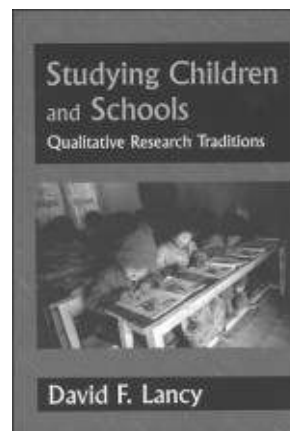


## **Studying Children and Schools: Qualitative Research Traditions**

(Waveland Press, 2001, 202 pages)

by David F. Lancy

Reviewed by Peter Woods<sup>1</sup>



This book is aimed primarily at students seeking to gain an overview of qualitative approaches to researching children and schools. Such approaches have become popular over the last thirty years, to the extent that the greater proportion of studies in the

social sciences now seem to contain a qualitative component of some kind. But specific approaches have been many and diverse, borrowing from different, and sometimes highly contrasting theoretical and philosophical traditions. Yet in their qualitative nature, they all have something in common. They have come to be loosely referred to as 'qualitative research', or 'ethnography' or 'ethnographic research' - often misleadingly. There is a clear need, therefore, for a book of this nature. A straightforward summation and text on the range of approaches might be informative but would be rather dull.

Lancy uses a different, more ambitious technique which gives more of a conceptual pattern to the organisation. Instead of using philosophical and methodological texts as his basic material, he uses actual empirical studies focussing on children and schools, and induces methodological principles through these. He 'foregoes paradigmatic purity for pragmatic utility' (p. xii), focussing on what is and what works in the rather messy, unpredictable research circumstances, rather than on what should be in an ideal situation. He is thus demonstrating in his own practice the inductive technique typical of qualitative approaches. Student readers might be doing the same - inducing from their own practice in dialogue with texts such as this.

The number and range of approaches is a veritable minefield, but Lancy gets round this problem by organising them into major 'traditions' - the anthropological, the sociological, traditions derived from animal behaviour and psychology, the case study, and personal accounts. This is a reasonable

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division in a way, though some studies have claims to belong to more than one of these. More might have been made of this point, since some have argued that educational research would benefit from more attention being paid by researchers to both anthropological and sociological studies. Preceding chapters on these traditions, there is an introduction to the nature of qualitative research, contrasting it with quantitative, discussing some basic techniques and principles, acknowledging the ease of access to the approach and better chances of ownership of the research, while acknowledging pitfalls and problems.

Following the traditions chapters there is a useful discussion of a how someone new to qualitative research might set about and shape such a study and cope with a number of practical problems. This, then, is the structure of the book. While the coverage of approaches applied to children and schools is impressive and handled through the adopted technique with deceptive ease, there are some notable omissions. There is no mention, for example, of phenomenography, fictive accounts, or of action research, though the latter is highly implicit in the chapter on 'personal accounts'. Nor is there any mention of approaches connected to postmodernism or the 'literary turn'. This is skirted around rather than engaged with, and does not help a certain dated feel about the book, lent by the predominance of older over newer empirical texts. More importantly for this journal, the book is admitted to be anthropologically biased. This is not a fault in itself, but the author is much less secure in his handling of sociological traditions, stemming perhaps from his limited vision of their concern 'with the study of how society comes to be stratified'.

This is a major concern among sociologists, certainly, but not the only one, especially among qualitative researchers. There follows coverage of studies in the strong and weak versions of the Marxist tradition, human capital theory, and ethnomethodology. There is a bias towards studies concerned with social class, with ethnicity and gender receiving less thorough attention through single, rather dated studies. The biggest omission, however, is of any of the studies in the symbolic interactionist tradition, arguably the most important in sociological research. These have been concerned with such subjects as teacher and pupil perspectives, strategies, cultures and careers, modes of adaptation to institutional life, evocations of life with all its subtleties and complexities, all, in short, that goes on in school. These stemmed from a second generation of the Chicago School in the 1950s and 60s, led by such as Hughes, Strauss, Goffman and Becker, inspiring a rash of qualitative studies in the 1970s and 80s, including the so-called 'new sociology of education' in the UK. Few of those are mentioned here. To be fair, Becker and Goffman do get a mention - but in the anthropology section. I had other

problems in this chapter. The author claims that while anthropologists can 'conduct their work from a dispassionate, neutral, scientific perspective, sociologists don't enjoy a similar freedom' (p. 64). This would make a good examination statement for students of research method to discuss, but they would need to look at other texts to get to grips with its contentiousness. Elsewhere, sociologists are deemed to be more 'etic' than 'emic'. This follows from the selection made here, but a more balanced overview would have led to a different conclusion. As if to emphasize the problems in this chapter, there is a simple mistake. The school Beynon (1983 in the text but 1985 in the references) worked in was not a London High School, but a South Wales Comprehensive (p. 82). But this is a useful book generally, with much good advice, a refreshing approach to the task, very well written, and with a keen eye for the basic qualities of qualitative research and for the need for rigour. In this spirit, the studies featuring in the text are tackled in constructively critical manner, and I have tried to do the same for the book in this review, as one qualitative researcher to another.