

# Ethnographic experiences: an interview with Frederick Erickson<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** During the 19th “Annual Research Forum on Ethnography in Education” (1998), Professor Frederick Erickson, a prominent scholar of ethnography in education, was interviewed by a team of researchers led by Professor Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos and the author of this text. The event took place at the University of Pennsylvania and was recorded by former undergraduate student, now a professor at UERJ, Professor Cleonice Puggian. The interview, dating back 25 years, serves as an example of ethnographic research and its distinctions from other qualitative research methods. This topic is always appreciated by those who are knowledgeable in the field of ethnography. Frederick Erickson discusses how ethnographers experiment with various ways in which people describe human experiences, drawing on simple language and sociological knowledge to explore the transition from practical application to academic knowledge in research. It is hoped that the reading of this interview will clarify many uncertainties surrounding “being and doing ethnographic”.

**Keywords:** Frederick Erickson ; ethnography; interview; qualitative research.

## Introduction

Professor Frederick Erickson is the interviewee in this dossier<sup>2</sup>. The interview was conducted by Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos, mediated by Vera Anselmi Melis Paolillo and recorded by Cleonice Puggian, on the first day of the 19th Annual Research Forum on Ethnography in Education, which took place on March 6-7, 1998, at the Graduate School of Education (GSE) of the University of Pennsylvania (Penn). Its importance in the context of the dossier on Ethnography in Education lies not only in the relevant contribution of the author, one of the eminent names in this field of knowledge, but also in the fact that the authors of the dossier, for the most part, are followers of his way of doing and teaching ethnography.

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<sup>2</sup> MATTOS, Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de. Interview with Frederick Erickson.” 19th Annual Research Forum on Ethnography in Education”, recorded on March 6, 1998, at the University of Pennsylvania School of Education (Penn), Available on YouTube: [https://youtu.be/RjWiUFp4UpU?si=WbtOq\\_JXzd8dDxDU](https://youtu.be/RjWiUFp4UpU?si=WbtOq_JXzd8dDxDU).



The interviewer follows Professor Frederick Erickson 's line of thought and has passed on his teachings to her students, researchers and authors of this dossier. In this context, it is imperative to introduce the interviewee.

Frederick Erickson is professor emeritus of the Department of Education in the School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California Los Angeles (Ucla), where he has worked since 2000, as: From 1998 to 2011, he was George F. Kneller Professor of the Anthropology of Education at Ucla. From 2000 to 2006 he was Director of Research at Corinne A. Seeds University Elementary School, Ucla. Since 2015 he has been a Full Professor in the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University. He received his bachelor's and master's degrees in music history and completed his PhD in education at Northwestern University in 1969.

His contributions to the field of educational anthropology have earned him numerous honors and awards, including Spencer and Annenberg Institute for Public Policy fellowships, the Fulbright Prize, and the Spindler Award for Scholarly Contributions to the Field of Educational Anthropology, a prize awarded by the American Anthropological Association. Frederick Erickson 's writings on micro-ethnography continue to be widely cited, especially by those studying the interactions between pupils/students, teachers/students and families/students/teachers. They generally focus on how these interactions affect disadvantaged students.

He has also written extensively on qualitative research methods in social and educational research. His book "Talk and Social Theory: Ecologies of Speaking and Listening in Everyday Life"<sup>3</sup> received a 2005 Outstanding Book Award from the American Educational Research Association. Between 1998 and 1999 and 2006 and 2007 he was a fellow scholar at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. In 2014, the Council for Anthropology and Education nominated him for its annual Outstanding Dissertation Award.

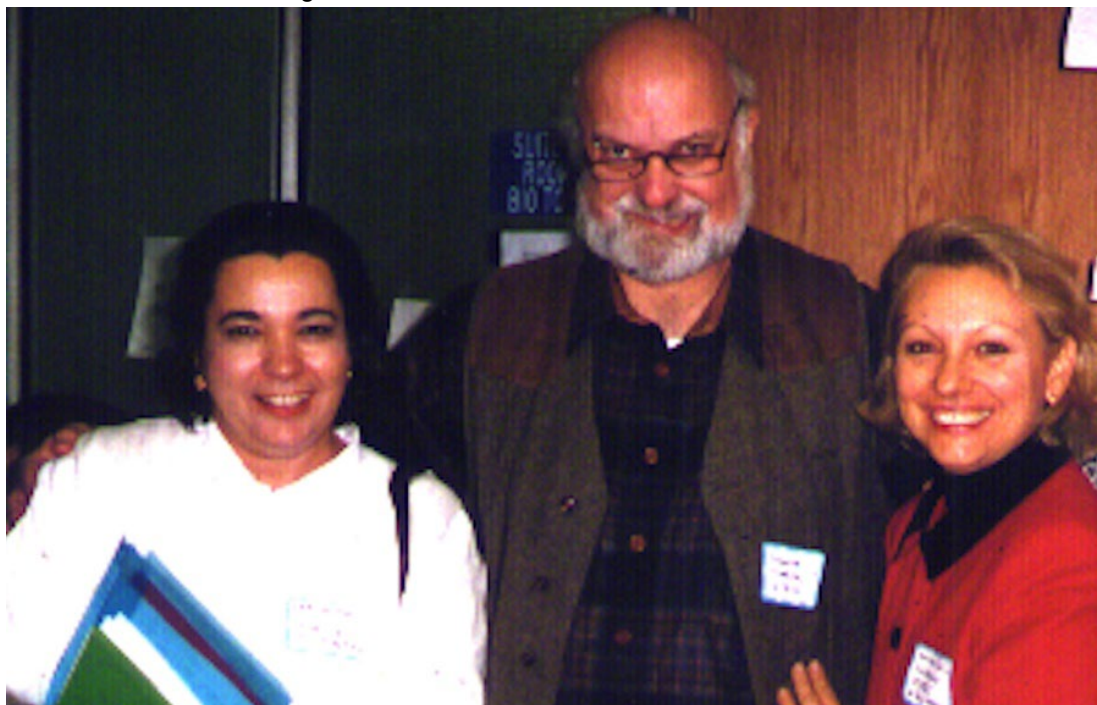
More recently, in 2019 the Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE/GSE/Penn) created the "Frederick Erickson and Hornberger Outstanding Book Award" in his honor. The award is part of the activities of the internationally recognized Ethnography in Education Research Forum. Created in 1980 and coordinated by Prof. Frederick Erickson during his time as a professor at GSE/Penn.

Frederick Erickson 's work for the fields of Education, Anthropology and Sociolinguistics would take us countless pages in this introduction, however, with this summary we begin to detail the interview itself, which will be presented and commented on by this author.

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Erickson, Frederick. **Talk and social theory: ecologies of speaking and listening in everyday life**. Cambridge UK; Malden MA: Polity Press. 2004.

Figura: Carmen, Erickson e Vera em 6/03/1998



Fonte: Mattos (1998)

## INTERVIEW

### **Vera Anselmi Melis Paolillo**

Before we begin, I'd like to express our gratitude and thank you for the precious time you took to listen to us and share this moment with us at the Forum<sup>4</sup>.

So, thank you very much!

### **Frederick Erickson**

Thank you! Thank you for coming!

### **Carmen de Mattos**

We're extremely grateful for your valuable participation and for your deep involvement with the ethnographic approach that is providing us with this conversation.

We've come up with three questions!

Vera has new students arriving all the time, which keeps her very busy. And she asks if you could outline a little picture of what ethnography is, what the difference is between ethnography and other fields and types of research. Just the basics, ex-

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<sup>4</sup> I am referring to Frederick Erickson's presence on the panel presented at the *19th Annual Research Forum on Ethnography in Education*, on March 6, 1998, entitled: *Experiences in educational ethnographic research in Brazil: influences of Frederick Erickson's thoughts*. His presence provided us with a unique moment, since he was the organizer of the event.

plaining the concept in simple terms and highlighting how it differs from other areas of knowledge. And I have a question. Now there are many types of research in the field of education calling themselves ethnographic, which leaves us a little confused about the differences between them.

Some books call themselves Ethnomethodologies. They involve analyzing the social practices of research and literature to gain a deeper understanding of the subject. everyday life. We notice the same thing with historiography. A mixture of terms and concepts.

Ethnography refers to a body of knowledge and techniques used to understand the processes that make people's lives easier. While other types of research focus on different aspects and stand out for the practical application of knowledge. This makes it very confusing to understand ethnography and these other approaches. As an example, many cite historiography and ethnomethodology as synonyms for ethnography. This fascinating mix of terms and disciplines that touch on ethnography is interesting and, we wonder, what do you think about it? Is it necessary to decide whether or not to separate what's different between them? That's one of the questions we'd like you to address. And the other question is how do you see ethnography in the future?

I can see three different fields: one is ethnography: classroom ethnography - researching social language and interaction in schools and classrooms and what is important in those contexts; the teacher as researcher - research into the teacher's own practice - seems to me another field; the other is ethnography more broadly, which many call simply qualitative research, but uses interviews and participant observation.

### **Frederick Erickson**

I'd like you to ask again and with each question I'll try to say something about each of them.

### **Carmen de Mattos**

First, what is the difference between ethnography and other types of research available to us, between the different types of research? Although I've already heard this answer from you several times, I'd like you to answer it with new students who are new to ethnography in mind. As well as an analysis of ethnography in the future.

### **Frederick Erickson**

Well, it seems to me that ethnography uses many methods at once, all the methods of qualitative research more generally, but there are two things I see. I remember saying two, three or four things that I think characterize ethnography as distinct from

others and I'll try to remember them; the first is that there's the emphasis on the meaning of actions for the people doing the actions that seems to me - if observational work doesn't do that or narrative reporting doesn't do that, it's not ethnographic. But ethnography and other types of qualitative research are also concerned with the meanings of actions from the point of view of other actors. I think what distinguishes ethnography is that it tries to look at a setting as a whole and that setting can be a classroom, it can be a community, or it can be a whole school. There are different types of units of a whole that ethnographers can look at. But when they do, they try to look at all the people within that whole and all the people's roles within it. As well as how that contributes to what everyone else is doing. Sometimes research doesn't try to do that - that emphasis on holism is the second characteristic.

Then a third is that one of the things that I think really makes ethnography different from other forms of social research, but not all of which can be called ethnography and which is part of my definition, is that ethnography always has a comparative perspective, it talks not just about what's happening here, what the events are, but what they mean to the people who are doing it - what's happening here and what it means to people, unlike other ways of doing it elsewhere in society or elsewhere in the world. So. when you're looking at a particular place as an ethnographer, especially an ethnographer with a background in education or anthropology, what are you looking for? You're thinking about other ways of doing the same thing, whether you're looking as a whole at a family, a classroom or a school. In relation to your neighborhood that you're thinking about in the United States you're thinking about here, you're in an inner-city school in your neighborhood that's different from a school in your neighborhood, in the suburbs or in a rural area, or in Germany, or in Great Britain, or in Japan, or in Brazil right! So. there's always this comparative sense and an ethnographic description the kinds of analyses that ethnographers do always have as a backdrop the sense that there's a wide range of humanly possible ways of doing the same kinds of things: family life, the classroom; teaching reading, relating to teachers and to parents. You're looking as an ethnographer at a particular setting as a whole and you're trying to see the meanings for people, what they do, you're trying to be very specific about what they do. If you're ethnographic you have that kind of comparative perspective. Not all of us use comparison.

If we used these strict criteria to analyze all the works presented at the forum<sup>5</sup>, we'd probably fail a lot of them, right?

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<sup>5</sup> Here Frederick Erickson refers to the ethnographic papers presented during the *19th Ethnography in Education Research Forum* that was taking place on the day of the interview. In the case of the discussion to which he refers, it is the panel that our group presented entitled: *Experiences in educational ethnographic research in Brazil: influences of Frederick Frederick Erickson 's thoughts*.



So, I don't insist on a strict definition of ethnography. But it is distinct from other things, as we said in the session [referring to our panel], so when I'm thinking about making distinctions, that's where I start. What's the next question?

### **Carmen de Mattos**

The second question is about differentiating between types of qualitative research, in particular, the characteristics that make them unique. What I often see is the term ethnography meaning, for example, historiography and life stories, sometimes providing a more comprehensive view than classroom research.

### **Frederick Erickson**

I don't know exactly how I can differentiate between these different ways of thinking and putting knowledge together in an effective and productive way. Well, let me say a few things about that.

Again, as I don't know the Brazilian terms and what's happening particularly there now, I might get a bit lost, and I might not answer adequately what you ask, but I can add some ideas that contribute to this discussion.

One is that it's difficult to distinguish between what I call microethnography, ethnographic microanalysis, and what some people call discourse analysis or a type of discourse analysis in sociolinguistics or interactional sociolinguistics, which John Gumperz<sup>6</sup> talks about.

There's also another type of discourse analysis called critical discourse analysis in England, which is a bit different, so there's a lot of overlap between these types of analysis as well.

But this converges on a tendency towards grand global social theories about class relations and other theories about domination in society that fall back on and interfere heavily in data collection and analysis, in our work we're not so closely connected with broader social theory, but there's always been a connection, at least in my own work. I'm interested in issues of class and race that are discussed in wider society and in local society I'm not exactly in the same theoretical camp as all the people who label the work as critical, I have argued, however, that there is a more critical approach; to the kind of work that people like Raymond<sup>7</sup>, and Hugh [Bud] Mehan<sup>8</sup> and

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<sup>6</sup> John Joseph Gumperz on the website [https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/\\_files/inmemoriam/html/JohnJosephGumperz.html](https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/_files/inmemoriam/html/JohnJosephGumperz.html).

<sup>7</sup> Raymond on the site: Raymond\_Williams no site: [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond\\_Williams](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Williams).

<sup>8</sup> Mehan no site: [https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/\\_files/inmemoriam/html/JohnJosephGumperz.html](https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/_files/inmemoriam/html/JohnJosephGumperz.html). Hugh Mehan no site: <https://sociology.ucsd.edu/people/faculty/emeritus/hugh-mehan.html>.

I and even John Gumperz do sometimes, recognized by those people, but anyway, that's another distinction.

In any case, ethnographic microanalysis or micrography and social and interactional linguistics and some kind of discourse analysis may well be a

kind of synonym in practice. Ethnohistorical and ethnomethodological methods are different and have a different kind of distinction.

I would say that many ethnographies in contemporary anthropology and even in the past sometimes, and often, analyzed some historical information in a detailed way in order to understand the culture more comprehensively.

But it is relatively new to try to systematically use a kind of recent history as an ethnographic field method, which involves participant observation and cultural immersion. John Puckett at our college (GSE/Penn) did this.

I don't think you can call it history and you can also call it that if there's no actual contemporary participant observation, interviews, review of contemporary documents, in a combined setting with looking at documents from the past, or even interviewing people about the past or doing life history interviews of people whose lives you're also looking at how they're living now.

So, you're not just interviewing them about what I would call ethnography with a time depth dimension, and you could call it... I'm not sure... and only you know what examples you're looking at - but that's how I would think of it if you were doing qualitative research to find out material about people's lives in the past. I would call it ethnography with a time-depth dimension, and you could call it ethnohistory.

I would say that some would call it history in the United States which would be more historical than ethnographic.

But if you combine a case study of everyday life with some time-depth information and I think that's what some of us sometimes call ethnohistory here.

Ethnomethodology is more complicated to distinguish, as there is a possibility that the term is being used in the wrong way, being confused with the "ethno" of ethnography. So, it's important to clearly separate the meaning of each term to avoid misunderstandings.

And perhaps I should consider backtracking or at least allow me to explain that this applies to the answer to the first question as well.

The term "ethno" and ethnography, as you know, I've lectured on this in your presence, comes from the Greek word for other people, the "ethnois", the people who are not Greek. Ethnography is writing about other people.

Now we have domestic ethnography. That's a big part of what we've been doing: reflecting on our society. Even while maintaining our comparative perspective with

other cultures, we can strengthen our sense of relationship with people at work. Comparing different practices between societies, such as the Japanese, Mexicans and rural areas in relation to our life in the city, allows us to broaden our understanding. This kind of comparative view is in the spirit of looking across a variety of groups culturally and ethnically, to better understand diversity.

So that's exactly what "ethno" stands for in the field of ethnography.

What ethno means in the context of ethnomethodology is something quite unique and specific. I know this because I know the people who coined the term, Harold Garfinkel and colleagues were the people who really developed the idea, and it was Garfinkel who coined the term originally.

He meant, as the German philosophical sociologist Alfred Schütz put it, that it was folk, popular methods of making sense of the world. This highlights the importance of the methods used by ordinary people to interpret and understand the world around them. They wanted to express something like what Bourdieu understands as habitus, in our view it's the expression of the common man, there's an expression in American English that means the street man's view, the kind of mundane understanding of common sense by people when they're not particularly reflective, just getting on with their daily lives.

That's the definition of ethnography or ethnographic methodology.

What the methodological part means is the forms of common sense of those ordinary people, even hegemonic common sense, but they didn't use the notion of shadowy hegemonic influence. It's a common, non-reflective, common-sense performance in the world.

They found that, in order to do this, you have to assume certain things about the world, for example, in ordinary interactions, you have to assume that, on some level, people are basically telling the truth. Because if you're a stockbroker, a car salesman or something like that, we don't assume that they're always telling the truth, it's important to question and investigate.

But if you walk into a store and ask, how much is that bag of fresh, juicy lemons? How much is that bottle of cachaça on the shelf? - I love your cachaça<sup>9</sup>.

They tell you the price, whatever it is, you assume they're not joking. When you hand them the money, they give you the change they said they would. This was one of the ethnographic methods they discovered in their research.

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Erickson was referring to a bottle of Brazilian "cachaça" (an alcoholic beverage, well know in Brazil) that Carmen had brought him as a gift.



I mean, they thought about what are these things that we never think of as ways of making sense of the world that they are so much a part of and are taken for granted as understandings that we never even think about.

Another example, and Garfinkel created a lot of interesting experiments to test things like this that we can't ethically do. Things like this - he assigned his graduate students to do things like get on a bus. And you say, this bus goes to Leme, right? (a neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro). You're somewhere in Rio de Janeiro. You ask, does this bus go to Copacabana? And the driver says yes, right? Or no! As required! And then, as a passenger, you say, at the next turn, you say, well, how can I know that? He says yes, the bus doesn't take that long. And you ask yourself, how can I be sure of that? And you can ask the bus driver to stop immediately, call a policeman if he insists on it - This is important to ensure everyone's safety - I mean, it completely paralyzes everyday life, making daily tasks impossible. It's as if there are certain fundamental things that we just assume about life, without question.

Another example is, you see someone lying in the street, in the middle of the street... - and ethnomethodology says that this is the original meaning of the term, you need to construct a story about what happened to fully understand it. This implies investigating the context and the social interactions involved. It's important to consider various possibilities... - when finding someone unconscious, such as drunkenness, diabetes, a heart attack or an accident. We don't just leave the perception there, the person on the street. We always construct some kind of narrative.

And so, when the teacher sees the student around her, she decides that she can't help because of his previous behavior. She sadly decides that she can't help. The reason she decides this is because she has a small negative assumption about this person that won't be worth her time and energy.

So, ethnomethodology, strictly speaking, is a thorough study of this kind of phenomenon. Conversation analysis is a type of microanalysis like discourse analysis that emerged from ethnomethodology, being a detailed and contextualized approach. Some ethnomethodologies are conversation analysis, which can cause confusion. And that seems to be what I call Micro ethnography.

But strictly speaking, ethnomethodology is the study of common and ordinary understandings in the world as people live in that world.

This concept comes from the continental philosophical tradition, partly inspired by the phenomenology of Alfred Schütz. And, as informed by American social scientists, especially sociologists in their academic research and field studies. There are other things about us that we won't go into in detail. But anyway, one of the sources is the phenomenology of the social world - there's a collection of articles on the

subject. I've been very influenced by ethnomethodology, but I don't think my work is ethnomethodological.

There's another thing to think about ethnomethodology and it comes from anthropology, it's the emphasis on how people make meaning as they move towards the notion of culturally learned patterns of meaning. How they make or use language in the way that language learning shapes what they do.

The stories being invented, and the meaning being created are completely invented in the current situation and reflect the creativity of the minds involved. Once again, there is no direct connection between social class, race or any of these factors and the construction of meaning in life

Both anthropology and critical theory are deeply committed to establishing broader connections as significant influences on people's actions and interactions on the local scene.

The ethnomethodologists - for some reason I don't have time to review - for reasons of social theory have said let's just simplify, that's been overdone. Let's put that in brackets. Let's just try to look at people making sense of the immediate scene. And then they kind of forgot, theoretically, about society in general.

But again, I don't know which ethnomethodology, you know, or which looks exactly like you know! because of that, because I don't live within those constraints, it's a disadvantage for me as a participant observer who's participating just a little bit really rather than being an observer There are some real disadvantages to not having those weights and constraints if I'm trying to describe people acting and making sense within a world of weights and measures. But there are also some advantages in being able to interview the principal about some things that the teacher can't and noticing some things at the back of the room that the teacher can't and so on and, likewise, on the teacher research side, there are advantages of that depth of immersion and sense of the weight of action and the institutional weights on what is difficult for one. But there's also the problem of tunnel vision and what you know to take.

But again, I don't know if that's what you wanted about ethnographic methodology. Is that it?

### **Carmen de Mattos**

Yes!

### **Frederick Erickson**

It seems to me that if I want to interview on a broader range of topics, I can do that, but maybe someone else can't. There are all sorts of ways in which I can't get as

close to some aspects of the subjective world. There are all sorts of ways in which I can't get as close to some aspects of the subjective world, because I'm not immersed in the specific constraints that people face daily.

This is both, disadvantage for me, as a participant observer, who is only participating a little. But it really has no comparison with a participant/observer/insider (one who is inside the researched context), because the absence of weights and restrictions affects the realistic description of actions and behaviors in a world with rights and limitations.

By interviewing the head teacher, he or she can reveal different perspectives and information from those at the back of the room, which the teacher is unable to observe, bringing unique advantages for him or her. Similarly, on the teacher's side, there are advantages in the depth of immersion and in the sense of the weight of their actions and the institutional weight that makes it more difficult for an outside observer to understand.

There is also the problem of the narrow view of the observer or their subjectivation of the insider observer. This means, in the case of the teacher, that they can take understanding of their own practice for granted and not see certain things from the inside. Therefore, the insider has a problem of myopia and limited tonal vision, while the external researcher has a more comprehensive vision, but sacrifices depth and meaning in terms of the practice observed.

So, I think, in fact, we will always need both, as each has its unique role. I support teacher research, but its limitations are recognized.

I'm very much in favor of regular qualitative research, but it has some real limitations that until recently people weren't so aware of, or at least weren't publicly acknowledging.

There is a certain elitist tendency, especially in the generation before mine, both in anthropology and in other areas of qualitative research, in which people didn't even consider the need to get involved in the work in order to fully understand it. They insisted on making a canoe, opting instead to just watch it being made. I actually wrote about this in 1978, during an unforgettable summer, when I presented the inaugural address to the board of the American Anthropological Association. In it, I delved into the issues related to this subject, using Malinowski's image of observing people making the canoe.

And I said that in educational research, there is something that can only be achieved by taking the torso with the other workers to carry out the tasks together. So, I was advocating greater participation in the work by external researchers, as well as ac-

tively encouraging teacher research at that time, in order to enrich the academic environment.

But I don't really think that's the case, there's often a simplistic dichotomization of saying that teacher research is the only virtuous and valid way of gaining knowledge. These other ideas are elitist and misleading, or vice versa.

Only an outsider can understand that the teacher is too immersed in practice and can't be reflective enough and can't get enough comprehensive information. I think both of these positions simply don't make sense. I think there are strengths and limitations in both.

Research is collaborative, ideally perhaps, true collaborative projects are valid. But they are very difficult to carry out because power relations are never symmetrical.

### **Carmen de Mattos**

And how do you feel about the future, knowing that it's not a matter of minutes away? Is it necessary to make these differences or distinctions between one method and another, one path and another, to follow?

### **Frederick Erickson**

We need to do our best. I think we should do a good job; I'm not worried about the label. But much of what is being called ethnography suffers from not having enough comparative perspective.

I think that's a distinct advantage of what was traditionally known as ethnography because of its in-depth empirical approach, and I don't mind if the term gets lost. I do mind that the comparative perspective is not properly addressed in many academic works.

I think this is intellectually a loss.

I think you can make a more powerful analysis when you realize that there are other ways of doing the things you're looking at.

And in educational work, this comparative vision can be an inspiration for creativity, because if you realize that what you're seeing isn't the only way or the essential way, it helps us not to naturalize and essentialize what we're seeing. If we know that elsewhere they don't do it like that, and it works very well.

### **Carmen de Mattos**

How do you manage to essentialize in words? Can you elaborate on that?

### **Frederick Erickson**

We shouldn't essentialize culture! We shouldn't essentialize race! We shouldn't just essentialize, or naturalize, think that this is inherently the way things are!

So, this comparative perspective is a powerful corrective against that kind of unwanted behavior.

I think that if you miss this opportunity, you weaken both your academic analytical capacity, but you also run the risk of narrowing your imagination of the new possibilities of academic practice. Because if I know that this is just one of many possible ways of teaching reading, and that people have used this way in human experience, then I can say - Well! Maybe we can play around with it a bit and try to do something different, and know that I'm not, you know! Messing with the pillars that hold up the universe.

There is a marked tendency among education professionals, at least in this country, to be extremely convinced of their own methods, without noticing that reality is quite relative.

### **Carmen de Mattos**

Thank you very much. We'll see you in Brazil soon, won't we?

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