

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS & THE STUDY OF CULTURES

A story of success
through diversity & context

→ Henrik von Wehrden



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ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES OPEN UP KNOWLEDGE IN COMMUNITIES

Knowing
cultures

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WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK?

Ethnographic fieldwork, carried out according to the method of **long-term participant-observation**, is what defines social anthropology. The method is **inductive** and **open-ended**. As such, the method directs the anthropologist to study that which is of **significance** to the **community** studied rather than test a number of hypotheses formulated in advance of the fieldwork.

Howell, Signe. (2018) 2023. "Ethnography". In The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology, edited by Felix Stein. Facsimile of the first edition in The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Online: <http://doi.org/10.29164/18ethno>



A SHORT CRITICAL HISTORY

Story of colonialism
Patriarchy
Continuous racism
Exceptions often marginalised
Neo-Colonialism
Recent diversification



Nicholas
Tindale

Bronisław Malinowski Margaret Mead



PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Not the fly on the wall

Embedded research

Contextual knowledge

As inductive as possible

Case study choice

Learn the local language & norms

Deeply qualitative documentation



OTHER METHODS & DATA SOURCES

Photography

Filming

Social media

AI searches

etc.



BIAS & ETHICAL QUESTIONS (SHORT SELECTION)

Influence on communities

Danger to communities

Danger to researchers

A clash of two worlds

Informed consent?

Ownership of knowledge

Level of embeddedness

Mode of interaction

etc....



A WORD ON AUTOETHNOGRAPHY & POSITIONALITY

Observe once own research

Reflect your roles

Discuss your relative & absolute positionality

Be transparent and extensive in your data



RECORDING BEHAVIOUR

Who owns the data?

Fieldnotes were the beginning...

Photography as snapshots

Movies to document practices

Digital revolution



EXAMPLE STUDY

Chicago Crack gangs

Initially static questionnaire

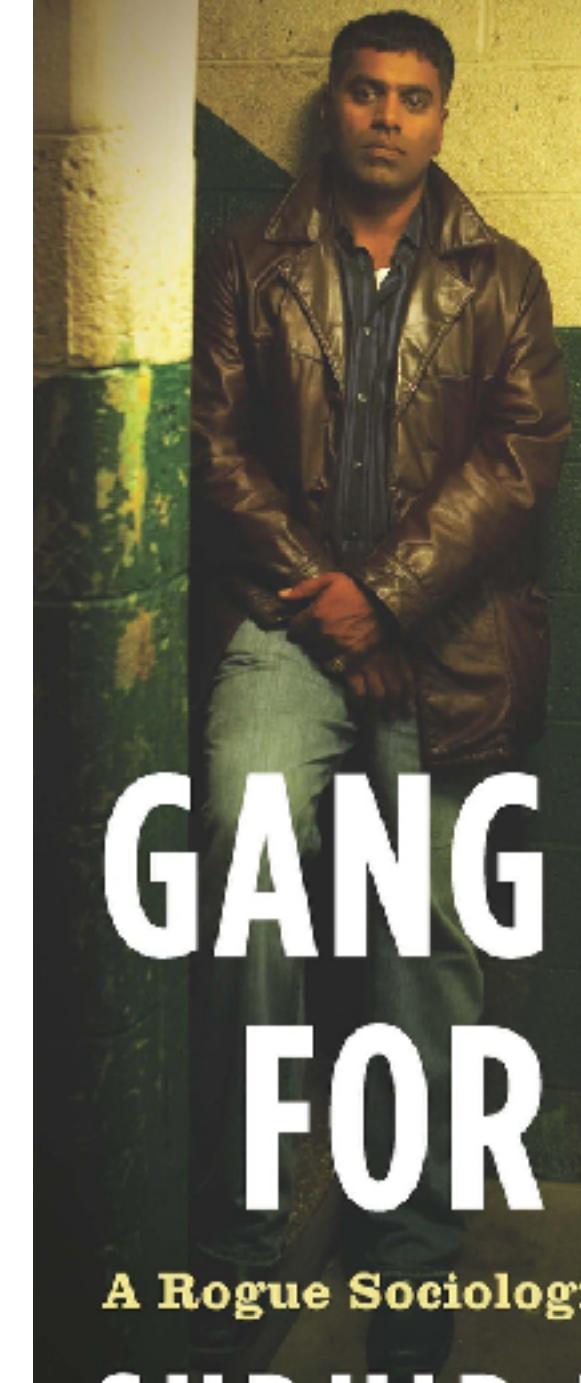
Ethnographic embeddedness

Years of research

Strong & complex community structures

“Board of directors”

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



GANG LEADER FOR A DAY

A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets

SUDHIR VENKATESH

Foreword by Stephen J. Dubner, coauthor of FREAKONOMICS

OPENING UP OF ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES

Learning environments

Critical ethnography

Business organisations

Alternative communities

Journalism

Arts



OUTLOOK

The digital is exploding
Ethical problems follow
Novel forms of research
Against the quantitative trend
Diversifying
Empowering



SUMMARY

- Ethnographic studies are deeply rooted in abuse and patriarchy
- Early cases prove their value
- Build on many methods, rooted in many disciplines
- Highly qualitative “snapshots” in time
- Becoming more embedded
- As long as there is culture, there will be ethnography



CONTACT

Henrik von Wehrden | Faculty of Sustainability
Universitätsallee 1 | 21335 Lüneburg
Fon 04131.677-1671 | henrik.von_wehrden@leuphana.de
<https://henrikvonwehrden.web.leuphana.de>