

# Ethnography: Linking Theory and Practices

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Ethnography has become popular in educational research. Its basic notion of exploring people's shared culture has inspired educational researchers to draw on it when, for example, exploring teachers' belief of a particular educational system of a certain country. In order to understand how this methodology is employed as one of multiple research methodologies in social sciences and education, this article will first lay out its dimensions, which includes definition and characteristics. Following this, it will present the ontological and epistemological aspect of ethnography as well as its research strategies. The article concludes with an understanding that unlike positivist, the cohort of ethnography methodology postulates the ethnographers must study the world in its natural context. The task of an ethnographer is looking for something that lies beyond himself, something that he/she has to uncover by understanding multiple realities that each individual in the world may perceive.

*Keywords:* ethnography, ontology, epistemology, research strategies

## 1. The Dimensions of Ethnography

### 1.1. Definition

Ethnography can be defined as a naturalistic inquiry that attempts to describe the social world from the perspective of the people who inhabit it. Initially, it was regarded as "a descriptive account of a community or culture, usually one located outside the west" (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, 1). The long history of its spread into other discipline and the influence from other theories put this methodology in substantial development. With such development, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) elucidated that the term ethnography has now beared multiple meanings. Ethnography has been reinterpreted in a number of ways by the cohort of other theories (e.g., in post-structuralism and post-modernism) to fit in a particular circumstance.

A myriad of scholars have attempted to define ethnography. For example, Johnson (1992) as cited in Mackey and Gass (2005) stated that ethnographic research aims "to describe and interpret the cultural behaviour, including communicative behaviour, of a group" (134) as well as "to give an emically oriented description of the cultural practices of individuals" (Ramanathan & Atkinson 1999, 49). From Creswell's (2012) perspective, such cultural practices can include language, rituals, economic and political structures, life stages, communication styles and interactions. Creswell (2012) contended that: "to understand the pattern of a culture-sharing group, the ethnographer typically spends considerable time 'in the field' interviewing, observing, and gathering documents about the group to understand their culture-sharing behaviors, beliefs, and language" (462).

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Other scholars, Denzin and Lincoln (1994), put ethnography very firmly at the centre of qualitative research tradition, especially as developed in sociology and anthropology. It is a multi-method form of research, including structured or semi-structured questionnaire/interviews, non-participant through to full participant observation (PO), diaries, film or video records and official documents (Griffin & Bengry-Howell 2007).

### *1.2. Characteristics*

A number of scholars have proposed their opinions on what characterizes an ethnography research. For example, Punch (1998) and Descombe (2003) as cited in Griffin and Bengry-Howell (2007) identified several important characteristics of an ethnographic research, which are:

(1) Ethnography is founded on the assumption that the shared cultural meaning of a social group is vital for understanding the activities of any social group, thus the task of an ethnographer is to uncover those meanings.

(2) Ethnography seeks an insider's perspective, aiming to understand a phenomenon from the points of view of those involved, which can be diverse, complex and contradictory.

(3) A specific group or a case will be studied in its natural setting.

(4) Research questions (RQ), hypothesis and data collection procedures may develop as the study proceeds, although most ethnographic studies do begin with a set of RQ, an overall research design and a strategy for data collection and analysis.

(5) Ethnographic research frequently involves prolonged period of data collection in order to become sufficiently familiar with the cultural world being studied.

Such characteristics by Punch (1998) and Descombe (2003) are in line with Creswell's (2012). For Creswell (2012), that shared cultural meaning needs to have adopted shared patterns that the ethnographer can discern. According to Spindler and Spindler (1992) as cited in Creswell (2012), a shared pattern in ethnography is "a common social interaction that stabilizes as tacit rules and expectations of the group" (470). The group shares any one or a combination of behaviours, beliefs, and language. In an ethnography context, a behaviour is defined as an action taken by an individual in a cultural setting; a belief is how an individual thinks about or perceives things in a cultural setting; and a language is how an individual talks to others in a cultural setting (Creswell 2012).

Griffin and Bengry-Howell (2007) also shared similar perspective with the above scholars. They explained that ethnography focuses on cultural interpretation, and aimed to understand the cultural and symbolic aspect of people's action and the contexts on which the actions occur. It usually focuses on a specific group of people or a case that involves culturally significant practices or actions. Thus, these researchers perceived ethnography as belong to the tradition of naturalism, which emphasizes the importance of the understanding of meaning and cultural practices of people from within everyday contexts.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) further elaborated such understanding of meaning and cultural practices of people from within everyday contexts. They claimed that ethnography is carried out in a naturalistic setting, a setting in which there is no treatment or modification of any variables pertinent to the object of inquiry. This makes ethnography stand in the opposite way of its predecessor paradigm, positivism. These researchers also maintained that in ethnographic research, the initial interest and questions that motivate the research could be refined later. In other words, an ethnographer may develop his/her inquiries into clearer research questions as the research progress.

However, criticism over the characteristics of ethnography persists. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) also criticized the subjectivity of ethnographic research. They claimed that the findings of this type of research are subjective, cannot provide foundation for social scientific analysis in the twentieth century. This is different from scientific research where objectivity is highly pursued. In other words, scientific research is available for being tested, to see whether it can be verified or falsified. One way to do this is by examining the variables through applying a set of standardized method. This is what ethnography does not have. Although observation is present in ethnography, but the way this procedure is carried out differs from the one in scientific research.

In addition to such criticism, Mackey & Gass (2005) discussed how the observation in ethnographic research could bring about potential challenges. Since the observation involves commitment to long-term data collection and detailed record keeping, and an ethnographer often participates in the event he/she is observing, this ethnographer may leave little time for the carefully detailed field notes that ethnographies may require. Accordingly, an ethnographer presence as participant in a particular event may change the nature of the event. This change is often associated with the terms Halo and Hawthorne effects (Mackey & Gass 2005).

The other criticism was pointed out by Stacey (1991) as cited in Denzin (2002). She stated that ethnographic method is more likely to leave subjects exposed to exploitation: the greater the intimacy, according to her, the greater the danger. In her study, she mentioned that many of her participants recognized that their stories and concerns could be taken to audiences, policy makers, and the public in the ways that they themselves could not, because they would not be listened to.

### *1.3. Ontology*

Ontology is recognized as questioning about reality—e.g. what is real and where is reality? In ethnographic study, ontology is located at the center, because such philosophy of existence makes ethnography different from another research paradigm, especially positivism, in the way of seeking for reality. Erlandson et al. (1983) claimed that reality in the world was not single, but multiple, because it is “a social construction” and “a projection of human imagination” (Morgan & Smircich 1980, 492). This multiple reality is seen as a unity from which a new knowledge is derived, and what is treated as true and false is relatively restricted to the specific context that is relevant with the people in the world being investigated.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) expressed that an ethnographer capacity as a social actor enables him to have access to understand such multiple reality that exists among the people he observes through “ongoing interaction and a developing relationship” (Fox 2004, 134). Yet, what seems to be true for a searcher might not be true for the people he is investigating. The story between Bauer and the residents of the Spanish Sierra del Caurel (Erlandson et al. 1993) represents such contradiction. This story implies that a researcher will need to seek as many details as he can to justify what he believes to be a reality, and at the end, he will need to conform his findings to the people he investigates (Erlandson et al. 1993). He needs to do this to avoid inappropriate self-interpretation and subsequently to construct a new knowledge derived from the multiple realities within the society.

### *1.4. Epistemology*

Two common concerns raised within epistemology are how we know that something exists and how we justify it. To address these concerns, it is useful to take a brief review of the value of ethnography beforehand.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) explained that the value of ethnography is the variety of cultural patterns that exist within particular society and how these patterns explain the whole processes of the society. Therefore, they maintained, an ethnographer seeks to utilize the capacity of people in it to learn a new culture, while attempting to minimize his own assumptions even when he is investigating a culture that he is already familiar with.

The epistemological claim here is that it is possible to understand such a new culture “by spending significant extended periods of time in the setting: participating, talking to people, observing what goes on, studying documentary sources, exploring the meaningful roles of material objects, and collecting other meaningful features of the setting” (Parker 2007, 2249). In achieving this, the ethnographer relies upon (to some extent) the everyday epistemological skills of social actors.

Fortunately, the capacities we have developed as social actors can give us such access. As participant observers we can learn the culture or subculture of the people we are studying. We can come to interpret the world in the same way as they do, and thereby learn to understand their behaviour in a different way to that in which natural scientists set about understanding the behaviour of physical phenomena. (Hammersley & Atkinson 2006, 8)

This quotation implies that an ethnographer may be able to recognize the shared meaning that exists among the people he is investigating by immersing himself into the people’s life. It is by understanding the people’s behaviour through an extended period of time and a series of data collection procedures that an ethnographer can begin to justify his assumption of what is believed to be a reality.

### *1.5. Research Strategies*

One of the first steps that a researcher has to consider when embarking on a piece of ethnographic research is how to gain access to people and places in such a way that the ethnography successfully achieves its outcomes (Karen 2012, 5). Yet, Thompson (1988) as cited in Karen (2012) argued that there is a general gathering stage. Here the ethnographers explore his or her topic, collecting background information, reading substantive and theoretical works related to the field and learning more about the research participants. The next step is actually getting into the field and this involves gaining access to the group or settings, and doing data collection using a range of procedures, such as interviewing, observing and writing reflexive journals.

Having collected data, the next step that an ethnographer will do is analyzing the data. Such analysis was considered by Erlandson et al. (1983) as “a progression, not a stage; an ongoing process, not a one-time event” (111). Unlike quantitative data analysis that quantifies data through measurements, frequencies, score, and ratings, qualitative data analysis relies heavily on “the provision of careful and detailed description” (Mackey & Gass 2008, 162).

Prior to report findings, it is of the ethnographers’ obligation to ensure that the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are clearly reflected in his findings. Erlandson et al. (1993) claimed that this was done for the reason of building trustworthiness of a research, a quality standard of a qualitative research.

## **2. Conclusion**

Ethnography has been promoted as a response to the existing research paradigm, positivism. Unlike positivist, the cohort of this naturalistic approach postulates the ethnographers must study the world in its natural context. The task of an ethnographer is looking for something that lies beyond himself, something that he/she has to uncover by understanding multiple realities that each individual in the world may perceive. To

understand such multiple realities for the reason of knowledge production is not an easy task to do. Thus, an on-going and active process, which includes selective observation and theoretical interpretation of what is seen, through asking particular questions and interpreting what is said in reply, through writing field note and transcribing audio/video recording, and writing report, is necessary.

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