

Summary and Reflection on Two-Week Observation Results and Process of Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the process from the author's original intention of observation and initial interesting topics to the summary and reflection of shortcomings in the observation process. In the middle parts, it comes through three sample sources which are observed records with ethnographic research method. The author compared her field notes and the field notes in these three articles and provided the advantages and disadvantages of her field notes. The reflection of recorded field notes is important for the growth of an ethnographer. A good reflection allows a researcher to learn to be more careful in the process of ethnography and to think deeply about the observation.

Keywords: *ethnography, field notes, anthropology, reflection*

1. INTRODUCTION

In my field note, there is one scene in my notes about an actress taking anti-anxiety medication. At the backstage of the show "Parents meeting" at the Wuhan Art School, the researcher was asked to carry a stage box into the rehearsal hall. The red velvet curtain on two sides of the stage has grayed a little. As soon as the researcher opened the backstage's soft masking curtains, an actor who was clearly playing one of the four students in a blue and white school uniform was taking her anti-anxiety pills. The researcher was so sure that it was an anxiety suppressant because "anti-anxiety" was written on the bottle she was holding. She stood in front of the water fountain in the corner. Although her hair model and make-up were delicate, these things still cannot cover her tired eyes. After she moved her neck and shoulders by turning her arms, she covered the medicine with her hands, tucked it into her bag, and took a deep breath. After doing these things, she went back to the stage again. She spoke something with the director. The voice was light so that the researcher did not hear what they talked. The researcher saw that she began to perform the part that her role was caught stealing the test paper. However, she was asked to do this part again constantly, and the director knitted his brow deeper and deeper.

Her situation reminds me of many girls' anxious, especially appearance anxious. Most teenage girls,

especially in East Asia, care about the appearance of each of their body parts from their head to toes. Girls with beautiful model-like shape of body feel that they are heavy and force themselves to go diet; Girls with the skinny shape of body still want to lose weight; Girls with healthy muscles still do not satisfy with their body shapes. Also, although people's mind is advancing, in the subliminal culture of many societies, women's good appearance is the biggest value of them. Men are obsessed with the good appearance of women, and because of the differences in social structure, men can be valued by having a large amount of property, good personality, or excellent ability.

Besides anxiety of appearance, women still face plenty of pressure and anxiety from all aspects of life. Married women who are going to be pregnant often face the reality of losing their job positions in the work fields. Unmarried women would face the gender discrimination or sexual harassment in workplace. People would like to seem women's general anxious as the result of their 'sensitive nerve', which concept often been used to attack office ladies. There are even some words said that women are easier to be anxious and depressed because of their weaker endurance. Although people's mind is advancing, in the subliminal culture of many societies, women's good appearance is still the biggest value of them. Men are obsessed with the good appearance of women, and because of the differences in social structure, men can be valued by having a large

amount of property, good personality, or excellent ability.

Additionally, society structured a list of doctrine for female, such as beauty, gentle, and kind. This list of doctrine for female were acquiesced as necessity. Women who meet the demand of the list of doctrine are seemed as general women, and women who does not meet the demand of it would be insulted in words or seemed like bad women. These phenomena the researcher associated with one scene that the researcher observed are actually very similar to what the researcher was curious about when the researcher first observed in backstage of theatre.

We often see in the TV series and even advertisements that some art students cut someone's clothes or bully someone in the backstage because of jealous and the desire of 'win' during the performance. They would have big conflict or shout in the backstage. Especially, the villains are mostly female characters. Although most of the time, these plots are to satisfy the drama of the story, but it is easy to let people have the stereotype of actors, especially actress.

The question 'How is true situations in backstage and the way actors get along?' and even 'How is society's implicit misogyny towards women reflected in the acting industry?' comes out to my mind when the researcher saw this scene. (Misogyny: hatred, dislike, or mistrust of women, manifested in various forms such as physical intimidation and abuse, sexual harassment and rape, social shunning and ostracism) However, although the researcher was curious in the field of gender issues, the truth is that my two-week observations and involvement in field note are not detailed and long enough to make this issue very clear.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions in ethnography research are essential, which is like the core or the main trunk of a research.

1. How do different parents interact with their children to get closer with their children?

The researcher wants to research this topic deeper because of my childhood experience. The researcher grew up in a seemly happy but not happy family. My parents were badly at getting closer with me and lacking accomplishment, especially my father. This experience left me shadow of developing intimate relationships with others. Therefore, the researcher wants to research for this theme to figure out how different parents interact with their children to get closer with their children.

2. How is society's misogyny towards women reflected in the acting industry?

The reason of providing this question has been given in the introduction. The researcher started out trying to figure out how misogyny works in the acting industry. However, two-week observations and involvement in field note are not detailed and long enough to make this issue very clear. Also, this topic needs long-time term observation from several aspects and professional theoretical basis. The researcher hopes the researcher can write this topic successfully as a proposal or paper in my future three years in college.

3. BACKGROUND

[1] For *How I learned What a Crock Was* written by Howard S. Becker, it claimed How Mr. Becker learned what a crock was during his observation and participation with medical students in a clinic. Mr. Becker was going to study medical students and medical education in the fall of 1955 as a fieldworker, but he did not know much about medical education. He firstly was curious about the real meaning of crock when he heard that one of the students called one talkative patient 'crock'. And then, he continued observed and tried best to participate in what major students do. After doing the communication with other major students, he finally got the meaning of 'crock'. It means the patients who took much more of medical students' time than other patients and gave medical students much less practicing knowledge or experiences that they wanted. The process of his observation is very interesting to read, and it is also a new field for me to learn and instill. The structure of this article is simple and obvious. Meanwhile, the theme is distinct, which led readers easily get what Mr. Becker wanted to express. He was carefully with the implicit rules among medical students and skeptical of his conclusions. For example, when he thought that these students might mean 'crock of shit', several questions and suspicions got out to his mind. These questions help him to make his research deeper logically. Also, Becker provided many 'supplementary instructions' in the form of brackets. These made me understand his field note better.

[2] For *Children and Gender* written by Thorn. B (1993), it claims how gender socialization was reflected on children. Thorn. B started from her experience and memory of childhood to elicit the following assumptions and observation. This article's structure is more complex than the first one written by Mr. Becker, and the theme is more complex too. It also provided me a new way to write a field note. Different from Mr. Becker's field note, she started with a subject that he was curious about and had some theoretical basis for. Or said differently, her previous childhood memories were a special observation for a long time, the only thing was that she observed those as an insider. Around gender socialization, she implemented ethnography research in

elementary school. She also provided reflections, include of problems she met and of her research at the end. It is very good for ethnographer to co-opted and apply. Additionally, her reflection of 'adult-ideological viewpoint' was like what the researcher learned from ethnography. Every ethnographer has their own formed growing environment, culture identity, and thinking model. These all would affect the objectivity of conclusions. We would involuntarily impose some formed thing of our own understanding upon the observed people. What ethnographer should do is to try their best to avoid from these 'implicit bias'. My situation is quite like hers. The researcher found many implicit misogynies when the researcher was growing up, including all the things the researcher indicated in the introduction, and curious about how misogyny is reflected in our daily life and culture. When the researcher first chose my place of observation, the researcher was also thinking about the stigma of female actors (stigma of female is also included in misogyny).

[3] For *With love and respect for young people: Learning with and from Barrie Thorne in the ethnography of childhoods* written by Marjorie Elaine Faulstich Orellana, it claims what characteristics are important for ethnographers to have. Positionality, open hearts and minds, and other things she mentioned in the article are important. There is one place led me to think deeper and realized where the researcher can come up ethnography questions from. She mentioned one experience that she drove south down Vernon Avenue. She claimed that the first sentence in her field note was not only the description towards that avenue. Instead, the first line is her criticized words, especially when she mentioned 'dark smoke' and 'dirty air'. She told me that these are scattered impressions which is important for ethnographers to note down. Scattered impressions helped ethnographers to recall and continue followed thinking. The researcher stopped for a while when the researcher read this. The researcher went back to see my two field notes in first two weeks and found that the researcher noted down some scattered impressions without realizing it. For example, '*I felt that he was not just happy when he was pointed.*' and '*A mixture of sweat, spray molding, plastic and floral water was in the air.*' are both the scattered impressions when the researcher was in that atmosphere. Still, because of not realizing, the ethnography questions the researcher came up from these scattered impressions were far from enough. In my writing, the researcher often wrote down these impressions and then went on to record other detailed descriptions. This situation was especially obvious in my first assignment.

Besides these three articles, the researcher also read *Misogyny* written by Chizuko Ueno. This book related to my interested topic closely though it is not an ethnography. *Misogyny* is not a purely theoretical work, but a practical analysis of various contemporary social

phenomena in Japan using feminist theory. She was thorough about how misogyny in Japan is reflected in all aspects of literary life and culture.

4. METHODS

Both my two-time observation and research are centered into one specific field site but different occasions. The first time was the backstage before formal students' presentation day of performance and the second time was the rehearsal of musical 'Parents Meeting' in the rehearsal hall. Besides the difference of occasions, the views of observation are different as well. In my observation of the backstage at the first time, the researcher only observed the field site in an 'Etic' view as an outsider.

In this paragraph,

'The field site I chose is the theatre of Wuhan Art School. My mother teaches in this school so that I got a permission to visit their theater before and during the performance. The day I visited was Wednesday, when was coincided with students' presentation day of performance. Voices mixed in the backstage before the opening ceremony. The shape of backstage is a concave, which presents as protuberant on both sides and hollow in the middle. There is a corridor outside of the backstage, and a dressing room is along the corridor. The corridor and the dressing room is a part of the backstage rather than is out of the backstage. Therefore, too much backstage sound will directly affect the performance effect.'

The tone of this descriptive field note is objective without any my subjective assumptions or thinking. The researcher was like in a god view above the structure of the backstage, defining its form through an objective tone. The researcher walked around the whole backstage to imagine and structure the pieces the researcher saw into a whole logically. Therefore, when the researcher continued my second-time observation, the researcher enhanced my thinking and assumptions based on my observation. For example: '*I did not know the casting system and principle of a production crew, and the researcher was curious about the mental activity of this lucky actor at that time. I felt that he was not just happy when he was pointed. The suppression of happy expression gave me this feeling.*' According to the behaviors and expressions of the observed people, assumptions are essential.

Also, in '*Dancers and opera actors are more likely to wear bright coloured dresses and more intense color make up. A mixture of sweat spray molding, plastic and floral water was in the air.*' I noted down 'scattered impressions' which was mentioned in Professor's article. These impressions could help me to raise questions when the researcher read these afterwards. Questions that the researcher came up from these

scattered impressions were far from enough. In my writing, the researcher often wrote down these impressions and then went on to record other detailed descriptions. It is the place that the researcher should improve in the future.

In my second field note,

‘The day I participated into the rehearsal was July 15th. I got to the rehearsal hall 15 minutes earlier. I thought I would be the first one to arrive and sit in the hall for a while, but when I walked into the door of the rehearsal room, I found it was already full of people. The shelves devoted to personal effects near the gate of rehearsal hall were full of water bottles and thermos cups. Several actors were pressing their legs against the wall with scripts on their hands. Bigger part of actors was opening their voice. They sang: “Mi-Mi-Mi, Ma-Ma-Ma-----” or “Ah-----” with scale in the corner of the rehearsal hall. Most of them have already dressed up and modeled. Based on the topic of “parent meeting”, there seems are four “parents”, one cleaner, three kids, and several extras. “kids” wore blue and white school uniform, and the “cleaner” wore a shabby dark blue jumpsuit with a broom in his hand. There were two female “parents”. Their clothes with aesthetic color blocks were the most magnificent, which were obvious among actors. They were reviewing their lines and sat up scenes with each other.’

The researcher participated into my field site instead of observing out of crowds this time. More precise details were presented, which makes the field note more vivid. Readers can experience what you have experienced and produce more empathy to think.

Also, the researcher did casual interviews when the researcher was observing in my second-time observation. These interviews are not like formal interviews which needs listed or structured questionnaire. Their existence is to let the observer fit in and understand the group they are observing better. Parenthetically, the researcher learned ‘unstructured interviews’ from Owen’s power point, and the researcher did brief research because it seems like the professional appellation of ‘casual interviews’ in ethnography research. [4]The researcher read *Unstructured Interviews* by Yan Zhang and Barbara M. Wildemuth, and ‘unstructured interviews’ was defined as interviews in which neither the question nor the answer categories are predetermined by Minichiello et al. (1990) (Zhang Y&Wildemuth B, 2015). For example, in my field note, the researcher interviewed one boy who was accidentally chosen to act an important character. He was chosen because the original actor of that character has been late for several times.

‘Therefore, I interviewed him after this rehearsal. He was a little surprised when he firstly saw me. After knowing what I meant, he nervously asked me if I would

reveal his name in the article. He told me that he felt a little sorry for the late actor in fact, but he was very happy because he had got this rare opportunity. In fact, it is very difficult to become the main actors in a drama. He has been trying very hard to be the best in the class, but because of the appearance condition is not so good, he was not chosen. The actor who plays the boy in B is actually a very good actor, talented and good-looking, but he liked to be late. The director, in view of his excellent acting ability and condition, had already forbear him once.’

My favor of unstructured interviews was stimulated during the process the researcher implemented it. It is a freer way to interview without predefined frameworks, and the ethnographer cannot even build a general preparation for this kind of interviews because no one can predict the trend of their observation and participation. The production of unstructured questions depends on the interests and the ability to ask questions while observing. This boy’s answer let me know the strict implicit rules in crews and made me closer to their real anxiety and fear. Of course, his personal feelings cannot represent all actors’ situations, but the appearance anxiety and an unbridled gap in talent should be the mindset that many actors have experienced.

5. POSITIONALITY

My positionality is a curious observer and an interviewer at the same time. Meanwhile, the researcher was an obvious outsider (Etic view) in the backstage at first. Just as what the researcher said in my first week field note:

‘The atmosphere of backstage was nervous and busy. I was like an outsider, because I was the only one idle person in the backstage.’

The reason the researcher was an outsider at first was because that the researcher was just sitting on the sidelines, watching, not participating, not understanding their lives deeply, and just noting down what happened. Everyone around me were busy on their preparation of performance and wore colorful costumes. Only me, a weird girl who wore a white T-shirt, sometimes sat in a corner and sometimes walked around the corridor and dressing room. The researcher tried my best to avoid from the awkwardness of being stared curiously for a while or called ‘teacher’. It was my first time to be regarded as ‘teacher’. The reason might be that backstage is a backstage of theater in an art high school. Some student actors were even still in Grade 10. The researcher was older than most of the student actors in that backstage. Additionally, all actors wore their costumes and did stage-make-up. With no makeup and plain clothes, the researcher could easily be identified as a staff member or a teacher.

To make a rapport between me and actors, the researcher participated into their rehearsal in my second field note. The identity of a true staff member gave me ample opportunity to meet actors and actresses without making them feel weird or apprehensive. Also, the researcher did my interviews into a casual way which let interviewees feel relaxed to answer my question. The increasing sense of participation also made me more curious. This was an interesting point that the researcher has made in my observations during this period. When you were just looking at their behaviors and the details, it was hard to get that kind of intense curiosity. It was very easy for us to unconsciously put our own interpretations on what they were doing and fall into fixed mindset. Participation could help ethnographers to break the fixed mindset and find new ways to think about one same detail. For example, in my second field note, the researcher thought at first that they were warming up like dancers because musicals are a comprehensive art that requires actors to have good capability of acting, singing, dancing, and being good at lines. The researcher felt confident about my knowledge of musical due to my mother is a musical teacher. However, when the researcher asked one actor, he told me that the situation of some of them may be a little special. Due to the particularity of the musical, they really need to press our legs to warm up before the stage performance. But many of them who are pressing legs were students who transferred from the dance department to the musical department, because they had to warm up and stretch before the dance training all the year round before, so they were just used to it.

6. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In my previous observations, my attention went by the dress details, the attitude and process of how actors get along with each other, the atmosphere, actors' expressions, and implicit rules in crew. For example,

'A mixture of sweat spray molding, plastic and floral water was in the air. One girl wore pajama just came out of the dressing room with a script on her hand and was preparing to review her lines. Suddenly, when she saw the warm-up dancers pressing their legs against the wall outside the door, she turned back into the dressing room and holed up in a small corner to continue practicing her lines.' and *'he seemed to be very happy and unbelievable, but the expression of happiness on his face did not linger for long. He quickly suppressed the joy and bowed solemnly to the director. And then, he walked into the group of main characters.'*

However, after reading those three articles, the researcher thinks the researcher did not notice the core point my observation is relatively scattered. There was not a specific direction for my field note though the researcher has already had interested topic. My assumptions were likely to be built based on observed

people's expressions and behaviors, but because of lack of specific direction, assumptions did not allow me to dig deeper into the topic the researcher wanted to pursue. In the end, my conclusion was just about the atmosphere among the actors, how do they get along, and the invisible competition in their industry.

For example, just as what the researcher concluded in my second field note:

'I really admire her to be brave to face the performance in the case of anxiety and taking medicine. In my observation this week, I really felt the tension and pressure of actors that I did not feel in the limited time last week. Their nervousness comes from the fact that not getting on the stage means that all their efforts are in vain, from the external conditions that cannot be changed from the fact that a few minutes of all the preparatory work is done just before the official performance. Respect for the stage is respect for themselves.'

7. IMPORTANCE

Reflecting the thing that we notice or not notice can help us to develop our awareness of ethnography. Sometimes, we do not know why one paragraph was praised by the teacher and classmates and why one paragraph was not vivid when the researcher was reading. After reflection, we can clearly know what is good about our field note and what is bad about it. This will help us to advance our research ability. Also, reflections are a good chance to practice the capability of finding problems and raising questions. When you are doing a reflection, you will have to think again about the article you have already finished thinking about. It is a process to break your original logic and build a newer one. These capabilities are essential for ethnographers' sensitivity of life.

8. CONCLUSION

Ethnography is based on a consideration of the cultural differences at home (either regionally or globally) [5]. It is a special research method for me. Not only because it is a relatively new method for me, but it also has some special aspects. For example, ethnography takes plenty of time. One of the biggest drawbacks of ethnography is that it requires a substantial amount of time. It depends on the ethnographer's relationship with his subjects. Also, it requires ethnographer to have good capability of listening, observing, writing, noting, and thinking at same time. These seems easy but are hard to implement. For example, if you want to interview others in your field site, you must note down all the details in the interview and your thinking based on what you observed during the interview. The details include the behaviors, expressions, and reactions of interviewee and

atmosphere during the interview. When the researcher interviewed Corinna, the researcher only could notice one thing at the same time. If the researcher observed her reactions, behaviors, and expressions, the researcher had to stare at her when she was talking, and this effected my note taking of her interview. On the other hand, if the researcher noted down her words, the researcher would miss some of her details during the interview.

Although the researcher thought so much, these were all based on my previous knowledge instead of my observation. They are assumptions. This observation of actresses' anxiety is far from enough in my short-term ethnography research. All these theories should be extended from our observation of people's behaviors and expressions. A good ethnographer can only give out hypothesis after taking plenty of observation and engagement. We cannot use a subjective tone or an absolute tone to draw conclusions. All the hypotheses can only be based on assumptions which are inferred by observation. The researcher thinks the researcher still have a long way to go on how to balance subjective judgment and objective observation.

All in all, at present, my cognition of ethnography is far from enough. Moreover, even if the researcher has learned a lot of theoretical concepts, in the future learning process, the researcher still needs to read more field notes of ethnographer and practice more.

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