

Ethnomusicology-at-Home and Grounded Theory

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Introduction

This paper is about ethnomusicology-at-home and grounded theory. I do not pretend to give a thorough introduction to either of them in twenty minutes. Rather I intend to share with you a rather individual feeling of surprise.

Let me start at the beginning. I started my on-and-offish 'career' in ethnomusicology with a master's thesis on Moroccan musicians in the Netherlands. Via a longtime involvement with multicultural music education in the Netherlands and a small study of the expression of Frisian identity in music, I now study 'musickers' (Small 1989) in the Dutch province of Groningen AD 2011.

My current research project is related to the fact that I work in a conservatoire where professional musicians are trained. My study aims to get a view on the 'other side' of the musicians we train: their audience. I do not want to look at that audience in entrepreneurial marketing terms, as is done too often in conservatoires. Rather I focus on the social practice side of music. Professional musicians should be aware how individuals in late-modern society think about music, talk about music, handle music. Not in terms of target groups but in terms of individual concrete and situated behavior. That is what I study.

Within the variety of the subjects I researched, there are two constant factors: the studying of musicking in my own backyard, and the less and less 'exotic' character of the individuals I study. From Moroccans through Frisians to my neighbours, as it were. And at the background of it all stands my interest in music as a social practice – for me the essence of ethnomusicology.

Ethnomusicology-at-home

My study of 'musickers' in Groningen of course is an example of ethnomusicology-at-home. I am not going to define that here. But whatever its definition, I am sure that one of the more at-home variants of ethnomusicology is the one where a Dutch-raised and Dutch-trained ethnomusicologist wants to research the practice of musicking of a wide and indiscriminate variety of his fellow-citizens.

My research project is definitely ethnomusicology-at-home. But at the same time it is of course also a qualitative social research project focusing on music. So I got myself introduced to qualitative social research theory and methodology – to grounded theory, conversation analysis, objective hermeneutics and ethnomethodology, to name a few. A new world for me. I had not encountered it in my own study. Nor was I aware that in ethnomusicological circles much mention of it was made.

But of course I looked for good examples of similar projects, their theory, their methodology. And this is where my surprise started. I knew Bruno Nettl had written about ethnomusicology-at-home long ago already (Nettl 2005 (1983)) and recently again (Nettl 2010). I knew that recently Jonathan Stock had dubbed it one of seven new directions in ethnomusicology (Stock 2008). I assumed that there would be quite some literature by now filed under the epithet of `ethnomusicology-at-home`. So I consulted RILM, our main database. It delivered 2 hits. And I consulted some of the more recent ethnomusicological handbooks (e.g. Stone 2008, Post 2006). They delivered some more examples – but not many.

Of course a scan of recent journals and collections of essays brought to the fore that much is written on Western music by ethnomusicologists. But apparently there is no need to set that type of work apart from `normal ethnomusicology. I then did a search on general musicologists using qualitative social research methodology. It turned out that there was a literature there, but mainly in three fields: music education, music therapy/health, and music psychology/performance studies. Interestingly, they often mention ethnomusicology together with qualitative sociological sources as their inspiration.

The methodological question

So: ethnomusicology-at-home seems still a small field. And it is as yet nearly unrelated to qualitative sociological studies on music. My main argument is that that may be an opportunity missed, because there is a methodological question in ethnomusicology-at-home which is well theorized in qualitative social research.

Let me start by stating the obvious. In whichever way ethnomusicology is defined, always its central method is considered to be fieldwork / participant observation / ethnography. (I am not going into discussions on definitions of these terms, which are sometimes used indiscriminately but sometimes have very definite, but never constant, meanings.)

The force of fieldwork lies in the fact that (and here I quote Hammersley & Atkinson's widely used introduction in ethnography (2007: 9)) it “exploits the capacity that any social actor possesses for learning new cultures, and the objectivity to which that process gives rise” (stress added by EBB). It is the journey from being an outsider to becoming more of an insider (and again I am not going into a discussion of those terms) that generates knowledge.

For ethnomusicology that is clear. But for ethnomusicology-at-home, one may ask how this type of knowledge generation works. What happens when there actually is no journey from being an outsider to becoming an insider, because the researcher is an insider from the start? Does this lead to `homeblindness' (Eriksen2001: 30), and if so: how do we deal with that?

Basically, I believe, there are three possible answers to the question how to deal with this question about `the estrangement of your own culture' (`Die Befremdung der eigenen Kultur'), as it is so elegantly phrased in a bundle of German essays (Hirschauer & Amman 1997). One is: there is no problem. Or rather: a competent

ethnomusicologist knows his way around the problem. Fieldwork works everywhere. (cf Van Ginkel 1998)

A second possible reaction is kind of the inverse. Ethnographic research has a deeply personal quality. Objectivity is therefore impossible. Ethnomusicology, wherever it takes place, turns into a personal narrative of the ethnomusicologist-as-author (see Barz & Cooley 1997, and especially Kisliuk's chapter there).

A third answer lies in the middle and is my starting point. There is no need to deny that ethnomusicology is a deeply reflexive discipline in which the ethnomusicologist must thoroughly take into account who he is and where he comes from as a person (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 18, and Davies 1999). But the enterprise still stands to "produce accounts of the social world and justify them" (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 18). For researchers, "their primary goal must always be to produce knowledge, and that they should try to minimize any distortion of their findings by their political convictions or practical interests" (ibid.).

The estrangement of the well-known

It soon became very clear to me that it is precisely this question: of distancing the researcher from the well-known, so important for ethnomusicology-at-home, which is one of the central methodological questions in qualitative social research in general. In for example grounded theory (see Glaser & Strauss 1967; Corbin & Strauss 2008; Charmaz 2006), which I use for my research project, there exists a constant quest for the combination of the utter interpretative stance of the researcher with a set of rather positivistic assumptions. This might be an inspiration for ethnomusicology-at-home more than it seems it is now. I will shortly illustrate this with two examples: the interview and sampling strategies.

The interview

Let me start with the interview. In ethnomusicology I think it is common ground to say that basically fieldwork delivers data of three sorts: (participant) observations, interviews, and documents/artefacts. Central to ethnomusicology is participant observation. But interviews are very frequently used for additional data. Specifically in ethnomusicology-at-home, it might well be that participant observation loses some of its centrality in favor of interviews. As Jonathan Stock observes talking about urban ethnomusicology: "the nature of the city as a research site (and of professional work in the modern world) may mean that the resulting ethnographies are quite distinct in style and content. (...) Interviewing and relatively formal interactions may be necessary rather than day-to-day participant observation." (Stock 2008: 200-201)

In ethnomusicological texts, interviews are often mentioned, sometimes labeled as 'qualitative' or 'open-ended', but that's about it. But the interview is not a simple tool. Let me quote Atkinson in his recent 'operatic ethnography' of the Welsh National Opera: "some critics, myself included, have argued for a certain degree of caution and rigor in discussing data derived from interviews. I do not believe that interviews can give us access to unmediated private experience. Indeed, it is far from clear what such private experience might amount to. Rather, I suggest that interviews with informants yield autobiographical narratives that can and should be understood as performed

identities. (...) They are mediated and framed by culturally shared forms and genres” (Atkinson 2006: 162).

When one chooses to use interviews one therefore has to give an extensive methodological justification. Let us see how this takes place in two examples, one from ethnomusicology and one from a more qualitative social research orientation. For ethnomusicology-at-home I choose the much quoted article of Kay Kaufman Shelemay on the Early Music Movement in Boston, published in *Ethnomusicology* in 2001. She does explain the methodology followed, roughly terming it ‘ethnographic enquiry’, and refers to interviews being held. There are remarks on the insider/outsider problem (many of the researchers were also part of the Early Music world investigated). This leads to the statement that “interviews sometimes slipped into conversations or even into spirited debates as members of the research team became at once musicians, audience members, or occasionally critics” (Shelemay 2001: ...).

I think that is a fine description of what may happen in research like this. But it also is a rather limited methodological consideration of what an interview is. To mention just one thing, in the existing methodological literature on interviewing it is not so much the case that interviews ‘slip into conversations or even into spirited debates’. Conversations and spirited debates are deliberate results of consciously chosen forms of interviewing.

The opposite example is an article by Melanie Lowe, “Colliding Feminisms”, on how teenagers perceive Britney Spears. It was published in *Popular Music and Society* in 2003. Lowe explains carefully where and when interviews were held and why, why she chose for focus groups and not for one-to-one-interviews, how she made sure she could make rapport in spite of e.g. age difference between her and her interviewees, the effect of using recording equipment in the focus group session on the sessions, the way the focus group recordings were transcribed, the general course of the sessions, and why she eventually bases her article on only two of the focus groups.

Turning to my own research, I use narrative-biographical interviews as core data. In those interviews, I ask my interviewees basically two questions: tell me your musical biography, and give me a guided tour around your music collection. The main thing in these interviews is to get people talking about music. I then transcribe the interviews, mostly word for word, and analyze them not so much on content but on discourse level, asking myself the question: in what wordings do the interviewees express which functions music have for them – and how may this be connected to more general societal discourses on music?

In order to do this, I must extensively justify the backgrounds of using the interview: what exactly happens when I have interviews with people? How will they perceive me, and how may this influence what they say? How am I sure that the discourses I get out of the interviews are the discourses in there, and not the ones already in my head – in other words, how exactly do I analyze? Et cetera et cetera. Those questions have to be answered in order to be able to use the interview with any convincing power.

Sampling

A second important point where ethnomusicology-at-home may benefit from ideas from qualitative social research is sampling strategies. When one studies, as I do, music as a social practice in modern Western society, an obvious question is: who, or what, exactly do I research? Where am I going to observe? Where do I find my interviewees? Which documents do I take into account?

The standard ethnomusicological answer seems to be a recurrence to the concept of 'culture'. One studies 'culture', and therefore seeks instances that are telling about this 'culture' in an exemplary form. That is the reason why Nettl chose to take as the subject of his ethnomusicology-at-home of Western culture the conservatoire. It instantiated for him the essence of the musical culture of the West (Nettl 1995). And Aaron A. Fox describes in his book on country music as working class culture (Fox 2004) how he takes a lot of trouble to find the central locus for his fieldwork – one that matches his ideas about what country music is all about.

The danger of circularity is all too clear here: how can you be sure that the results you get out of this kind of research (Western music culture is ...; country music culture is...) is not only the result of the careful interpretation of data but also based on the implicit choices you made already before any explicit interpretation started, when you decided which were the data you were going to work with?

The matter of sampling has been the subject of extensive discussions in qualitative social research. One of the strategies that have come forward there is that of 'theoretical sampling' in grounded theory. When one goes to study a new field, basically one puts into brackets any ideas about how this field works. The researcher simply starts somewhere – it does not matter where.

In my case: I started to interview a randomly chosen individual on music in his life. I then analyzed the interview. On the basis of that analysis I looked for an interviewee that contrasted as much as possible with the first interviewee. The contrast lies in variables that came out of the analysis as relevant, which need not necessarily be the variables widely used in quantitative social research, such as age, gender or socio-economic status. I analyzed the second interview and then looked for a third interviewee with maximum contrast to the first and second interviewee; thus continuing until either the point of saturation is reached (new interviewees do not generate extra knowledge any more), or – maybe more often – time has run out.

Learning from qualitative social research

I think it is very important that research is carried out on the social practices of the Early Music-world in the US (Shelemay 2001), American conservatoires (Kingsbury 1988; Nettl 1995), country musicians in Texas (Fox 2004), practitioners of aerobics (DeNora 2000), Milton Keynes' "hidden musicians" (Finnegan 2007 (1989)), or the Welsh National Opera (Atkinson 2006). I also think that this kind of research is natural for ethnomusicologists who consider themselves to be the researchers of music as social practice. But I think that ethnomusicology-at-home might fortify its methodological basis by looking at the more general methodological literature in qualitative social research. Specifically, the problem of a reflexive distanciation of what is 'yours' would be served by that.

I am not able to give a huge quantitative basis for my concern, but what I see up until now is that in ethnomusicological literature on the study of modern Western society there is (much) less clarity on e.g. the character of the interview as data or on sampling strategies used than in publications from other fields.

I can only speculate about the reasons for this limited use by ethnomusicologists of knowledge available in other disciplines. Maybe it still is true that ethnomusicology as a discipline is often too busy demarcating itself from other fields rather than cooperating with them. Maybe the fieldwork paradigm or the still heavy stress on 'culture' is so strong that it has begun to serve as an underreflected 'that's-the-way-we-do-this' methodology. Maybe the inherently musicological stress on music as a work and on the musician (Titon describes ethnomusicology as "knowing people making music" (1997: 91; stress added EBB), instead of on music as a social practice, hinders orientation towards qualitative social research. And also the choice by some for a more post-modern subjectivism may prevent orientation towards the 'subjective objectivism' of important strands of qualitative social research.

With this I end my paper. It was rather sketchy and probably superficial. But for me, the methodology of ethnomusicology-at-home is an important question. I am aware that methodology is widely discussed in ethnomusicology. Already in the seminal *Shadows in the Field*-collection (Barz & Cooley 1997) there are many passages that lead to methodological considerations I think are needed in ethnomusicology-at-home. My point is that in the literature I see, a bit more methodological explicitness might strengthen our claim of giving plausible interpretations of musical life.

In a recent article two German anthropologists make a plea for anthropology to turn to qualitative sociology in order to make a "...methodological step ahead in field research by re-importing sociology in ethnology" (Meyer & Schareika 2009). I think ethnomusicology could profit from such an inspiration by qualitative social research as well, thus enriching the already very rich ethnomusicological community even further.

Thank you.

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