

## Comprehensive Field Work Instructions: A Review of *Applied Ethnography. Guidelines for Field Research*

Elizaveta Polukhina

National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), Moscow, Russia

---

*This book provides extended information and concrete guidelines for applied ethnographic research. It is rich in methodological advice, applicable empirical instruments and tools. The work will be helpful for advanced researchers, academic and non-academic people involved in complex international programs, lectures and graduate students planning to conduct ethnographic research for their dissertation. It includes research examples in education, marketing, community health, nursing, geography and more. The empirical fields of Pelto are slightly removed from the focus on Euro-American academic research and include reflections of working in the developing countries such as South Asia (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) and more. Keywords: Ethnography, Observation, Mixed Methods Research, Field Work*

---

Pertti J. (Bert) Pelto is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Connecticut. He received BA degree at Washington State College and a doctorate in anthropology at the University of California (Berkeley). He was a professor at Cornell University, the University of Minnesota, and Washington University. Professor Pelto is both an author and editor books and textbooks in the field of anthropological research methods (Messer, Pelto, & Pelto, 1989), healthcare and nursing (Pelto, Verma, Schensul, & Joshi, 2004), and social change (Pelto, 1973), *Technology and Social Change* (Bernard & Pelto, 1983). His anthropological work *The Structure of Inquiry* (Pelto, 1970), promoting a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches, was pioneering in socio-cultural anthropology and qualitative research generally. Pelto is the founder of the educational program in *Medical Anthropology* at the University of Connecticut. Medical Anthropology is the dynamic subdiscipline, focusing on the diverse borders between, bio worlds introduced by health, biology, and the environment and, social reality, presented by culture, social relationships, and actions. Thus, most of Pelto's projects relate to Medical Anthropology and research such important fields such as HIV/AIDS, reproductivity and the investigation of women's health.

*Applied Ethnography* (Pelto, 2013) is the methodological result of a 50-year research career. The author defines this type of study as the mixture of structured and less structured methods in problem-solving research. Data gathering strategies are a combination of observation and interviewing, aimed to get people's verbal descriptions and explanations (p. 322). Ethnographic research varies widely including, for example, short (RAP as it called "rapid assessment procedure") and long-term ethnography realized in academic and non-academic organizations.

This book is rich in practical advice, applicable empirical instruments and tools of Pelto's projects. His field of work covered health, community development, education, agriculture and applied to various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, marketing, geography, psychology. Most chapters' include sequential guidelines for certain research steps, clear easy read instructions and detailed pencil sketches drawn by Dunja Pelto, the author's daughter. For example, in a core chapter about data analysis (chapter 12) Pelto pointed at the relevance of systematic reading, categorizing, and searching for patterns and "themes" in field materials. He introduced the case of a *Domestic Violence* study in Bangladesh. The author demonstrably shows in a table how sets of categories emerge from interviews and gives the

example of the code list. The text is full of lists for tracking, instructions, notes and the steps in data analysis (pp. 199-217).

The book is organized logically by the steps in research process. He broadly describes the whole circle from the gaining entry to a study site (chapter 3) to data analysis (chapter 12) and writing (chapter 18). The research steps include, for example, training a research team (chapter 17), social mapping and informant interviewing practices (chapter 4), sampling strategies (chapter 8), data gathering and preliminary coding text ("start list"), creating a conceptual framework (chapter 10, 12), linking from qualitative data to survey, a combination of mixed materials and reporting (chapter 8 and 18).

*Applied Ethnography* (Pelto, 2013) combines epistemological, methodological, methodical and procedural levels. At the epistemological level Pelto pointed-out that the philosophical issues related to positivism, realism, and constructivism are not relevant to applied, problem-solving studies (p. 41). His view is very close to pragmatism as one of the epistemological origins of mixed methods research. Based on pragmatism, there is no contradiction between the qualitative and quantitative approaches. Each approach has its own advantages and the researcher needs to use both in order to get the best results (Morgan, 2014). Pelto noted that most design in 21st century is exactly "the qualitative-quantitative mix." He showed the inter-relation between qualitative and quantitative data-gathering and analysis. Nowadays ethnographic research methodology includes not only a qualitative methodological core, but a diversity of patterns and mixtures (i.e., both components, and the distinctions between them are often blurred; p. 7)

A powerful ethnographic research design includes a combination interviewing with participant observation (p. 166). He states that interviewing 30-60 cases with a carefully planned strategy of sampling is enough. Traditionally ethnography is rich in unique and powerful instruments such as card mapping, the diary-plus-interview technique, mobility mapping (p. 264). Collective discussion as focus groups are very efficient for social mapping and vocabulary tasks (p. 102). Pelto also reminds the readers about the relevance researcher notes:

*...I have seen many instances in which researchers had excellent interviews and direct observations of actions and events, but their written interviews notes and other descriptive materials failed to capture all the concrete details*

*Researcher need to remember: If you don't write it, it's done!*

*Writing up interview notes is also the main step in which you will present "the voice of people." (p. 11)*

Overall, the multiple method strategy allows more data credibility and triangulation takes place (p. 154). The researcher has opportunities for cross-checking data and for outcome generalization. The author advises keeping data grounded and being inductive as much as possible. Moreover, Pelto argues that much applied research is abductive by nature:

*...it is really a mixture of discoveries, suggesting some possible explanations, and a back-and-forth between theoretical thinking and getting more information related to the hypotheses (p. 39)*

Another goal of this work is to show that each applied ethnographical project is a scientific attempt to add to useful knowledge for specific and local use in an ethnic group, geographical region or concrete institutional setting. Pelto insists that this kind of study is "local

knowledge and practices” of target communities (p. 323). But at the same time the research and data gathering is an endless procedure where “knowledge is practically never a final product. Additional research will suggest modifications in “what we know” (p. 7).

The book finishes with reflections about the future of applied ethnography. The tendency to use technological innovations and moving away from the basic face-to-face actions of ethnographic data-gathering is emphasized (p. 323). Probably, Pelto predicted the reasonability of Netnography (Kozinetz, 2010) as a contemporary approach and way of data collection.

Overall, this book is practical, well organized and explained everything clear. It will be useful for a wide readership including experienced researchers, lectures, and students with a range of discipline such as sociology, anthropology, and marketing.

### References

- Bernard, H. R., & Pelto, P. J. (1983). *Technology and social change*. Prospect Park, IL: Waveland Press.
- Kozinetz, V. R. (2010). *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*. London, UK: Sage.
- Messer, E. G., Pelto, P. J., & Pelto, G. H. (1989). *Research methods in nutritional anthropology*. Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University Press.
- Morgan, D. (2013). *Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods: A pragmatic approach*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Pelto, P. J. (1970). *Anthropological research: The structure of inquiry*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Pelto, P. J. (1973). *The snowmobile revolution. Technology and social change in the Arctic*. Prospect Park, IL: Waveland Press.
- Pelto, P. J. (2013). *Applied ethnography: Guidelines for field research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Pelto, P. J., Verma, R., Schensul, S., & Joshi, A. (2004). *Sexuality in the time of AIDS: Contemporary perspectives from the communities in India*. New Delhi, India: Sage Publications.

### Funding

The review was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2015 (grant No. 15-05-0012) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

### Author Note

Elizaveta Polukhina is a PhD, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at The National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), faculty of Social Sciences (Moscow, Russian Federation). She is co-leader in scientific and educational group *Mixed Methods Research in Social Sciences* (URL: <http://social.hse.ru/en/mixedmethods/>). Her interests include sociological research methods (qualitative approach, online methods as well as mix methods research strategy). Elizaveta is the author of several methodological articles with the topics as netnography, focus groups discussions, and strategies of integration qualitative and quantitative research methods. Her projects related to the issues of social ecology, sociology of home and social mobility. Correspondence regarding this review can be

addressed directly to: Elizaveta Polukhina at, E-mail: [epolukhina@hse.ru](mailto:epolukhina@hse.ru); personal page: <http://www.hse.ru/en/staff/polukhina>

Copyright 2015: Elizaveta Polukhina and Nova Southeastern University.

### Article Citation

Polukhina, E. (2015). Comprehensive field work instructions: A review of *Applied Ethnography. Guidelines for Field Research. The Qualitative Report*, 20(6), 826-829. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/6/polukhina2.pdf>

---