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Ethnography: An Introduction to Definition and Method

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1. Introduction

Ethnography, emerging from anthropology, and adopted by sociologists, is a qualitative methodology that lends itself to the study of the beliefs, social interactions, and behaviours of small societies, involving participation and observation over a period of time, and the interpretation of the data collected (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Reeves, Kuper and Hodges, 2008; Berry, 1991). In its early stages, there was a desire by researchers to make ethnography appear scientific, and with this in mind a manual was produced for people in the field, with a set of instructions as to how ethnography should be 'done' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). As such it was seen to be more accurate than the descriptions of travellers, although not in the sense that scientific experiment or quantitative measurement is deemed accurate. A feature of positivism, the scientific approach, is that results can be tested, and the researcher is separate from the research. This was seen by ethnographers as failing to capture aspects of the way humans behave, the setting being artificial (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). On the other hand a naturalist approach is more interpretive, cannot be verified by tests, and the researcher's own interpretation is part of the process (Mackenzie, 1994). The goal of ethnography then was to give an analytical description of other cultures (Barbour, 2007), an exploration of a particular phenomenon, rather than the testing of an hypothesis (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). The data consisted of unstructured accounts and the analysis, which provided interpretation of meaning, was done by the researcher, using observation, description and explanation (Reeves, Kuper & Hodges, 2008).

Ethnography developed as the tool of social science, and involved the social scientific observer, the observed, the research report as text, and the audience to which the text is presented (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It was hoped that the social sciences would gain the sort of credibility of physical science, and the initial approach was like physical science in that it was assumed that the researcher had the right to study any phenomenon provided it led to new knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), and the only point of view was that of the researcher. There was a tendency to ignore the subject or to be critical of their claims (Katz and Csordas, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), they were, rather, seen as passive participants in the research, with no impact on the content of the study. The line between the researcher and the researched was clearly defined, and this was also true of the text produced and the audience for which it was produced. Only the researcher had input into the final report, and this product in turn, became for the most part the property of the scholarly community (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

As already mentioned, there was no attempt in the nineteenth century to represent the point of view of the people being observed, ethnography was conducted by outsiders providing a view of the actions of the people under study (Reeves, Kuper and Hodges, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). It was etic, rather than emic – or as Geertz (cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), puts it, the difference between a wink and a blink. The functional significance of an action was ignored, the ‘raw facts’ simply described ‘objectively’. Malinowski is credited with creating a shift in ethnography, when he sought to introduce into his accounts the point of view of those being studied, and the cultural significance of the actions described (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), going so far as to say that the researcher must immerse himself in the culture so that ‘they’ becomes ‘we’ (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003, p.216). Abu-Lughod (2000, p. 263) applauded, in ethnographic research, “the use of the poignant pronoun: we”, seeing it as symbolic of the importance of location. Rather than represent cultures as alien, by creating hierarchical discourses that excluded the familiar, accentuating differences and distance, it is important to identify with those being studied rather than turning them into objects (Abu-Lughod, 2000). Hence, immersion within a culture means being able to discern the significance of the blink in that culture, and becomes the ‘thick’ description of ethnography (Rosen, 1991).

The idea of a method that had shifted away from the scientific, and was thorough and broad, and topic oriented, lent itself to a broader application and has appeared in other research areas such as nursing, education, social work, planning, and marketing (Devault, 2006). The advantage of using such a method to investigate work practices is that some organisations recognise some work and not other work, whereas ethnography tracks all that is done whether it is recognised or not, and by analysing the social relationships, the relevance of experiences can be highlighted. Texts and discourses in organisations can be a means of maintaining control, and researchers can track the way this occurs, through seemingly neutral documentation such as funding proposals, planning documents and accounts (Devault, 2006).

The researcher as participant observer has the advantage of being immersed in the culture over an extended period and therefore in a position to discover what was ‘hidden’, but it became clear that the subjectivity of the researcher also has to be taken into account. Ethnography is linked to the lived experience of the ethnographer (Berry, 2011). Rosen (1991) comments that there is no absolute truth of interpretation, but rather the value of the account lies in whether it is a plausible explanation for the data collected. The aim is to provide meaning for the culture under study, and the strength of ethnography lies in the use of more than one method (Reeves, Kuper and Hodges, 2008), this flexibility allowing for change as the research continues over time. The process involves the collection of data via field notes, journals, audio visual material and cultural artefacts, and the analysis of this data using codes and references. This is then strengthened by triangulation and analysis, using such techniques as interviews – both individual and group, and informal dialogue. The epistemological framework of ethnography encompasses meaning and behaviour in any situation, and how these are linked; the awareness of changes in behaviour that occur when understanding others; the many perspectives existing in situations; the need to understand behaviour and beliefs in the context of the culture or organisation and the need to study the group or culture ‘as it is’ (Mackenzie, 1994).

When people within a group or culture are studied, they are invariably being ‘represented’, and this raises the moral and ethical issue of the purpose of ethnography. Whilst it was

perceived that there was some value in doing ethnography to add to the sum of knowledge, ethnography came under criticism for being an academic exercise with little constructive value (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). There is a shift to a critical ethnography (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994) and a move to provide practical solutions to problems that emerge from the study. As Madison puts it (cited in Chari and Donner, 2010, p.76) critical ethnography ...begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain. By 'ethical responsibility' I mean a compelling sense of duty and commitment based on moral principles of human freedom and well-being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of living being. The conditions for existence within a particular context are not as they *could* be for specific subjects; as a result, the researcher feels a moral obligation to make a contribution towards changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity...the critical ethnographer resists domestication and moves from 'what is' to 'what could be'.

This goes beyond reflexive ethnography, which gives a critical analysis of the power relations and injustice that may exist in a culture, rather it involves writing against injustice and denouncing it (Bourgois, in Chari & Donner, 2010). Barbour (2007) in the context of training people for school leadership, also says there is a need for ethnographers to study the uses and abuses of power in any organisation, and goes on to evaluate the use of ethnographic narrative in order to understand the issues involved in observing a cultural group, and in aligning with the members of the group.

Barab, et al (2004) describes the process of empowering people in the context of implementing a programme to facilitate learning at a local Boys and Girls club. Whilst the authors' focus was to train people to use the programme, it required the tools of ethnography for them to understand and respond to the culture of the clubs. They immersed themselves in the clubs, building relationships with the children as well as the staff. They sought to respond to the people's needs and to empower them by developing their knowledge and critical awareness, but with this came a responsibility to understand the social context and give voice to the people concerned (Barab et al, 2004).

Market research has generally been characterised and dominated by a positivist approach. The tendency to ignore qualitative in favour of quantitative research methodology was primarily due to market researchers' lack of understanding (Chong, 2010; Milliken, 2001). This inclination was borne out of the perception that the "volume" of data, the "complexity of the analysis" required, "classification" details, and the "velocity and flexibility of analysis" (Milliken, 2001, p.74) made it too cumbersome and expensive for a qualitative approach to market research. However, the growing awareness of the subjectivity, and the constructed nature of market research, demands a more socially oriented approach. An interpretive paradigm has emerged with ethnography playing an essential role in studying the habits of consumers (Chong, 2010). Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003) advocate an interpretive approach and suggest that people are not necessarily the best predictors of their own behaviour. Therefore, it is important to study people in situ, to see the consumer as a social being, to study them in their natural setting and for the researcher to experience the life of the consumer. Market strategies can then be improved by targeting, product and service positioning, and brand managing (Chong, 2010). It should be said, however, that it is not always possible to adhere to these strategies, and in some circumstances the researcher assumes the role of a non-participant observer where the situation is not conducive to the

researcher being a participant observer. For example, Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003) describe the researcher posing as a shopper. As they observe they make field notes and assess what they see of other shoppers and their consumer behaviour. Marketing management decisions are made based on the observations and conclusions of the market researcher. Chong (2010) discusses a similar phenomenon, describing the notions of research done in real time. This is similar to an etic approach and an emic approach, as discussed earlier. She suggests that the advantages of employing ethnography to market research include recording human activity in a natural setting, a structured and more comprehensive approach to collecting data, and a more authentic representation of consumer behaviour. In addition to this, Chong advocates that thick description allows a more thorough understanding of consumer meaning. This in turn allows the marketer to modify strategies or reposition the product or service in accordance with that meaning. Because they have become immersed in the consumer culture they maintain an understanding of it over time (Chong, 2010).

Any discussion surrounding market research would not be complete without considering the immense impact of information and communication technologies, in particular, the internet. Maclaren and Catterall (2002) suggest that new strategies need to be adopted by market researchers in order to capitalise on the potential that the internet offers. For example, the internet has created the means of communicating 'many to many' in "global virtual meeting places" (p.319) rather than the 'one to one' of traditional market research. In this way, researchers can access the views of many different consumers in many different locations. What is particularly significant is that each of these online communities has a unique culture, set of values, belief systems, and sense of identity. These elements form the basis of ethnography, and ethnographic techniques provide the means to discover the essence of these communities. In a very real sense, the discussions which occur in online communities (discussion boards, chat rooms, social networks) have partly replaced the use of focus groups, and the use of symbols replaces the 'reading' of body language and facial expressions (Maclaren and Catterall, 2002). However, it is important to note that the market researcher will still use focus groups to gather research data that cannot otherwise be obtained via the online or virtual world, when it is felt that a more real setting is going to produce a clearer result. Whilst online research is essential for the market researcher, it is potentially fraught with issues relating to multiple identities of participants, authenticity of data, and less control of interviews, but Maclaren and Catterall (2002) argue that rather than ignore its vast potential, it is a question of adapting to a set of different cues and finding new ways of researching.

Much of the work of auto ethnography has investigated the ways in which dominant historical accounts maintain structures of power. Auto ethnography seeks to demonstrate that when personal experiences clash with such histories it challenges previous meanings and understandings (Denzin, 2006). It is defined by a reflexive writing as in a narrative of experiences with other cultures or experiences of other social contexts, whereby the physical, personal presence of the researcher is political (Spry, 2011). Spry (2011) uses performative auto ethnography to chronicle her traumatic experience of the death of her son at birth. She goes on to say that in itself this is not what auto ethnography is about until it is aligned with a greater social context. It must be connected to other people and the struggle to deconstruct power relations. In her particular experience Spry makes reference to the dominant discourse of grief, and yet her experience was not consistent with this. In this

context auto ethnography was used to challenge hegemonic discourses and therefore, validates the experiences of others whatever these may be. Auto ethnography is a “small performance that asks how our personal account counts” (Jones, date, as cited by Spry, 2011, p.500).

Auto ethnography seeks to communicate the mechanisms of the “inner world” (Holt, 2003, p.5) of an individual from the perspective of the researcher. It is important to recognise that auto ethnography not only places the researcher within the experience of an individual or group, but it sees the researcher reflecting upon their own, personal experience of the experience being researched. The process involves writing the ‘self’ into the history and projecting it into the present, by using various writing and communication techniques and forms (Denzin, 2006; Holt, 2003). It is a study of the ‘self’ as ‘other’ and when linked with culture, involves a negotiation between the ethnographer stories (us) and their relevance to culture. It exposes the hidden ‘I’ in the accounts, to allow for a more authentic process (Berry, 2011). The aim of auto ethnography is always to challenge the norms of methodological practices in order to achieve a more egalitarian and just society, making clear where power, privilege and biases lie (Denzin, 2006; Berry, 2011), in the process of studying those who have been hidden or represented as “abject, abnormal, exotic, and uncivilised”, and to critique the master narratives of western white history writers (Spry, 2011, p.500).

Performance ethnography links sociology, anthropology, community studies, performative arts and cultural studies, and is gaining impetus, as a useful tool for bringing new knowledge and understanding to an audience, as well as revealing power structures. From there, depending on the response of the audience, which can be varied depending on gender, ethnicity or social class, it can lead to action (Smith and Gallo, 2007; Hamera, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Warren (2006) argues it has the potential to change ourselves and others, and by disrupting the ‘taken-for-granted’ aspect of a practice, it can make that practice more meaningful. It creates the ability to see how lives are constructed, ‘real people in real places’, describing lived experiences, so that what seems stable can be probed and possibly transformed (Warren, 2006, p. 318; Smith and Gallo, 2006).

The material that informs performance ethnography can range from research results, stories, field notes, journal entries and memories, and is described as a performance text that is written and read by one or more people for an audience, with a view to critique social structures of power, justice, gender and race (Smith and Gallo, 2007). It is a way of bridging the gap between the practitioner and the artist, and to bring theory and practice together, in such a way that everyone involved, subjects, audience, and performers, all gain from the experience. Presented as real, subjects gain by having their histories and their voices heard so that they no longer feel isolated. Performers have the satisfaction of communicating to an audience, who in turn are moved to act. They have travelled to the world of the subject and met there (Smith and Gallo, 2007).

The performance ethnographer’s poems, plays, readings, conversations, and journals are a way of presenting the results of research, in such a way that when heard by the audience moves them to act (Smith and Gallo, 2007). The object of performance ethnography becomes the performance, and the relationship between the researcher and subject has become one of co-performance, and as stated earlier, both are transformed by this (Pollock, 2006). Where traditional ethnography’s writing was about the culture, that writing is placed into a

performance framework able to be used again and again, and has the capacity to reveal power structures, therefore requiring action on behalf of those involved (Pollock, 2006). The hidden 'I' of the researcher is now immersed in the co-subject, entangled with, even ravished by the cocreative process such that the subjectivity of the researcher is diffused within, even to the point of disappearing into, the field's body. Accordingly, we no longer see the scholar 'I' at work but we certainly feel her passion, his grace (Pollock, 2006, p.326).

In areas where performance ethnography has been used little, nursing and medicine, Smith and Gallo (2007) describe the potency of the voices, spoken out loud, of parents of children who have a genetic condition, and to this they add the feelings of the researcher experiencing the interviews. The information garnered from the stories was significant in that it revealed how the condition was disclosed to the parents, how the parents passed this information on to the child, and other information relating to the parents and children, and certainly gave a deep understanding of the lived experience of the families involved with children with genetic conditions (Smith and Gallo, 2007). Pollock (2006, p.327) describes this as "going *in* to a social field at risk of going *under*", and being transformed by it in profound ways.

The ubiquity of image in today's society challenges the ethnographer to consider the place of photography in qualitative research (Prosser in Denzin, 2011). In the past it has been seen as a means of portraying truth. Where images have been used to capture aspects of a culture, it was seen as an unproblematic piece of information, and was often used to portray something that was difficult to describe with words, and was considered as part of the process of observation (Harper, 2006). It was popular, as it seemed to reflect scientific realism, and was used extensively in sociology, science, geography and history. However, this view has been contested, as Prosser (In Denzin, 2011) points out, even photographs are an interpretation, they are not the thing itself. In using visual material, there is still a need for reflexivity and an understanding of the subjectivity of the photographer. Whilst this can be expressed in text, in photography, the viewer is not aware of why they are confronted with one image and not another, whether the image reflects something that is true, or simply an isolated incident. The 'gaze' of the camera leads the viewer to see the image or film from the photographer's point of view, so that they end up with the same viewpoint (Pink, 2006, p. 2).

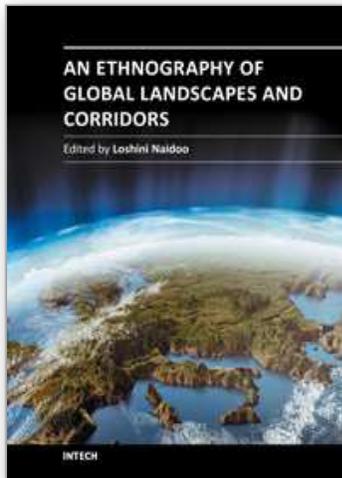
Prosser (In Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) argues that whilst the use of images has increased, visual literacy has not kept pace with this, and most research is still focused very much on the written text. Whilst tables, charts, graphs, and pie charts are useful for quantitative research, they are limiting when using qualitative methodologies, as they lack the flexibility to represent the sort of data produced. He stresses the need to train researchers in methods of visual representation as there are definite advantages in the use of imaged based methods. For those who are less articulate, it allows them to communicate in other, creative ways, "Art can describe, reflect, and evoke emotion, which dry facts or figures and cool logic rarely do" (Prosser, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; p. 488). He goes on to say that the use of such methods can give a much better idea of what it is like to live that life. He sees it as a tool for thinking, when words cannot convey the meaning, images are able to grab the attention in ways that words on paper do not (Prosser, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). He goes on to describe how people with disability are excluded from any form of research because they are not able to articulate their ideas in interviews, but when given the opportunity to express themselves visually, showed remarkable insights into their lives.

The challenge to ethnography from globalisation lies in the concept of 'field', and the need to provide the 'hard' data that characterises positivist research (Gille, 2001). Some researchers have always questioned the concepts of field or homework, rural or urban, community or corporation, arguing that such dichotomies create boundaries that are in fact non-existent, and are products of discriminatory white western discourses, whereby no alternative way of looking at 'other' is presented. Globalisation, however, seems to have made such concepts redundant, since the whole notion of location appears to have lost its meaning. Gille (2001) argues that such challenges need to be put into the context of global social relations. The epistemological basis of ethnography involves the study of people who are in or affected by certain situations, and sometimes locale is difficult to define, even with Marcus' attempt to put this in the context of multi-sited ethnography, allowing for the fact that many localities are no longer isolated, but linked to the world in often complex ways (Marcus in Gille, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2000). There is what Marcus calls a 'logic of association', the ethnographer's task is to find what connects to what, and to construct subjects in changing contexts as they act and are acted upon. In taking such a stance, the ethnography becomes an ethnography of the system, too, and the global, "...an emergent dimension of arguing about the connection among sites in a multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus, 1995; p.99). In choosing, and in following the links, the ethnographer constructs reality (Gille, 2001), but Marcus (1995) argues, what is not lost by multi-sited ethnography is the translation from one culture to another, rather it loses the 'us and them' dualism, and simply becomes more complex. In contrast to the 'one site of reality' of traditional ethnography, what is being studied is social relationships that develop amongst sites and evade boundaries (Gille, 2001; p323). Gille (2001) lists Massey's four elements to the notion of place in the light of globalisation, the first being that place is not static, nor does it have the boundaries that mark it from the outside. Thirdly, place has no single identity, even though, fourthly, it is unique, this uniqueness borne of a mixture of local and wider social relations (Massey, 1994 in Gille, 2001).

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An Ethnography of Global Landscapes and Corridors

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The chapters presented in this book draw on ethnography as a methodology in a variety of disciplines, including education, management, design, marketing, ecology and scientific contexts, illustrating the value of a qualitative approach to research design. The chapters discuss the use of traditional ethnographic methods, such as immersion, observation and interview, as well as innovative ethnographical methods which have been influenced by the new digital culture. The latter challenges notions of identity, field and traditional culture such that people are able to represent themselves in the research process rather than be represented. New approaches to ethnography also examine the use and implication of images in representation as well as critically examining the role and impact of the researcher in the process.

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