

Prus, R. (1997). *Subcultural mosaics and intersubjective realities: An ethnographic research agenda for pragmatizing the social sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 349 pp. (Hardcover).

This is an interesting book. I use the term interesting because I'm still not sure what I really think about it. Interesting is a term of equivocation for me and I find myself equivocating over what I can say to do justice to the author, Robert Prus, a professor of sociology at the University of Waterloo, and his book which offers itself as a "an agenda for reorienting the social or human sciences" (p. xi).

Professor Prus positions himself in the tradition of symbolic interactionism as a conceptual home and ethnography as a methodological home. As a symbolic interactionist of the Chicago school he emphasizes the researcher's need to be inter-subjectively at home with the subjects of his research. That perspective leads him to espouse the methods of ethnography as an especially useful way to use observation, participant observation, and interview techniques as a way to achieve this intersubjectivity. He illustrates how to combine symbolic interactionism and ethnography in order to explain how "people experience (make sense of and engage on an ongoing basis) the life worlds in which they find themselves" (p. xii).

I found this program quite admirable in its purposes and motivation. Professor Prus explains that it is his reaction to the positivist/structuralist, as well as to the postmodernist disregard for the fundamental reality of social life as an ongoing accomplishment of members. In the preface the author explains how the book shows that examining the life-worlds of people through ethnographic inquiry can counteract the tendency of most social scientists to avoid or ignore the day-to-day accomplishments of people in constructing their worlds.

In order to achieve his ends the author divides the book into three sections (with a total of eight chapters) in which he explains, in the first section, the conceptual foundations of his enterprise, in the second section, his research agenda and how to use these foundations to study human experience, and in a final section, the practicalities of using the methods of ethnographic research.

In Section One, the author relies heavily on Herbert Blumer's conceptualization of symbolic interaction that characterizes the work of well known symbolic interactionists like George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. He quotes Blumer's three premises: "that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they have for them;" "that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows;" and "that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p. 5).

Professor Prus explains how society is constructed by people interacting with one another through shared symbols which give meaning to their actions. In order to make this clear he presents seven premises of his own that outline the accomplishment of everyday life and goes on to explain the implications these premises have for research methods in the social sciences. He asks, How can we understand the lived situation of others? By "venturing out into the life-worlds of those being studied and interacting extensively with those involved therein." This may be achieved most effectively through ongoing participation in the life-worlds being studied and through extended open-ended conversations with those whose activities and experiences are being considered (p. 18).

The rest of the book reads like a manual for doing this kind of symbolic interactionist, ethnographic research. Chapter two whittles the notion of culture down to a manageable research size by employing the notion of subculture located in everyday small group interaction. Chapter three provides a taxonomy of subcultures which includes suggestions for how the neophyte ethnographer/symbolic interactionist can engage her or his subjects and organize that experience.

Chapter four continues the author's taxonomy of the lived-world by cataloguing what people do in order to achieve intersubjectivity in their subcultural encounters. For example, he outlines people's experiences with shared stocks of knowledge by presenting lists of activities such as defining situated and enduring concerns about knowing, and building on verbal communication, under headings such as Developing Folk and Scientific Knowledge; Stabilizing and Maintaining Information; Developing, Funding, and Maintaining Educational Forums; Acknowledging (and Disattending to) Stocks of Knowledge; and Experiencing Classroom (Student) Routines. He does the same thing with

topics such as dealing with objects, locating and consuming foods, developing and using clothing, and obtaining negotiables for exchange.

Chapter five uses the same approach to provide an ethnographic taxonomy for studying "Encountering the Other, Managing Morality, and Emphasizing Community Presence." Chapter six concludes this section with a taxonomy for "Experiencing the [Inter-subjective] Self."

Chapter seven, "Doing Ethnographic Research: Fieldwork as Practical Accomplishment," describes, through generalized theorizing, description, and interviews with colleagues who are themselves ethnographers, the enterprise of ethnographic research using observation, participant-observation, and interviews as the three principle methods and sources of data.

Chapter eight, "Writing Ethnographic Research Reports: Some Practical Considerations for Students," uses a similar format to provide a guide for writing up ethnographic research. The author believes such writing requires learning some special skills because it involves making such diverse and complex data understandable by detailing people's life-worlds, quite a different enterprise from reporting the results of survey or experimental data in statistical form.

In essence, this book turns out to be a "How To" manual for aspiring symbolic interactionist ethnographers, with however, some important ontological and epistemological problems.

For example, I have serious concerns with a basic inconsistency in how this book conceptualizes phenomena of interest and research methods for making them visible and understanding them. I applaud the author's recognition of the need to understand human behavior in context, but I fear he sees context as a relatively unproblematic phenomenon. Otherwise, how could he so present endless lists of human behaviors as technical categories of analysis rather than as commonsense categories that are themselves socially created but cannot be taken for granted as members' categories?

I appreciate the symbolic interactionist's concern with "respecting the life-world of the other," as a way of expressing the need to get as close to the inside of people's everyday lives as possible in order to understand why people do what they do (p. xi). However, I would like to suggest that we can never do better than describing and interpreting how people go about their everyday lives in concert with others based on retrievable records of those activities. The real job here is to assemble records on tape or film of people's ordinary, everyday interaction. Only the public

face of experience can ever be described and we cannot assume an isomorphic relationship between this face and the private face. We can only "access (and grasp) the experiences of the other" as social phenomena, never as a private ones.

The symbolic interactionist notion of the "inter-subjective other" presents itself as that which we as researchers can enter into through our ethnographic interactional accomplishments. However, inter-subjectivity, in the Schutzian, phenomenological sense, seems a more accurate description of our everyday assumptions of other's taken for granted knowledge and experience of the world. Using this notion we would say that people assume intersubjectivity until something goes wrong. Intersubjectivity is not a personal position but a social one.

Given Professor Prus' claims to understanding the world as an intersubjective, socially created reality, I found it initially hard to reconcile his willingness to disregard the positivistic "quantitative, speculative, moralistic, or prescriptive analysis of the human condition," with his reluctance to deny the "scholarly merit" of these approaches (p. xiv). However, I did find a reconciliation when I realized that positivism comes in many forms. Symbolic interactionism and ethnography become positivist when they fail to carry their initial insights into the nature of the social world, and the ontology of its phenomena, to their proper epistemological conclusions.

Further evidence of this failure can be seen in a methodology which relies on observation, participant-observation without requiring a taped or filmed record, and interviews as its way of finding out about people's behavior in other circumstances. For example, Professor Prus suggests that we can understand subcultures such as "the hotel community," with its "hookers, desk clerks, exotic dancers, musicians, bar staff, security people, rounders and some rather diverse sets of patrons" (p. 35) by watching, joining, or talking to these people. Then we will be able to make claims to knowing about this community and the people who fulfill these roles.

However, there are a number of problems with this model of research. First, it mistakes social phenomena for social objects. Culture, subculture, organizations, communities, occupations, roles, and all other social phenomena do not exist as things in the same sense that physical phenomena do and cannot be known or understood in the same way. Social things don't exist on their own. Their existence depends on us. We create them *when we give meaning* to the things people say and do.

Without us social things are only sound or movement in time and space. Our interpretation of the thing is the thing. Cultural identities, roles, and occupations are convenient, commonsense labels, but not technical, scientific categories of analysis which give us unambiguous insight into what people labeled in this way will actually say or do.

Because physical and social things are so different in their nature, the things we can know about them also differ substantially. Physical facts and social facts are as different as rocks and love. In order to evaluate the value of information we get about our world through the methodology Professor Prus describes we must first ask whether it is appropriate to understanding social things. This is where his methodology fails the test because it treats subcultural things as if they were physical rather than social things.

The taxonomies, the lists of social activities the author gives us, appear as technical, scientific categories of analysis. But they are not. They are nothing more or less than analysts' ways of making sense of the world. Their relationship to how members make sense of the world as they navigate their way through their everyday lives is highly problematic.

Professor Prus' methods and conceptual model seem inconsistent. For example, his suggestion that interviews are a good way of learning how people make sense of each other contradicts his earlier acknowledgment of a social world that is an inter-subjectively created phenomenon that can only be understood in context. It makes no sense for him to endorse George Herbert Mead's excellent description of a reflexive world where

language does not simply symbolize a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or appearance of that situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created, (p. 39)

and then to say that "ethnographers can use interviews to obtain a great deal of information about the life-situations of the other" (p. 203) and that

without this opportunity to uncover, ascertain, and qualify the meanings that others hold for objects in their life-worlds and the ways in which people go about accomplishing their activities in practice, it would make little sense to talk about studying human lived experience. (p. 205)

Although the author states that "interviews in themselves should not be seen as substitutes for extensive involvement as participant-observers" (p. 203) this still begs the question.

Interviews are good for learning about how people give accounts of their lived experience to an interviewer but accounts of activities are not the activities themselves. We cannot use people's answers to questions about their everyday lives as standing for the truth of their behavior. Telling about our words and deeds never reveals the words and deeds themselves because the telling is already an interpretation of what was said or done in the sense that it is a description of those things. Social things cannot be literally described because descriptions are always a choice of (a) to describe or not to describe, (b) what to describe, (c) how to describe, (d) how much to describe, (e) when to describe, and (f) and for what purposes to describe.

Prus's proposed methods would leave us with a research report which might be good for showing how the researcher makes sense of what others say and do but unless we have a verbatim record of the interaction in the form of tapes or film we would have to take the researcher's word for the account. In every moment of our lives we actively create the world in which we live by interpreting the meaning of everything we see and hear. Nothing comes to us pre-interpreted. It's always up to us to make sense of everything we encounter. If ethnographers want to make claims about people's sense making, then they must provide us with good evidence for those claims. Their accounts of what people say and do are good evidence. A verbatim record of what people say and do is good evidence. Ethnographic research is valuable when it provides us with a record of people making sense of the world in interaction where their sense-making practices become publicly available as evidence for the ethnographer's interpretation. Recorded observation can do this. Interviews cannot.

I have focused on the problem of interviews as an example of a persistent problem. Throughout the book I found myself consistently confused by what I thought were legitimate claims being made about the indexical and reflexive nature of social phenomena juxtaposed with positivist methods and descriptions of those phenomena. Unfortunately, the author critiques normative sociology and psychology but often relies on the very positivist methodology which he criticizes.

Professor Prus wants to catalogue the objects and processes of the social world. In spite of my criticisms of this book I have great sympathy

for his project even if I do not quite see how it will produce what he says it will using the methods he proposes. I have no idea of what the finished product would look like because he presents no examples of how his method works in furthering our understanding of the human condition.

Regardless of these problems I think this book has its heart in the right place, if not always its head. I would certainly recommend *Subcultural Mosaics and Intersubjective Realities* as a comprehensive ethnographic methods text. Additionally, it presents an interesting look into the author's way of making sense of the symbolic interactionist ethnographic enterprise. Finally, I would encourage readers to judge for themselves if this account, as brief as it is, presents a fair description and evaluation of the book.

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