

Book Review - Ethnography Step by Step (David Fetterman)

Ethnography Step by Step, by David Fetterman, approaches the practice of ethnography in a sequential and practical manner. He begins with the research question, since “What do you want to do?” is the fundamental inquiry for every area of life. Fetterman’s preference for phenomenology, which he characterizes as accepting multiple realities, over positivism, which he characterizes as believing in objective reality, is typical for a modern academic, at least until the objective reality of a traffic ticket or a bank overdraft hits them in the face. People have multiple perceptions, each of which corresponds more or less to the objective reality. Fetterman then noted the characteristics of ethnology, including holism, diversity, emic vs etic contexts, structure, symbolism and ritual.

Methods and Techniques commonly used by ethnographers include observation, interviewing, questionnaires, and projection, such as photography. Fetterman’s discussion of equipment is useful but already dated. His discussion of analysis is excellent, including triangulation, pattern seeking, noting key events, and graphically portraying the data in charts, maps, and matrices. Ethnographers will write differently depending upon the purpose, the audience, and the ethnographic role in which they find themselves. Finally, ethnographic work is ethical work, respecting the needs of all of the stakeholders, from the sponsors through the researchers to the participants.

Ethnography Step by Step is a brief and broad overview which would be useful to a missionary doing field work. While not scoped for in depth discussions on each technique, it includes sections such as content analysis and projection which open up new horizons for the

researcher. The discussion on internet use in ethnography is valuable, and the examples throughout the book illustrate points well. The book is small, light and easy to stow; an advantage in a field environment. Like James Spradley, David Fetterman is a giant in the field of ethnography, and his instruction, though perhaps not parts of his underlying philosophy, is reliable.