

Some contributions of ethnographies to educational research

Oliveira, Amurabi. 2023. *Etnografia para Educadores*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp.

**Mateus Paula Leite
Paz**

University of Brasília.

E-mail:

mateusppaz@gmail.com

The book "Etnografia para Educadores" [Ethnography for Educators] was written by Amurabi Oliveira who is a professor at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (University of Santa Catarina) and was published in 2023 by Editora UNESP (Publisher of State University of São Paulo "Júlio de Mesquita Filho"). He is a highly active Brazilian social scientist who, among other themes, explores the connections and contributions between education and anthropology. A quick search on Google Scholar reveals that a significant amount of the academic works published about these topics in Portuguese are authored by him. As well, the author is the vice-president of the Thematic Group 09 - Sociological Teaching - of the International Sociological Association (ISA) and has published many articles aimed to discuss Educational Sociology and Sociological Teaching.

Some of his works: "Reading the world through the educational curriculum" (Oliveira, 2021), "The rise of School Without Party movement and the denunciations" (Oliveira, 2022), "O combate à ideologia de gênero e o impacto sobre o ensino de ciências humanas e sociais " (Oliveira, 2023) and "A ascensão dos populismos e a crise democrática: desafios para o ensino das ciências humanas e sociais hoje" (Oliveira, 2023) discuss the advance of the extreme right in the political field and its consequences for educational policies, especially its effects on the humanities and social sciences curricula in Brazil. "Etnografia para Educadores" may be a helpful book to introduce the possibilities of using ethnographic methods to sociological teaching newcomers researchers and also has great potential in becoming a reference text for sociological methods teaching at both secondary and university education.

"Etnografia para Educadores" aims to be a contribution to developing ethnographies in education by presenting discussions, principles, and pathways of ethnographic research. The text's most notable aspect is its extensive use of quotations, weaving together theoretical concepts and practical experiences from various researchers, resulting in what the author names a "polyphonic narrative", contributing to the text with a dialogical and multiperspective nature which presents to the readers a glance on macrological aspects of the ethnographic research processes. Oliveira asserts the viability of conducting ethnographic research within educational contexts and offers strategies for addressing the structural challenges in employing this research methodology.

In the first chapter, he contextualizes the potential use of ethnography, asserting that education is an essential part of the broader cultural fabric of societies. He suggests that adopting an ethnographic style can facilitate the interpretation of "school culture," thereby giving educators an opportunity to cultivate a fresh perspective on already known environments and equip them with tools to foster a more comprehensive understanding of educational processes.

Historically, ethnographic research primarily focused on interpreting cultures and contexts external to the Western societies from which anthropologists originated, often emphasizing radical otherness. However, contemporary anthropologists are increasingly exploring subtle nuances of alterity closer to their cultural milieu. The author invokes the insights of Clifford Geertz to position ethnography not as a direct transcription of cultural practices and perspectives, but rather as an interpretation shaped by both the researcher's standpoint and the perspectives of "native" informants. Geertz characterizes ethnography as a dialogue, an interpretation of the native informant's cultural perspective by the researcher, emphasizing collaboration rather than observation. Thus, the distinctive quality of ethnography, relative to other research methodologies, lies in its inherently dialogical nature.

Amurabi acknowledges the challenge in instructing individuals on conducting ethnographic research, given its reliance on various factors such as the researcher's specificities, the characteristics of research subjects, and the theoretical-methodological framework. While ethnographic interpretations are, to some extent, unique and irreplicable, they engage with broader cultural aspects and extend beyond

mere "case studies". Through these contributions of a more general nature, ethnographies continually enrich socio-anthropological theories, catalyzing their ongoing refinement. Particularly, the use of ethnography as a methodological approach of education emphasizes the importance of comprehending day to day school practices to comprehend broader cultural processes of societies.

In the second chapter, he discusses the preparatory phases of ethnographic fieldwork, which include: developing the ethnographic gaze, crafting the research project, selecting the field site, and establishing the theoretical framework. He emphasizes the importance of acquainting oneself with the field before commencing research, which may involve prior engagement with the institution or reviewing institutional documents and data. Oliveira underlines the necessity of immersing oneself in existing ethnographic literature and honing ethnographic writing skills. Furthermore, the importance of identifying ethnographic potential in the chosen field and considering the viability of research implementation and access to the desired space is highlighted. Flexibility in adapting the research project to suit the objective conditions of the field is crucial. As a matter of fact, researchers frequently encounter challenges in gaining acceptance within the field, a phenomenon which may also happen in educational ethnographies, where researchers may be seen by "natives" as they are evaluating educational practices and potentially menacing institutional reputations or professional careers.

Regarding the theoretical framework choice, the author recommends engaging with literature pertinent to the research project to familiarize oneself with theoretical articulations relevant to the ethnographic field. The primary objective is to ensure that the theoretical framework contributes effectively to the research's development and outcomes.

In the third chapter, he delves into the intricacies of entering the research field. Drawing insights from anthropologist Ruth Landes (2002), he contends that researchers should engage in self-reflection regarding their relationship with the field, primarily through written reflection. This process proves valuable as it allows researchers to visualize their journey and decision-making regarding the research subject and fieldwork.

Additionally, the author underscores the significance of preparing necessary instruments, documents, and obtaining permissions for fieldwork. Subsequently, he discusses the initial phases of fieldwork, stressing the importance of attentiveness during both formal and informal interactions, considering the impact researchers' presence may have on participants. Available time emerges as a crucial element in ethnography, as ethnographers, despite linguistic fluency and prior training, must acclimate themselves to the dynamics and cultural norms of the researched schools. Besides, time and informal interactions may help the researcher's acceptance within the field.

Regarding ethics in this kind of research, he proposes that it involves collaborating "with" individuals rather than simply studying them as subjects, which requires considering different ethical dimensions beyond traditional biomedical standards. Despite this perspective, he acknowledges the challenge of establishing ethical guidelines tailored specifically for educational research.

When it comes to gaining acceptance in the field, the author references Clifford Geertz's experience conducting research in Indonesia. The community he was researching only truly accepted him when he joined them in hiding during a police raid on an illegal cockfight. This event illustrates that the unfamiliarity subjects may feel toward the researcher can pose a significant obstacle to ethnographic research. An "informant" who feels uneasy or mistrustful of the researcher may withhold information or even fabricate it to avoid scrutiny. Therefore, it is essential that the researcher takes advantage of situations (usually informal ones) to get closer to the subjects. It may be that official authorizations the researcher may have with him at certain times will serve more as an element to distance him from the subjects than to bring them closer together; hence the importance of taking advantage of informal moments to get closer, but without dispensing with ethical precepts.

Concerning sociological teaching research, approaching the field and self-reflecting your own practices has its own particular issues, primarily because almost everyone is familiarized with school contexts, making it even more critical to be aligned with ethical parameters and to distance oneself from preconceptions which may bias the investigation.

In the fourth chapter, the author explores the observation of school practices. He contends that through an "ethnographic lens," researchers should be adept at

capturing, interpreting, and verbally depicting the connection between local phenomena in the field and broader societal and cultural aspects. Additionally, the author theoretically distinguishes between "school culture" and "schooling culture": the former relates to the educational process and organization within modern societies, while the latter encompasses the empirical practices occurring in day-to-day school activities specific to each school context. The key lies in ensuring that ethnographic observation remains attuned to this interplay between general and specific elements. On sociological investigations this means one must explore the connections between school practices and the broader processes of cultural development and reproduction in societies. Oliveira also discusses the feasibility of integrating ethnographic observation with other methods, such as interviews and visual documentation, contingent upon the research design and objectives.

In the fifth and final chapter, the author focuses on reflecting on ethnographic writing, with particular emphasis on the field diary as a crucial tool to support this endeavor. The diary enables researchers to create distance from the field, facilitating a diachronic perspective on their work. It may thoroughly document field experiences and perceptions, serving as the foundation for crafting the final text. If we conceptualize ethnography as a process of learning and generating knowledge about a specific reality, it's within the final text that the author communicates his or her findings. Amurabi stresses the importance of striving to comprehend how categories manifest in reality during the writing process, while also cautioning against allowing the theoretical framework to unduly constrain the researcher's interpretation. Also, he emphasizes the significance of attending to native categories, as this interplay between theoretical frameworks and empirical data serves as a fundamental means of refining the theory itself.

This book aids newcomers to do ethnographic research, highlighting critical issues encountered when conducting ethnographies in school contexts. Additionally, it emphasizes their potential to provoke reflection and challenge conventional understandings of teaching-learning processes, thereby fostering knowledge development and school practices enhancement through an anthropological lens. According to the author, it is important to contemplate the production of

ethnographies within school contexts to advocate for their use as a collaborative means of generating knowledge.

In addition, this work establishes itself as a significant effort to draw attention to the possible contributions of anthropology to the social sciences and sociological teaching field. This action may be a great aid in Brazil, where sociology has taken center stage in teaching of social sciences educational practices and given the relative isolation of anthropology and political science from the non-academic educational context.

References

Barbosa, I. I., & Oliveira, A. (2023). O “combate à ‘ideologia de gênero’” e o impacto sobre o ensino de ciências humanas sociais. *Acta Scientiarum. Education*, 46(1), e68066. Acesso em 17 de abril de 2024 pelo endereço eletrônico:

<https://periodicos.uem.br/ojs/index.php/ActaSciEduc/article/view/68066>

Oliveira, A. (2021) Reading the world through the educational curriculum: the social sciences curriculum in Brazil in the context of the rise of conservatism. *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Languages & Literature*, 40(2). Acesso em 17 de abril de 2024 pelo endereço eletrônico: <https://raco.cat/index.php/Bellaterra/article/view/394657>

Oliveira, A. (2022) El auge del movimiento Escuela Sin Partido y las denuncias contra los "maestros adoctrinados" en Brasil. REIDICS. *Revista De Investigación En Didáctica De Las Ciencias Sociales*, 11, 85-100. <https://doi.org/10.17398/2531-0968.11.85> Acesso em 17 de abril de 2024 pelo endereço eletrônico:

<https://revista-reidics.unex.es/index.php/reidics/article/view/1905>

Oliveira, A., & Fernández, A. S. (2023). A ascensão dos populismos e a crise democrática: desafios para o ensino das ciências humanas e sociais hoje. *Acta Scientiarum. Education*, 46(1), e70525. Acesso em 17 de abril de 2024 pelo endereço eletrônico: <https://periodicos.uem.br/ojs/index.php/ActaSciEduc/article/view/70525>

Accepted in: june 2024