

Comentario al artículo: 'Comparison through collaboration: Dilemmas and opportunities of joint ethnographic research on gangs in Nicaragua and South Africa.'

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Comment on: **‘Comparison through collaboration: Dilemmas and opportunities of joint ethnographic research on gangs in Nicaragua and South Africa’**

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The type of collaborative ethnography proposed by Jensen and Rodgers deals with two challenges that anthropologists faced almost from the onset of their discipline: It is a proposal on how to carry out comparisons between different societies or social groups; but it is also an original take on how to deal with the ways in which theoretical and cultural assumptions, plus each ethnographer's own individuality, influence their fieldwork and the interpretation of the data that results from it.

Although Jensen and Rodgers provide multiple examples of how their collaboration allowed them to revise some of the assumptions underlying their previous research on gangs, their strategy suggests additional forms of reflexivity that could be used in other contexts. One example is their analysis of what they call the 'ground zero' of their respective ethnographies. The reciprocal inclusion of one ethnographer in the fieldwork of the other allows them to recognize how the particular ways in which they entered the field permeated their understanding of the groups they studied. While this possibility is made explicit, the text implicitly suggests more ways in which collaborative ethnography could enrich the reflective process in virtually any kind of fieldwork.

For example, while reading the text I became curious about the possibilities that this type of collaboration opens for the analysis of the categories gangs used to classify themselves and other people. At least in my experience, the ways in which gangs rank their members and nickname the people they interact with (e.g. police officers, common neighbors, addicts, etc.) provide revealing insights into their worldviews. This kind of analysis would not only add a

complementary dimension to the comparison of gangs in Nicaragua and South Africa. It would also create an opportunity to reflect on how each of the ethnographers captured and translated the meanings underlying these terms. In this case, the exercise is potentially more enriching due to the multilingual context that is generated in this collaborative experience. It not only deals with the contrast between the languages spoken in both countries. If I understand well, the native languages of the two ethnographers also differ from each other. Each of these differences could provide new points of 'disjuncture', as the authors call them, increasing the opportunity to understand how their cultural and theoretical backgrounds intervened in the production of their ethnographies.

Beyond the particularities of the case, this type of exercise does not seem exclusive to the study of gangs. Reflexivity on how ethnographers translate native categories is just one possible example of the increasing number of possibilities that collaborative ethnography could open in almost any kind of fieldwork. Furthermore, this type of analysis may enable interesting alternatives to deal with what became one of the great challenges to the production of ethnographic knowledge since the 'interpretive' turn introduced by Geertz (1973) in the 1970s. Along with the notion of ethnography as a kind of cultural translation, came an ongoing debate on how to exercise some sort of 'epistemological control' of the way anthropologists decoded one cultural universe in the terms of another and turned them into text (Resta 2021).

Debates on this issue led to the proposition of several alternatives: from the need to accept that ethnographies were 'fictions' closer to the field of literature than to science (e.g. Clifford 1983; Tyler, 1986), to proposing some sort of dialogical form of ethnographic writing (e.g. Tedlock 1987; Capranzano 1990). However, the debate seems to have waned while none of these or other alternatives turned into common or widely accepted practice. It is not certain that collaborative ethnography can solve all the dilemmas that this debate has risen. But it certainly provides grounds for a sort of 'anthropological imagination' on new ways to enrich the reflective process by which ethnographers decipher foreign cultures in terms of their own and put them in writing.

Finally, the article proposes a type of 'disjunctive' comparison that differs from the more conventional modalities of contrast. Traditional large-scale comparisons were made with the

purpose of establishing regularities and differences, without accounting for the way in which the data was produced and the particularities of the different contexts in which it was gathered. The reflective character of collaborative ethnography provides grounds to examine the conceptual assumptions that underlie the comparisons, and to recognize the potential variations that would result from using other instruments. But while disjunctive comparison opens up valuable opportunities, it may be wise to reconsider the possibilities of large-scale comparisons in light of, at least, two recent developments: The growing number of international databases (e.g. World Values Survey, Latinobarometer, Eurobarometer, etc.) that provide a large amount of useful information for comparisons between societies and regions, and the development of computerized processing programs that enable an increasingly sophisticated analysis of this data.

Although I cannot develop the argument in full here, the fact that these bases consist of quantitative data collected through surveys does no longer preclude the possibility to critically examine the way in which it was produced and to account for the particularities of the contexts where it was found. These databases are usually accompanied by protocols that provide detailed accounts of the way in which the data was gathered and the associated possibilities and limitations. Many statistical techniques, in turn, (i.e. reliability and validity tests) enable the revision of the assumptions that guide data collection, while others (e.g. multilevel regression models) allow to identify regularities, and the way in which the contingent conditions of each context affect them. In view of these advances, it may be convenient to consider combining both types of comparison instead of taking them as mutually exclusive. This combination may increase the chances to critically assess research results (adding more points of disjuncture) by enriching the understanding of large scale regularities with data provided by the in-depth analysis of specific cases and, reciprocally, situating case studies in the wider context revealed by extensive comparisons.

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