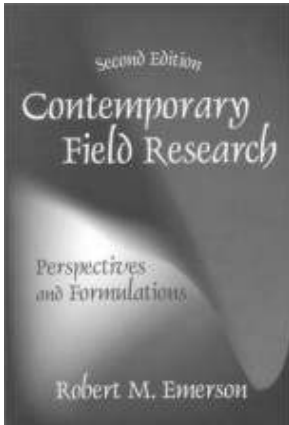


BOOK REVIEWS

Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations, 2nd ed.

(Waveland, 2001, 433 pages)

by Robert E. Emerson



Reviewed by Vicki Mayer¹

As a communication and cultural studies scholar reviewing a book on anthropological field research for sociologists, it sometimes felt odd commenting on two disciplinary traditions that heavily underpin my own. This review hence looks not only at the blurring between sociology and anthropology, but also the bridges that can be built from that union to interdisciplinary fields such as my own.

Emerson's book provides a pedagogically useful introduction to the issues involved in adopting anthropological field methods to sociological research questions. The book is organized into three sections that approximate the stages of ethnographic field research: (1) choosing research questions and methods, (2) fieldwork practices, and (3) producing the ethnography. Emerson begins each of these sections with clearly written summaries of the debates that historically generated differences among scholars of field research. Within each section, the articles are presented roughly chronologically – starting with Geertz, Goffman, and Becker – and thematically, according to contemporary themes – issues of realism, legal constraints, and validation techniques. All of the selections are reprints with the exception of Carol Warren's article on women as field researchers and Emerson and Melvin Pollner's piece defending the emotional and analytical distances between field researchers and their subjects. These additions, as well as Emerson's introductory reviews, differ from the book's first edition, which concentrated more heavily on the shift from classical field research and normative ethnography to more self-reflexive forms and analyses.

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Emerson avoids taking a stand on the issues raised in the readings. Instead, he encourages readers to consider their own positions on, for example, whether to engage in overt or covert research. This alone makes the book potentially an excellent compendium to the upper-division undergraduate or lower-division post-graduate course on qualitative research; students might enjoy discussing the epistemological, practical, and ethical issues that field researchers have debated for decades. In addition, Emerson defines keywords and key moments for the sociological student considering the vast range of field methods and their applications.

Perhaps I find the book's structure and commentary the most compelling aspects of the anthology because they reflect Emerson's own position as a sociologist looking for a third way in debates about field research. To his credit, the author establishes his own concerns about conducting field research. In the preface, he struggles with the concept that ethnographers cannot produce truthful accounts of their research concepts (ix). Yet, he fears that "postmodern" ethnographies reduce reality to relativist texts. Emerson advocates a "neo-realist" approach that combines his version of the modern and postmodern ethnographies. Similarly, he straddles the gap he sees between highly localized ethnographies and ethnographies that support the theoretical advancement of the discipline. His stances reveal the tensions he later explains over how sociologists might navigate the issues that have plagued anthropologists for the past half-century.

I also find Emerson's stance in the preface particularly interesting in revealing his assumptions in trying to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary field research. His selection of readings is almost exclusively focused on American sociologists and anthropologists. This selection supports Emerson's characterization of many of the debates in these disciplines as often having two sides, such as whether to analyze field notes inductively or deductively through "generic social theories" (286). The omission of Emerson's preferences for particular authors and issues is unfortunate because it ignores sociologists doing field research based on other theoretical traditions, most notably Bourdieu, but also Gayatri Spivak, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Melanie Klein. The inclusion of the debates central to field research from these perspectives would help students further map the diverse terrain of field research in sociology today, as well as include voices from feminist, queer, ethnic, postcolonial, and media studies into the dialogues on research questions, methods, and writings. The oversights in Emerson's book could be easily amended in perhaps a later edition of the book, one that takes an engaged approach to the politics of his own sociological project and highlights the gaps and limits to the field he claims to define.