

INTERACTIONIST RESEARCH: EXTENDING METHODS, EXTENDING FIELDS

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Abstract

Symbolic interactionist research has long been associated with qualitative methods, and with ethnographic fieldwork in particular. This chapter outlines the basic principles that underpin such affinity, while acknowledging that there is no one-to-one correspondence between interactionism and any one research strategy. It is suggested that too much qualitative research and methodology has lost its fundamental sociological commitments. The relevance of interactionism therefore needs to be reasserted. It then goes on to discuss some of the ways in which ethnographic fieldwork has been 'extended'. Those extensions include: extending 'fields' beyond face-to-face encounters, to incorporate virtual environments; extending the ethnographer's gaze, by means of digital cameras and camcorders; extending the senses, through the development of sensory ethnography; extending the ethnographer through critical self-reflection; extending analysis and representation through multiple forms of non-traditional styles of writing and representation.

Introduction

This chapter outlines a number of directions in which research methods and analytic strategies have developed since the 1980s. We explore the connotations of 'extending methods' in examining some new strategies in the collection and analysis of data relevant to interactionist fieldwork. If the actor of classic interactionism was often a disembodied one, then newer methods allow us to capture her or his physical, embodied activity. The sense of interaction is extended by observing how actors interact with a spatial environment. Greater attention is paid to how actors engage with material things as well as with other actors. The 'fields' of ethnographic fieldwork are increasingly extended by being dispersed and distributed, not least through social media. We can pay ever closer attention to the organization of communicative acts by digital means. Social media can provide opportunities to examine how identities are formulated in interaction over time, and how senses of self are constituted. Interaction and the management of the self are mediated by and through many media – textual, visual, auditory. We do not need to be hidebound by rigid definitions of SI

(which is itself subject to considerable change) in appealing to methods and analyses that reflect interactionism's guiding principles.

In the course of this chapter we shall not attempt to review all of the methodological implications of interactionist sociology. The field of (symbolic) interactionism is now extensive, and highly variegated, as other chapters in this Handbook attest. Likewise, the research methods that are associated with interactionist research (broadly defined) are varied. There is no single orthodoxy, theoretical, methodological or epistemological that can be assigned unequivocally to symbolic interactionism. We shall, however, sketch out what we regard as the fundamental commitments of the research tradition that is closely associated with the main strands of interactionist work. It is, after all, a characteristic of decades of interactionist sociology that its influence is to be found most deeply embedded in programmes of empirical research (cf Atkinson and Housley 2003). Inevitably, therefore, methodological issues of direct relevance to interactionist sociology are to be found beyond the confines of that particular tradition. We prefer to use the term interactionism in this context, rather than the more narrowly defined symbolic interactionism, as the former captures that broader tendency within sociology that includes empirical work in the style of the Second Chicago School (Fine 1995) - urban and organisational ethnography, deviance studies, workplace and occupational ethnography (Atkinson and Housley 2003; Gibson and vom Lehn 2018) - that is not always captured by the narrower term, although we recognise that some authors use symbolic interactionism to include that broader stream of sociology (see Gibson and vom Lehn 2018, p. 22 ff.)

Fieldwork in social settings exemplifies the pragmatist roots of interactionism. It promotes knowledge through a sustained engagement with the (social) world. It is exploratory. Its character derives from the underlying pragmatist philosophy that advocates abductive reasoning as the basis for social exploration (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) and that was the basis for the original formulation of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Ideas are thus based on the repeated question: 'What could this be a case of?' (Atkinson 2017). The particularities of local scenes and settings are transcended by using and extending generic ideas that link differing social circumstances and contrasting social worlds. Regrettably, grounded theory has subsequently been treated as a set of procedural devices, based on coding (often of interview data), and as a methodology or paradigm in its own right, rather than as a characterisation of any empirical inquiry, and of the fruitful interactions between

concrete circumstances or observations and generic ideas. We touch on some of the tensions in the conceptualisation of analysis later in this chapter.

The most elementary principle of ethnographic fieldwork in the interactionist tradition is that it uses the methods of everyday life to study everyday life itself. The ethnographer, therefore, develops an understanding in the same way as the novice or stranger : by watching, listening and asking. The ethnographer is the analogue of interactionism's model social actor: an adaptable explorer of surrounding social worlds; capable of comprehending actions beyond their immediate effect; able to imagine past and future actions as well as acting in the present; capable of reflecting upon her or his own actions as well as those of others, and therefore able to take the role of the other. Interactionism is not defined by ethnographic fieldwork, however, and qualitative research in general does not *ipso facto* become interactionist. These are family resemblances: there is really little 'pure' symbolic interactionist fieldwork that has no affinities with other traditions: influences can be varied: social phenomenology – with its emphasis on treating aspects of everyday life as 'strange' – is a pervasive influence (Eberle 2015; vom Lehn and Hitzler 2015); ethnomethodology has also influenced many ethnographers. Broadly interactionist ideas are implicit in many versions of 'qualitative' research, although too much qualitative work ignores disciplinary foundations (Atkinson 2015).

The key difference between ordinary everyday action and ethnographic investigation is this: the ethnographer uses everyday means, but uses them self-consciously. That is the equivalent of the phenomenological distinction between the 'natural' and the 'theoretical' attitudes. In the natural attitude the social actor is content to use practical means to achieve practical ends, with little concern for how they get done. In the theoretical attitude, the actor reflects not merely on the *what* of practical life, but also on the *how*. The field researcher, therefore, exhibits a hyper-conscious version of the interactionist model actor – engaging in practical activities in concert with fellow men and women, *and* simultaneously reflecting upon the content and meanings of those engagements.

Several things are, however, abundantly clear. First, there is now a vast corpus of methodological and empirical work that is identified as 'qualitative', but recognises little or nothing of the interactionist tradition: although as Atkinson and Housley (2003) argue, many interactionist ideas have become incorporated into generic sociological strands – such as those celebrating the 'practice' and the 'cultural' turns. Second, much of what currently

passes for qualitative research or qualitative inquiry has singularly little in common with interactionist sociology (or indeed with any sociological analysis), even when leading practitioners such as Denzin have their own intellectual roots in interactionism. Third, there has been a drift of qualitative research away from its disciplinary roots. Consequently, too little qualitative research is directly focused on matters of social interaction and the interaction order, social organisation and institutions, moral careers and biographical constructions. While ‘qualitative research’ has become widespread in the social sciences, too little is focused on the interaction order – on collective social activity, on the social production of identities, or on the cultural resources of shared understanding.

Before we think, therefore, of ‘extending’ research methods for interactionist sociology, we need collectively to reaffirm the basic principles of interactionist research. We shall, therefore, identify a number of key commitments. Not all interactionist sociologists would subscribe to all of these criteria in equal measure, but taken together they help to identify affinities. In essence, interactionist research is based on the homology between the researcher and the researched. The ideal-typical social actors of symbolic interactionism, in Mead’s social psychology and onwards, are capable of self-awareness. They reflect on their self as an object as well as being an active subject. Social life can thus be imagined as a series of dialogues – the internal dialogue between the I and the Me, and the dialogue between the Self and the Other. There is a symmetry between the interactionist actor and the interactionist researcher. Both use the methods of everyday life. The researcher does so self-consciously, capable of reflecting on her or his engagements with the social world, and on the processes of learning and interpretation that are gleaned from such interactions. To that extent – to borrow from the ethnomethodological tradition – interactionist fieldwork uses everyday methods of inquiry simultaneously as resources and topics for research processes.

Extensions

Interactionist fieldwork is predicated on the methods of everyday life. But in the past it has not deployed all of those methods equally. The methods of participant observation have depended on a limited variety of the senses. An emphasis on face-to-face encounters has the potential to restrict the interactionist’s sense of the ‘field’ of inquiry. Interaction through talk has sometimes led to a relative neglect of other modalities of action. The social actor is too readily portrayed as a disembodied self. Consequently we need to pay attention to the variety of sensory modes of inquiry: an extended range of interactions, and of extended methods of

research that are faithful to the phenomena of everyday life (such as spaces and place, bodily work, an extended range of senses, and situations that are distributed in time and place.) This is reflected in the diversity of research strategies among interactionists and field researchers.

We do not need to confine the ‘fields’ of ethnographic exploration to face-to-face encounters or communities. Everyday life is not conducted solely on that basis. ‘Virtual’ communities are also significant (Hine 2015). The everyday world is also a digital world, and the fields of research also encompass that. We can use the everyday nature of digital communication to document such phenomena. Such research should remain faithful to the basic principles of interactionist research, however. Cyber-ethnography deals with social action and social organization in such virtual settings. Matthew Williams, for instance, undertook an ethnographic study of multi-user domains (MUDs) in which participants can take on virtual identities (avatars), and interact with one another in virtual worlds (Williams 2006). He focused on mechanisms of social control within such domains. Acting as a virtual participant observer he demonstrates that participant observation is not confined to here-and-now contexts, but can also take place in virtual social worlds (Williams 2006). The virtual embodiment of cyber-spaces provides a key opportunity for ethnographic exploration. There is no fundamental distinction between ‘virtual’; and ‘real’ environments.

Boellstorff and his colleagues provide a major statement on the ethnography of virtual worlds (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor 2012). They see themselves as ethnographers who conduct ethnography in virtual worlds, not as ‘virtual ethnographers’ (p. 4). The ethnographic study of ‘virtual’ worlds and other social worlds can be undertaken in similar ways. Virtual ethnography does, of course, call for the acquisition of local knowledge that includes some technical skills – such as learning how to operate as an avatar – but again this is no different in principle from the conduct of ethnography in any specialised or esoteric domain.

In their recent studies Hindmarsh, Heath and Fraser have reiterated the need for firsthand, empirical research in virtual social settings. Introducing their work on virtual reality, they stress that far too many commentators on ‘cyber’ or ‘virtual’ phenomena are preoccupied with projections of global social trends and imagined futures, but undertake little or no research on practical social action in virtual settings (e.g. Hindmarsh, Heath and Fraser 2006). They emphasise the extent to which action in a virtual world is dependent on concrete action in the material domain. It is unwise to extrapolate towards an (unknowable) future in

which human actors are transformed into cyborgs and ‘virtual’ action is divorced from the mundane practicalities of ordinary social life.

Ethnographic fields are extended in other ways. An enhanced sense of space, place and motion can transform the subject-matter and the methods of fieldwork. Consider, for instance, some of the classics of modern urban ethnography. They are defined by places (e.g., *Tally’s Corner*, *A Place on the Corner*) where participants come and stay put. They eat, drink, and talk. The ethnographies capitalise on the exchange of conversation in such settings. They are exercises in sedentary ethnography. Immobility is the main characteristic of the observed activity. This is not inherently a bad thing. But it highlights the relative lack of observed motion in many ethnographies. Fields have been extended and modified by recent attention to studies of mobility and mobile methods (Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017; Edensor 2010). While the classic urban ethnographies stressed speed and movement in the modern metropolis, they did not make mobility an explicit topic of inquiry. Contemporary fieldwork, on the other hand, not only deals with mobility, it also develops and uses mobile methods (e.g. Vannini 2012). Such methods are themselves reflections of ubiquitous digital technology: videos, audio-recordings and images can be collected on the move, while wearable devices mean that both the ethnographer and participants can record their own mobility. In the same spirit, methods such as the ‘go-along’ can prove faithful to the everyday activities of social actors (Bergeron, Paquette and Poullaouec-Gonidec 2014). They stand in contrast to the static or sedentary data-collection of the single-site ethnography or the more conventional interview. Mobile methods are thus in themselves methods for the study of mobility itself (Merriman 2014).

Extending the gaze

Almost by definition, ethnographic participant observation has been a visual activity, in that watching the actions of others is a fundamental research activity. Observation is now routinely extended through the collection and analysis of visual data. For the interactionist, this form of participant observation remains faithful to the methodological imperative to pay close attention to the forms of everyday activity. The ready availability of digital devices – cameras, camcorders and smartphones – means that visual resources are now among the methods of everyday life. The ethnographer can collect interactional data in a way that has rarely been possible until recent decades. Wearable technology means that such devices are

also extensions of the observing self, and can render visible otherwise overlooked aspects of mundane action.

The intensified gaze of visual ethnography is not new. Photography and film have been associated with sociological and anthropological fieldwork for over a century. What is newer is the intensity of visual record-making, and – more significantly – the centrality of the visual to ethnographic analysis: images are not merely illustrative, but are core data. Such phenomena, captured in permanent recordings, can thus be rendered as topics for fine-grained examination. The analyst can document precisely *how* mundane work and interaction are accomplished: just how the physician undertakes a physical examination of the patient's body; how the experienced craft-worker manipulates materials, tools and the body in creating artefacts; how embodied social interaction is managed through practical action as well as through the exchange of talk. Such visual analysis aligns interactionist analysis with varieties of ethnomethodological work, not least in permitting fine-grained attention to the multiple modalities of collaboratively organised social interaction (Mondada 2012, 2014).

In recent years, the somewhat limited sense of 'observation' implied in most participant-observation has been extended to incorporate a wider repertoire of sensory perceptions. In some quarters, this has become identified as 'sensory ethnography' (Pink 2009). The senses are always implied in fieldwork; the extension lies in greater awareness of the sensory basis of ethnographic comprehension. Ethnographic fieldwork and interactionist sociology have implicitly relied on the full range of senses, insofar as participation and observation imply full presence in the field. Classics of early urban sociology emphasised the extent to which city streets were thronged and noisy. The urban ethnographers of the Chicago School were under no illusion concerning the dense soundscapes and smellscapes of their surroundings, but such phenomena were not foregrounded. Soundscapes and smellscapes are now key aspects of the contemporary canon of ethnographic research (e.g., Rice 2013).

There are major studies that address, in different ways, the enculturation of the hand and the eye, and therefore address the significance of touch and grasp in the acquisition and use of esoteric, specialised competence. David Sudnow's is a classic phenomenological description of an organised, co-ordinated activity (Sudnow 1978). He carefully traces his own performance of jazz piano. That requires a close coordination of the senses: the ear and the eye, the hands and the body. Posture and the management of the hand undergird such production: 'A grasp of the setting of the keyboard, and its dimensions relative to the hand's

and arm's extension from the center of the body, develops. In time this skill becomes so elaborated that a precisely maintained alignment from the center point is itself unnecessary' (p. 13). Felicitous performance is impossible without the adequate socialisation of touch (as well as sight and hearing). The way of the hand is not only about touch, it is also a matter of knowing or sensing where objects are available to one's reach, and one's grasp. In a very similar reflective study, Chernoff (1979) learned African drumming, in Northern Ghana. His remarkable book includes unusually detailed analyses of the aesthetics and techniques of drumming. The way of the hand is implicated in a complex array of sensory phenomena – notably an acquired competence in following rhythmic and temporal patterns.

Paterson (2009) offers a valuable overview of the treatment of haptic knowledge in human geography, with wider significance beyond that particular discipline. He notes that 'the body' has been granted significance as a topic in a great deal of current social science, but writing *about* sensations of touch and feeling is less common, and is more difficult – not least in terms of finding appropriate language. Consequently, embodied fieldwork is actually rather under-developed. The dominance of the visual endures, Paterson suggests. He echoes Crang (2003) who suggests that there is an absence of work on and from 'haptic knowledges'. As Paterson makes clear, haptic knowing and the study of touch are necessarily embedded in complex orders of the senses, and in sensory explorations (e.g. Stoller 1997). While touch has received some degree of attention in recent years (see Classen 2005) there remains need and opportunity to explore further haptic aspects of embodied fieldwork.

Many commentators have emphasised the extent to which the senses are intertwined in the formation of experience. Touch and feeling can be communicated visually, while vision, taste, smell and motion are all mutually implicated in everyday activities, such as walking (Pink, Hubbard, O'Neill and Radley 2010; Taussig 1993). The sensory experience of ordinary activities reflects its carnal, embodied character, and that commonplace observation is most visible in a number of fields, such as the sociology of sport (e.g. Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2010). Dutkiewicz (2015) describes particularly clearly the embodied action of rock-climbing. This requires an engagement of the climber with the rock that is visual, kinaesthetic and haptic; the climber must grasp and cling to it while plotting a route, and in addition to the use of embodied techniques and skills. The climber does not merely touch the rock: he or she interacts physically with it, and experiences it through the entire body. Haptic and, more generally, carnal ethnography is reflected in a number of monographs on embodied sport (Delamont, Stephens and Campos 2017; Wacquant 2005).

Extending the ethnographer

The ‘extensions’ we have already outlined imply – metaphorically speaking – extending the researcher in the field. The extended gaze and the incorporation of a wider range of senses, all commit the field researchers to renewed and increasingly demanding acts of self-consciousness. This enhanced sense of ‘the field’ carries in its train an equally heightened level of self-awareness on the part of the ethnographer. This encompasses not only the cognitive attention to multiple forms of action and organisation. It also implies a heightened sense of the affective foundations of fieldwork, that is embodied and emotional. This is an extension in the sense that the researcher cannot operate as if she or he were a detached, neutral observer devoid of any affective engagement with (or repulsion from) the ‘others’ with whom she or he interacts. Hence the extensions of fieldwork also imply ethnographers who are themselves ‘extended’ beyond the safe intellectual territories of dispassionate, disengaged observation (cf Collins and Gallinat 2010). They are no longer the origin of cool observation, but more passionately engaged as a participant, and as a sentient, sensuous being. The ethnographer in contemporary fieldwork practice is thus an actor who functions in terms of all the senses. The optic of participant *observation* is thus supplemented by haptic, olfactory and auditory senses. The fieldworker is embodied. He or she also acknowledges her or his feelings, rather than being a perfectly detached observer of the surrounding social world. The actor of interactionist sociology, and the ethnographer are now constructed in thoroughly embodied ways (Waskul and Vannini 2006).

Extending analysis and representation

The variety of methods we have already discussed imply different kinds of data, and hence an equal variety of analytic perspectives. We do not review them all in this short chapter. Rather, we identify some major trends, notably analytic strategies that extend in contrary directions. The analysis of qualitative data, even from within the interactionist traditions, is drawn in opposite directions. On the one hand, ‘analysis’ is rendered in technicist, procedural terms, while at the other extreme is an interpretivism that owes more to ‘art’.

The procedural strategy is closely associated with versions of ‘grounded theory’ (GT) that are somewhat simplified, sometimes vulgarised, versions of the original formulation by Glaser and Strauss. While widely treated as a definitive source, Charmaz (2014) provides the clearest example. Her approach is predicated on two things: data are transcripts of extended interviews, and analysis is inductive. Data are inspected and coded in order to generate

themes and concepts. Exponents of GT tend to describe it as a protocol-based approach to the systematic ordering of 'data', rather than an iterative interaction between ideas and observations, formulated in the context of an unfolding and developmental research design. Although coding-based analysis is not necessarily tied to inductivism, the widespread use of bespoke software for qualitative data analysis tends to promote a coding and inductive approach to qualitative analysis, which is too often based only on interview data. A very similar criticism can be levelled at the procedural approach of Thematic Analysis (TA), also in practice often associated with the coding of interview-derived text (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2012). Too often the result is the content analysis of speech rather than an analysis of social action (which might of course include speech-acts). In contrast, Clarke (2005) embeds grounded theory in a matrix of much greater complexity. While firmly anchored in the spirit of grounded theory, she develops a comprehensive analytic framework that is faithful to the multiple modalities of social action, and of relations between the many aspects of social situations (including the position of the researcher). The complexity of her approach reflects the multiple forms of data that interactionist analysis now draws on.

At the other extreme, there is a very different strand of analysis, associated with Denzin. We might call it extreme interpretivism (see Denzin 1997, 2001 for early statements of the position). It owes more to literary, textual experimentation rather than a procedural approaches to data analysis. It promotes research outcomes couched in performative texts, autobiographical writing and literary experimentation. While Denzin's own intellectual roots lie with interactionist sociology, the development of 'qualitative inquiry' (as this tendency has come to be called) has led many sociologists and communication researchers away from any overt grounding in interactionist theory or methodology. Indeed, there is a strand of qualitative work based on the overt repudiation of any form of sociology or anthropology.

An interactionist emphasis on the analysis of situations and encounters is, however, discernable in Clarke's 'postmodern' version of grounded theory (Clarke 2005). This reinstates the interaction order as the focus of analysis and helps to move it away from an interest solely in the spoken word of interview transcripts. Tavory and Timmermans (2014) also articulate an approach to analysis, that stresses abductive reasoning, deriving more clearly from interactionism's pragmatist roots, and the roots of grounded theory. Together, such correctives help to reinstate some of the core preoccupations of interactionism.

The multiplicity of data-collection strategies – as we have outlined – currently available to ethnographers means that multimodal analysis is appropriately used and advocated. That is, analysis which pays full and systematic attention to the multiple orders of organization and representation – not just linguistic but visual, spatial, and sensory. It also recognises the physical nature of ethnographic fieldwork, together with the embodiment of ethnographic knowledge. In principle, the multiple modalities of signification and action should give rise to ‘thick description’ that pays full attention to the dense, simultaneous enactments of orderly and significant conduct: visual, haptic, olfactory, embodied. This demands more than merely paying occasional lip-service to ‘sensory’ phenomena – which are often conflated with visual representations. It means a thorough recognition and analysis of socially organized activity through which social actors accomplish collaborative action, construct meaningful engagements, and sustain social identities. In its embrace of the cultural complexity of everyday life, such close and rigorous attention extends the methodological armamentarium of interactionist sociology and leads it away from a logocentric obsession with transcribed speech, not least the spoken performances of research interviews.

At the same time, the modes of representation show a similar pattern of divergence. While there has never been a single genre of ethnographic writing (cf. Van Maanen 2011; Atkinson 1990) the contemporary scene is characterised by variety and widening differences. On the one hand, authors deploy the conventions of ‘realist’ representation, drawing on the textual models of urban and organisational ethnography. On the other hand we witness a proliferation of styles that depart radically from them. They include autoethnography and creative nonfiction, the writing of ethnographically informed fiction, performance ethnography, the construction of poems and the re-ordering of materials into found poems. Moreover, in many quarters, the conventions of the realist text are themselves modified. The relatively impersonal tone of the traditional realist text is now likely to be suffused with the ethnographer’s presence, feelings and personal responses (where once they might have been shunted off into a separate ‘confessional’).

Conclusion

Extensions of method and representation imply a re-evaluation of fieldwork itself. But they should not become ends in themselves, and a degree of caution is in order. ‘Visual methods’, ‘mobile methods’, or ‘sensory methods’ are – as we have implied - significant expansions in the ethnographer’s strategies for data collection and analysis. But they need to be deployed in

the pursuit of sustained sociological (interactionist) investigation. The visual, the haptic, the sensory – these are worth studying because they are among the ways in which social worlds are constructed and construed. They are implicated in the production and reproduction of social identities. They are part of the semiotic order that parallels the interaction order, used and interpreted by social actors in the conduct of everyday social activity.

We allude to a perceptible danger. Qualitative research and qualitative methods do not constitute the equivalent of paradigms or disciplines in their own right. They are embedded in disciplinary traditions, of which interactionist sociology is one significant strand. The identification of self-justifying forms of qualitative research – sometimes now glossed as ‘qualitative inquiry’ – pays little heed to the core commitments of interactionist sociology, such as the sustained analysis of negotiated social organisation, forms of social interaction, and collective formations of identity. The traditions of ethnography, enhanced and supplemented as we have described, need to be deployed in the pursuit of sustained analysis. Moreover, that analysis should explore sociological (or anthropological) *ideas* that develop and extend the repertoire of concepts and explanations (Atkinson 2017). That is the ultimate ‘extension’ that research methods should inform. One of the abiding strengths of interactionism lies in programmes of research in key areas of organised social life (Gibson and vom Lehn 2018). Those studies have been methodologically imaginative, empirically detailed and conceptually rich. The ‘extension’ of research and its research methods must develop and project such research traditions into the future, while continuing to extend and develop the conceptual machinery that inform such analyses.

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