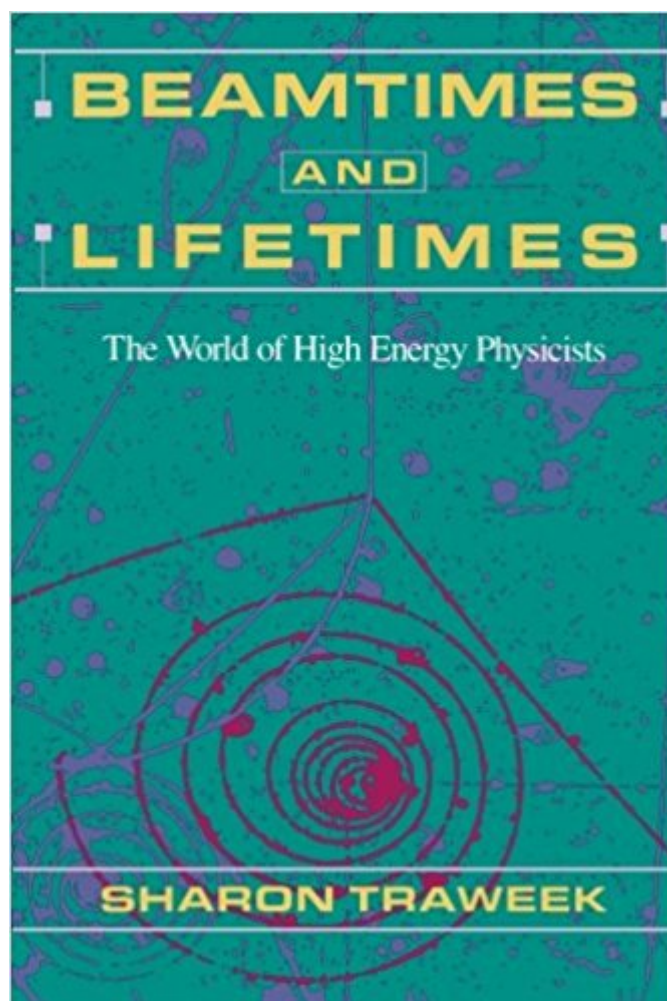


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Beamtimes And Lifetimes: The World Of High Energy Physicists



Synopsis

The unique breed of particle physicists constitutes a community of sophisticated mythmakers--explicators of the nature of matter who forever alter our views of space and time. But who are these people? What is their world really like? Sharon Traweek, a bold and original observer of culture, opens the door to this unusual domain and offers us a glimpse into the inner sanctum.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Every sensitive observer of contemporary science and technology will want to read this short, compelling description. (Susan E. Cozzens *Science*) A groundbreaking work about how modern science functions. As the only anthropologist studying high-energy physics, Traweek brings a unique and valuable perspective to the study of this curious and important modern community. (Michael Riordan *Technology Review*) Traweek gets inside the heads of physicists—She shows their similarities and difference, how their careers are shaped, how they interact with their colleagues, how they do physics and how their ideas about time and space shape their social structure. Traweek has produced a revealing and intimate look at this exclusive world and its mores. (Lee Dembart *Los Angeles Times*) Traweek's account successfully captures much of the flavour of the high-energy physicist's way of life—They aspire to reveal the immutable, everlasting laws governing the evolution of the universe "outside human space and time" yet the physicist themselves, only brief visitors to this world, are all too human, children of their cultures in their pride and frailties. (John Mulvey *Times Higher Education Supplement*)

Sharon Traweek is Professor of Anthropology at Rice University.

One of the first ethnographies of scientists and scientific work, Traweek's monograph is an essential starting point for any social scientist interested in an ethnographic approach to scientists; one of the first to suggest that scientists could have "culture" removed from other allegiances.

A classic and must read for anyone interesting in the culture of science in general and physics in particular.

This is an unique book on ethnographies in laboratories. Specially because Traweek do a cross-national comparison between Japanese and American research laboratories and scientists.

I read a review of this book and it sounded interesting, so eventually I bought it. The idea seemed good - study the community of physicists as a subculture of its own. And this book has its moments. Unfortunately, it was a bit too dry for my tastes. Traweek's habit of not giving names to the people she talks about and referring to everything in incredibly generic terms can be very irritating. I assume that this is some sort of anthropological or ethnographic practice - however, I'm not sure if this book should have been cast so heavily in the scholarly mode of anthropology. Parts of this book I skipped over because it seemed too dry. However, it's interesting to hear about the distinctions between the different kinds of physicists, the educational system that they were taught in, and the like. Looking back, I probably should not have read this book in one sitting, short as it is. Maybe my attention span just isn't long enough. But it still offers some interesting insights.

If the relation between science and society, nature and human, interests you, this is a book you should read. The author, who majors in anthropology, tries to examine high-energy physics community in the light of anthropology. As far as I know, anthropologists have hardly written any book about physics, physicists' community. As you will see, this book is different from the books that are usually written by physicist. The books, that physicists write, require more physical and mathematical background. But such prerequisites are not required at all in this book. Rather, this book requires the information about community, that is, anthropology. In prologue, the author explains the motivation of beginning this fieldwork, the relation between high-energy physics and war, the method of analyzing physicist community, and the landmark emerged in constructing an account of physicists' culture. First of all, the method of analysis through anthropology is the thing

that this book is different from usual books about physicists. The author says that the account written as an outcome of anthropological fieldwork usually includes information about four domains of community life. They run as follows: ecology, social organization, the developmental cycle, cosmology: the group's system of knowledge, skills, and beliefs, what is valued and what is denigrated. As this method, she develops his argument until epilogue. In chapter1, she, who was partly employed to conduct public tours of Stanford Linear Accelerator (SLAC), introduce SLAC and KEK in Japan, as if we tour through SLAC, KEK. In ch2, detectors, which is probably the most important tool observing nature, is revealed. There are many differences between detectors at SLAC (ESA, LASS, and SPEAR) and those at KEK. She does proficiently explain "why are detectors at SLAC and those at KEK different?" In the next chapter, she turns from the detectors to their makers who have different strategies for making research equipment. This chapter is entitled "Pilgrim's Progress: Male Tales Told during a Life in Physics". If you are concerned with physics, considering to major in physics, you are strongly recommended to read chapter. The life of physicist is divided by 4 stages: undergraduate student, graduate, postdoctoral physicist, and established physicist. The author does minutely explain the psychological state, required qualifications, in each stage. Until this chapter, the author has introduced the actors in the high-energy community but from now, she will describe their activities. Ch.4 entitled "Ground states: Distinctions and the Ties that Bind" explain networks of physicists, ranking of institutions, distinctions between experimentalist and theorist, women and men, etc... In this chapter, the author try to show the relationship that bind physicist community, she consider it to be highly fixed relation through talking, not writing. In last chapter, physicists, who try to maintain stability, negotiate with one another for resources, and change themselves in the front of knowledge. As deeply as this book probes into the anthropological details of high-energy physics community, it disappoints in being constrained to honor a typical theory of anthropology. "I have explored a theory originally formulated by Durkheim and...."[P.157]. The author did certainly succeed in analyzing high-energy physics community in the light of Durkheim's theory, but she failed in creating her unique view. Sometimes, she tries to vaguely show her opinion. The question of "whether electrons exist or not?" is translated into a less abrupt form to her "where do the social categories of physicist and physics community and physics culture exist?"[p.162]. On the other hand, it is likely that she has a prominent insight into detectors. "The relationship between scientist and nature is at its most intimate and physical in the detectors"[p.158]. "The detectors in the end are the key informants of this study; physicist and nature meet in the detector, where knowledge and passion are one" [p.17]. It is reasonable that she regards the detectors as the outcomes of physicists' culture and science policy of governments,

etc.... But, it is a little drowzy...not clear...

Beamtimes and Lifetimes by Sharon Traweek is an unusual book which documents the specific norms, values, and physical aspects of the high energy physics community in Japan and the U.S. One of the main strengths of this book is its comprehensive study on why physics is not a gender-neutral, unbiased, and totally objective science. Traweek exposes the fact that science is not the an individual endeavor devoid of human experience, biases, and human nature. By systematically, documenting the community and the ethos that the phycists adhere to, the reader walks away with the fact that physics like many other sciences are results of human intepretation - a construct of knowledge that is organized, affected, and generated by concerns of collaboration, funding, competition, gender biases, and culture. Although parts of this book may be pretty dry for the non- scholar and people are simply not interested, there are pivotal and salient paragraphs in Beamtimes and Lifetimes that show that science isn't objective and neutral as it seems. It is worth reading and non-scientists and scientists alike. Read carefully and don't plow through it!

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