

Lisa Flower and Sarah Klosterkamp*Courtroom Ethnography: Exploring Contemporary Approaches, Fieldwork and Challenges*

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People go to court for many different reasons: dissolving disputes, obtaining redress, pleading for acquittal, proving cases beyond reasonable doubt, making fair and just decisions – and to do research. The many layers of the courtroom make it a sociological enigma, open for dialogues between disciplines and theoretical approaches. While the allure of this research quest is obvious, entering the courtroom as a researcher for the first time can be a bewildering and daunting experience. Even though tacit knowledge of the rhetoric and rhythms of this space will evolve over time, the initial confusion and overwhelming nature of the experience take time to digest. Moreover, as your understanding of one layer of the courtroom becomes saturated, another curious layer unravels. In times of uncertainty (how to handle a methodological challenge, what interpretative frames to choose etc.), previous research and methodological reflections from others in the field yield comfort as well as encouragement.

Courtroom Ethnography: Exploring Contemporary Approaches, Fieldwork and Challenges, edited by Lisa Flower and Sarah Klosterkamp, assembles more than 20 scholars with keen and longstanding interest in the masteries and mysteries of the courtroom, jointly offering rich and reflexive insights into the tricks of the trade. Like a box of assorted flavors, the different contributions in this anthology sketch out the vibrant playing field of courtroom ethnographies, providing food for thought for newcomers as well as valuable nibbles for more established scholars in this interdisciplinary and wide-ranging research field. While my own ethnographic struggles and current involvement in the field resonate more with some of the entries in the book than with others, I believe that the particular strength of this volume is that it will cater to researchers with very different aims and approaches. Although each chapter tackles different empirical obstacles and analytical issues in enlightening ways, it is the encyclopedic breadth of the book that makes it an essential read.

The 14 chapters are divided into two broad themes, the first part directly addressing methodological issues inherent in doing courtroom ethnography and the second part laying out the state of the art, presenting the manifold discoveries made in and outside

courtrooms around the globe. With a personal tone, the first chapters discuss questions of framing, access, positionality, reflexivity, and ethnographic senses and provide a helpful guide in how you as a researcher can forestall and deal with different kinds of methodological challenges. The major takeaway from the more loosely knitted subsequent section is that it gives the reader a comprehensive orientation into contemporary works of court researchers. In particular, the last part of the book shows us where courtroom ethnographies can take us, and it turns out to be very diverse, sociologically fascinating places.

On a more critical note, I believe that the question of why we need a book specifically on *courtroom* ethnography could have been discussed more fully in the book. Indeed, the courtroom is a venue where the power of the state is abundantly sharp, and one could argue that to understand 'law in practice,' what better tool do we have than being where it happens? Yet, when it comes to the refined expertise of studying this unique space, I would have wanted arguments for both the distinctness of courtroom methodologies and their transferability to other arenas of criminological concern. What can lessons learned in the courtroom add to literature on ethnographic methodologies more broadly? A concluding chapter discussing this question and providing an outlook for future endeavors would have elegantly finalized the book's ambition of bridging gaps between disciplines and empirical foci.

As pointed out in the excellent foreword by Nick Gill, the courtroom interaction in many instances epitomizes legal abstraction and, by extension, brings forward ideas of bureaucratic dullness and slowness. I believe that the presumption of courtroom dreariness haunts the criminological field, drawing many scholars into the more 'action-oriented' fields of police or prison research instead of the courtrooms. Having spent a lot of time in the courts of Sweden over the last decade, I would like to emphasize the vividness and elusiveness of this space. Courtroom ethnography is actually quite addictive, and while surprisingly few criminologists have found their way here, those who do tend to stay. I believe this book demonstrates the profound knowledge growing out of this enduring scholarly presence in courtrooms and I hope that this engaging and highly educational anthology reaches a wider audience than those who have already seen the light, igniting a spark of curiosity for researchers in other criminological fields as well. Unlocking the secret garden of qualitative courtroom research, *Courtroom Ethnography: Exploring Contemporary Approaches, Fieldwork and Challenges* is not only a brilliant invitation for students in criminology and adjacent fields to get their first taste of courtroom research, but also a valuable resource for more established scholars to deepen their understanding of this flourishing research field.