FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 5, No. 1, Art. 24
January 2004

Review:

Maximilian C. Forte

Robert V. Kemper & Anya Peterson Royce (Eds.) (2002).
Chronicling Cultures: Long-term Field Research in Anthropology.
Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 336 pages, Cloth (ISBN 0-7591-0193-0) $75.00 US, Paper (ISBN 0-7591-0194-9) $29.95 US

Key words: longitudinal research, restudies, revisits, long-term research, collaborative research, ethnography, rapport, methodology, temporality

Abstract: *Chronicling Cultures* provides readers with detailed case histories of ethnographic projects that are long-term in duration, lasting decades in some cases and often involving multiple collaborators and new generations of researchers. The central theme of the text is that extended time spent in the field leads to both qualitative and quantitative transformations in research. Contributors to the volume examine these transformations with respect to the data gathering process, the theoretical outcomes of long-term research, the impacts on host communities and the many problems and benefits of spending extended time in the field through multiple revisits and restudies. The volume will be of especial interest to those interested in the history of anthropology and to a lesser degree those interested in field methods. Amongst the shortcomings of the volume are its somewhat loose thematic organization, the overly descriptive nature of many of the contributions, the narrow range of cases selected and the lack of diverse perspectives.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

One of the stereotypes that most dogs depictions of ethnographic field research is that of the lone anthropology student, awkward and lost, notepad clutched in nervous hands, entering a village for the routine year of fieldwork expected for earning a PhD. In anthropological contributions to discussions of research methods, comparatively little is written about projects that render the stereotype laughable at least and unjust for certain. Such projects involve not just revisits and restudies but also longitudinal, large-scale, multi-generational and collaborative research endeavours that have literally spanned decades. This is one reason why Robert KEMPER's and Anya Peterson ROYCE's edited volume, *Chronicling Cultures*, represents such a refreshing contribution to our knowledge of long-term research projects, with discussions of research projects stretching from 1945 to 2001, authored by the researchers themselves and in some cases by students and colleagues who have followed them. The volume builds on a previously thin literature which itself has been developed by some of the current

contributors to the KEMPER and ROYCE volume. Nevertheless, throughout the actual history of anthropology, as the editors indicate, long-term field research has not been as uncommon as the stereotype would suggest. Better-publicized examples include Bronislaw MALINOWSKI's three expeditions to the Trobriand Islands from 1914 through 1920; Robert REDFIELD's restudies of Chan Kom, Mexico; and, many other precedents for long-term exposure set by Alfred KROEBER, Margaret MEAD, Julian STEWARD and Raymond FIRTH. [1]

Quite apart from simply presenting an alternative vision of anthropological research methods, this robust volume can lead readers to raise broader methodological and theoretical concerns that intersect with both long-standing and current debates in anthropology. Included here are debates concerning units of analysis, the time-frame of study, interests in processes and flows, and the rising prominence of history in anthropology. *Time* has to be a critical feature of any discussion of culture as a process—processes can only be rendered visible through time. "Bringing time back in" could well have been an alternate title for the volume, for indeed the qualitative effects of temporality and change are at the core of concern in this collection of papers devoted to the subject of long-term research. As the editors explain, "Returning to the field changes how anthropologists see and what they accept" (p.xv). Extended time, built into the research process, facilitates description and explanation of both *change* and *persistence*, concepts so critical to much anthropological research for more than a century. Extended research time, as the editors note, makes us more sensitive to ethical issues of research and our personal responsibilities to those from whom we have the privilege of learning. Moreover, temporally extended studies have contributed to development studies, applied anthropology and have aided in raising new questions (p.xvi). [2]

One year is not enough. Anyone who has known the excitement, the personal and intellectual enrichment afforded by fieldwork will not only agree that twelve months are "not enough" (in the sense of wanting to prolong the joys of fieldwork), but we also come to recognize that the standard year is largely an arbitrary construct enforced more by bureaucratic and financial concerns than scientific ones. In addition, as the editors argue,

> "Because the human condition is open ended, our research designs also need to be open ended ... Our willingness to go beyond a 'typical' year is a measure of our commitment to see life on its own terms instead of through our external assumptions" (p.xviii). [3]

A lengthy span of time spent by anthropologists working in the same place and/or with the same people is set out as the basic working definition of long-term field research (p.xvi). Such research can be conducted by a single person through various repeat visits or extended years spent in the field. It may also be transgenerational in nature, bringing in students and new colleagues over the years. Long-term research may thus also involve a collaborative dimension of team research. [4]

This impressive volume, uniting between two covers documentation of some of anthropology's better known long-term ethnographic projects, will mostly be of interest to a committed anthropological readership, and useful (in part) for advanced methods courses. Given the prominent reputations foregrounding many of the contributors, if not their affiliated institutional prestige in the background, this volume may also have a place in courses on the history of anthropology, especially as such courses tend to focus on the discipline's elite few. Nonetheless, the volume has, as I believe and will explain below, a significant number of shortcomings that rather than being seen as a means of deprecating the work of the editors and contributors, should be seen as an invitation to the rest of us to contribute new works, possibly organized and presented in ways that differ from the present collection. [5]

2. Overview of the Volume

Chronicling Cultures is divided into three main parts, each preceded by useful editorial synopses that also provide a broader historical contextualization. These parts are: 1) restudies and revisits; 2) large-scale projects; and, 3) multigenerational projects. The first part focuses on research projects that began with one individual (or a couple) and developed over decades to include multiple collaborators. The second part presents three large-scale, long-term ethnographic enterprises of some repute in anthropology: the Navajo project first initiated by Clyde KLUCKHOHN's "Ramah Project" in 1936; the "Harvard Chiapas Project" started in the 1950s; and, the Ju/'hoansi-!Kung project started in the 1950s. In fact, Harvard University has figured in all of these projects. The third part of the volume consists of essays by representatives of different generations of participants in two well-known multigenerational projects: Gwembe (Zambia) and Tzintzuntzan (Mexico). [6]

While reading through the volume, I must confess that the distinctions between these parts often faded away, especially as the essays in the third part could just as easily have been placed in the first part on restudies and revisits. Moreover, some of the chapters do not seem to fit well within the overall volume. Wade PENDLETON's chapter, "Katutura and Namibia: The People, the Place, and the Fieldwork" is one example where too much time is lost on the major findings of his research—which are indeed very interesting on their own and in which the writing is fluid and accessible. Like some of the other authors, PENDLETON devotes effort to such items as producing a table with a precise listing, by date, of the total number of months he has spent in the field, offering more detail than necessary. When added to other such chapters, such as those by Evon VOGT ("The Harvard Chiapas Project: 1957-2000") and Robert V. KEMPER ("From Student to Steward: Tzintzuntzan as Extended Community"), the reading can become a rather tedious chore. The question that inevitably comes to mind is: Is this in fact a methodological volume about the problems and prospects of long-term research, or is it one whose goal is first and foremost a presentation of the history of select ethnographies? There are important differences between these last two ways of presenting such work and while the volume has successfully achieved the latter aim (one that is not stated by the editors), it does not satisfy

as a methodological treatise. Some of the authors also simply fail to demonstrate the theoretical insights that have resulted from extended research in one locale. [7]

Several authors in the volume, I assume, have been invited to establish their primacy within their respective ethnographic areas, a feature of the volume that can sometimes take an unfavourable tone. The first part of the volume, for example, presents essays that each feature a vignette of how prominent and utterly well respected the ethnographer has become in his or her host community. One mentions that a child was named after her; another has the ear of government Ministers and almost single-handedly establishes university teaching programs and research centres; yet another has a library named after her. Are these the inevitable outcomes of long-term research? That is not the question that is raised in these instances, though the volume is devoted to the subject. Instead we are treated to what seem to be essays on the "ethnographer as hero". One author, Scarlett EPSTEIN, establishes her primacy in her given geographic area in rather blunt terms, especially with reference to other researchers who had worked in the same area: "None had stayed as long as I did and none was accepted by them [the locals] as I had been" (p.66). Some authors feel relatively assured enough of their celebrity status within the discipline to speak in self-deferential terms and may even go as far as referring to their own works as "classics". Accurate though their self-assessments may be, these made for some rather embarrassing moments in the reading. One could also mention examples of some of the contributors suggesting an almost proprietary attitude towards their research subjects, acting as gatekeepers to knowledge of "their" communities—indeed, the possibility of feeling that one may have an informal right to possess a community, in scholarly terms, may itself be one of the short-comings of long-term research that does not receive attention in the volume. [8]

While focusing above on some of the shortcomings of the volume that struck me as just one reader, there are essays and other features of the volume that are extremely valuable in terms of presenting a broad and grounded exploration of the benefits and challenges of long-term research. Certainly the editors' introductions as well as their shorter introductions to each of the three parts, when added together, produce a very informative and thought provoking collection of statements and revelations. The chapter by Richard LEE and Megan BIESELE, "Local Cultures and Global Systems: The Ju/'Hoansi-!Kung and their Ethnographers Fifty Years On", is one of the few that actually draws out the impacts of long-term research on the generation of new theoretical insights, whereas others are seemingly content to explain that more research leads to more data. The chapter by Elizabeth COLSON and Thayer SCUDDER, "Long-Term Research in Gwembe Valley, Zambia", was by far one of the most sterling contributions. This chapter could be read in connection with any of a number of interests in mind, including anthropological theory, research methods, ethnography of the local and the global, the transition from colonialism to nationalism as experienced by rural peoples, the rise of the state, and the "ground-level" impact of international political economy. Perhaps the most touching, immediate and fluidly written essay is that by George M. FOSTER, "A Half Century of Field Research in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico: A Personal View", which I

would also highly commend for bringing attention to long-term temporality in field research front and centre. [9]

3. A Consideration of the Volume's Thematic Contents

The areas of interest in the volume are intended to have implications for anthropological theories, methods and ethics. In general, chapters document the histories of the given research projects, along with observations of how long-term exposure transformed their research, their methodologies and their findings; the problems and benefits of long-term research; and, the impact that long-term research has had on their host communities. [10]

In terms of the impact on the people at the centre of these various research projects, contributors to the volume generally seem to agree that there have been positive benefits. Long-term research can provide members of host communities with a sense of continuity in the face of massive dislocations. The way people see themselves as a result of this prolonged attention, and in some cases a heightened sense of pride, are observed results noted in the volume. Generally speaking, however, consideration of the impact of these projects on host communities tends to receive the least attention across the various chapters. Indeed, a number of the contributors speak of informants who have earned advanced degrees and have become researchers in their own right, with others having obtained various degrees of schooling. It is somewhat surprising, however, to see that we are still in an age where the "voice of the informant" is still left "out there", excluded and inaccessible, when some members of these communities could have actually written their own chapters addressing the impacts of these research projects on their communities and on themselves. [11]

Amongst the challenges of long-term research are those of a technical, ethical and theoretical nature. In technical terms, the problems of maintaining "minimum core data", such as census information gathered by ethnographers early on, over a period of decades, has been a daunting task. In addition, converting older data on paper into computerized databases has also been a challenge. Changes in the demography of the host community, in variables and in measurement techniques, and problems in comparing data, all afflict the viability of productive research across generations. Fostering a Hawthorne Effect amongst informants, who are the repeated focus of attention in publications, is a problem that only a few of the contributors acknowledge and which none try to resolve in this volume. In ethical terms, some of the contributors worry that prolonged dealings with key informants can create ties of dependency or aggravate material inequalities in a community with some gaining more from a researcher's budget than others. From a theoretical point of view, the data themselves may become of less interest given the theoretical vagaries of the discipline and the interests of new researchers. VOGT and LAMPHERE disagree over whether teams of researchers are advantageous or not, the latter stressing the divisive nature of diverse theoretical interests guiding different members of a project, while the former points to experience where researchers were forced to collaborate more closely and reconcile different findings. In addition to all of these changes, some

of the contributors refer to the difficulty in recruiting students to their research projects—students sometimes perceiving an area as overstudied or too dominated by one or more researchers. Those who do join these research projects can find themselves bogged down in reading decades of field notes and too much other data to even sift through in a reasonable period of time. During fieldwork, students may find themselves the involuntary inheritors of the obligations of their mentors and are called upon to provide material benefits to their mentors' informants. [12]

The contributors to the volume tend to see more benefits than disadvantages in long-term ethnography. The climate of mutual trust and respect that is established from prolonged contact and restudy is one advantage that favours further restudies. The aging process itself can facilitate the ethnographer's access to older age groups of informants, according to EPSTEIN (p.66), although FOSTER seems to suggest that one is merely preserving access to the same individuals, who age along with the ethnographer. Knowing "more" is certainly one of the persistent themes in the volume, where the benefits of restudy and revisits are concerned. For students joining established projects, and this volume includes chapters by three of these (Lisa CLIGGETT, Robert KEMPER and Peter CAHN), benefits are to be found in rapid access to volumes of ethnographic data, access to established social networks between ethnographers and informants in their respective field sites, and thus settling in and commencing research is greatly facilitated. FOSTER is one of the few contributors to devote considerable attention to the benefits of long-term temporality in research. Amongst these he includes the vital theoretical benefit that stems from the surfacing of anomalies that only long-term research can adequately bring to light (p.263). Added to this, the quantity and quality of the data obtained, the opportunity to correct and clarify, the allowance for greater serendipity in long-term exposure, and the more dynamic view of communities impacted by national and global processes are all critical, as FOSTER argues, in advancing anthropological research. COLSON and SCUDDER apparently concur in commenting on the fact that many concepts in anthropology stemmed from synchronic studies and thus stressed fixity over flux and integration over transformation. The quality and quantity of data obtained are, as FOSTER states in very memorable terms, of priceless value: "Theories come and go, but good data are timeless, grist for the anthropologist's mill when least expected" (p.266). [13]

Overall, I continue to have misgivings about the thematic organization of the volume. It might have been more productive, focused and easier to engage readers if the volume had been divided into contributions each written with an objective of concentrating on a select theme, such as time in the research process, the issue of prediction in social research, personal ties and research ethics, and so forth, rather than histories of particular projects where authors randomly and unevenly consider some or most of these themes. The tendency for authors to highlight the histories of their projects can have more of a commemorative than an edifying effect. [14]

4. Lingering Questions

While I am generally convinced of the benefits of long-term research, (I have personally engaged in revisits and restudy over a comparatively shorter period of eight years, although half of those were spent in the field), I am concerned that sceptical readers will remain unconvinced of the merits. Many of the contributors seem to have adopted a "more is better" philosophy. What are not addressed in the volume are situations where more time spent in the field can actually be harmful. I remain uneasy about the inadequately analysed assumption that clarity, correctness, or some other approximation of "truth" is merely a function of time. Can "errors" never be compounded? [15]

Indeed the unanimity of the volume's contributions is perhaps one of its greatest weaknesses, a unanimity that is expressed on too many levels. To begin with, little attention is paid to aberrant case studies of long-term research fraught by ever diminishing returns (as one possible example).The issue that anthropologists themselves have raised about the "problem" of acquiring too much familiarity with a social setting is generally left under-discussed, and strikingly so. If more time spent in a social setting is better, then why is there is no inclusion of case studies adopting an "anthropology at home" approach, an obvious implication that is never once mentioned at any point in the volume (and, indeed, all of the essays involve projects away from home, in another culture, though not necessarily outside of the national borders surrounding a researcher's home base). None of the contributors even once mention long-standing concerns of ethnographic research of any duration, such as "culture shock", "going native" (which intuitively would seem to be especially relevant in a volume on long-term research), or the possibility of "familiarity breeding contempt". On another level, unanimity is shown in the fact that in at least nine of the twelve case studies in which it was possible to determine, US-based researchers are writing. The volume is largely reflective of the experience of American anthropologists, possibly giving initiates the unwarranted impression that long-term research is a uniquely American feature of ethnography. While not accusing the volume of being out rightly hegemonic, to the extent that US doctoral programs are based on mentor-apprentice relationships between supervisors and students where mentoring is especially salient, it may not be so surprising to find more cases of students following in the footsteps of their seniors into the field, thereby creating the multigenerational effect in some of the cases explored in the volume. [16]

In a text that could be more rightly be said to be concerned with methodology than with methods, the contributions could have maximized the intersections between long-term research and historical anthropology, itself one of the more prominent methodological developments in contemporary anthropology. Contributions could also have maximized the intersections between long-term research in a given place with contemporary explorations of "space and place". [17]

While this volume has provided the reader with a very solid foundation for beginning to consider long-term research (and hopefully to convince funding bodies of its inherent merits), it should not be used as a template for further

publications on the subject. In my view, as a solitary reader, a thematically focused volume with less elite history making, more cases of anthropology at home and chapters by long-term informants would make for a very interesting and important alternative. [18]

Author

Dr. *Maximilian C. FORTE* is an Assistant Professor in Anthropology at the University College of Cape Breton, Canada. He has conducted ethnographic field research over several years in Trinidad & Tobago and is the current editor of Kacike: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology and directs the Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink. He has published papers on virtual research ethics and online research methodology. Previously in *FQS* he has published the review essay Is it Real? Problems and Prospects of Research in "the Real World".

Kontakt:

Dr. Maximilian C. Forte

Assistant Professor
Dept. of Anthropology and Sociology
University College of Cape Breton
1250 Grand Lake Road
P.O. Box 5300
Sydney, NS B1P-6L2, Canada

E-mail: max_forte@uccb.ca

Citation

Forte, Maximilian C. (2004). Review: Robert V. Kemper & Anya Peterson Royce (Eds.) (2002). Chronicling Cultures: Long-term Field Research in Anthropology [18 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *5*(1), Art. 24, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0401242.