

Michael H. Agar: Remembering a Master Craftsman

Ethnography: Not Simply a “Methodological Adjunct”



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Why the ethnographic in drugs research?



- ❖ Thick description/'structures of significance'

- ❖ Research agenda of engagement

- ❖ Rich points, themes and metaphors

“an ethnographer learns that his or her assumptions about how the world works, usually implicit and out of awareness, are inadequate to understand something that has happened” (Agar, 1996: 32).

“The rich point doesn't mean that they're [research subjects] irrational or disorganized; it means that you're not yet competent to understand it” (Agar, 1996: 31).

- ❖ Interplay of context and meaning

Ripping and Running



- The life and behaviour of those under study – drug users – became meaningful, understandable and reasonable.
- “... if you want to learn a concept, watch how people use it in everyday situations” (Agar, 2002: 251).
- Challenged the assumed objectivity of commonsense understanding of drug use, enabling the discovery of plural – and competing – interpretations of drug use that often fall outside the more restricted frameworks championed by positivist and quantitative research.

Ethnography and Epidemiology in Dialogue?



- Differences between epidemiology and ethnography apparent on very many levels: sampling, data collection, data analysis and the end product.
- Ethnography: inadequate N size; ‘non-scientific’.
- Epidemiology: “a scientific method that allows them [epidemiologists] to become experts on drugs without ever having to interact with drug users in their problematic, dangerous, and uncomfortable indigenous environments” (Bourgois, 1999: 2165).
- The pragmatic positivism of public health epidemiology versus the critical theory of anthropology?

Michael Agar on Ethno-epidemiology



- ‘Agent’, ‘host’ and ‘environment’.
- The need to reinstate ‘host’ and ‘environment, “to defocus on ‘agent’ and celebrate the two other corners of the epidemiological triad” (Agar, 1997:1166).
- The introduction of qualitative ways of thinking about epidemiology – which requires the study of meaning and context.
- “Ethnographers attempt to understand ‘what is going on’ from the multiple perspectives of those involved, where is epidemiologists bring a systematic structure to the collection of data over time. Epidemiology grounds the possibilities; ethnography stretches them. Working with this tension is essential, as both disciplines seek shared goals of promoting universal health and well-being” (Reisinger, 2004:242).

Michael Agar on Ethno-epidemiology



“ ... ethnography is not simply a methodological adjunct; instead, it is the fuel for transformation” (Agar, 1996: 391).

Understanding of person in context requires the placement of the researcher in context.

Ethno-epidemiology in Drugs Research



United States

- ❖ Drug and sexual risk practices among men who have sex with men (Clatts et al., 2001, 2002; Clatts & Sotheran, 2000);
- ❖ Drug injecting practices of ketamine users (Lankenau & Clatts, 2004);
- ❖ The spread of amphetamine use (Pach & Gorman, 2002).

Canada

- ❖ The health of injecting drug users in Vancouver, Canada (Small et al 2008).

Vietnam

- ❖ HIV risk among young heroin users in Vietnam (Clatts et al., 2007).

Australia

- ❖ Psychostimulant use among young people in Australia (Moore et al., 2008, 2009).

Ireland

- ❖ Onset of heroin use among 'high risk' youth (Mayock et al., 2008, 2015).

“How the drug field turned my beard grey”



- What, if anything, had changed in the realm of qualitative and/or ethnographic research in the drug field?
- “ ... as any dealer will tell you, there is money in illicit drugs” (p.250).
- Good and bad ‘news stories’ for qualitative/ethnographic research in the drugs field.
- “Everyone is happy about “qualitative” until it starts happening” (p. 253).
- Words of advice.



THANK YOU

Some treasured
photos from
Dublin, Venice
and Oxford.

