

Prospects of Ethnographic Research in Qualitative Study: A Short Review

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Abstract: Ethnography is a branch of qualitative research that is used in public health study. This review article is developed to conduct a detailed analysis of ethnographic research by addressing the key characteristics, drawbacks, and advantages. This essay focuses on an important methodology of qualitative research that is ethnography. All such aspects of ethnographic research are discussed by referring to the relevant theory and research work. This study used secondary data such as articles and book chapters to shed a light on different aspects of ethnographic research. A comprehensive overview of ethnographic study is discussed which will help future qualitative researchers to have a quick grasp over this less discussed type of qualitative study (Ethnography).

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Qualitative Approach, Ethnography.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ethnography can be described as the study behaviour, social interaction and behaviour that happens within any particular groups such as communities, team and organizations. So, the research design of ethnography is precisely about the societies, individual and culture, where the cultural and social aspects of the society is read. Ethnography has its own advantages and disadvantages as like other methods of research. However, the method of collecting data is totally different when using ethnographic design in the research paper. The objective of designing ethnographic research is to explore phenomenon of culture where the society is observed by the researchers from a particular point of view. Also, the research method used in this particular study is qualitative where the participants of study is interacted and observed by the researchers in their real-life environment. The application of ethnographic research can be done virtually to any thoughtful of anthropological and sociological subject of enquiry.¹ Lastly, this paper has also outlined the differences and similarities between ethnographic and other qualitative research approaches.

II. METHODS

For the purpose of writing this review article, Medline (EMBASE) database was searched using the keyword 'ethnography' and 'qualitative' with the help of University of Glasgow Database access. All the related articles and book chapter was accessed to gain an insight on ethnographic research. Also, Google Scholar was searched to find out additional research paper on ethnography. No primary data was used for the purpose of this review. Information from related articles are described in different sections below.

III. HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography was originated in year dated back to early 1990 when the research undertook the work of anthropological studies of rural and small societies and the documentation of their belief system and social arrangements were done. Later, the application of this approach was done on the numerous urban settings to study their social lives by the members of Chicago school of sociology. Ethnography has the central objective of providing holistic and rich insight into the actions and views of the people along with incorporating the observation of nature of their location and such information was gathered by conducting a detailed interviews and observation². The enquiry of ethnography also included some new development such as auto ethnography, virtual or online ethnography and eta ethnography. In the auto ethnography, the central element of study is the perspective and thoughts of researcher in their social interaction. In visual or online ethnography, the customary notions of study of ethnography is extended to interactions that are technologically mediated in online communities and network from face to face interaction of the participants of researcher and situated observation.

Numerous elements in the field notes is required to be recorded by the ethnographers due to the complicated nature of social life. The observations of participants are typically gathered by the ethnographers and this necessitates direct involvement and engagement with the world they have undertaken study on³.

Some instances where ethnographic studies can be used include conducting research on the meanings of the views and norms of culture, for gaining an understanding of the reasons behind the application of certain practices and behaviour, when it is required to examine social encounters and interaction, for understanding the sanitation and hygiene practices of particular communities, for studying the workers behaviour in any organization, when it is required to gain new insights and identify particular pattern in the social behaviour and when it is required to conduct an examination into any particular trend and instances of migration, divorce and illness⁴.

IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Ethnography is one of the kinds of qualitative research that helps in producing a comprehensive and detailed account of variety of social phenomenon by gathering data from interviews, observations, and documentaries. Such research methodology has a strong foundation in naturalism and empiricism as the data collection is done in a social setting that is naturalistic. There is a difference between positivistic inquiry and ethnographic study as the hypothesis of research work is not done by the ethnographers and no testing of hypothesis is set out by the ethnographers⁵. The research work conducted under the ethnographic design is exploratory in nature rather than positivistic. Under this approach, in order to explore a certain social interaction and a cultural group, it is required by the ethnographers to get out in the field and therefore, it is not always necessary to specify the research questions at the beginning of conducting the research work. As the ethnographers is required to study the social phenomenon, research questions are developed by thick descriptions and which is facilitated by iterative and inductive approach.⁶

The social phenomenon that is being studied under the ethnography offers a richly described accounts with the help of its written record. Such phenomenon can be explained, illuminated, and framed by entailing a theoretical component with the help of producing textual reports. Like the needs of all other researches, it is important that ethnographic research is undertaken in an ethical manner and attention and due care should be exercised so that the interest of the participants of research is safeguarded.⁷For the purpose of data analysis, ethnographic research literature demonstrates the trend where such method becomes reliant on the software programmes. Ethnographers are provided with new ways to manage and organize the data due to great variation in the capabilities available in the software packages.

Some of the main characteristics of ethnography research are listed below:

Naturalistic and holistic- The general reality of the facts can be studied from different viewpoints that is external and internal. External viewpoint includes researcher interpretation of the society studied and internal viewpoint is the researcher being the member of group.

Relatively persistent-In order to get the trust and acceptance of the participants, it is important for the professionals to be involved in the group. This would help in creating a connection and relationship between the society members that are being studied and researchers⁸. The culture being studied by the researcher should be well understood to him.

Emico character or phenomenological-The social phenomenon studied should be well interpreted from the inside perspectives of the participants of the group which helps researcher in gaining a vision. Researcher will be able to know that social phenomenon can be viewed as the society member through description and interpretation.⁹

Ethnographic design-Many researchers consider ethnography as a branch of cultural and social anthropology as such study was undertaken to conduct an analysis on aboriginal communities and is regarded as an investigative tool. Usually, all the research aspects are integrated under the ethnographic report and the work is sustained by the empirical and theoretical information. A comprehensive explanation of the procedures and methods implemented in and the final conclusions and results are also integrated in the report.¹⁰

Ethnographic model-Researcher under this method uses deductive and inductive method which are the two opposed approaches for conducting research work.¹¹

Cyclical model-The procedures of ethnography tend to occur and overlap on simultaneous basis. More new information is collected with the help of explanation work and collection of data.

Inductive design-The participant observation helps in knowing a social scenario by the exploration and experience. The concept of categories is generated by obtaining the information from this strategy. This is so because researchers intend to discover the association and irregularities between the social phenomenon by conducting an analysis based on the hypothesis, models, and explanatory theories.¹²

Techniques of ethnography- Some techniques of ethnography used in the study includes formal interview, participation observation and survey. This includes studying on certain behaviour, studying the concepts with different purpose and culture and political studies.

The quality of data in the ethnographic study is favoured instead of quantity. This study therefore makes it important for the researcher to select the people on which the research is aimed at and the right location. Often, a single group is studied under ethnography due to the time-consuming nature of the study. It is therefore required by the researcher to plan accordingly and the study undertaken contribute to produce meaningful results by choosing that the community in the best position. Ethnography is an in-depth and detailed description of the culture, way of society and of a society.¹³ The landscape of ethnography is the universe where a length period of time is investigated by researcher by interviewing and observing people in their natural habitat.

V. ADVANTAGES OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Ethnographic study is one of the qualitative methods of conducting research that became considerably popular and useful tool all across the academic globe in year 1980s.

Numerous advantages are offered by the qualitative research method of ethnography and they are as follows:

Ethnography in terms of depth of gaining an understanding, is considered as one of the most valuable aspects of such research method. Compared to other research design, ethnographic research helps the researcher to have an access to more accurate and wider scope of data. Firsthand information is collected about the variables of research in this approach. The outcome of research work conducted would be more objective due to the availability of wide range of data to the researchers to work upon.¹⁴

A competitive differentiation within the population can be enabled under the ethnographic research. A bespoke approach is enabled by the researcher under the ethnographic research so that the products fitting the niche can be developed and thereby shutting the competitors for good. A clearer insight is given by such research work whether the ideas are delivering the promises.¹⁵

The complexity of behaviour of any group can be accounted by ethnographies as the interrelationship between the various dimensions of the interaction of the group is revealed by such research method. This in turn helps in providing behavioural contexts.¹⁶

Any unexpected issues can be analysed and identified using the ethnographic research and such unexpected issues can be missed out in any other methods of research as they are not based on interaction or in situ observations. Such issues under the ethnography research is directly apparent to the researcher and researcher helps in risk mitigation due to the presence of in situ.¹⁷

One of the benefits of ethnographic research which is important to cite is the ability to deliver the faithful and detailed representation of the attitudes and behaviour of participants. An ethnographic study is quite useful in analysing and uncovering the emotions and attitudes of users due to its subjective nature. The identified research problem is addressed by bringing weakness and strengths due to the use of sociology, cultural anthropology, organizational psychology, and business.¹⁸

The groups experience qualities are revealed with the help of ethnographies and such qualities are recognized in a manner that cannot be done by other method of researches. The kind of follow up research also helps in determining the future research questions. In addition to this, the reason for occurrence of any

distinguishing behaviour instead of just identifying the occurrence, is understood by researcher which expands the knowledge range. This can be explained with the help of an instance, teaching composition to students using a processing method would help them in scoring higher grades rather than using other method such as product method¹⁹. Nevertheless, it might be revealed by conducting a qualitative study that even though the benefits of the process method are well known to the composition instructors, product method continues to be used by them as revealed using qualitative study.²⁰

VI. DRAWBACKS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

There are some drawbacks too to be considered under ethnographic study and they are listed below:

For conducting a study using ethnographic design, it is important to have a well-trained researcher and this research method is also time-consuming. Since the research method of ethnography is a specialist method, a well-trained researcher in social theory is required with having best practices in collection and analysis of data, sampling, and research design. Meaningful and long conversations would be driven by the research participants by employing ethnographers who have excellent social skills and are trained. Analysis of data under ethnographic research is again time consuming and has a consequence of thick description of cultural and societal issue. Often, culture shock is experienced by ethnographers due to their immersion in the different culture and this also makes them experience occasional personal danger and discomfort.²¹

Evaluation of ethnographic work faces the challenge of application of subjective and scientific notions. This is so because both the artistic and scientific approaches are used by the product and process for the interpretation and collection of data. Even when evaluating a single piece of work that is complex, the application of subjective and scientific notion becomes difficult. This requires discussing the potential ways of evaluating the work along with discussing the value of work that helps in facilitating the engagement with ethnography.²²

In order to facilitate the honest and full discourse, researchers should build trust with the informants which takes quite a few times. In this regard, studies conducted for shorter term are at disadvantage. Interpretation and collection of data along with the design of study is also affected by the biasness of the researcher. When studying the pattern of behaviour, false assumptions might result due to availability of too little data.²³ Furthermore, there might not be effective processing of the data available in larger quantity.

Costs- Compared to other method of research, ethnographic can be a time consuming and more expensive option. It is important to account for the factors such as researcher's salaries, cost of travel and time scales that all would add up to the expenses of conducting research work.

It is important to take into account ethical issues prior to conduct any type of research work. Various ethical dilemmas are faced by ethnographers because of their need to maintain relationship whilst collecting data. In the methodology of ethnography, analysis of data is unstructured and iterative, and the components of data analysis cannot be teased apart easily. It is important for the reader as well as ethnographer to understand the components of data analysis as the rhetorical devices which might have been used in the writing and further collection of data is reflected in part by such description of data.²⁴

As regarding reliability, ethnographic study has issue as there is difficulty accurate replication because there cannot be production of an event in natural setting and this particular research work takes place in the natural process and settings. However, addressing of such problem can be done by describing the research method as comprehensive so that the strategies of original analysis can be reconstructed by the next researcher.²⁵ Furthermore, it is the agreement of researchers that forms the basis of replication findings. Findings under ethnographic study is difficult to replicate because an accurate description of any phenomenon being studied is required in ethnographic research. There might be variation in the information flow in an effort to support the accurate description. Such situation makes one researcher to make thicker description compared to another researcher and thereby resulting in different interpretation.²⁶ For addressing this issue, it is important for the researcher to ascertain the disagreement cause from the description so that the disagreement can be resolved and discussed.

VII. IDENTIFYING DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES OF ETHNOGRAPHY WITH QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

The similarities between ethnographic research and other methods of qualitative research such as grounded theory, narrative research, case study and phenomenology is that the research work in all such approaches initiates with identifying research problem and then proceeding to the research questions and then to the data analysis and interpretation and finally report.²⁷

Table 1: The comparison of five qualitative approaches of research is demonstrated in the table below:

Ethnography	Phenomenology	Narrative research	Grounded theory	Case study
The focus of research is to interpret and analyse the social setting and cultural sharing of the group.	The experience is understood in this research work.	Life of any individual is explored in this research work.	The data grounded in the field is used to develop the theory.	For any individual or multiple cases, an in-depth analysis and description is developed in the study.
A group sharing the same culture is the analysis unit of the study.	Numerous individuals sharing the experience is studied.	One or more individual is studied.	Action, process, or the interactions of many individuals are studied.	A program, event, and activity of one or more than one individual is studied.
Using interviews and observations as primary data but also relies on other sources to gather the data.	Conducting interviews with individual, observations, and documents and also considering arts.	Documents and using interviews primarily.	Primary data is collected by interviewing twenty to sixty individuals.	Multiple sources are used to gather data such as observations, interviews, artifacts, and documents.
The group sharing culture being studied is the focus when preparing the report.	When writing a report, explaining the phenomenon is the main focus.	The focus is on the nature of story and the participants.	The intention of theory to explain the action and process is the focus when writing report. ²⁸	Entry vignette is used and thereafter focusing on the central features of the case. ²⁹
The concluding format is to describe the work of cultural sharing group using a portrait of culture. ³⁰	Conclusion describe the experience essence.	In conclusion, pattern of meaning is interpreted.	A theory is advanced in the conclusion.	A closing vignette is advanced, and assertions of case study is made.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The paper outlining the characteristics and importance of ethnographic research has identified that such research work offers numerous benefits as it can generate a detailed and rich accounts for the researchers. It is important for the researchers to have fine knowledge and understanding of the key elements and foundations of ethnography. In addition to the advantages, the method of ethnography research has its limitations. Researchers are therefore required to have wide range of skills so that the issues can be addressed. However, research work of ethnography can be problematic as repeated access can be difficult to secure due to long time spend by ethnographers in observing actions and talking to the participants. It is important for the researchers interested in undertaking this research to be well-known with the prerequisites of such research.

Notes on author

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