

Ethnography: A Method of Research and Genera of Writing for Informing, Reforming and Transforming Lives

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Abstract

Ethnography is one of the richest research approaches within the qualitative research paradigm for studying the cultural life worlds of others and/or oneself at a deeper level of consciousness. Additionally, it is a genre of writing that uses multi-epistemic lenses to go deeper into the phenomenon in order to inform, reform, and transform lives. The term 'ethno'(graphy) is a compound word made up of the words ethno and graphy, which stand for culture and writing, respectively. In order to conduct ethnographic research, a researcher must possess a thorough understanding of a specific cultural context, be able to communicate in the language used by the informants, and be able to bracket one's biases, while understanding how to make sense "recover meaning" from their complex lifeworld. In doing so, it gives the researcher—the ethnographer in the role of an outsider the chance to chronicle the 'noodle moments' of the insiders as informants, within their cultural context, by witnessing their way of life and recording what truly takes place there. To this purpose, through their involvement over an extended length of time, ethnographers must generate detailed accounts of the discussions, observations of the events, symbols, artifacts, festivals, and everyday activities of the researched, among other things. Through critically analyzing behaviors, it offers a window into the meaning that people attribute to their cultural sensibility and a source of insights to inform, reform, and transform communities. Thus, it is a more comprehensive way of examining through the perspective of an insider, which sets it apart from other inquiry techniques.

Keywords: ethnography, exploring cultures, meaning making

Introduction

The qualitative research paradigm has interestingly allied ethnography to a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches (Wolf, 2012). When considering this varied viewpoint, ethnography seems to be a very rich but costly portrayal of a person's lifeworld that uses a variety of data sources to cover a wide range of nuanced lived experiences in a cultural context. One might examine ethnography from a wider perspective and consider its consequences for readership while keeping this component in mind. Ethnography encompasses methodological, ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political notions in addition to methods of research design, data collecting, and analysis (Hammersley, 2018). As I reach this point of evaluation, to me, it appears to be a potent genre of writing for not only for informational purposes but also for a reformation that finally leading to envisioning a transformational agenda for a paradigm shift in lives of the people.

Thus, to build a better understanding of this powerful method of inquiry and genera of research, this paper is structured into five sections. Sections one through four of the study aim to tackle fundamental inquiries including "what, why, when, and how." Furthermore, in section five, the researcher in his capacity as an ethnographer offers a contemplative note to all practitioners of qualitative methodology, encouraging them to consider how ethnography adapts lived experience narratives to make sense of respondents' cultural settings and why it differs from other research methodologies in its capacity to transform societies. A thorough process of close engagement with respondents and critical reflection to create culturally contextual meaning of the life-worlds would likely be necessary to accomplish the aim of transforming people.

What is ethnography?

It is an investigation method and a genre of writing about a cultural milieu. To understand the patterns of social behaviors was the aim of ethnography, which was previously seen as an insider's perspective on culture rather than an outsider's (Roberts, 2009; Wolf, 2012). This line of thinking seems to support Sharman's (2007) claim that ethnography is both a social science research method and a genre of social scientific texts. However, ethnography asserts its uniqueness by means of its dedication to attaining a particularly profound interaction with participants via attentive observation of, and involvement in, their social lives over an extended

duration (Sinanan & McDonald, 2017). Perhaps, the unique methodological approach and powerful writing style is the outcome of the rigorous process of a prolonged engagement. That may be one of the reasons as to why it is one of the ‘richest and most expansive traditions of qualitative research’ and one of the most demanding methods of inquiry (Harrison, 2018, p. 1).

It is a process that develops over time through interaction with people, giving them the opportunity to express themselves, think critically about the practices, and question preconceived ideas about who they are and how they should be in order to both recover and generate new meanings for the life-worlds that ethnographic studies are intended to examine. Furthermore, ethnography appears to be a useful study strategy that allows researchers to observe the noodle moments of cultural settings—something that other approaches most likely are unable to do. For instance, ethnography enables researchers to converse with members of various cultures, learn about their values, preferences, and preconceptions, and assist them in studying their way of life in its entirety including the celebrations, holidays, beliefs, symbols etc.

According to Fleming and Rhodes (2023, p. 1) there are eight varieties of ethnography such as “hit-and-run, historical, focus groups, auto ethnography, visual, applied, performance, and digital.” The emphasis of all of these types may not require involving observation in a face to face setting but all diverse approaches focus on a cultural context and the kinds of experiences people have while adhering to the moral and ethical standards that are specific to the particular culture. Negotiations between participants as a way of life in a natural setting where people engage in daily experiences, commitments, and compromises that are regionally and culturally practiced are therefore crucial to ethnography (Atkinson et al., 1999). Perhaps understanding this particular viewpoint on the moral and ethical aspects of ethnography is essential to understanding the nature of ethnographic research.

I came to the realization that ethnographers need to embrace the moral and ethical dimensions of their discipline while exploring deeper socio-cultural contexts once I reached this point in the meaning-making process. Accordingly, ethnography as a genre and methodology is effective in the liminalities of ethical and moral dimensions; it produces grounded theory that is nonetheless useful for comprehending experiences, goals, anxieties, and other social and cultural

phenomena (Parrenas, 2023). I believe that ethnography's core characteristic is a more comprehensive and authentic method of research, as well as a philosophical lens through which to understand other people's cultures. Additionally, it establishes the basis for its defense as one of the most unique research methodologies.

Why ethnography?

The question why ethnography, why not other methods of inquiry? gives researchers a chance to consider their goals, the constraints of their work, and their justifications-philosophical, methodological, ontological, and so on (Ploder & Hamann, 2021; Walford, 2009). For example, ethnography is one of the most well-known approaches to inquiry in qualitative research. It emphasizes critically analyzing first-hand accounts from informants in order to understand their culture through discussions, conversations, and extended observations of events, celebrations, and everyday actions.

Therefore, for a number of reasons, it seems almost impossible for a researcher to draw in research participants more deeply in order to collect the data required for "digital" or "analog" ethnography using other, simpler, and less involved research methods (Fleming & Rhodes, 2023; Forberg & Schilt, 2023). For instance, it is different from previous studies but more expensive due to its deeper examination of cultural settings and longer duration (at least six months). After reaching this realization, it becomes clear that the practice under investigation is a "mode of engaging with practices", and that in order for researchers to explore it from a "outsider-insider" perspective while staying within the bounds of its moral and ethical dimensions, they must be a part of the culture they are studying (Lillis, 2008, p. 3). This trait, along with a unique set of features, makes ethnography stand out when compared to other research methods.

When ethnography is the only choice over other methods of inquires?

Within the qualitative paradigm, ethnography has a specific set of traits that distinguish it apart from other methods of inquiry and persuasively support its adoption. For example, ethnography is the only method more suitable for researchers who need to investigate cultures and examine social behavior inside a specific cultural context (Falzon, 2016). However, ethnography goes beyond this level of engagement (Atkinson et al., 1999) by covering a wide range of events and

activities of the everyday lives of the people living within a culture, displaying and interpreting their cultural sensibilities (Geertz, 1973) over a prolonged intimate engagement without violating ethical boundaries and moral values. Other methods, such as phenomenology, are also used to capture noodle moments of a phenomenon in a natural setting.

This research approach promotes methodological diversity, which others cannot, by utilizing a range of data sources to gather an abundance of information from all facets of life connected to objects, images, events, conventions, traditions, values, interactions, and costumes, to name a few. Ethnography is used when a group of events, situations, and phenomena need to be examined in order to jointly investigate the cultural norms, practices, beliefs, habits, and traditions, to mention a few, both inside and outside of that specific context. Multi-sited research and other straightforward study genres and inquiry procedures cannot comprehend it (Falzon, 2016). As a result, ethnography has developed into a rich research approach for scholars who are not strictly trained in social and cultural anthropology (Atkinson et al., 1999).

How is ethnography carried out as a method of inquiry?

In order to collect a vast amount of data for the purpose of exploring cultures and regaining its significance for both insiders and outsiders, ethnography is a form of inquiry that is conducted in a natural cultural setting over an extended period of time. In order to do this, it is imperative for an expert ethnographer to be able to interpret events and possibilities within a specific cultural context (Fleming & Rhodes, 2023). Therefore, to do this type of research, an ethnographer must be well-versed in the culture they are studying and must interpret it via the perspective of insiders. So, to grasp what people in that culture are talking about and how they are expressing their feelings and emotions, the researcher—who is an outsider—must be fluent in the language used as their primary means of communication. However, to comprehend context, individuals must be extremely cautious about the moral ramifications of bracketing oneself (Wolf, 2012). This means that in order to investigate and prevent researcher bias from influencing respondents' points of view about the cultural background, ethnographers must concentrate on insiders' perspectives. In order to record the insiders' "personalized accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork in dramatic form," the researcher, acting as an outsider, continues to focus on and observe their environment as informants (Follet & Ianko,

2015; Van Maanen, 1988, p. 136).

Nevertheless, there are drawbacks to this type of researcher involvement. A renowned researcher engaged in embodied ethnography, for instance, might injure themselves or other members of the community by interfering in the personal matters of the respondents (Wacquant, 2015) or having intimate relations with respondents that leads to an undesirable ‘pregnancy’ (Goode, 2002). Therefore, while using this strategy to perform studies, it must be used with much caution and sensitivity compared to other approaches.

Reflections

To me, ethnography is a way to critically examine how other people see the world in contrast to how one sees it through one's own lens in order to better understand other people's cultures and social lives. It is also a means of transforming oneself and other people. This is most likely due to the persuasive power of stories, which are produced via an intense attempt to delve deeper into the social fabric of the larger lifeworld of a cultural context with the aid of a methodological richness that other research methods do not give for a variety of reasons. The depth of the researcher's or researchers' methodological positioning—for instance, methodological diversity as opposed to methodological standardization, as stated by Lamont and Swidler (2014)—is probably closely linked to the processes of participation, close observation, discussions, reflections, imaginations, and meaning-making, among other things. As I come to this point of reflection, I think that ethnography is a sophisticated approach to educating readers, offering chances to comprehend life reforms, and enabling one self and others to undergo transformation while participating in the entire study process (i.e., the ethnographic research). It is not just a method of inquiry that explores the cultures of others by delve deeper inside through prolonged engagement into their (respondents') social lives. Engaging in this manner and considering how others perceive the world through a lens that differs from one's own enables researchers to derive meaning and generate fresh viewpoints that ultimately lead to transformation that has a cascading effect on other people. These transformational ripple effects from the masterfully written lifeworld stories most likely allow the readership to change the way they think and behave by adopting a new perspective on the world compared to how they (as readers) used to do.

An ethnographic study report written as a narrative that immerses readers in realistic situations and fosters a critical thinking style among educators that eventually leads them questioning their own ingrained, unconsciously held beliefs and behaviors. That self- and other-realization most likely emerges from attentive observation, active engagement, and critical reflection through the process of extracting new meaning from the data sources. Here, changing oneself starts with introspective self-evaluations in light of the story's deeper meaning, and I believe that's something an ethnographer must accept in order to function as a researcher. At this point in the learning process, the researchers may consider embracing an approach that embraces more of an ethical barometer for what constitutes appropriate behavior in analog ethnographic participation rather than requiring development for a digital ethnography, among other types of ethnographies. Here, the analog ethnography, or 'participant observation in a social world', takes place in a face-to-face setting over an extended period of time and explores the world of the insiders in greater detail (Forberg & Schilt, 2023, p. 11).

Given these difficulties, researchers must carefully assess the benefits and drawbacks of choosing the optimal mix of several procedures in order to strike a balance between methodological heterogeneity against methodological chauvinism (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). They also serve as a reminder that different strategies have varying limitations and perform better in various situations. Hence, the questions under exploration should dictate the methods of inquiry that are employed.

With these difficulties in mind, researchers must carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks of choosing the appropriate combination of numerous methodologies, balancing "methodological pluralism against methodological tribalism" However, go on to remind us that "different methods shine under different lights, and generally have different limitations", thus the "selection of methodological approaches should depend on the questions being pursued". Therefore, while developing open relationships with participants and considering Forberg's digital ethnography as well as Schilt's analog ethnography, ethnographers should also be aware of the behavioral norms in the setting in which they are conducting their research and reflective about how their degree of involvement matters. For example, based on the extent of critical thoughts, meaning-making, and the development of new perspectives on the real world, they can "transform the group dynamics" by "lurking, liking, or tweeting in a digital space or observing,

nodding, or engaging in an analog space” (Forberg & Schilt, 2023, p. 12).

In my opinion, in order to perform an ethnographic study, researchers must concentrate not only on the basis of the possibilities within a particular cultural setting but also on the morally right, culturally suitable, and practical aspects of gathering rich, detailed, and high-quality data through the level of researcher’ engagement in the field and the level of participation with research participants throughout the entire study process. Therefore, ethnography not only gives researchers and readers a way to study people's cultural lives more insightfully, but it also helps them consider the extent of reforms and transformation that can be experienced through critical reflections on the caliber of writings that emerge from data gathered through multi-epistemic lenses.

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