and so they re-considered, and left their son in the class to which he was originally allocated. BELL's discussion of the sociological elements is intriguing. Her middle-class awareness of schooling and the power of education sits against the lack of agency of working class parents but, she challenges the limited view of the middle class and what might constitute knowledge of the situation. From a broader perspective, brought on by the process of moving and then not moving her son (which was done entirely without his knowing), BELL and her husband review what they consider to be "right" about education. She concludes that sometimes actions which appear resistant are not necessarily resistant in their consequences but in fact reinforce the status quo. For me it also exposed the contradiction that being *with* the best students in a school does not always reinforce for the child the feeling of *being* the best and raised issues that could initiate much discussion amongst students. [7]

Continuing with a parenting theme, GERSTEL and ZUSSMAN (Chapter 7) suggest that "sociology is not just part of what we talk about. It is how we talk" (1999, p.61). I was not convinced that this is terribly reassuring for those of us who do not cohabit with another sociologist. Although it does offer some insight into how to incorporate parenting into a sociological framework, it read more like a description of how advantageous it is to live with a partner who is a professional in the same discipline. Another piece that did not work well for me was THORNE and HOCHSCHILD's (Chapter 21) suggestion that life in an academic department is like a marriage and relies on the same tolerances, accommodations, and alliances. While the concept has some merit, I was wary of taking it too far, mostly because, like SCHWARTZ, I am also aware of members of staff who do not live entirely through their work environment, but remain excellent sociologists. It might raise an eyebrow or two amongst students and give staff something to debate over coffee but I wasn't convinced. [8]

What will probably be of more general interest is DINGWALL's (Chapter 22) examination of the changes in tertiary education, and sociology in particular, with the introduction of teaching and research quality assurance and the perception that students enter the system as customers. Another personal favorite raised some interesting issues surrounding academic mentoring in the chapter by HECHT and BECKER (Chapter 26). A fascinating account of a wonderfully supportive mentoring relationship conducted by email to help a new faculty member deal with the challenges in her teaching. This would be especially topical for postgraduate students and their supervisors as the piece shows the mentoring process in quite personalized detail. Here BECKER responds very openly to HECHT's questions about the process of teaching: getting students to help each other; not always answering questions; creating a group spirit and giving students the space to learn for themselves. HECHT's questions are refreshingly honest about her fears of teaching a graduate class but, she also reflects on her role as pastoral carer of her students—an interesting thought considering the process she is engaged in with one of her own teachers. [9]

Although the focus is always on symbolic interactionism, and its relevance to the multiple spaces of social life, the variety covered by twenty-six chapters is extensive and I am wary of devaluing this through summarizing. I hope that this has given you a taste of what this book has to offer. Overall I found this book to be a very readable, potentially useful source of diverse material that explores in a concrete way the insider/outsider experience of the everyday life of the sociologist. [10]

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