

SPRINGER BRIEFS IN EDUCATION

Teena Clerke

Nick Hopwood

Doing Ethnography in Teams

A Case Study of
Asymmetries
in Collaborative
Research



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Preface

This book constitutes a detailed and accessible case study documenting our collaborative approach to **doing ethnography** in a professional health practice setting. We explicitly articulate the nature of our collaboration through the term ‘asymmetry’. Asymmetry describes the unevenness in our team, and how doing ethnography in uneven teams unfolds. For example, while Nick and Teena worked together on an ethnographic research project in Sydney, Australia, in 2010–2011, our work varied on a number of registers: the hours we each worked, the roles in which we engaged, and our different professional and research experiences and knowledge. These differences informed our individual fieldwork practices and insights, and our asymmetrical approach to collaborative analysis, writing and publishing.

Asymmetry may also be seen as a neutered term for power. As a relation of power, gender is a constant sub-text in this book, within fieldwork, in the relationship between us, in relationships with participants and within the research setting itself. We flesh out how our collaboration unfolded and evolved through the ethnographic process, warts and all. By fully accounting for the nature of our relationship and the asymmetries, we set a new standard for what it means to talk about and describe team ethnography, which contrasts with the reductive use of terms in methodological texts and what they are associated with. What follows is a punchy and provocative account of the nuts-and-bolts of uneven (not unequal) research relationships, the details of which are usually not shared in such texts. It therefore constitutes a high level of critical self-analysis and reflection and a thorough documentation of every aspect of the research and analysis process, along with the differences and tensions in the team about this. With Teena as lead author, rather than exploited collaborator who receives no credit, the book is a valuable exemplar of the inversion of the power relation between chief investigator and research assistant. We anticipate it will be a useful reminder to ethnographers that they work in teams, either tangibly or effectively; and that there are power relationships in all teams that can be exploited positively for best-use value.

Historically, options for teaching and learning ethnography have been somewhat limited, focused on (i) jumping in at the deep end and doing it; (ii) reading full ethnographic accounts and drawing from explicit and implicit information as to what was done; (iii) reading methods textbooks that describe ethnographic

methodological principles and practices, often with accompanying illustrations. In this book we offer a fourth, and much less developed option: that of a full, detailed, reflexive warts-and-all account of how our ethnography was done. By showing ethnographic rigour in its specificity, we provide a new means for learning about ethnography and in particular, doing ethnography with someone else. What this book does, which much of the ethnographic literature on collaboration and teamwork literature does not, is to provide detailed descriptions and illustrations of our teamwork processes. It combines empirical detail with a discussion on method, which counters the many normative prescriptions and recommendations in the ethnographic literature. We incorporate visuals of different forms within the fieldnotes and the analysis, including an innovative methodological approach to tracing photographs. This case study will therefore be useful for those working in health or education settings, as well as those new to ethnographic methods, those working in multidisciplinary teams and those keen to get a sense of the messy practicalities of the ethnographic research process.

Each of the six chapters focuses on what was asymmetrical, how it worked, what we thought was effective and what we have learned. In each chapter, we discuss the nuts-and-bolts of ‘uneven’ relationships, and how we exploited this unevenness in highly productive ways.

We introduce the study and ourselves in [Chap. 1](#), through a brief explanation of the research context and what we were observing, and short individual biographies.

[Chapter 2](#) briefly accounts for the historical emergence of collaborative ethnography and team ethnography. We explain the differences between these approaches and show how our collaborative approach to doing ethnography in teams occupies a distinctive niche within this literature.

[Chapter 3](#) describes the ethnographic research methods we employed, focusing on our divergent practices and how the study benefited from this divergence. We use visual representations of these practices to give a sense of how differently each of us conducted fieldwork, and what these differences produced.

[Chapter 4](#) is the most detailed chapter. It documents, by way of description, excerpts and images, the team processes we devised for managing fieldwork, analysing data, and writing and disseminating research outcomes. We account for our individual understandings and insights into what was going on in the research setting, and how we jointly made sense of this during an intensive one-day discussion. The focus is on how our different ideas complemented, affirmed and enriched the research outcomes.

In [Chap. 5](#) we reflect on our individual experiences of asymmetrical team ethnography.

[Chapter 6](#) identifies what we consider to be essential for asymmetrical team ethnography. It is for readers to judge which processes, methods and approaches may be useful to their own particular contexts.

The book concludes with references and appendices, of which Appendices 2 and 3 list our recommendations for further reading.

Acknowledgments

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Alison Lee was an early supporter of the study, and we note, with great sadness, her passing in September 2012. We acknowledge Alison's commitment to research pedagogy and her profound influence on both of us as researchers and writers.

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