

Ethnography: Fundamentals, Opportunities and Complexities

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Abstract

This article examines the issue of defining and understanding ethnography as both a method and a writing practice within the human sciences, highlighting its role in explaining culture its norms, values, traditions, institutions, behaviors, and beliefs through participant observation, interviews, and personal narratives. The main objective is to discuss the scope and importance of ethnography for researchers, emphasizing that ethnographic inquiry requires developing an awareness of lived experiences, complexities, contradictions, and insider perspectives of cultural groups. Methodologically, the paper draws on historical foundations of ethnography, Agar's conceptualization of the "ethnographic space of possibilities," and a comparative discussion of different types of ethnographic research, distinguishing between those that align with ethnographic sensibility and those that do not. The findings underscore that ethnography is driven by iterative, recursive, and abductive logic, enabling researchers to uncover both shared and contrasting viewpoints, and conclude that ethnography has significant applications not only in academic contexts but also in broader fields where understanding human experience is essential.

Keywords: Ethnographic Perspectives, Culture, Logic of Inquiry, Ethnographic Spaces

Introduction

Ethnography is a systematic approach to studying the everyday life that a social group co-creates through their actions and interactions over time. It is not only a specific method of collecting data, but rather it is a tool to understand the social and cultural meanings and activities of people in field. The term 'ethno' (graphy) is a compound word made up of the words ethno and graphy, that means for culture and writing respectively (Roberts, 2009; Wolf, 2012). Ethnography as a theme denotes to the central aim of human sciences is to know peoples' actions and experiences in the world, and the ways in which peoples' activities stimulate and reflect on their experiences. It is a tool to collect data and throw light on the issues that are the focus of research (Hammersly and Atkinson, 2007: p4). Ethnographers aim to answer the question, "What is happening here?" from insider-driven, culturally relevant perspectives. Ethnography is not just a method for data collection or fieldwork; it is a way of seeing (Frank, 1999; Wolcott, 2008), being (Heath & Street, 2008; McCarty, 2014), using language (Beach & Bloome, 2019), theorizing (Bloome et al., 2005; Kelly & Green, 2019a), living (Skukauskaite, 2021), and knowing (Agar, 2006b). It is an epistemology (Green et al., 2012) and a philosophy of research (Anderson & Levitt, 2006) through which ethnographers come to understand and represent the complex social worlds they study. Guided by an iterative, recursive, and abductive logic of inquiry that emphasizes understanding different viewpoints (Agar, 2006b), ethnography sheds light on the intricate dynamic systems (Agar, 2004; Anderson-Levitt, 2006) that constitute everyday life within the multilayered contexts of people's actions and interactions with each other and with historical, material, ecological, and non-human actors, and resources. Ethnography draws data primarily from the fieldwork experiences and emphasizes descriptive detail as a result (Davies, 1999: pp 4-5). The beginning of ethnography's journey started from 1492 to postmodern time.

Ethnography has been integral to anthropology since its inception, but our understanding of it has evolved significantly over time. Initially, in the nineteenth century, ethnography focused on comprehending human societies, meticulously documenting their traditions, beliefs, and institutions across diverse cultures worldwide. Anthropologists engaged in documenting "the ethnography" of various peoples, aiming to a mass knowledge about different cultural groups. This pursuit was fundamentally about gathering and subsequently recording information, reflecting the term's Greek roots: "ethnos" meaning folk or people, and "grapho" meaning to write. However, contemporary anthropologists view ethnography not merely as information to be collected and documented but as a methodological approach to understanding. In this sense, ethnography represents a distinctive way of gaining knowledge from the community, making it truly unique in the field of anthropology. Ethnography is 'the systematic description of a single contemporary culture, often through ethnographic fieldwork' (Wood 1997: p157).

According to the European Association of Social Anthropologists, ethnographic research demands substantial time commitment alongside immersive engagement, emphasizing meticulous attention to detail and subtle nuances, aspects often absent in other research methodologies (2015). Anthropological ethnography today is a practice grounded in embodied, empirical, experiential knowledge gained through intensive participant-observation in the field. The terms "fieldwork" and "ethnography" are frequently used interchangeably to denote this research approach, characterized by anthropologists immersing themselves in communities. Researchers live among or near their subjects for extended durations spanning months, years, or even decades. Initial fieldwork experiences over several years establish a foundational ethnographic understanding, facilitating shorter subsequent research periods as scholars' progress in their careers. Anthropological fieldwork entails integrating one's personal and professional lives within the research context, whether in physical communities like schools, neighborhoods, villages, cities, or regions, or in contemporary digital spaces approximating traditional ethnographic settings. This approach involves active participation in daily community life over an extended timeframe, distinguishing anthropological ethnography by its emphasis on "being there" as a cultivated practice (Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009), demanding dedication and methodological rigor uncommon to those untrained in ethnographic methods. Ethnography is concerned with the behavioral actions carried out in a social setting, and the activities of that social setting are collections of work related to it.

Beginning with the concept of ethnography as a way of knowing, this chapter briefly reviews the key historical foundations and challenges that emerged as ethnography expanded, leading scholars to develop various labels and approaches for ethnographic work. I then explore the ethnographic space of possibilities, driven by an underlying logic, and explain two types of ethnographic research that fit within this space, as well as one type that, while referencing ethnography, does not fit. The chapter proceeds to outline the primary goals of ethnography and concludes with reflections on its potential applications both within and beyond academic settings. In order to collect data for the purpose of exploring cultures, significance for both insiders and outsiders, ethnography is a form of inquiry that is conducted in a natural cultural setting (Fleming & Rhodes, 2023).

Literature Review

Challenges in Understanding of Ethnography

Ethnography has a long history in the social sciences and humanities, enduring numerous challenges over more than a century of use. Despite these challenges, it remains widely employed in education and across various disciplines as a systematic and empirical method for exploring how people culture-into-being (Skukauskaite & Green, 2023, drawing on

Street's 1993 concept of culture as a verb) through their actions and interactions over time. Ethnography's origins are typically traced to anthropology, where late 19th and early 20th-century cultural anthropologists used fieldwork methods to study groups unfamiliar to Western audiences. In the early 20th century, sociologists began using ethnography to study groups in modern societies, adapting anthropological techniques and incorporating social and critical theories to examine everyday life. For comprehensive accounts of ethnography's histories from various disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, see works such as Atkinson et al. (2007), Beach et al. (2018b), Hackett & Hayre (2020), and McCarty & Liu (2017).

Tim Ingold (2014) rightly criticizes the view of ethnography as merely the collection of cultural facts or the objectification of social life. Ethnography has long moved beyond this approach, now emphasizing participation, reflexivity, and innovative methods of interpreting and recording experiences, those of both the people being studied and the ethnographer. This shift was notably challenged by Jeanne Favret-Saada in the 1970s through her critique of Malinowski's ethnographic model.

The early anthropologists' inclination toward colonialist, Eurocentric, and US centered agendas has faced extensive criticism (Beach, 2017; Bejarano et al., 2019; Hammersley, 2006; Marcus, 2008), leading to "crises of representation" and a reflexive turn in anthropology, sociology, education, and other fields that utilize ethnography (Green & Bridges, 2018; Marcus, 2021). Critiques of Eurocentric, Western, Anglo, white, male, and elite-centric research agendas, along with the narrow and often flawed constructions of "culture" as a stable and geographically bounded entity (Agar, 2006a, 2019; Eisenhart, 2018), have paved the way for diverse perspectives and theories that have broadened ethnographic epistemology and practice (see, for example, volumes by Anderson-Levitt, 2011; Beach et al., 2018b). Modern ethnographies acknowledge their early roots in anthropology and sociology (and even earlier in the work of ancient historians like Tacitus) but also critically examine concepts such as "culture," "participant observation," and the "insider-outsider" dynamic. The concept of "culture," essential to ethnographic scholarship, remains ambiguous and lacks a universally accepted definition (Agar, 2006a). This ambiguity allows for creative and locally responsive reconceptualization of culture, as an ongoing process, a verb, a system of beliefs, patterned practices, language, or a combination of various aspects of a group's life engaged in common activities (Agar, 2019). The absence of clear definitions increases the responsibility of researchers to be transparent about their logic of inquiry and reporting, while also providing opportunities to learn from and with the people about how they conceptualize their own cultures, both locally and globally.

Ethnography, understood as the study of cultural difference, has traditionally grounded its research methods and standards of validity in the idea of objectivity. This involves treating

the native as an object someone fundamentally 'other' and speaking about them in terms of what they do or say (e.g., "he practices this" or "he says that"). Such framing makes it possible to construct knowledge about a culture distinct from the ethnographer's own. A notable feature of ethnographic writing is that the native, often referred to as "he," rarely appears as an active participant in dialogue. Scholarly works usually exclude the original context in which statements were made, using native speech only to support broader arguments. Explanations tend to reduce the speaker's words to their social role suggesting, for example, that he speaks a certain way because he is a warrior, aristocrat, or shaman. The implication is that the native's words were spoken not as personal expressions, but as representations of a group's collective interest (Favret-Saada, 2010: 27–28)

Variety of Ethnographies

There are eight varieties of ethnography such as "hit-and-run, historical, focus groups, auto-ethnography, visual, applied, performance and digital (Fleming and Rhodes (2023, p.1). Ethnography is no longer confined to a specific discipline, national, or organizational origin. It serves as an epistemology for exploring human social worlds and is employed in numerous countries, representing diverse languages and cultures worldwide (e.g., Anderson-Levitt & Rockwell, 2017; Milstein & Clemente, 2018; Modiba & Stewart, 2018). Ethnography is widely used across various fields, including education, law, medicine, hospitality, and many others. Today, there are numerous types of ethnographies available, and a general search reveals a multitude of adjectives describing them. In Table 1, I have listed some of the more common labels for ethnography and classified them based on their focus.

Table 1: Varieties of Ethnographies classified by focus:

| Sn | Classification Focus | Kinds Of Ethnographies |
|----|--------------------------|---|
| 1 | Discipline of field | Educational; linguistic; sociolinguistic; ethnomethodological; medical |
| 2 | Site | School; community; classroom; organization; multi-sited; cyber; virtual |
| 3 | Scope | Micro; Meso; Macro; focused |
| 4 | Primary mode of inquiry | Observation; interview; visual; sensory; video; hybrid; multimodal; |
| 5 | Theories or Epistemology | Cognitive; realist; critical; feminist; postmodern |
| 6 | Phenomenon of focus | Interactional; educational; performance; communication |
| 7 | Purpose | Practical; applied; in/of/for education |
| 8 | Relationship | Participatory, insider; collaborative |

Table 1 presents a potential method for classifying various types of ethnographies based on their primary focus, such as discipline, site or phenomenon, among other criteria. There are many other types and classifications of ethnographies, and I encourage readers to explore alternative possibilities or develop their own organizational frameworks. In later sections of this chapter, I introduce further classifications based on their alignment with ethnographic space and disciplinary purposes in education.

Key Qualifies as Ethnography

The diversity of ethnographies across disciplines and countries highlights the potential of ethnography, while also raising questions about what qualifies as ethnography and its defining characteristics. These questions became particularly pertinent since the 1980s when adaptations of ethnographic methods led to works that diverged significantly from traditional ethnographic principles, practices, and logic (Agar, 2001; Hammersley, 2006; Zaharlick & Green, 1991). A major factor in this evolution was the increasing popularity of qualitative research. While the growth of qualitative methodologies over the past several decades has introduced positive developments and fresh perspectives for studying complex social worlds, it also presented new challenges for ethnography by conflating it with qualitative research (Hammersley, 2018). Historically, ethnography has been an epistemology enabling ethnographers to employ various methods, now recognized as both qualitative and quantitative, and dynamic designs to explore multiple angles of overarching research questions. Ethnography has primarily been, and continues to be, a multi-method approach (Agar, 2001; Walford, 2020), recognized as scientific, systematic, and rigorous even by those in traditional behavioural social sciences and funding organizations (Shavelson & Towne, 2002).

Unfortunately, in recent decades, the blending of ethnography with "qualitative methods" has often resulted in misunderstandings and misapplications of ethnography, gradually affecting its credibility and utility. Many researchers began labeling their "qualitative" studies as "ethnographic" without a thorough grasp of the histories, theories, and epistemology underlying ethnography (Birdwhistell, 1977). This trend emerged either because they used certain fieldwork techniques or interviews, or simply because ethnography was seen as a legitimate, systematic research approach they wished to align with. Consequently, this has led to instances of what have been termed "blitzkrieg ethnographies" (Rist, 1980) and a range of studies that claim to be ethnographic but lack essential ethnographic elements (Agar, 2001; Atkinson, 2015).

This widespread dissemination and misuse have sparked decades of discussions and debates about what constitutes "authentic" ethnography. Anthropologist Michael Agar contends that the notion of defining "real ethnography" is flawed because it presupposes a specific definition and a fixed set of methods, rather than recognizing ethnography as a

dynamic and adaptable logic of inquiry for examining complex social phenomena (Agar, 2006b). Nonetheless, numerous attempts have been made to define and establish criteria for ethnography, as briefly outlined in the following section. Despite ongoing efforts, definitive answers and clear-cut distinctions regarding what qualifies as "authentic" ethnography remain elusive. Nevertheless, there exist several explicit descriptions outlining expectations for studies that align with the accepted parameters of ethnographic research.

Efforts to Define Ethnography as a Theme

Agar (2006b) contended that "more than one ethnography is possible, not all ethnographies are acceptable" (par. 26, *italics in original*). Acceptability criteria have been presented diversely by different ethnographers, groups, and publication outlets. At its most fundamental, ethnography involves documenting a group of people, rooted in its Greek etymology where *ethnos* denotes people or culture, and *graphic* signifies writing. Various definitions, historical accounts, and multiple perspectives on ethnography can be found in journals focused on ethnography and multidisciplinary volumes like the *Handbook of Ethnography* (Atkinson et al., 2007), *International Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Callan & Coleman, 2018), and *Wiley Handbook of Ethnography of Education* (Beach et al., 2018b), among others. Instead of reiterating these histories, I present two significant explanations of ethnography, including extensive quotes from original texts to allow readers to follow the arguments as they were formulated. The first explanation, from the journal *Ethnography and Education*, delineates ethnography's parameters as conceptualized by editors situated at the intersections of sociology and education in the UK and Europe. The second description, provided by the American Anthropological Association in a statement for Institutional Review Boards, offers another perspective on ethnography. Despite originating from different organizations, countries, and types of publications, these two presentations of ethnography share commonalities that underpin the understanding of ethnography as an epistemology governed by a specific logic, rather than a mere method or set of criteria, an argument to be elaborated upon in the subsequent section.

In the inaugural issue of the *Ethnography and Education* journal, the editors outlined the core principles of ethnographic research as applied to the study of educational contexts (Troman et al, 2006. p. 1, original bullets):

- Emphasis on studying cultural formation and maintenance within the context.
- Utilization of multiple methods to generate diverse and comprehensive data.
- Direct involvement and sustained engagement of the researcher(s) in the field.
- Recognition of the researcher as the primary research instrument.
- Valuing participants' perspectives and understandings as central to the study.

- Engaging in an iterative process of data collection, hypothesis development, and theory testing, leading to further data collection.
- Focusing deeply on a specific case while aiming to form theoretical generalizations based on findings.

These fundamental aspects highlight the importance placed on culture, employing diverse methodologies, sustained immersion in the research setting, the centrality of participant perspectives, and the iterative nature of data analysis. Originating from the tradition of ethnographic research within sociology in the U.K., these elements are frequently referenced as criteria for research deemed ethnographic and suitable for publication in the Ethnography and Education journal.

Ethnography entails the researcher's exploration of human behavior within natural settings where people reside. Specifically, it involves describing cultural systems or aspects of culture through immersive fieldwork among the everyday activities of a designated community. The primary aim is to depict the social context, relationships, and processes relevant to the topic at hand. Ethnographic inquiry focuses on understanding the beliefs, values, rituals, customs, and behaviors of individuals within socioeconomic, religious, political, and geographic contexts. It employs an inductive approach that builds on the perspectives of the studied individuals. Ethnography places emphasis on studying individuals and communities, both domestically and internationally, fostering short or long-term relationships between researchers and participants.

Ethnographic research employs a variety of methods, including but not limited to unobtrusive direct observation, participant observation, structured and unstructured interviewing, focused discussions with individuals and community members, analysis of texts, and examination of audio-visual records. These methods can also be adapted and applied innovatively in interdisciplinary projects that integrate the sciences and humanities.

- Long-term immersion in the field
- Examination of cultural groups and processes
- Utilization of diverse methodological approaches
- Incorporation of multiple perspectives
- A dynamic, non-linear process of data collection and analysis
- Valuing participant perspectives as central
- Cultivating ongoing relationships and ethical considerations

While many ethnographers use these elements to define ethnography, others criticize them as overly prescriptive and inflexible, insufficiently adaptable to new theoretical developments, technologies, and evolving societal dynamics with their fluid spatial and temporal boundaries both locally and globally (Agar, 2019; Beach et al., 2018a). Debates

surrounding these criteria highlight uncertainties related to concepts like culture, researcher involvement, duration of study, formulation of hypotheses, role of theory, and researcher positionality (Agar, 2006a, 2006b; Eisenhart, 2018).

Ethnographic as a Logic of Inquiry

Drawing on examples of various ethnographic studies conducted at the same site but yielding different representations of the studied culture, Agar (2006b) illustrates how multiple ethnographies can emerge from a single location. According to Agar, these ethnographies "will be different because of varying combinations of ethnographer and community, diverse paths the study takes, different decisions and contingencies encountered along the way, and various external events influencing the study, any or all of which can alter its trajectory over time. More than one path is feasible" (par. 23). However, not every path and resulting study meets the criteria for ethnography. Rather than relying on parameters as discussed earlier, Agar proposes examining the logic of inquiry and perspectives taken as criteria for determining which studies belong in the ethnographic realm. He introduces the concept of an "ethnographic space of possibilities" to underscore that there are no definitive binary distinctions dictating what constitutes ethnography. Instead, the approach and perspectives adopted can help ascertain if a study falls within the acceptable spectrum of ethnographic possibilities.

Agar (2006b) contends that the iterative, recursive, and abductive logic, along with a focus on perspectives divergent from those of the ethnographer, are pivotal in determining a study's alignment within the ethnographic framework. This emphasis on iterative, recursive, and abductive logic mirrors the Ethnography and Education editors' call for a "spiral of data collection, hypothesis building, and theory testing—leading to further data collection" (Troman et al., 2006), and the American Anthropological Association's advocacy for a "dynamic and flexible" ethical approach due to the "complexity and length" and the "inductive" nature of ethnographic studies (2004). Ethnographic logic involves iterative processes essential for exploring diverse perspectives across multiple scales, recursive actions in constructing new insights while retaining contextual foundations, and abductive reasoning that allows researchers to pursue rich insights, develop novel understandings, and integrate them into evolving representations of how people engage in cultural processes over time (Skukauskaitė & Green, 2023).

Ethnographic inquiry is characterized by its intricate and dynamic processes that prioritize perspectives divergent from those of the ethnographer (Agar, 2006b). The ethnographers adopt a learning stance, aiming to discover new insights alongside the people they study (Agar, 1996; Baker et al., 2023; Skukauskaitė & Green, 2023). They pose contextually grounded questions about who can do or say what, in what manner, when, where, with whom or what resources, for what reasons, under what conditions, and with what outcomes—both

intended and unintended (Green et al., 2012; Skukauskaitė & Rupšienė, 2023). In their exploration, ethnographers identify "rich points" (Agar, 1994)—moments highlighting discrepancies between insider perspectives and the ethnographer's understanding. By noting these discrepancies, surprises, and shifts in viewpoints, ethnographers pursue various rich points using iterative, recursive, and abductive reasoning until they construct explanations grounded in insider actions, language, and viewpoints to produce novel insights (Green et al., 2020; Skinner, 2023).

"In" or "Out" of an Ethnographic Space

Ethnographers across various fields have long contended that ethnography transcends mere method to encompass an epistemology, logic of inquiry, philosophy, and a way of perceiving, understanding, and engaging with the world (e.g., Agar, 2001; Anderson-Levitt, 2006; Atkinson, 2017; Green et al., 2012). Merely employing methods like participant observation or artifact analysis, rooted in anthropological or sociological traditions, does not automatically qualify a study as ethnographic, regardless of a researcher's desire to align with ethnographic scholarship. Green and Bloome (1997) introduced a useful distinction between two approaches that do align with ethnographic practice within its realm of possibilities: conducting ethnography and adopting an ethnographic perspective. However, studies that merely utilize methods derived from ethnography without integrating ethnographic goals and methodologies do not meet the criteria for inclusion within this space.

Engaging in ethnography (also known as comprehensive or full ethnography) involves studying a cultural group over an extended period. This approach includes conceptualizing culture(s) through specific theoretical and disciplinary lenses and conducting research through prolonged participation and observation in the field. The duration considered "long-term" varies depending on disciplinary norms and the natural cycles of the group under study (Bloome et al., 2005; Kelly & Green, 2019b). For instance, it could span a semester-long course in higher education or a full academic year in a K-12 school setting. The "field" of study may encompass physical as well as virtual environments (Eisenhart, 2017; Erstad & Sefton-Green, 2013), and methods like observation, interviewing, and artifact collection, including the use of video, photography, and digital tools, adapt to fit the life patterns of the group being studied (Baker et al., 2008; Bridges, 2023; Skukauskaitė & Sullivan, 2023; Tobin, 2019).

Engaging in ethnographic research involves a deep understanding of its histories, theories, and epistemology, employing iterative, recursive, and abductive reasoning to generate new knowledge by exploring differences in perspectives between researchers and participants. Ethnographers focus on deciphering intricate patterns of practice co-constructed by cultural groups through their interactions and discourse in the everyday contexts, which

are embedded within visible and hidden layers known to insiders (Skukauskaitė & Girdzijauskienė, 2021). Ethnography functions as an epistemological framework rather than merely a methodological approach. As such, it necessitates a theoretically grounded, coherent, and transparent logic of inquiry guided by specific ethnographic objectives aimed at representing the complexities of daily life comprehensively. In the subsequent section, I introduce three potential educational goals of ethnography. While I draw insights from educational scholars, these distinctions are applicable for understanding the purposes of ethnography across various disciplines.

Opportunities and Power of Ethnography

Various perspectives illustrate the intricacies, diversity, challenges, and opportunities inherent in ethnographic epistemology across different fields. At its core, ethnography embraces an iterative, recursive, and abductive logic of inquiry, emphasizing the exploration of cultural patterns through the perspectives of those actively involved in creating these patterns within specific groups, settings, and contexts. Anthropologist of education Kathryn Anderson-Levitt, in her contribution to the *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research* (Green et al., 2006), highlighted the potential of ethnography. In addressing the question "what is ethnography good for?" she elaborated on its strengths.

Understanding the types of inquiries ethnography can address and those it cannot is crucial. Ethnography serves several purposes: firstly, it uncovers the diverse interpretations actors give to situations. Without comprehending how actors define the problem, it's impossible to solve or assess a solution effectively. As Erickson and Gutiérrez (2002) argue, "a logically and empirically prior question to 'Did it work?' is 'What was the "it"?'?" (p.21). Secondly, ethnography provides a valid understanding of local contexts in all their intricacy. It allows for an exploration of actions within their broader settings, thereby capturing the complexity of real-world human behavior. Thirdly, due to its time-intensive nature, ethnography enables the observation and comprehension of ongoing processes. In essence, ethnography is well-suited for probing questions like "What is happening here?" It is a valuable approach when the exact problem is unclear, ideal for investigating "How does this occur?" and "What does this signify?"

By sharing this extensive quote, I illustrate how an anthropologist specializing in education, who has conducted ethnographic research globally, explores the capabilities of ethnography to reveal intricate, context-specific insights into the processes, practices, and discourse that shape "what is happening" and its significance within a community. Ethnography's ability to uncover the intricacies of human behavior and evolving processes within broader contexts, shaped by and shaping the actions of individuals, also raises issues of power dynamics, particularly concerning who has the authority to conduct and engage in ethnographic studies.

Anderson-Levitt (2006) asserted that "Ethnography requires the researcher to grasp how insiders interpret a situation, enabling ethnographers to highlight and publicly convey viewpoints of individuals with less authority" (p.283). While shedding light on the lives and perspectives of the "less powerful" is crucial for comprehending the complexities of social life in diverse social structures and cultures, she also cautioned that "focusing solely on the powerless can inadvertently render their actions more visible to those in positions of power, potentially facilitating control; it may also unintentionally contribute to obscuring the operation of power" (p.283). Therefore, ethnographers, both individually and collectively, should investigate the social and cultural construction of life across various social strata and power dynamics.

Considering what, whom, where, and how to study, ethnographers must also be conscious of their own influence and potential impacts, striving for power diffusion or sharing whenever feasible. Ethnographers adopt a stance of learning and position the individuals studied as experts in their own lives and evolving cultures (Agar, 1980; Baker et al., 2022; Collins & Green, 1992). Members of the group serve as cultural guides, deciding if, when, and how to assist the ethnographer in understanding their worlds (Skukauskaitė & Rupšienė, 2023). By listening to people, inviting their collaboration and guidance, and partnering in research processes, ethnographers can mitigate some of the power differentials between themselves and the group members under study (Guerrero et al., 2023; Skukauskaitė & Sullivan, 2023).

Over recent decades, increasing attention has focused on the agency and power of research partners, including children, students, and teachers (e.g., Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998; Guerrero et al., 2023), who may even opt to co-author research publications and presentations. However, academic environments oriented toward publishing, while significant for academics, often do not hold the same significance or relevance for the cultural groups being studied. When ethnographers involve research partners transparently throughout the ethnographic process, these partners can develop new understandings of how ethnography can serve their own needs, whether in teaching, understanding systems, learning from and alongside diverse perspectives, collaborating, or exploring aspects of daily life often taken for granted. In this way, individuals themselves become ethnographers of their own lives and social groups.

The Strengths of ethnography

Ethnography has been instrumental to identifying other cultures, especially traditional and indigenous cultures. Below are the key strengths of ethnography (L. Whitehead 2002, p5). It is a tool used to understand the models of society, a group and activities; through the knowledge, belief, values and behaviour of the members in community. Researcher conduct participation observation in the living situation of the researcher.

- The use of ethnography as a research approach beyond the fields of ethnography and anthropology highlights its significance as a core theme in theoretical and methodological tool in the social sciences (Whitehead, 2005). One of ethnography's key strengths lies in its ability to capture participants lived experiences and perspectives while interpreting them through various disciplinary lenses (Mohanty et al., 2008). This multi-faceted approach to understanding social issues enhances interdisciplinary engagement and promotes the application of ethnographic methods in anthropology as well as in other human-centered fields such as education, sociology, psychology, and the broader social sciences. The key strengths are as follows:
- Ethnography includes both qualitative and quantitative methods, and both classical and non-classical ethnographic approaches.
- It is more than a method, but has ontological and epistemological attributes
- It is a holistic approach to the study of cultural systems
- It is the study of the socio-cultural contexts, processes, and meanings within cultural systems
- It is the study of cultural systems from both emic and etic perspectives.
- It is a process of discovery, making inferences, and continuing inquiries to achieve emic validity
- It is widely dependent on field work
- It is an iterative process of learning episodes
- It is a highly flexible, creative, interpretive, reflexive and constructivist process
- It requires the daily and continuous recording of field notes
- It presents the world of its host population in human contexts of thickly described case studies.

Complexities of a Term “Ethnography”

“Ethnography differs from other forms of qualitative research through the ethnographer’s personal involvement and experiences, moving beyond the idea of passively collecting data as if it simply awaits discovery and analysis (Ingold, 2017). It relies on a heightened sensitivity to culturally shaped ways of being and perceiving the world (McGranahan, 2018, p. 2). Ethnographic research is simultaneously ontological and epistemological in nature (McGranahan, 2018). This distinctive approach often challenges its acceptance within conventional methodological frameworks of the social sciences (Ingold, 2017).”

Ethnography can be understood in multiple ways as an approach, a method, and a form of writing (Guber, 2017); as a technique, a method, and a writing style (Restrepo, 2018); or as a theory, a method, and a narrative form (McGranahan, 2018). However, it is often narrowly

interpreted merely as a technique, specifically participant observation which reduces the broader social experience of the observer to a set of data-gathering tasks. This perspective turns interactions into tools and people into informants, undermining ethnography's core aim: to understand relationships within their natural, lived contexts by actively engaging in them. While ethnography does have a technical aspect, fully embracing it as only that risks losing what fundamentally characterizes the practice.

In both anthropology and sociology, particularly within symbolic interactionism ethnography is viewed and practiced as a deeply immersive personal experience. This is why individuals engaged in ethnographic work often identify themselves as ethnographers, rather than simply as observers or researchers (Mannay & Morgan, 2015)."

Ethnography is subject to two major criticisms, one rooted in positivist approaches to social research and the other from postmodern perspectives (Brewer, 2010). From a positivist or 'naturalistic' standpoint, ethnography is often criticized for its perceived subjectivity and for treating the ethnographer as a variable within the research process. In contrast, postmodern critiques challenge ethnography on several aspect: (a) how it represents the field, (b) its emphasis on 'thick description', (c) questions surrounding the reliability and validity of its data, and (d) the way ethnographic texts are constructed."

My Insights

Ethnography as a theme or epistemological framework considers a series of techniques having an ethnographic sense assuming a context of socio-cultural production (Restrepo, 2018). An ethnographic sensibility fills ethnography with significance. It involves a keen focus on the realities and lived experiences of individuals. It entails an openness to the interconnected worlds observed through participant-observation, extending beyond the confines of narrowly defined research queries. Recognizing that a narrow perspective is comprehensible only within a broader context, and vice versa, an ethnographic sensibility demands depth and time. It represents both a theoretical commitment and a methodological approach. Just as people's lives encompass both the predictable and the unpredictable, ethnography, as a method of understanding these lives, reveals insights that are simultaneously expected and unexpected. It surpasses mere questions and answers, offering unique insights into the realm of surplus knowledge, illuminating aspects that were previously unrecognized. The nature of ethnographic knowledge has given rise to talk on ethnographic theory (da Col & Graeber, 2011, McGranahan, 2018).

Ethnography seeks to understand people and their activities from their own perspectives. This approach relies on the researcher's presence and participation in the daily lives of individuals and communities, providing numerous opportunities to encounter and comprehend different ways of life and thinking. Through participant observation,

ethnographers immerse themselves in everyday life, gaining access to hidden meanings, nuances, and emotional realms that are not immediately apparent. Originating from anthropological and sociological studies, ethnography aimed to understand foreign cultures and distinct communities through a Western lens. It has since evolved into a broad research field with diverse methodological focuses. Today, ethnographic research methods are utilized across various disciplines to examine human interaction and experiences. Ethnography as a theme produce the interactions sufficient for the context studies and those sufficient to the study of that context (Guber, 2017).

Finding and Discussions

This paper "Ethnography: Fundamentals, Obstacles, Opportunities " explores the fundamental principles, enduring challenges, and expansive potential inherent in ethnographic research. By exploring into the foundational aspects of ethnography, the paper elucidates its historical development within anthropology and beyond, highlighting its evolution from a descriptive tool to a nuanced methodological approach deeply rooted in participant-observation. It navigates through the inherent complexities and persistent challenges encountered in ethnographic research, emphasizing the complex balance between immersion and interpretation, as well as the ethical considerations involved in studying human cultures and communities.

Moreover, the paper underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of ethnographic inquiry, identifying various spaces of possibility where ethnography can contribute significantly to understanding social phenomena, cultural practices, and lived experiences. Ultimately, it suggests that ethnography, with its rich tradition and methodological rigor, not only informs scholarly discourse but also has practical implications for addressing contemporary issues and advancing knowledge across diverse fields of study.

Conclusion

Ethnography provides a first hand, descriptive and in-depth views to culture and human behavior. 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 to better understand other people's culture and social lives. To inquire into how individuals ascribe meaning to their world is inherently an ethnographic inquiry. Therefore, to rigorously explore the boundaries of this inquiry transcends mere methodological practice. Ethnographic research, rooted in participant observation and supplemented by a variety of other methodologies such as interviews, daily diary maintains, video recording, focus groups, oral histories, collaborative writing projects, participatory photography, and more, derives its strength from the intellectual vigor that shapes one's conception of ethnography. Without a robust conceptual framework underpinning ethnography, these methods risk losing the

profound significance they are uniquely prepared to uncover. Instead, they risk becoming indistinguishable from other qualitative approaches. The strength of ethnography lies in its capacity for individuals to integrate it into their own practices and meaningful contexts, thereby (re)shaping their cultural environments by comprehending the functioning and rationale of the systems they are involved in.

Within education, educators, students, and administrators have increasingly adopted ethnography as a means of inquiry, learning, and transformation (Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998; Yeager, 2023). They illustrate that ethnography transcends mere research methodology it embodies an epistemology, a mode of understanding, and a way of life that allows for comprehending the intricate and evolving worlds we inhabit and create. Ethnography listens to and respects the efforts and lives of individuals through culturally responsive, relational, situated, grounded, and transparent approaches. In my opinion, in order to perform an ethnographic study, researcher must concentrate not only on the basis of a particular cultural setting, but also on the morally right, culturally acceptable.

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