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The ethnography of sport:
some observations and suggestions

La etnografía del deporte:
algunas observaciones y sugerencias

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The considerable social meaning and economic significance of sport in contemporary society is evident in a myriad ways. Ranging from huge financial contracts between media corporations and professional football clubs to young children saving up their weekly 'pocket money', so as to purchase their first item of sports equipment. Yet sociological analysis of sport as a meaningful category of social action is a 'relatively new development' (Rouncefield and Tolmie 2013, 3). The outcome being as Molnar and Purdy (2016, 1) have noted 'the field of sport and exercise studies is a late bloomer in terms of letting itself be inspired by what we may refer to as the qualitative and ethnographic turn'. However, the blooming has recently flourished and there is now a growing field of ethnography focused upon a spectrum of sports (for details see Collinson, McNarry and Evans 2021, 601; Hockey 2021, 135-136; Meyer and Wedelstaedt, 2017; Naess, 2017, 51; Sparkes, 2017, 11-16).

Social life is both complex and dense in terms of interaction between people in both public and private domains. Thus, corporeal, emotional and cognitive processes at both individual and collective levels change depending on context. Hence, the football stadium and its few maintenance staff on a Wednesday morning, is a different social phenomena from that same ground on a weekend afternoon, with two teams and 50,000 fans present. To analytically explain and depict this complexity and density necessitates a particular approach to investigating social life. Ethnography was developed with the objective of meeting this general intellectual challenge initially in anthropology and later sociology (for a summary see Skinner and Edwards 2005, 406-407). The focus of its method is then to comprehend and portray the depth of interaction present and its consequences for individuals, groups and organizations, both outside of and within sport. What follows are some observations on certain fundamental aspects of the 'craft of ethnography' (Atkinson 2013).

Levels of Analysis

Sport has its own internal types of functioning covering a number of levels which the ethnographer may or may not want to focus upon. These include institutional bodies governing sports, more local organizational structures such as 'clubs', their sub-components – 'teams', rules and regulations. Then there are the contextual features within which 'playing the game' takes place, namely time, space and place. Within the latter interaction ensues in both formal and informal forms. The former evidencing conformity to rules and the latter sometimes deviating from them. Thus, behaviour is heavily influenced

by norms and values specific to particular sports and the contexts of their occurrence. Such interaction often being communicated by language specific to particular sporting social worlds. In addition appearances, emotions, knowledge, and practices which are skilled (particularly embodied ones involving sensory perceptions) all merit ethnographic attention. The latter are frequently brought together in routines and rituals (e.g Hockey 2009), which may feature particular symbolic objects. For example, the coin which is tossed to decide who starts play in cricket or rugby matches. So structural and interactional processes collide and engage with specific social identities/biographies, plus the bodies of bureaucrats, managers, coaches, players and fans. To engage analytically with that complex spectrum of factors constitutes an ethnographic challenge of some magnitude.

The doing of ethnography demands considerable 'commitment' (Becker 1977, 261-273), in terms of energy and time, relative to other research approaches (more on this later). Therefore decisions about what levels of analysis need to be focused upon require a realistic and pragmatic assessment initially. So the question which needs to be asked is 'what are the limits to my research?'. Am I interested in all levels of analysis: organizational, interactional, biographical and their mutual interaction? With the intention of constructing an ethnography of a sporting subculture (e.g Downey 2005) in toto? Or is my analysis to be more limited? Perhaps confined to sports pedagogy (e.g. Muntanyola-Saura and Sánchez-García 2018) or the skilled sensory perceptions fundamental to doing a sport, which are not just physical but also culturally constructed (Groth and Krahn 2017). The problem with erecting such limits is that as field research ensues, a developing understanding may well enlarge or contract the research focus. So an alertness to that possibility is required. Therefore pragmatism and realism in relation to the scope of the research needs to be at the forefront of the ethnographer's mind as a limited time-line invariably looms.

The Self as Ethnographer

Ethnography is accomplished by the researcher engaging with a selected sporting context in a manner, which arguably demands much more personal involvement and commitment than other ways of collecting data in the social sciences. Fort traditionally the prime way of achieving this has been via *participant observation* defined by Emerson et al. (2002, 352) as: 'establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate,

experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in a setting'. In sum one goes and spends large amounts of time with the group being researched, or even lives with them. A case of 'thick participation' (Samudra 2008, 665) by the ethnographer. This allows the latter to chart the complexity of the group via the accumulation of fieldnotes, as processes unfold and change from hour to hour and day to day. Building an analysis which pays attention to the 'desire of, and necessity for, individuals…to act in terms of what is possible in specific immediate situations' (Vidich 1971, 171). In this way analytic *thick description* (Geertz 1973) of fieldnotes is accumulated constituting 'a nuanced portrayal of cultural layers' (Schwartz-Shea 2006, 101).

Prior to commencing participant observation some thought needs to be devoted by the ethnographer as to how that role is to be occupied? There have been various classical attempts to portray a spectrum of involvement (Junker, 1960, 36; Gold, 1958) wherein participation in ongoing group activities ranges from 'complete participant' to complete observer'. This in part depends upon the degree of commitment to the project and the skills possessed. Thus, if one is going to study sports parachutists, having to learn to parachute constitutes considerable commitment and one might argue fortitude, but less so if one is already a skilled participant (e.g. Laurendeau, 2006). The least the ethnographer needs to ensure if participating fully in sports which are 'energetic' (as distinct from more sedentary kinds such as darts or snooker…) is to ensure that her/his university health insurance policy covers sporting injury! So stark questions need to be posed to the ethnographic self, namely 'what am I prepared to do in the field' and 'what I am not'? Another connecting question which needs to be reflected upon prior to research commencing is 'how am I going to present myself to participants?' This is important because the presence of a researcher impacts upon ongoing social processes either negatively or positively. When doing 24/7 participant observation with UK infantry (Hockey 1986/2006) I made the decision to try not to disturb the flow of social processes around me. In the hope that what occurred would be habitual, normal and typical of the infantry world. Decades later at a reunion I asked one of my research participants what it was like to have me around 24/7 and he replied grinning 'you were just a smiling little ghost'. A comment which pleased me as it confirmed I had not disturbed the tenor of ongoing events. Thus, a useful rule of thumb for engaging with participants is *do not* ask lots of questions during the early days of fieldwork. Just be slow and absorb the field analytically. This is difficult enough as there is

no slow-motion button to press as interaction whirls around the researcher perpetually! Simultaneously one needs to let participants adjust to one's presence initially, so limiting questioning facilitates that. The ethnographic self then needs to be reflected upon considerably, prior to going into the sporting field and when in it.

Awareness and Analysis

Another important feature of the ethnographic craft process is the degree of sporting knowledge and skilful practice brought by the researcher to the field of study. If there is little then what unfolds before one is 'strange' and arguably more easily identifiable as a topic for analysis. If there is a lot then one of the major analytic tasks is to make the familiar strange. The danger if that is not achieved is: 'Familiarity becomes an encompassing hindrance' (Atkinson 2022, 17). One cannot see analytically enough because the social processes are taken for granted, as one has always been doing them, on the rock face (e.g Jenkings 2017), in the tennis court etc. Whilst there are exceptions (e.g. Purday 2016), if one does research upon a sport the probability is that one has already some knowledge of and potentially considerable embodied experience of it. Awareness of what is happening in the field with the people one is researching and oneself is then vital. This has been articulated as the problem of 'reflexivity' in the general literature on ethnography (Bieler et al. 2021; Buscatto 2016). Some of the ways to make the familiar strange and thus 'see-able' include: continually posing questions about the context of happenings, making detailed observations about the latter, linking interaction to events and contexts, so as to develop analytic themes. As Atkinson's (2022, 131) asserts: 'rendering phenomena strange and hence available for self-conscious scrutiny, is not an instantaneous event… It is something we have to work at, if only to get beyond immediately superficial experiences and responses.'

Small and big phenomena in sport are inextricably linked. A personal marathon record may be achieved or not, depending upon how running shoes are fitted on prior to the race. If the athlete secures them correctly that invokes a feeling of confidence which supports good performance. If shoes are wrongly aligned the probability is that the opposite occurs, let alone the possibility of laces becoming undone and so on. So here we have a 'small thing' underpinning bigger things, and an alert ethnographic sensibility pays attention to small things perpetually. The 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of putting on running shoes should

then detail a routine which is done in a particular way producing a particular touch on the feet, which in turn produces a particular *feeling* of surety. Hence a useful mantra to alert one's ethnographic sensibility might be 'small builds big, small builds big'.

Three Ways of Categorising/Conceptualising

As ethnography is undertaken and descriptions of phenomena which constitute field notes are compiled, the next step is to generate analytic themes from that data, which chart the central features of the research context. Three kinds of categorisation, which are simultaneously conceptualization, are usually used. Firstly, the identification and utilization of 'member identified categories' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 50) by the ethnographer is one way of achieving this. The latter needs to be alert enough to recognise such categories and their analytic utility. So for example within the UK distance running subculture athletes (the author is a life- long distance runner) are categorised by members utilising *typifications* (Schutz 1967). Common sense categories used to order the running life –world on a moment- to- moment basis, to organise and structure experience (cf. Benson and Hughes 1983, 53). These categories form a continuum with at one end those who are agile, well balanced and typified as 'floaters'. At the opposite end there are those who have less of those characteristics, but are still strong runners, who tend to force through ground, being typified as 'diggers' (the author has been placed by peers and places himself within this category). A second kind of categorization used by the ethnographer is 'observer-identified categories' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 50). These are created by the ethnographer analytically forming concepts directly from the accrued data. So for example Downey (2005, 162-167) conceptualises the vision of capoeira practitioners as 'seeing through shifty eyes'. The third kind of categorisation rests upon the researcher having a knowledge of relevant *resources* lodged in wider academic literature. As Atkinson (2015, 45) notes: 'It is my general contention that the contemporary ethnographer needs a working knowledge of a variety of analytic traditions', which are 'repositories of ideas about the social world', which include fundamental concepts.

The latter are often used by ethnographers to categorise their empirical data. Atkinson (2015, 44-54) has presented a whole list of such resources, and here I am going to identify in my view the three most apposite for aiding ethnographic analysis of sport. The first resource is Symbolic Interactionism (SI)

which rooted in the works of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), focuses upon social interaction and the development of identities, individual and collective within particular social groups. This constitutes a valuable resource with which to examine the organizational, interactional and biographical dimensions of sport (Weiss 2001). Replete as it is with useful conceptual devices such as 'generalised other' (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969) and 'identity work' (Snow and Anderson 1987). This resource has been applied to topics as diverse as football fans (Sarver Coombs and Osborne 2018), savate (Southwood and Delamont 2018) and distance running (Hockey 2005).

The second resource is the combination of Ethnomethodology (EM) and Conversation Analysis (CA) emanating from the work of Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks (1992). The ethnographic usefulness of EM is its facility to identify and categorise sequences of embodied sporting action such as those completed in weightlifting, or when a collective 'scrum' is accomplished in rugby union. This sequencing has been identified particularly in various combat sports as participants attack and defend (Girton 1986/2017; Lefebvre 2016; Sánchez García, Villaroya-Gil and Elrio-Lopez 2016; Coates 1999). In contrast the usefulness of CA for ethnography is its capacity to focus upon group verbal interaction and it has been used to chart sporting pedagogy between players and coaches during matches in football (Corsby and Jones 2020; Groom, Cushion and Nelson 2012). Also the combination of EM/CA methods has been used to isolate embodied sequences and the verbal interactions accompanying them in various other martial arts (e.g Raman 2018; Lefebvre 2016).

The third resource is Sociological Phenomenology (SP) with ethnographers of sport turning in particular to the writing of Merleau-Ponty (1962/2001) on the body, which contains concepts such as 'intercorporeality', 'reversability' (one touches a tennis bat and is touched by it), 'intention' and 'embodied habit'. These are valuable for analysing sensory perceptions which underpin sequences of sporting movement (for a recent review of this approach, ranging across cycling, golf, swimming etc, see Hockey 2021). The above three disciplinary based resources constitute slightly different ways of conceptualising sporting phenomena. It is thus possible to use all of them when analysing data and constructing an ethnographic narrative.

To recap three forms of analytically categorising data are possible: routine member identified categories, categories constructed by the ethnographer, and categories available from within various 'analytic traditions' (Atkinson 2015, 45). Again it is possible to use all of these when writing ethnography.

Concluding Observations

The most important attribute needed by the researcher prior to fieldwork, during it, and when writing the eventual ethnography of sport is *awareness.* This is because on the latter depends the efficacy of the whole enterprise. This awareness needs to be *constant* and paying attention to the aforementioned salient features:

- The levels of analysis encompassed by the research and their internal complexities (e.g. language, practices, emotions, values, etc.).
- The presentation of the self when occupying the ethnographer role.
- The making of the familiar strange.
- The realisation that small things build bigger social patterns.
- The resources for categorising data by members, the researcher, and using disciplinary literature.

Social interaction generally involves a flow of events both individual and collective. In sport that flow is particularly intense and dynamic. Hence, the level of alertness needed to come to analytic grips with the phenomena whirling around the researcher, requires a similarly intense focusing, which instigates the following questions: 'what am I seeing', and 'what does it mean to participants'? Achieving the latter is not unproblematic if one is doing participant observation for long periods one gets tired cognitively and focus diminishes. Also if one is participating fully in sporting activities physical fatigue accumulates, which in turn impacts upon the cognitive process of being analytic about those activities. As Dewey (1980, 12) has observed people are often struggling to maintain an 'equilibrium' with their surrounding environment, so constant awareness is needed to achieve that condition by the researcher. Therefore, being aware of when to engage fully and when to engage partially with one's respondents, constitutes a process of judgement which forms part of the 'craft' of ethnography (Atkinson 2013).

Failure to develop the above kind of awareness and focus upon the various features outlined, will seriously jeopardise the momentum of any ethnography of sport. As a research approach ethnography via participant observation constitutes a way of gaining considerable insight into the organizational, interactional, biographical and sensory dimensions of sport. That said to accomplish it effectively demands considerable, commitment, time and energy from the researcher, and it is not for the 'faint hearted. If of the latter ilk the researcher had better stick to doing on-

line surveys or single interviews and gain useful data those ways. Albeit data which is not so dense, not so located in the everyday as it happens and arguably not so insightful about the complexity of social processes, as that gained via participant observation. What follows are various examples of ethnographers committing to the sporting field and their analytic tasks at hand.

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