Focused Ethnography[1]

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Abstract: In this paper I focus on a distinctive kind of sociological ethnography which is particularly, though not exclusively, adopted in applied research. It has been proposed that this branch of ethnography be referred to as focused ethnography. Focused ethnography shall be delineated within the context of other common conceptions of what may be called conventional ethnography. However, rather than being opposed to it, focused ethnography is rather complementary to conventional ethnography, particularly in fields that are characteristic of socially and functionally differentiated contemporary society. The paper outlines the background as well as the major methodological features of focused ethnography, such as short-term field visits, data intensity and time intensity, so as to provide a background for future studies in this area.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I focus on a distinctive kind of sociological ethnography which is particularly, though not exclusively, adopted in applied research. It has been proposed that this branch of ethnography be referred to as focused ethnography. Focused ethnography shall be delineated within the context of other common conceptions of what may be called conventional ethnography. The comparison between conventional ethnography and focused ethnography however should not be construed as an opposition. Rather than opposed to, focused ethnography is rather complementary to conventional ethnography, particularly in fields which are characteristic of socially and functionally differentiated contemporary society. [1]

As a strategy of research, focused ethnography does not necessarily relate to a new phenomenon. Indeed, it is a strategy that has been widely used particularly in the investigation of research fields specific to contemporary society which is socially and culturally highly differentiated and fragmented: The pluralisation of life-worlds and the enormous specialisation of professional activities demands

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1   This paper has been presented at various conferences since 1999. It has been published in a more elaborate fashion in German under the title *Fokussierte Ethnographie* in: *Sozialer Sinn*, 1 (2001), 123-141. In Germany, the article has triggered a debate on whether the term "ethnography" may be rightly applied here (cf. BREIDENSTEIN & HIRSCHAUER 2002, KNOBLAUCH 2002). I would like to thank Gabriele CHRISTMANN for her help.

ever detailed descriptions of people's ways of life and their increasingly increasingly specialised and fragmented activities. Moreover, in recent years we have witnessed the proliferation of a number of ethnographies that deliberately chose an approach which can be called focused. As a peculiar form of ethnography, it is characterised by relatively short-term field visits (i.e. settings that are "part-time" rather than permanent). The short duration of field visits is typically compensated for by the intensive use of audiovisual technologies of data collection and data-analysis. Length (extension) of data-collection as it is common in conventional ethnographies is substituted for by the intensity of data-collection. In addition, the lack of intensity of subjective experience in conventional ethnography is compensated for by the large amount of data and the intensity and scrutiny of data analysis. Writing is increasingly complemented by recording, solitary data collection by collective data collection and subsequent data analysis in collective data sessions. Instead of social groups or fields, studies focus on communicative activities, experiences by communication. [2]

The paper does not suggest that focused ethnographies constitute a closed movement in ethnography which may be opposed to other forms of ethnography. It rather indicates that such a form of ethnography is being practiced in an increasing number of studies. For this reason, it stresses the importance of discussing the method which may be applied in such ethnographies. [3]

After sketching the range of research topics studied by focused ethnography, the paper points to a number of methodological features specific to this approach, which, as will be argued by way of conclusion, are most apt for the ethnographic analysis of complex societies. However, focused ethnography is neither to be considered as an all-encompassing approach nor is it to be reduced to cheap and dirty research. Although it is able to address specific aspects of fields in highly differentiated organisations, it presupposes an intimate knowledge of the fields to be studied. And although data collection may be reduced to shorter visits, it demands a large amount of work in preparing and analysing data collected in the field. Therefore the paper does not regard focused ethnography as a panacea for qualitative research, yet it is one legitimate and respectable instrument in the field of ethnographic research. [4]

2. Sociological Ethnography, Strangeness and Alterity

In recent decades, ethnography has flourished in a number of fields. It seems as if sociology, in particular, has recently become more familiar with ethnography than it was in the past. This holds particularly for European, non-Anglo sociology which has not been too intimately familiar with ethnography for quite some time (as several of the papers in this volume indicate). Although qualitative methods have been blossoming in the last decade (cf. FLICK, KARDOFF & STEINKE 2004), it is scarcely recognised that for many researchers ethnography represents all qualitative research. Indeed, ethnography has been at home in sociology for quite a long period of time, and one of its core techniques, participant observation, may be claimed not by anthropologists but by a

sociologists.[2] Moreover, within the tradition of the Chicago school, sociological ethnography has been producing an impressive number of studies which have contributed not only to sociology but to the social sciences in general. Despite this importance of ethnography to sociology, it seems as if the current methodological debate concerning ethnography is dominated by anthropologists, particularly of the postmodern ilk (cf. the paper of Paul ATKINSON, this volume). These debates have raised a number of crucial issues for ethnography in general: The "crisis" of representation challenges the claim of scientific observers to reproduce their observations within texts, and the "crisis" of legitimation challenges the claim of scientific observers to free themselves from their ethnocentric background[3]. [5]

As important as the effects of these methodological questions may have been for ethnography in general, I would argue that the problem of ethnography within the contexts of one's own society (i.e. what I would call *sociological ethnographies*) are quite different from those posed by "anthropological ethnography". The problem of ethnocentricity presents itself in a different way if one encounters people in what is supposedly one's own society. Therefore, the problem of strangeness is less pertinent (or, to put it another way, "the other" is to be construed differently). Whereas, some ethnographers (e.g. AMANN & HIRSCHAUER 1997) have argued that "bestrangement" is the defining feature of any ethnographical observation, so that the principal methodological task of the "ethnography at home" would be the "bestrangement" of the familiar, I would hold that particularly sociological ethnographies are confronted with other problems and defined by other features. Undoubtedly, the ethnographical travesty by which we "bestrange" our everyday world is a prominent and common genre of popular ethnography, disguising one's own culture as if it were a foreign world.[4] Bestrangement, however, signifies only one single strategy rather than the core of the methodological approach called ethnography. From the point of view of the sociology of knowledge, sociological ethnography does have a starting point that is decisively different from that of ethnographies "in other cultures": As opposed to ethnographers travelling to other cultures who begin with knowledge mediated by earlier studies, hearsay etc., sociological ethnographers do have vast implicit and explicit background knowledge of any field they are studying. Since these ethnographers are members of the societies which they study, they dispose of this knowledge before they even start to get interested in the field. This knowledge constitutes a methodological problem in its own right. It has to be controlled, it has to be taken into account reflexively, and as "members' knowledge" it may be used heuristically. Even if the researcher may lack the contextual knowledge of

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2 Ethnography has often been considered a synonym for participant observation. This notion was been indeed used for the first time by the Chicago sociologist LINDEMAN in 1924. In its contemporary meaning the term was been coined by William FOOTE WHYTE. Only in 1940 was the term introduced into ethnology by Florence KLUCKHOHN.

3 As MARCUS (1994, p.573) concedes, there is a "current exhaustion with the explicit rhetoric of postmodern debates". In the same vein, LINCOLN and DENZIN (1998, p.583) state that "we are already in the post-'post' period—poststructuralism, post-postmodernism".

4 For a famous and convincing example cf. MINER (1956) who works with a series of disguising strategies.

specific situations, he or she typically knows of these situations, and he or she disposes of methods to handle new situations. [6]

The abundance of knowledge is categorically different to the situation of a researcher who lacks knowledge of the culture he or she investigates or who even has difficulties understanding the basics of the language of the culture. Such an ethnographer is confronted with what one may call *strangeness*, a situation of unfamiliarity not only with specific situations but also with the general culture which may provide means and methods to get into specific situations and to know their meaning within the overall cultural context. The situations and particularly the actors confronted may appear, therefore, as the *Other*, denoting the alien, the different, the awesome. [7]

Sociological ethnographers, in contrast, are confronted with a problem one would rather call *alterity* than strangeness (KNOBLAUCH & SCHNETTLER 2004). The starting point of sociological ethnography is contact with a form of Other Alfred SCHUTZ has called Alter ego. Alter ego may be a different actor; alter ego may even know different things, but is accessible in the backdrop of common, shared knowledge.[5] It is in this backdrop of communality that sociological ethnographers attempt to identify differences, i.e. specific features: differences between them and other types of persons, differences of scenes, settings and situations, differences of fields. It is in this context that ethnography can attempt to take the natives' point of view (MALINOWSKI 1948)—and it is this stance that seems to me to be the *differentia specifica* of ethnography. [8]

The distinction between these two types of methodological stances, strangeness and alterity, provides only the background for what I would like to elaborate in this paper; i.e., focused ethnography. This background may appear very general at first sight; nevertheless one should stress that focused ethnographies may only be undertaken under conditions of alterity rather than strangeness. In this sense, alterity as the most general methodological feature of sociological ethnographies is also a necessary prerequisite for focused ethnographies. [9]

3. Focused Ethnography

The purpose of stressing the category of focused ethnography lies in the fact that the image of ethnography until today is shaped by the image of long-term field studies common in anthropology. Only long-term field studies, it seems, epitomise what may rightly be called ethnography. With this ideal derived from anthropology, many of the ethnographies done in sociology and other fields frequently appear to fall short or to be "deficient". As indicated, I would like to argue that sociological ethnographies do not only have their own methodological orientations, as indicated by the notion of alterity. Moreover, I want to show that particularly within sociology there has developed a type of ethnography that differs from this classical type, a type I shall call focused ethnography. By stressing this type of ethnography, similar to what GLASER and STRAUSS did in

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5   To SCHUTZ (1962), elements of the knowledge guiding interaction is characterising the life-world of any human being.

the 1960s,[6] I would like to pursue a kind of practical purpose, too, that is: give methodological support to those researchers who already apply this method and allow them to share their reasons for doing so. Although much of these focused ethnographies are performed and taught in sociology, it is rarely located in sociology departments but, rather, in departments of information science, in engineering, or, as the context of this publication demonstrates, in organisation studies. To be sure, it constitutes only one part of contemporary ethnography, and I would not even argue that it constitutes its centre. There are a number of other important developments, such as multi-sited ethnography (see NADAI & MAEDER, this volume) or the go-along (KUSENBACH 2003) Nevertheless it strikes me as one of those methods that appears both promising and methodologically innovative. [10]

I use the term focused ethnography because it focuses on small elements of one own's society. I would not claim this to be a novelty. In fact, focused ethnography can be traced back to researchers such as GOFFMAN (1952), GUMPERZ and HYMES (1963) or FESTINGER (1964) who focused on the life of a small group and utilised the then revolutionary tape recorder. The category of focusing has been used by anthropologists in a somewhat similar way by, for example, SCHOEPFLE & WERNER (1987). The notion of focused ethnography seems to have been introduced by OTTERBEIN (1977) in a somewhat different way as an ethnography that focuses on a culture trait. It has been later used for particularly for ethnographies in nursing without, however, employing natural data recordings. (Cf. MUECKE 1994: 187ff.). Examples for what I consider as focused ethnography are to be found also in the sociology of sciences (i.e. the ethnographic investigation of particular laboratory practices). One has also to mention the so-called Workplace Studies, i.e. ethnographically oriented studies of particular activities in the course of (typically high technology) work.[7] This kind of focused ethnography has been also acknowledged in a series of other disciplines, such as computer supported collaborative work where it is "now one of the key approaches (...) to specify the role of computer based systems in work practice" (HARPER, no year, p.2); it is also used in "requirement engineering" (JIROTKA & GOGUEN 1994), architecture, museum research (HEATH, VOM LEHN & KNOBLAUCH 2001), and within marketing research and consumer behaviour studies. [11]

In using the label of focused ethnography I do not refer to a new program for doing ethnography in the future. I rather relate to a range of ethnographies that are already in practice and share a number of features that allow us to speak of a family resemblance (to use a notion coined by WITTGENSTEIN. By "family resemblance" I want to stress that many of the focused ethnographies referred to do not cite a common methodological reference. They do not even consider themselves to be part of one common scientific movement (although there are streams within focused ethnography that have developed their own identity).

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6   GLASER and STRAUSS (1967) gave these political reasons for their "Grounded Theory" book; they wanted to support researchers who submit projects by providing them with a reference.

7   A more elaborate portrait of Workplace studies will be found in HEATH, KNOBLAUCH and LUFF (2000).

Finally, they do not mention a common authority (although one must say that GOFFMAN is not infrequently cited as an authority). Instead, they share similar features in doing ethnography, features that are at the same time rather unexpected to arise in the field of ethnography. It is for this reason that I would like to turn to some of the features of the practice focused ethnographies. [12]

4. Features of Focused Ethnography

Among the few people addressing the issues of focused ethnography explicitly one has to mention the research team of HUGHES, KING, RODDEN and ANDERSON (1994). When relating to their argument one should be aware that HUGHES et al. (1994) refer only to applied research in the field of technological systems development. HUGHES et al. distinguish between various forms of applied ethnography. For example, *Concurrent ethnography* refers to those kinds of investigations that accompany the course of developing a specific technological system, thus supporting the usability of the technology. If, for example, a new communication system for emergency services is being introduced, concurrent ethnographies may focus on the resulting changes in work practices and the respective requirements to the technology. Whereas this task may last up to a year, the so-called quick and dirty ethnography is much shorter.[8] As dubious as the title sounds, it refers to an often practiced and respected form of short-term ethnographies by which information relevant to the development or change of technological systems are collected in an intensive and rapid way. (Which is, one should stress again, not possible without prior familiarity with the setting.) In developing a system of portable video access to surveillance cameras one might, for example, need information about the type of mobile workers who might use such portable devices and the kind of problems they may need to solve. Moreover, HUGHES et al. (1994) recommend an evaluative ethnography in order to examine assumptions of the technology: How are the technologies used in real life? Finally they suggest re-assessment of previous studies, a form of secondary analysis of former studies (a task which should be obligatory to any ethnography). [13]

These distinctions between various types of applied ethnography give a first indication of what we mean by focused ethnography. The meaning of this notion will become clearer if we contrast it to the type of ethnography typical of ethnological research which unfortunately still serves as a prototype for all "real ethnography". I shall elaborate this contrast in an ideal-typical way. That is to say that the features will be designated by categories which are designed in such a way as to provide clear analytical distinctions and to stress the oppositional features. In this way they clearly overstress the differences for the sake of clarity. Moreover, I do compare them only with respect to those features which are specific to focused ethnography. Since both are ethnographies, they do, of course, exhibit a number of similarities. This list of categories is quite long, and it

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8   Similarities can be discerned with respect to "Rapid Rural Appraisal", "Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal", an ethnological field research method restricted to few days or weeks. Cf. SCHÖNHUTH and KEVELITZ (1993).

may not even be exhaustive. For the sake of brevity, I shall try to explain some of them in more detail, others only in passing.

Conventional ethnography	Focused ethnography
long-term field visits	short-term field visits
experientially intensive	data/analysis intensity
time extensity	time intensity
writing	recording
solitary data collection and analysis	data session groups
open	focused
social fields	communicative activities
participant role	field- observer role
insider knowledge	background knowledge
subjective understanding	conservation
notes	notes and transcripts
coding	coding and sequential analysis

Table 1: Comparison between conventional and focused ethnography [14]

First, conventional and focused ethnographies differ with respect to their demands on time. The former may be called time extensive since they require continual work of long duration, as a rule for most students about a year. At the same time, the researcher is getting deeply involved into the field, as to make intensive multisensory experiences.[9] In this sense, they are "experientially intensive". As opposed to this kind of experience-based ethnography, focused ethnographies are short-ranged and not continual. Fields are visited in various intervals (they may even exist only in certain intervals, such as "events"). [15]

The standard argument against this short-ranged character is that these kinds of ethnographies are "superficial". Yet, for what I call focused ethnography this is not true in an emphatic sense. The short time period covered is compensated for by another type of intensity: focused ethnographies are typically data intensive. That is, they produce a large amount of data in a relatively short time period, and, therefore, they demand an intensive analysis of data. The analysis of data may be said to be utterly time-intensive since it focuses on a massive amount of data collected in a short time in contrast to field notes which cover long durations. [16]

This data (collection and analysis) intensity is often due to various recording devices used in focused ethnographies, such as tape recorders, videos, and

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9   In the words of LÜDERS (2000, p.391): "If the is one conviction among ethnographers, it is the assumption that situated practice and local knowledge are to be acquired and then analysed only on the basis of long lasting participation in the field" (my translation).

photo-cameras.[10]. Therefore it may no longer be accurate to define ethnography by its lack of "extracorporeal instruments of research", as AMANN and HIRSCHAUER do (1997, p.25). To the contrary, in focused ethnographies technical devices are equal to human observation techniques.[11] (This is not to say that observations are done by technical means only. As ethnographies, they still apply traditional forms of observation and description—in addition to what is recorded.[12] [17]

Treating data collected by technical devices turns out to be a quite different task than handling one's field-notes. With respect to the social organisation of data analysis, the latter usually requires some individual training and expertise. Technically recorded data, on the other hand, often demands a method of analysis which is exerted intersubjectively, such as hermeneutic analyses of interviews or conversation analysis of naturally occurring talk in certain social situations. [18]

The availability of recorded data allows for another difference from classical ethnography. Whereas field-notes play an important role and are subject to personal authorship as well as individual analysis, technically recorded data is accessible to multiple listeners and viewers at the same time. This resource is exploited by the institution of data sessions, i.e. the gathering of researchers listening to and viewing the same data. This way, interpretations and analyses can be made intersubjectively accessible to a degree unbeknownst in common text procedures. Again, one should be aware that intersubjectivity does not mean to claim some kind of naïve objectivity. However, this procedure opens data socially to other perspectives. In order to support this opening, data session groups are helpful, the more they are socially and culturally mixed. (However, qualified knowledge on research goals and methods is a prerequisite for participating in such groups.) Data sessions treat data in a way that—at least with certain methods—does not presuppose ethnographical knowledge of the field. Indeed, a number of methodologies suggest that it may be helpful not to draw on ethnographic knowledge of the social contexts, such as social hierarchies, personal knowledge about the actors or "official" goals of an action under observation. However, a number of situative knowledge elements ("What do they see on the screen?", "What kind of machine is that?", "Who is that guy entering the door and saying nothing?") is necessary to understand observed activities. It is for this reason that audiovisual-oriented research usually necessitates a form of focused ethnography. [19]

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10 One should note that the rapid developments of visual technologies allow for vast opportunities of research which have scarcely been realised. Putting aside improvements in video systems, cable-less synchronic transmission of visual data, automatic visual recognition systems and the professionalisation of visual observation, are only a few of these.

11 Of course, the use of these systems causes "reactivity". Nevertheless, the huge popular success of video systems has led to an acceptance and familiarity with these systems even in the private sphere.

12 Note that in ethnographies as early as e.g. FESTINGER et al.'s "When Prophecy Fails" (1956) tape recorders had been in use.

The reason for this link lies in the fact that focused ethnographies are characterised by selected, specified, that is: focused aspects of a field: Thus rather than study, e.g. the police as a field, one may focus on the question as to how police officers do their rounds (walk their beats); instead of studying youth clubs one may focus on the question how the members of these clubs perform at a certain event; instead of studying the management of a company one would focus on the meetings of managers. The point is, in order to focus, one needs to have knowledge of the field of which it forms a part. [20]

Since the kind of focusing we are talking about here relies very much on the use of audiovisual equipment, it is quite logical that those aspects that may be recorded audiovisually move more into the centre of research. Whereas classical ethnography turned towards social groups, social institutions and social events, focused ethnographies are more concerned with actions, interactions and social situations. The major subject matter is verbal and visual conduct as well the visual representation of objects and actors. In that sense one may say that focused ethnographies do study communication in the sense given to the word by George Herbert MEAD and Erving GOFFMAN, for example. The fact that researchers enter the field with technical equipment also affects their participation statuses. As GOODWIN (2002, pp.1508f) formulates in a way that somehow parallels the distinction between classical and focused ethnography:

> "Rather than wandering onto fieldsites as disinterested observers, attempting the impossible task of trying to catalog everything in the setting, we can use the visible orientation of the participants as a spotlight to show us just those features of context that we have to come to terms with if we are to adequately describe the organisation of their action". [21]

Open participation is hardly any more possible (except in fields which are constituted by such equipment, such as film sets). The equipment almost always demonstrates that the researcher is present as an observer. However, the fact that parts of the observation is done so to say automatically does relieve the researcher and allows him to invest more time in inquiring, interviewing and retrieving background knowledge. [22]

Whereas technical equipment fosters the tendency to concentrate on a certain focal point, it results in a further difference from classical ethnography: In lieu of writing acts, often linked to the classical ethnographic "impressionism" (as its critics would have it), the magnetic or digital records are much less dependent on fieldworkers' linguistic and literary proficiency and his or her perceptive consciousness. Focused ethnography still relies heavily on observation, but observation is being supported by technologies. As many problems as these technologies (and the focus imposed by them) may cause (problems which are widely discussed in visual sociology and visual anthropology), they do change the character of the data produced: one is no longer subject to the "uncurable subjectivity" of field reports but disposes, instead, of a substantial degree of

intersubjectivity.[13] This does not mean that recorded data are more objective; it does, however, allow for outsiders to access the data which are less dependent on subjective perspectives than are field-notes. [23]

Moreover, one goal of focused ethnography is to acquire the background knowledge necessary to perform the activities in question. Thus it still addresses the emic perspective of the natives' point of view, yet in a very specific sense: specified with respect to certain situations, activities and actions. This does not mean that it needs to reconstruct the cultural stock of knowledge necessary to act in the whole field. It only aims at certain elements of (partly embodied) knowledge relevant to the activity on which the study focuses. For instance, studying technological activities, only those elements of knowledge will be highlighted which are relevant to understand the practices involved in handling the technology under scrutiny. [24]

Being aware of the problem of the reification of data, records particularly allow one to analyse data gathered by one researcher in a group of other researchers. It is my impression that data sessions constitute one of the most important features of focused ethnographies. They refer to meetings in which data (records and observations and interview information) collected by individuals or teams are being presented to others.[14] Thus, at least in a common-sensical way, focused ethnographies are more "objective" (in inverted commas) than field notes. Whereas field notes transform what has been observed into words, i.e. a sign-system which is arbitrarily linked to what it represents, there is at least a relation of similarity (or "mimesis") between what is recorded and the records—if not in the eyes of postmodern critics of representation, then in the eyes of those being recorded and studied. [25]

An important requirement and resource of analysis consists in detailed transcriptions of data. Transcriptions (which typically involve a lot of work and confront the researcher in a very intensive way with the data) include paralinguistic and prosodic features (COOK 1990). Since ethnographies also draw on other kinds of data, such as interviews, protocols, field notes), the question as to what to transcribe depends on an overall strategy of data management, including pragmatic questions. As the transcription of data is as time-extensive as is data analysis, it seems decisive to develop strategies of sampling and selecting relevant data. [26]

This is, however, not to say that focused ethnographies consist of record-taking only. Rather, there is not only a need for doing "prior" ethnography in order to make records (CORSARO 1981); there is also a procedure called "scouting" (ALBRECHT 1985, 328f). CICOUREL (1992) has stressed this focusing

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13 PERÄKLYÄ (1997) relates to this in standard methodological terms as validity.

14 Focused ethnographies thus are linked to the "Natural History Approach" as well as to contemporary context analysis (KENDON 1990). Whereas classical ethnography has been a solitary process, including a serious psychological strain on the individual researcher (cf. LOFLAND 1971), the data analysis of focused ethnographies are subject to intersubjective verification.

presupposes prior knowledge, prior familiarity with the field and prior ethnography, and KNOBLAUCH (in press) suggests to referring to the "elective affinity" ("Wahlverwandtschaft") between video-analysis and ethnography by the term videography. As opposed to doing observations, the technologies of recording also set the researcher free and allow for ethnographical observations, questions and reflections while making the records. Since the data collection is supported technically, researchers dispose of more time to observe specific features or to inquire into certain aspects of the already focused field. In addition to recordings, focused ethnographies consist of field observations, field interviews etc. Furthermore, it also allows the triggering of additional information on the records as well as on the events recorded. Nevertheless, the very fact of doing recordings (and managing the problem of "reactivity") tends to detach the observers from the situation to such a degree that participant observation is rarely possible, aside from situations in which observation is a participant's task. Therefore the researchers are likely to find themselves in the field-observer role. [27]

Conventional ethnographies may be called "open" since they define the boundaries of their field in the course of the fieldwork. Focused ethnography, on the other hand, restricts itself to certain aspects of fields. The entities studied in focused ethnographies are not necessarily groups, organisations or milieus but rather situations, interactions and activities, i.e. the situative performance of social actions. They lay a "focus on the particular", i.e. the "particulars of situated performance as it occurs naturally in everyday social interaction" (cf. ERICKSON 1988, p.1083). ERICKSON also stresses the link between ethnographic research and audiovisual recording. Focused ethnography, therefore, typically analyses structures and patterns of interaction, such as the coordination of work activities, the course of family arguments or meetings. [28]

Even if this short description highlights the technical aspects of focused ethnography, one should stress that it still preserves the mixture of various data typical of any ethnography (SHARROCK & ANDERSON 1987, pp.244ff). And since the ethnographers are not supposed to hide within their technologies, they are to seize the member's perspective. [29]

5. Conclusion

Instead of dwelling on the elaboration of the features of focused ethnographies, I would like to indicate their sociological implications. Critics may contend that the focus on the particular is part of a microscopic "hyper-pointillism" which cuts sociology off from more encompassing societal concerns. The empirical orientation towards the details of social practice, however, must be seen as a form of acknowledgement of the importance and relevance of the multitude of this social practice. This way, it is one way of considering what in "grand theories" is called social differentiation. In fact, focused ethnographies are studies of highly differentiated divisions of labour and a highly fragmented culture. The more diverse and short-term the fields and activities to be observed become, the more flexible, short-term and focused should be the instruments of our research. Inasmuch events, people-processing or key-situations are the basic segments of

social life, organisations and whole societies, and inasmuch as social relations, social networks, even whole social milieus depend on events, encounters and situations, the study of these building blocks of society and their order within that society becomes a quite obvious task for sociology. In studying modern society in its details, ethnographies do not only demonstrate their peculiarity; they also address the ways in which these particular fields are related to other aspects in society. This way, these ethnographies may contribute to a view of modern society that is much better "grounded" than most of the grand theories. If indeed one may concede that too many ethnographers do abstain from relating their finding to issues of more general theoretical interest, one must also acknowledge that a grounded notion of contemporary society has no alternative but to take these findings into account. [30]

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Citation

Knoblauch, Hubert (2005). Focused Ethnography [30 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *6*(3), Art. 44, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0503440.