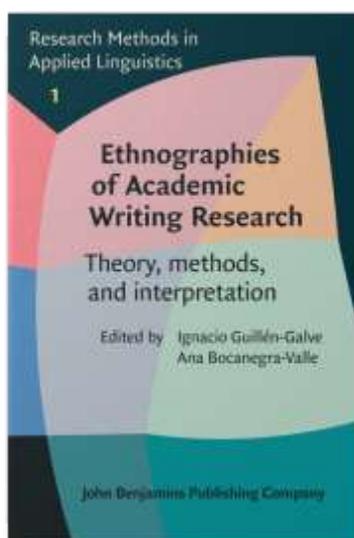


BOOK REVIEW



DEEPENING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH WORK ACROSS ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

**Ignacio Guillén-Galve and Ana
Bocanegra-Valle (Eds.).**

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The prevalence of ethnography has indisputably been growing in studies of academic writing across contexts. Though mostly all hearkening back to the discussion of theoretical models emphasizing *thick description* of practices, groups, and contexts (Geertz, 1973), these ethnographic studies have taken a range of approaches to investigating writing practices and experiences of particular academic groupings (e.g. Dressen-Hammouda, 2014; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Swales, 1998). Adding to these discussions of academic disciplines, other researchers have drawn on ethnographic methods to describe the often-underemphasized language practices of marginalized students (e.g. Alvarez, 2017; Ávila Reyes, this collection; Canagarajah, 2012). Though different, all fall within the general bounds of ethnography. This collection contributes to these conversations about what constitutes ethnography and how such research is carried out, outlining major features of ethnographic research and linking them to detailed examples, illustrating the potential for studying academic writing in ways not captured by other research methodologies.

The collection opens with a Foreword by Theresa Lillis, describing the potential for ethnography to take researchers' understandings of academic writing beyond the *a priori* formalism that can permeate some approaches to genre analysis. She argues that, because of the inherently social nature of writing practices, ethnography is best-suited to understand the lived experiences of writers and communities. Further, she suggests that, by laying bare the social construction of writing practices, ethnographers can engage in counter-hegemonic work that sheds

light on otherwise underrepresented values. This potential for highlighting the unseen runs strongly throughout this collection.

Chapter 1, written by the editors, reviews the methodological considerations central to ethnographic work. While this collection foregrounds the need for more of the *deep theorizing* called for by Lillis (2008) and many others, the editors claim that the collection can be differentiated from other works on ethnographies of academic writing by accentuating how ethnographic studies respond to Canagarajah's (2011) call for dialogical pedagogy that highlights the interactions between researchers and participants, a thread picked up throughout the collection. Bocanegra-Valle and Guillén-Galve conclude the chapter by highlighting the contributions the collection makes to discussions of thick description, deep theorizing, researcher reflexivity, and ethics, as well as a call for ethnographic researchers to go beyond observing and describing by taking up the role of tellers of insiders' stories.

In Chapter 2, Christine M. Tardy provides a reflective grounding for ethnographic researchers, investigating the meaning of *thick description* in twenty-one research articles using the term. One of Clifford Geertz's most-cited concepts in ethnographic research, *thick description* is, according to Tardy, used rather variably, sometimes resonating with the Geertzian sense of the term and other times seeming "to mean simply *close detail* or perhaps *rich description*, adopting the term in a way that seems mostly performative" (p. 34). Tardy examined five elements of ethnographic research in these texts that often constitute thick description: multiple data sources, sustained engagement, attention to emic perspectives, elements of researcher reflexivity, and explicit interpretation or theorization. By highlighting the varying ways that researchers incorporated these elements, Tardy provides a useful reminder to readers that ethnographic work takes on a range of forms. Of especial relevance for researchers looking to follow Tardy's advice and maintain a rich theoretical orientation to ethnography is her discussion of *thick participation* rooted in deep relationships constructed over time. Though none of the studies Tardy reviewed use the term *thick participation* explicitly, she highlights Sarangi's (2005, 2007) work as especially relevant for researchers to consider when designing ethnographic projects, since it stresses the importance of building and reflecting on long-term engagements in research sites.

Jennifer Sizer's discussion of textography in Chapter 3 provides a thorough guide for researchers interested in taking up this particular form of ethnography-influenced work. Largely offering an overview of Swales's (1998) *Other floors, other voices*, the chapter would be particularly interesting to genre-focused researchers who are looking to incorporate more ethnographically-inflected methods in their current work. For such readers, Sizer offers a series of methodological considerations to help avoid potential *reductionist* practices that risk "cherry picking research methods but not adopting an ethnographic perspective or theoretical outlook" (p. 48). Sizer lays out her discussions of textographic methodologies to highlight how researchers can adopt these practices authentically, noting, for example, multiple ways for textographers to incorporate thick description, thick participation, contextualization, and narrativization.

In this way, Sizer's chapter is especially effective in its emphasis on the interwoven nature of different elements of textography, which all contribute together to construct a fuller picture of academic writing contexts and practices.

In Chapter 4, Sofía Albero-Posac and María José Luzón describe thirty-seven articles studying scholarly communication in digital and online settings, highlighting the ethnographic methods these researchers drew on to understand participation in these contexts. Throughout, Albero-Posac and Luzón insist that their purpose is not to simply provide a "systematic review of these articles and their results, but to identify and illustrate how the principles of traditional ethnography [...] have been adapted to account for scholars' online practices as part of their academic activity" (p. 62). Their discussions of *blended* and *guerilla ethnography* are particularly useful for surfacing the complexities inherent in studying writing in digital spaces, emphasizing alternative approaches to observation, document collection and analysis, participant interaction, and self-reflection. Therefore, this chapter would be of interest to new researchers who are interested in designing an ethnographic study of digital writing practices, but also might be particularly useful to experienced ethnographic researchers who are looking to transition into digital spaces and are in the process of figuring out how to adapt their practices.

In Chapter 5, Rosa M. Manchón suggests the potential value of ethnographic methods for researchers studying the *hidden* aspects of L2 writers' writing processes and text production processes. Manchón argues that, while these processes have been more commonly studied through socio-cognitive frames, expanding research methods to include ethnographically-oriented approaches can help to better understand the relationship between the individual and the social in the act of composing. To do so, Manchón usefully reminds readers of Lillis's (2008) distinction between *talk around texts* and *talk around processes and strategies*, an important addition to this collection since, due to the focus of each individual chapter, descriptions of the former might slightly outweigh the latter. Throughout the chapter, Manchón alludes to the widespread intellectual shifts toward sociocultural understandings of L2 writing, arguing that it is useful to incorporate ethnographic methods alongside "a narrowly quantitative cognitive analytic perspective" (p. 100) in order to more fully appreciate learners' experiences. These considerations are useful for those of us who might still be facing audiences who remain somewhat skeptical of the value of ethnographically-oriented methods when compared to larger-scale quantitative analytics. Manchón's emphasis on the invisible elements of second language writing processes therefore serves a complex purpose: not only reminding readers that ethnography can uncover important things about those practices, but that it can reveal things that other methods cannot.

Chapters 6 and 7 shift from descriptions of different aspects of ethnographic work to case studies in putting ethnographic methodologies into practice, though both do so by highlighting the ways that particular methods take precedence in response to the exigencies of a given study. In Chapter 6, Baraa Khuder and Bojana Petrić describe their work with Syrian academics reestablishing themselves and

their research in exile. Khuder and Petrić offer an exemplary account of deep theorizing in their presentation of details of their study and the methodological decisions made throughout the process. Through descriptions of choices related to participant recruitment, conducting and analyzing interviews, use of text histories, representation of participants and their experiences, and collaborative ethics, Khuder and Petrić provide a guide for future ethnographic researchers designing projects in general and work with vulnerable populations in specific. Central to all of these discussions is a call for researchers to engage in deep theorizing by drawing a distinction between mere reflection and reflexivity, noting that “while reflection means merely thinking about an issue, reflexivity is more dynamic, immediate, and entails continuing self-awareness” (p. 106). To illustrate this distinction, each section of the chapter highlights an attempt to be reflexive in methodological choices and orientation toward participants. While certainly instructive for new ethnographers, these examples could prove equally useful for more experienced ethnographic researchers insofar as they offer guidance on the always-important process of continually interrogating researcher positionality and assumptions. Thus, Khuder and Petrić provide, arguably, the most detailed example of the deep theorizing discussed in this collection.

In chapter 7, Natalia Ávila Reyes illustrates the ways that ethnographically-oriented methods can foreground the perspectives of underrepresented students, emphasizing the potential that an attention to the emic can have when working against deficit frames of these students. Ávila Reyes’s chapter describes two related longitudinal studies in which she worked with cohorts of underrepresented students as they moved through their first two years of university study. She shows how literacy histories and talk around texts provided insights into these students’ experiences with language before and after entering University, an important prerequisite to the dialogical pedagogy emphasized by Canagarajah (2011) and the counter-hegemonic potential described by Lillis to open this collection. In this way, Ávila Reyes’s chapter is particularly important to researchers who are interested in developing a deeper understanding of such marginalized voices.

The collection concludes with an Afterward by Dwight Atkinson, consisting of a series of “scenes” in which he reiterates his position that ethnography – because of all the complexities discussed in preceding chapters – might best be understood as an anti-methodology, reminding readers of the human nature of storytelling, saying that, if ethnography exists at all, it does so as part of that larger tradition.

Throughout this collection, readers develop deeper understandings of what insights ethnographic methods can offer, with special emphasis on those that might not otherwise be accessible to other kinds of researchers. On one hand, chapters like Manchón’s and Ávila Reyes’s provide clear examples of the invisible and (especially in the case of Ávila Reyes’s underrepresented students) sometimes suppressed processes and perspectives surfaced by ethnographic work. Similarly, Alberro-Posac and Luzón’s suggestion that ethnographic methods offer important reorientations to texts and writers in digital spaces illustrates the potential for seeing beyond what

mere text-based research might. But on the other hand, the collection's emphasis on deep theorizing and reflexivity also highlights several ways that ethnographic methods can deepen researchers' understanding of their own positionality vis-à-vis their own work. Such attention to theoretical rigor is bound up in the push for researchers to take on a reflexive stance that, as Khuder and Petric's chapter makes clear, is ongoing and might be considered a requirement for research to be described as ethnographic. Similarly, Tardy suggests that a more theoretically-attuned approach to thick description might be a prerequisite for fulfilling the more specifically Geertzian requirements of ethnography. Thus, for both novice and experienced researchers, this collection provides a rich range of opportunities to continually deepen their approaches to this theoretical and reflexive work.

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