

An introduction to the origins, history and principles of ethnography

Abstract

Ethnography is embedded in the history of research and has been considered a methodology in its own right. Due to its long-standing history those new to ethnography may find navigating the differing perspectives and historical context complex. Combined with philosophical perspectives this further compounds the complexities when understanding and making decisions about method. Hence, this article seeks to provide an introduction to the historical context of ethnography, the wide ranging and differing perspectives within it.

This discussion provides an overview of the historical context of ethnography and goes on to discuss the different approaches to ethnography based on philosophical paradigms.

Examples of ethnographic research in nursing literature will be used to illustrate how these different approaches and types of ethnography may be employed in nursing.

KEYWORDS: ethnography; critical ethnography; social anthropology; positivist ethnography

Introduction

Ethnography can be defined as:

“the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation. Observation and participation (according to circumstance and the analytic purpose at hand) remain the characteristic feature of the ethnographic approach” (Atkinson et al, 2001:4-5)

Ethnography focuses on work in the *field* and may use data collection techniques such as observation, focus groups and interviews that may be combined or used individually in order to explore, explain and/or described a situation, community, environment or culture.

Ethnographic study is deemed to be a valid approach to explore patient perspectives, experiences, healthcare systems and policy along with nursing as a profession and has been employed for many years (Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013; Robinson & Florczak, 2013; Hodgson, 2000; Roberston & Boyle, 1984).

Upon reviewing the origins and evolution of ethnographic research it can be summarised into two core categories: ethnography informed by *historic, social and/or cultural* changes or ethnography informed by *philosophical* values (figure.1 illustrates these). Philosophical influencers demonstrate how ethnographic study and associated data collection methods may be aligned to specific philosophical values. Conversely, history has influenced the process and method of ethnographic study; a researcher will align with *philosophical* principles and employ ethnographic methods developed through its *historic evolution* that also aligns to these values. For example, while virtual ethnography is part of a *historic* progression due to changes in society and technology of the modern age that is not to say it cannot be employed by a *positivist* or *feminist* researcher. An introduction to research philosophy is discussed in other articles.

This article will be presented in two parts, firstly it will discuss the role of social anthropology, the Chicago School's influence on the development of ethnography as a methodology and virtual ethnography as a more recent development as a result of *historic, cultural or social change* (Figure.1). It will then go on to discuss how *philosophical* paradigms have employed ethnographic approaches: positivist ethnography, Critical Ethnography, Critical Realist Ethnography (CRE) and Post-modern/constructivist ethnography.

Figure.1 illustrates the overarching historical context of ethnographic study which will guide the discussion in this article, and presents an overview of the key perspectives in ethnographic study since its first recognition in the 1800s.

Insert figure.1

The historic evolution of ethnography

Anthropology

Ethnography originated in early anthropology in the 1800s. The roots of ethnography can be traced back to 'New World' colonization where anthropologists became interested in exploration of tribal cultures and races outside of Europe. The primary focus was the study of 'primitive' non industrialized people and culture through written description, personal record keeping [of the researcher] and even the use of early photographic equipment (Kelly & Gibbons, 2008; Lambert et al, 2011; Rees & Gatenby, 2014). Researchers typically spent months or years on the process of inquiry. During this time the researcher was 'detached' from those under observation; seen as the authority of knowledge on the cultures they observed and conclusions they drew. Being 'detached' meant that they observed without influence of their own beliefs and values; as an outsider looking in. Fetterman (2010) argues that the process was heavily reliant on the researcher's ability to describe and explain the

community in richness and complexity. Hence, such a method was often influenced by preconceptions and prejudices of cultures different to the researchers own.

Malinowski's Social Anthropology

Malinowski (1922) was the first person to more explicitly describe ethnographic study through detailed inquiry into the communities of New Guinea (Rees & Gatenby, 2014). This was termed social anthropology and was characterized by the concept of 'marginal native' or 'professional stranger'; becoming embedded into a culture and conducting extensive participant observation in order to really understand social norms and structures that exist within a society. Malinowski placed emphasis on holism in order to obtain the native's point of view and their vision of their world through a rigorous scientific approach that also incorporated a degree of reflexivity. Holism was illustrated with the following,

"we cannot perceive or imagine the realities of human life, the even flow of everyday events, the occasional ripple of excitement over a feast or ceremony, or some singular occurrence"

(Malinowski cited in O'Reilly, 2009: 100)

Hence, holism involved looking beyond the surface of what is observed, not simply measuring but considering the wider issues and interactions that occur in a community and society e.g. it is not just observing what body cell appears to be, there are cell organelles, the tissue and part of the body in which it exists, combined with other physiological factors that inform its behaviour and function.

Malinowski's approach originates from Anthropology and therefore, valued systematic, detailed and methodological approaches to observation and data collection; *objectivity*. However, despite this focus on being 'detached' from the culture being observed, Malinowski also kept a journal that outlined his own perspectives, feelings and opinions about the community and its members. In publishing this he challenged the concept of

objectivity in ethnographic study i.e. when compared, the scientific findings of his study were often in conflict with his own reflections in his journal (subjectivity) (Nazaruk, 2011). Hence, Malinowski's reflexive turn and reflexivity was created; based on the principle that a researcher can never distance or disengage themselves and their own values and beliefs from the object of study. Hence, they should reflect on these values and consider how they impact on the process and findings of research. The acknowledgement of the researchers own values and beliefs on research in combination with the systematic and methodological collection of data has subsequently informed the evolution of qualitative, critical, critical realist and virtual ethnographic study. The qualitative nature of ethnographic study was influenced heavily by the Chicago School.

The Chicago School

The Chicago School researchers were Park & Burgess (1921). Their students and associates aimed to study society 'as it is' and advocated fieldwork with the researcher observing face-to-face, everyday interactions, getting out and seeing the world. Each core researcher took their own stance to their processes of inquiry and descriptive narrative, however they were similar in the following way:

"Each sociologist analyzed the everyday life, communities and symbolic interactions characteristic of a specific group" (Deegan, 2001: 11)

Much of the Chicago School work had no strict set of criteria, with emphasis on openness to people, data, places and theory (Deegan, 2001). Park and Burgess's students based their work on the original ethnographies of their supervisors and utilized statistical data combined with qualitative approaches to examine the modern urban context at the time (Mowrer, 1927; Luton, 1931; Kluver, 1933; Faris & Warren Dunham, 1939 and Anderson, 1940). This in turn developed several programmes of research that contributed grounded theoretical

knowledge in these fields; the students who followed those reinforced patterns that emerged through their inquiry.

The Chicago School made no explicit affiliation to a particular research philosophy however, Mead (a member of the Chicago School) (1934; 1964) proposed that:

“each person becomes human through interaction with others. Institutional patterns are learned in communities dependent on shared language and symbols. Human intelligence is vital for reflective behavior...” Deegan (2001: 19)

This was later termed Chicago Symbolic Interactionism and was more akin to the post-modern, interpretivist forms of ethnography which will be discussed in the second part of this article.

Atkinson et al (2007) present the range of international perspectives of ethnographic study that now exist, such as critical ethnography, ethnomethodology and feminist ethnography. However, the Chicago School and Park & Burgess (1921) were pivotal in establishing its legacy as a credible process of inquiry in sociology and the social sciences. There are authors who state the importance of philosophically driven research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Collier, 1994). Arguably, the process of any ethnographic inquiry should be informed by a set of values and principles in order to rationalise and justify the processes of the research process. Consequently, these principles then inform decisions about research methods, analysis and may be deemed to enhance the credibility or scientific rigour of the research within the scientific community. The lack of philosophical values in some of the historic influencers on ethnography has therefore come under criticism from those who believe that research should be philosophically informed (Rees & Gatenby, 2014).

Virtual ethnography

Since the early 1990s the internet is increasingly accessible and popular, and now has a plethora of functions and uses. Online gaming has also rapidly expanded allowing interaction between groups, communities and individuals across the globe within virtual worlds and Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPG) e.g. Age of Conan or first person video games e.g. Call of Duty. Consequently, the terms digital ethnography, netnography, online and virtual ethnography have become apparent. Angrosio & Rosenberg (2001) highlight that the internet and online interaction is communication mediated rather than geographically linked or through long established ties.

Netnography is a modification of the terms online or virtual ethnography (Bowler, 2010).

Gatson (2001) suggests a range of online and virtual approaches to ethnography with a final addition from Boellstorff et al (2012):

- Traditional field methods applied to the online environment
- Online Auto ethnography
- Multi-sited ethnography
- Virtual ethnography

Participant observation in the field is a core component of almost all approaches to ethnography. Hence, observation in the online environment could be considered to be application of traditional ethnographic methods to a less defined boundary of 'space'.

Rheingold (2000) was the first to employ ethnographic methods in the online environment with a description of his personal experiences in creating an online community and the links between online and offline environments. This work transcended both traditional field methods but also auto ethnography of his personal experience.

Multi-sited ethnography sources data from observation and other traditional ethnographic methods such as focus groups, interviewing or surveying (Bryman, 2008) across both offline and online environments. It could be argued that this is simply ethnography applied to different spaces or 'fields'. Indeed, Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) and Crang & Cook (2007) make no strict definition of what should constitute space or boundary of place in ethnographic inquiry, just that it should be appropriate to the phenomena being studied.

Virtual ethnography is described by Boellstorff et al (2012) with several core characteristics. Virtual worlds are places where participants traverse and interact with each other, they are multi-user shared, and synchronous environments and they continue to exist when individuals are not in them. Individuals are also identified with an online persona through an avatar or similar. Here, Boellstorff et al (2012) reject networked environments such as Facebook, twitter and online discussion forums as virtual worlds. While Facebook shares some similarities with the characteristics above it does not fit all of them. Alternatively, Hine (2000) presents virtual ethnography as a new way of bringing ethnographic features into the domain of the technologies and the cultures within them being studied. These two quite different definitions of virtual ethnography have one main aspect in common and this is that the research is conducted almost completed online. With the dawn of social media sites such as Facebook [which has only been evident in the last 12 years] the opportunity for ethnographic study to further develop and expand in its application, enabling researchers to further explore, explain and understand online social networks and their influence on society, groups, communities and individuals.

This is of particular importance to nursing and healthcare. The increasing role and opportunities for engaging, listening and observing patients and the in the online

environment has been discussed in Ryan (2013). This increasing focus on social media engagement, digital health and telemedicine will increasingly provide opportunities for ethnographic research that seeks to explore the uses of these technologies.

Ethnographic approaches informed by philosophical paradigms

Howell (2013) proposes three core philosophical approaches to ethnography: positivist, critical and post-modern/constructivist. Each of these are presented in the context of the evolution of ethnography in figure.1 and discussed here.

Positivist ethnography

Positivist ethnography advocates objectivity and distance from the object of inquiry.

Objectivity requires researchers to remain as detached from the object of inquiry as possible. Hence, the results are focused on facts rather than the researchers own beliefs and values (Payne & Payne, 2004). Its primary focus is to seek rationale, causes and generalizable laws that may be applied to human behaviour. The researcher retains power and authority over inquiry with an aspect of superiority to the community being studied (Howell, 2013); the researchers' views are deemed to be the most important.

There is often the misconception that positivist research must always use experimental or employ quantitative methods (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). This is not the case, and certainly there were characteristics of positivism in the work of early anthropologists, Malinowski (1922) and certain members of the Chicago School where both statistical and qualitative methods were employed as complementary. Furthermore, certain types of positivist ethnographic studies have significantly progressed our knowledge of nature. Charles Darwin's 1859 *Origin of the Species* in the Galapagos Islands being one of the most common

and has contributed to a widely accepted theory of how species of nature evolve and adapt (Darwin, 1998).

The majority of nursing research tends towards more post-modern or critical approaches to ethnography. This could be linked to the influence of the Chicago School in the development of ethnographic study (Heyl, 2001). The introduction of ethnographic interview and acknowledgement of the influence of researchers' values, beliefs and perceptions on the ethnographic process is commonly viewed as crucial in understanding patient or service user experiences, perceptions and behaviours. Hence, it is argued that post-modern and critical approaches to ethnography are commonly viewed as more akin with the art of nursing practice, principles and values.

Post-modern/Constructivist ethnography

Post-modernist approaches emphasise that reality is created through human interaction, perceptions and experiences of the social world. In this way the world is socially or individually constructed. Conversely, this means that there are multiple realities, which are subject to continuous change. As a result some of the first post-modern ethnographers like Schutz (1970) relied on analysis of participant perspectives and interpretations of their experiences of the world. In order to achieve this the researcher is required to immerse themselves in the community, society or lives of the participants in order to reproduce the various realities seen by each (Denzin, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). While post-modernist ethnographers reject positivist approaches for their lack of acknowledgment for social complexity and their claims of 'generalizable' laws, it shares the characteristics of critical ethnography as it is focused on the participants and is highly subjective (Crang & Cook, 2007). Conversely, post-modernist ethnography does not seek generalizability but instead

aims to progress knowledge of a culture through the use of 'thick description'. Geertz (1973: 9) describes this as:

“what we call our data are really our own constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to”

This emphasizes the interpretive and therefore highly subjective nature of post-modernist ethnography.

Post-modern and constructivist approaches to ethnography are of benefit to nursing research in that they value the perceptions, feelings and experiences of participants which could be considered to be aligned to the principles of nursing; allowing nurse researchers to understand the experience of a patient may help them understand their behaviours or deliver care in a more effective way (Robinson, 2013). It may be employed to study nursing as a profession, nursing education or the experiences, perceptions or behaviours of patients, groups of patients or communities. Coughlin (2013) describes an ethnographic study that explores the perceptions of nurses and patients during hospitalisation. Observation and interviews were used to study the interaction between patients, families and nurses. This enabled the researcher to explore themes and topics that quantitative measures or positivist inquiry could not achieve. The importance of subjectivity in this approach highlighted the differences between the nurse and patient perspectives which subsequently informed the way in which care quality could be improved during hospital admission.

Critical ethnography

Not to be confused with [critical] realist ethnography, critical ethnography may be informed by critical theory or more traditional Chicago School ethnography (Thomas, 1993; Howell, 2013). Like critical realists, critical ethnographers go further than describing a situation or forming narrative. However, critical ethnography seeks to consider how participants and

communities are represented, the constraints and repressive aspects of injustice, inequality and control (Madison, 2012) and rely upon a high degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Furthermore, critical ethnography moves away from some of the more traditional anthropological and positivist approaches by seeking to remove the 'authority' of the researcher. Howell (2013: 124) outlines five key characteristics of interpretation in critical ethnography:

- Reflection and evaluation of purpose and intent
- Identification of consequences and potential harm
- Creation and maintenance of dialogue and collaboration between researcher and researched
- Specification of relationships between localism and generality in relation to the human condition
- Consideration of how the research may ensure equity and make a difference in terms of liberty and justice

There is a clear focus on social change and social action through raising awareness of oppressive, taken for granted power structures in order to challenge them and bring about change. As a result, Thomas (1993) would argue that critical ethnography has a political purpose. Similarly, feminist ethnography complements the principles of critical ethnography but focuses on the emancipation of women through challenging gendered assumptions. It has played a role in developing new theories of structures such as race and class previously influenced by male orientated science through history (Afshar & Maynard, 1994).

Critical ethnography places emphasis on the effects of the research rather than the search for ultimate truth. Characteristically, it should be informed by theory but approached with an open mind. It could be contested that this is inconsistent, particularly for certain types of feminist research where there are already value-laden assumptions about oppressive

gendered power structures. Howell (2013) would agree proposing that a researcher cannot possibly have theoretical pre-conceptions and approach inquiry with an open-mind. This is illustrated in work such as Happel (2012) who studied how an all-girls club reinforced binary gender formations and where the assumption that gender, race and class were oppressive rather than enabling.

These assumptions about power are often criticized for their lack of objectivity and reflexivity. This criticism is supported in Stacey (1988) who further argues that such research with these perspectives is almost always steered by personal feelings, beliefs and values. While the influence of such values cannot be denied, in most cases, if the researcher enters with such negative assumptions about structures that exist then these may inevitably lead to confirming these negative assumptions and therefore, bias may be evident in the process of inquiry.

Smyth & Holmes (2005) provided an overview of how to employ Carspecken's critical ethnography in nursing research and emphasizes the role of philosophy and method. Critical ethnography in nursing may enable the researcher to explore the political influences and power relationships in the broader context of healthcare or indeed, more local teams and communities (Parissopoulos, 2014). Conversely, critical ethnography has been used to explore and explain the power relationships and impact of policy on nursing as a profession. For example, Batch & Windsor (2014) employed critical ethnography through observation, field notes, focus groups and interview to explore relationships between the casual or non-standard workers and nursing teamwork. This enabled the researchers to explain the systemic structures and cultural aspects of contemporary nursing. The results indicated that the medical profession combined with traditional stereotypes of nurses influences the experiences of casual workers.

Realist Ethnography

Realist philosophers such as Bhaskar (1989) have negotiated the concept of meaning between the positivist and constructivist paradigms by proposing the processes that produce social phenomena have both a natural and social explanations. The mind, body and social experiences interact and are interdependent.

Ethnography is traditionally the observation and description of cultures within groups. Hence, the term culture is of importance but arguably misunderstood across other disciplines. Maxwell (2012) argues that the concept of culture [despite being of primary focus in ethnography] is difficult to define, however most disciplines acknowledge that culture is shared belief or values held by members of a community or social group. Maxwell (2012: 26) defines culture as:

“a domain of phenomena that are real, rather than abstractions; both symbolic-meaningful (i.e. part of the mental rather than physical perspective) and collective (that is, a property of groups rather than of single individuals); that cannot be reduced to individual behavior or thought or subsumed in social structure; and that is causally interrelated with both behavior and social structure.”

It is in this way that culture can be seen as an interaction between the mind and social experiences, also that it is not always consciously produced but the influence of such a structure might be observed in the common behaviours within and across groups; it is not just about what is happening but why it is happening.

The significance of this for ethnography is that traditional ethnographic methods from a constructivist or positivist standpoint can never really go to sufficient depth to explain why a

culture and associated behaviours exist (Danermark et al, 2002). Where the research focus requires going beyond telling stories, taking behavioural observations and perceptions of participants at face value the Critical Realist ethnography may be appropriate. Critical realist ethnography starts in the same place to that of more traditional methods, with the perceptions and experiences of individuals. Porter (1993) and Sharpe (2005) propose that critical realist ethnography considers the micro level (the individual), acknowledges how this fits into a macro (wider/social) context but also seeks to explain why the object of study behaves the way it does.

Hence, critical realist ethnography acknowledges the perceptions and experiences of social actors but uses this as a starting point for further inquiry through observation, use of theory and evidence. This means it can negotiate the conflict between positivist and post-modernist ethnographic approaches by using the post-modernists emphasis on the role of subjective meaning, the structure and rigor of positivists methods and the critical theorists need to identify possible underlying power structures in order to ever challenge and change behaviours and attitudes [if we find this necessary].

Porter (1993) is one of the most well-known critical realist ethnographic studies in nursing. Porter (1993) employed covert participant observation (the participants did not know the observation was occurring) and field notes to explore the concepts and relationships between nursing, medicine and racism. This enabled the explanation of how racism impacts on relationships across the nursing and medical profession. Conversely, Porter & Ryan (1996) explored the concept of the theory-practice gap in nursing by employing a case study. This approach illustrates how intensive, smaller scale design can be employed in critical realist ethnographic research in the nursing profession.

Conclusion

Post-modern/constructivism is a commonly employed approach in ethnographic study. This approach has many influencers such as Weber, Geertz and Schutz; placing value on the 'thick description' of communities and cultures along with perspectives and experiences of the participants. Such approaches have been criticised for their subjectivity and risk of bias. Situated between positivist and post-modern ethnography, post-positivist (realist) ethnography has been discussed. Influenced by the theory of Roy Bhaskar this type of ethnography focuses on finding the most plausible explanations of 'why' actions, behaviours or events occur, valuing modified objectivity. Since the rise of the World Wide Web, online gaming and social media the concept of 'virtual' or netnography has become more common and is likely to develop as technology advances.

This article has presented an overview of the historical context of ethnographic study with a discussion of the components and principles of social anthropology, positivist ethnography, critical ethnography and critical realist ethnography. In doing so, this has provided an introduction to ethnography throughout its progression and development to serve as a starting point for those who are new to ethnography or wishing to undertake ethnographic study while providing a critical view of the differing perspectives within it.

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