Employing an ethnographic approach: key characteristics

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Abstract

Aim Nurses are increasingly embracing ethnography as a useful research methodology. This paper presents an overview of some of the main characteristics we considered and the challenges encountered when using ethnography to explore the nature of communication between children and health professionals in a children's hospital.

Background There is no consensual definition or single procedure to follow when using ethnography. This is largely attributable to the re-contextualisation of ethnography over time through diversification in and across many disciplines. Thus, it is imperative to consider some of ethnography's trademark features.

Data sources To identify core trademark features of ethnography, we collated data following a scoping review of pertinent ethnographic textbooks, journal articles, attendance at ethnographic workshops and discussions with principle ethnographers.

Review methods This is a methodological paper.

Discussion Essentially, ethnography is a field-orientated activity that has cultural interpretations at its core, although the levels of those interpretations vary. We identified six trademark features to be considered when embracing an ethnographic approach: naturalism; context; multiple data sources; small case numbers; 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives, and ethical considerations.

Conclusion Ethnography has an assortment of meanings, so it is not often used in a wholly orthodox way and does not fall under the auspices of one epistemological belief. Yet, there are core criteria and trademark features that researchers should take into account alongside their particular epistemological beliefs when embracing an ethnographic inquiry.

Implications for practice/research We hope this paper promotes a clearer vision of the methodological processes to consider when embarking on ethnography and creates an avenue for others to disseminate their experiences of and challenges encountered when applying ethnography's trademark features in different healthcare contexts.

Keywords Ethnography, fieldwork, culture, characteristics

Introduction

EMOTIONAL LABOUR is often mentioned in relation to ethnography, especially the fear, anxiety and stress experienced in the field. However, these emotions extend far beyond the field, beginning with the ultimate question: what is ethnography? As Agar (1996) highlighted: 'We're closer than we were in 1980, but we're still in the early steps of the dialectic dance of exploring what ethnography is and how it works.'

It is often easier to state what ethnographers do than to come up with a definition of ethnography. In its literal translation, ethnography refers to writing, describing or painting a picture (graph) about particular people (ethno) (Agar 1986, Wolcott 1999, Brink and Edgecombe 2003). With many variations and interpretations of ethnography, it is unsurprising there is no consensual definition because it would be impossible to encapsulate all its meanings in all contexts

There are essentially two criteria at the core of ethnography. It is a field-orientated activity and it has cultural interpretations

(Boyle 1994, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Savage (2006) contended that 'the absence of a single fixed understanding of ethnography has probably contributed to its under-utilisation in healthcare research'. In this paper, we outline some characteristics for consideration by researchers when using ethnography. We do this by referring to an ethnographic inquiry that explored the nature of communication between children and health professionals in a children's ward (Lambert 2009).

Definition

Ethnography's intricate history is one explanation for its ill-defined singular meaning (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Ethnography developed as a methodology mainly in anthropology and sociology (Mackenzie 1994, Laugharne 1995). Within 19th century cultural anthropology, ethnography developed as a means to understand and describe tribal cultures (Malinowski 1922). Traditionally, anthropologists lived among these 'other' cultures for months and years. In the 1920s to 1950s, sociologists at Chicago University adopted anthropological traditions to study patterns of city social life (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In recent times, ethnography has diversified in and across many disciplines such as anthropology (Bluebond-Langner 1996), sociology (Emond 2005), education (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2001), midwifery (Hunt and Symonds 1995), nursing (Soderback 1999, Tinney 2008) and medicine (Zaman 2008). As a result of this diversification, ethnography has become re-contextualised in various ways. Box 1 illustrates a number of diverse definitions of ethnography from different perspectives.

One distinct change is that traditional ethnographers predominantly studied exotic, overseas, isolated and strange cultural worlds. In contemporary times, ethnographies have become preoccupied with cultural behaviours, activities and beliefs in more familiar settings (Boyle 1994, Atkinson and Pugsley 2005). The diversity of ethnographic approaches (for example, classical, evaluative, cognitive/ethnoscience, critical, feminist and narrative) further enhances its complexity. However, as Savage (2006) highlighted, the many different forms of ethnographic approaches are informed and differentiated by ethnographers' epistemological (a way of knowing, understanding and explaining what exists) and ontological (the nature of existence and of being) perspectives, such as naturalism, realism, relativism, modernism and post-modernism.

Our view is that knowledge and reality are socially constructed. This means that knowledge is 'constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty 1998).

While there are many different perspectives inherent in ethnography, there are essentially two criteria at its core. It is a field-orientated activity and it has cultural interpretations.

Field-orientated activity

The hallmark of cultural anthropology - doing fieldwork - remains the commonest feature of ethnographic work (Wolcott 1999). The majority of authors agree that ethnography involves the researcher gathering information about people first-hand, through observing and questioning participants (Spradley 1980, Fetterman 1998, Hume and Mulcock 2004). For instance, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) contended that ethnography involves the researcher participating 'in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts'.

Similarly, Wolcott (1999) highlighted that 'there is little mystery in an approach that encourages one to experience the ways of a group first hand, to supplement what one is able to observe with interviewing to learn what those in the group make of their experience'.

Cultural interpretations

The second concept lying at the heart of ethnographic work is cultural patterning (the ethnographer looks for repeated, identifiable thoughts and behaviours in various situations and with various participants) and interpretation (the ethnographer does not simply provide a description of a particular scene or event, but rather incorporates the specific context, and the meaning participants attribute to, and the ethnographer's understanding of, the scene/event) (Spradley 1980, Fetterman 1998, Wolcott 1999). Arguably the centrality of culture has waned with the changing nature of ethnographic work (Wolcott 1990), the necessity to learn about culture being most understandable when studying societies other than our own (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). However, Wolcott (1990) argued that 'there

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Box 1 Defining ethnography

Definition	Author
For some, ethnography refers to a philosophical paradigm to which one researcher makes a total commitment; for others it designates a method that one uses as and when appropriate. And, of course, there are positions between these extremes.	Atkinson and Hammersley (1994)
Ethnography is the work of describing a culture. The central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native point of view.	Spradley (1980)
The social research style that emphasises encountering alien worlds and making sense of them is ethnography, or 'folk description'.	Agar (1986)
Ethnography is a collaborative, participatory methodology. The representation you build is neither 'theirs' nor is it 'yours'.	Agar (1996)
Ethnography is an ambiguous term, representing a process and a product. The product is usually a book, which almost always focuses on some social group, though it may be guided by any number of theories and methods. There will be a dash of history, something about the various environments – physical, biological, and social – and some detail on the things the group does and the beliefs they hold.	Agar (1996)
Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture. The description may be of a small tribal group in, for example New Guinea, or a classroom in middle-class suburbia.	Fetterman (1998)
More anthropologically orientated writers distinguish between ethnography as process and ethnography as product. 'Ethno' refers to people and 'graph' to a picture, then the challenge of presenting a picture of a group of people seems to provide direction enough for many a researcher. For the anthropologically orientated researcher, ethnography has always been associated with, and intended for, studying culture.	Wolcott (1999)
Ethnographic research involves the use of various techniques for collecting data on human beliefs, values and practices.	Hume and Mulcock (2004)
Ethnography is a method of collecting, describing and analysing the ways in which human beings categorise the meaning of their world. In other words, ethnography attempts to learn what knowledge people use to interpret experience and mould their behaviour in the context of their culturally constituted environment.	Aamodt (1991)
The essential purpose of ethnography, which literally means 'a portrait of a people', is to understand a cultural group's way of life from the 'native's' point of view. Ethnography is used to describe and explain the regularities and variations of social behaviour.	Lipson (1991)
An ethnography is always informed by a concept of culture. An ethnography focuses on a group of people who have something in common.	Boyle (1994)
At its simplest level, 'ethnography' can refer to a way of collecting data (a set of research methods); the principles that guide the production of data (a methodology); and/or a product (the written account of a particular ethnographic project).	Savage (2006)
Ethnography is a product – the book that tells a story about a group of people – and a process – the method of inquiry that leads to the production of the book. Ethnography also is an investigative process that social scientists employ in different ways to study human behaviour, depending on their discipline.	LeCompte and Preissle (1993)

'There is little mystery in an approach that encourages one to experience the ways of a group first hand'

is no ethnography until culture makes an entry, no matter how tenuously', although he clarified this later by highlighting that culture can – but does not have to – be the mission. Wolcott (1999) went on to define culture as 'an abstraction, a perspective for studying human behaviour that gives particular attention to ("privileges", in today's lexicon) acquired social behaviour'. The emphasis is describing and understanding regularities of human social behaviour that implicate cultural processes.

The goal of our study was to explore, describe and interpret patterns of social behaviours related to the communication between children and health professionals on a children's ward. The intention was to implicitly represent and critically interpret local cultural practices of the children's ward to contextualise these social behaviours locally and universally (Savage 2006). Thus, while ethnography is fittingly aimed at describing a particular group's culture, it encompasses other goals such as exploring patterns and processes of human social behaviours and presenting detailed contextualised cases (Wolcott 1990, Emerson *et al* 2001). Many different layers of cultural knowledge exist, with the value of ethnography 'founded upon the existence of such variations in cultural patterns across and within societies, and their significance for understanding social processes' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

The different cultural orientations – that is the cultural focus the ethnographer wishes to capture such as time, place and/or circumstance boundaries (Wolcott 1999) – implicit in the argument might be explained by the actual scope of ethnographic studies.

Scope of ethnographic studies

Spradley (1980) placed ethnographic research along a continuum from the macro level to the micro level. At one end are micro-ethnographies that examine a single situation, multiple social situations or a single social institution; at the other are macro-ethnographies that examine multiple communities and complex societies. For instance, the culture described might range from a small tribal group in locations such as New Guinea and Kiriwina Islands to a small classroom in middle-class suburbia (Fetterman 1998). Through diversification and re-contextualisation across disciplines, ethnographies have shrunk in scale from 'macro' studies covering holistic cultures over long periods to 'micro' or 'mini' short, focused studies over a number of weeks or months rather than years.

Micro-ethnographies are also known as focused or specific ethnographies because they focus on particular behaviours in a particular setting, rather than attempting to portray a cultural system in its entirety (Wolcott 1990). Some would argue that it is the application or borrowing of ethnographic techniques that is taking place as opposed to 'true' ethnography in its traditional sense. Boyle (1994) outlined two main 'taxonomies' of ethnographies: processual and binary.

For the context of our study, we were concerned with processual ethnographies, which Boyle (1994) defined as 'ethnographies that describe some aspects of social processes' and of which there are four distinct sub-types. These are: holistic, particularistic, cross-sectional and ethnohistorical. We were interested in the particularistic sub-type, although we also want to draw attention to how the term holism is used. Particularistic simply means applying an ethnographic approach to processes in small groups, isolatable human groups, any social units or parts of a culture (Boyle 1994). According to Boyle (1994), holistic ethnographies, also named classical, focus on describing entire social groups and cultural systems. However, this does not mean that an ethnography that does not study an entire social group or cultural system is not or cannot be holistic. A particularistic ethnography could provide a holistic – rounded, comprehensive, contextualised – account of the focused topic or setting under investigation. Yet, painting a holistic picture does not mean that the picture is complete. Geertz's (1973) concept of 'thick description' implies that a total picture of the social setting, context or situation, be presented. At best, the picture painted can only be partial, inferential and partisan (Agar 1986, Wolcott 1999).

Characteristics

When applying ethnographic techniques, it is imperative to consider some of their trademark features, namely: naturalism; contextualisation; focusing on small case numbers; employing multiple modes of data collection; presenting multiple perspectives and considering ethical implications (Box 2).

Collecting data in the natural environment

Ethnography relies on the collection of data in

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Box 2 Main characteristics of an ethnography

- Exploring: it is about discovery.
- It relies on collecting data in the natural environment.
- Value is placed on context: it cannot study people independently of their environments.
- It does not de-contextualise as with an artificially structured interview.
- It observes what people do: it does not rely totally on what people say, but sees, visualises and creates a picture through first-hand experience of it.
- Phenomena cannot be analysed, divorced from their social and cultural contexts.
- It is about immediate social and cultural contexts and broader socioeconomic and political contexts.
- Emphasis is on the native's perspective.
- Multiple perspectives including researcher and researched (emic and etic).
- Intimate relationship between researcher and researched.
- Uses a variety of different methods: multi-modes of data collection.
- Works with unstructured data.
- No variables purposively manipulated.
- Becoming progressively focused: starts with broad descriptive inferences.
- Being reflexive; conscious thought; researcher as prime instrument of data collection.
- Interpreting meanings of human action.
- Analytic induction.
- Being guided by, and generating, theory.
- Culture, holism, naturalism, flexibility.

natural environments or real-world settings. Naturalism refers to the fact that the researcher must go to places where people are – or as more traditionally stated – they must 'enter the field' (as opposed to participants entering artificially constructed settings for structured interviews). Wolcott (1999) eloquently portrayed the emblematic image of an ethnographer arriving in a native land: 'Ethnography is, for many, a rather highly romanticized (and technically impossible) idea about "living one's way into a culture... an idealised image of someone outfitted in safari suit and pith helmet stepping onto the shore and into the center of a circle of huts, with camera, binoculars, and notebook at the ready".'

In the field, the ethnographer assumes an 'apprenticeship' role, learning about and participating to varying degrees in mundane everyday activities and observing the actions and behaviours of the people in the setting (Boyle 1994, Fetterman 1998, Hume and Mulcock 2004). The setting for our ethnographic inquiry was a 35-bed children's ward in a specialist children's hospital. Fieldwork spanned four months, with a total of 245 hours spent by the first author [VL] on the children's ward: that is one to eight hours per day between 7.30am and 7pm, three to five days per week, with all seven days represented.

The intensity of this fieldwork contrasts with other studies where visitations are spaced out over months and years. However, this was influenced by the nature of the setting and high turnover of child patients. The inclusion of different times of day and days of the week ensured that we captured a comprehensive picture of typical everyday activities and occurrences on the children's ward.

Value is placed on contextualisation The contextualisation of activities and behaviours is extremely important. The underlying belief is that human behaviour cannot be studied in isolation or independently from the environment or context in which it occurs (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Baillie 1995, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Contextualising the data enables the researcher to place it in a larger perspective and capture a more holistic view (Boyle 1994). This involves extensive fieldwork in naturalistic settings for prolonged time periods in which the researcher has direct personal face-to-face contact with participants (Robertson and Boyle 1984, Boyle 1994, Christensen 2004). This enables researchers to capture more than a snapshot of activity and assists in recognising routine, repeated and patterned social practices and processes (MacPhail 2004).

In our study, VL undertook a semi-participatory role, acknowledging that there are limitations to the extent the adult researcher can participate in children's activities (Punch 2002, Emond 2005). To avoid being identified as a nurse, she dressed in ordinary street-clothes and did not engage in any hands-on nursing duties, because we thought it was important to create some space between the role as researcher and nurse. VL introduced herself to the children as a student who was doing a project to learn more about children's experience of interacting with healthcare professionals.

Being a semi-participatory observer enabled her to build rapport, engage in activities with, and listen to, children's perspectives. Visiting the children's ward daily, VL joined in with the children's friendly banter, watched television,

DVDs and played board and console games with them. Children often talked about things going on around them during such activities. These close encounters with children provided a forum for observing children's interactions with health professionals, which in turn provided an opportunity to explore researchers' observations of interactions with children taking place in the clinical setting, such as nurses attending to children's vital sign measurements or doctors coming to see how children were feeling and to perform physical examinations. It was often difficult to tell where the dividing line was between participant observation and informal interviewing, but this interconnectedness was extremely important because it put into context the information elicited from children.

Ethical considerations Collecting data in a natural environment raises many important ethical issues, two of which are the cementing of relationships and building of trust (Oliver 2010), and the establishment of firm boundaries around the research field, since it is impossible to control who enters the observation zone (Murphy and Dingwall 2001, Moore and Savage 2002). In our study, the constant and ever-changing movement of health professionals, children and parents was challenging because we had to try to avoid observing non-consenting children who were marginal to the boundaries of observations. We addressed this by ensuring that as many staff, children and parents as possible knew about the study at the outset through posters, verbal presentations and written information packs and leaflets; if they did not, we informed them retrospectively. Sometimes, we had to decide whether it was appropriate to include or exclude data from field notes.

Directly linked to this, honesty and trust, predominantly communicated through self-presentation and general demeanour, are critical qualities to consider for every ethnographic effort (Fetterman 1998). As Oliver (2010) highlighted, researchers must cultivate sensitivity to the research field, because inevitably they will affect the immediate contexts, either directly or indirectly, depending on the role they adopt in the field – complete observer, complete participant, observer as participant, or participant as observer (Gold 1958).

This was evident in our study, where we learned from our pilot work the danger of developing 'over-rapport', which could affect the attaining of authentic information. However, another factor was the shortness of the duration of admissions and the resultant high throughput of children. Each day felt like new because child participants continuously changed, so relationships were only transitory. This differs from other ethnographies where participants mainly remain the same over the course of the fieldwork. This was one reason why VL 'hung around' and spent intensive time periods on the children's ward, observing and engaging informally with children to capture as many details as she could before they were discharged. Engagement in play and the incorporation of participatory activities assisted in establishing trust and rapport in this short time frame.

Using multi-modes of data collection By being there, in the field, the ethnographer is the prime instrument of data collection (Wolcott 1999, Hume and Mulcock 2004). The ethnographer embraces multiple techniques to gather data, most notably participant observations, interviews, documents and artefacts. Researchers should be as innovative as possible in thinking about the potential sources of data and draw on a range of sources to answer questions. In our study, data were generated through fieldwork, which incorporated semi-participatory observations, informal conversations, participatory activities and documentary evidence, such as policies, philosophies and written information for families. The sequence in which these methods of data collection were employed was not prescriptive; VL often used the methods simultaneously and interlinked them to form a matrix. The inherent value of ethnography is the depth of data generated by integrating multiple data sources to give a richer and more comprehensive picture.

Multiple perspective: emic and/or etic Many draw on the original work of Malinowski (1922), arguing that the central goal of ethnography is 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world'. This predominant 'emic' perspective, prevalent in historic and traditional times, neglects to acknowledge the researchers' presence and 'etic' perspective. As the anthropologist Geertz (1973) wrote on interpretive cultures: 'What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.'

Reality is a product of multiple perceptions, including those of the researcher, and is produced by interactions between researcher (etic) and participants (emic). So using multi-modal methods captures rich and diverse data from 'etic' and 'emic'

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perspectives. The interface between observations and conversations results in the reflexive nature of ethnography (Boyle 1994, Soderback 1999). Lipson (1991) says reflexivity acknowledges the presence of the researcher alongside the social actors (research participants). Both views are important in enabling us to understand why participants do what they do and develop conceptual and/or theoretical interpretations (Boyle 1994).

For this reason, the ethnographer tries to make sense of the data in terms of the emic, etic and scientific analytic perspectives (Boyle 1994, Hume and Mulcock 2004). We used this technique in our study, drawing on data from the children's points of view and adding them to our perspectives. We encountered one challenge at the time of data analysis. A tension emerged between producing 'thick descriptions' to display it 'like it is' (the emic perspective of the children) and grounded theorising (applying our etic in-depth interpretation, losing the voice of the child). We were faced with the dichotomy of trying to remain faithful to the raw data but simultaneously recreating it to enable us to see the phenomenon under investigation in a new way (Sandelowski 1995, Graneheim and Lundman 2004). This is in principle the same as how one would handle data in any other type of research with adult participants, for if we merely work towards 'telling it as it is', we risk having implicit and underdeveloped data (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

A small number of cases In ethnography, sampling is concerned with the selection of key participants to give insight into the phenomena under study, but also with sampling across time and place (Mackenzie 1994, Woodgate 2000). Talking about the sample in terms of people and numbers dismisses the context and environmental setting. The focus is on a small number of cases, with a case equating to a single setting or group of people. There is no standard answer to: 'How many and what is a small number?' It is a theoretical issue. The aim is to achieve depth rather than breadth (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

The ethnographer assumes an 'apprenticeship' role, learning about and participating in mundane everyday activities

We selected a 35-bed children's ward in a specialist children's hospital as the site for our study. We chose the hospital for ease of access and the ward because it catered to a wide age range of children with diverse medical and surgical conditions, which ensured there were children experiencing the phenomenon (communication) being explored.

We chose one children's hospital only because selecting other hospitals might have resulted in institutional differences and potentially have changed the study into a comparison of different cultural settings. A trade-off between breadth and depth was also considered - the more settings we studied, the less time we could spend in each.

In ethnography, participants are purposively or judgementally selected based on their roles, knowledge, insights, and willingness and ability to discuss their experiences (Baillie 1995, Roper and Shapira 2000, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In our study, child participants aged six to 16 years

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with a variety of medical and surgical conditions were purposively selected from children admitted to the ward at the time of data collection. The children who took part tended to be those who spoke more freely and with whom VL had most contact and built stronger rapport.

Defining the specific characteristics of the participants posed some challenges and we had numerous debates about the diversity of sampling taking place. Greater similarity in children's ages and cases would have enhanced consistency and dependability. However, we believed that being too narrow and prescriptive would fail to represent the diversity of patients who were cared for on the ward. So, we deliberately chose a diverse age range and children with various medical and surgical conditions to reflect the holistic category of patients admitted to the ward. We believed this was important to ensure that the participants selected in some way portrayed the natural context of the ward where fieldwork took place.

In total, 49 children participated. The availability and accessibility of parents and children, in addition to admission rates, patient turnover and the timeframe of the fieldwork, determined the sample size.

Conclusion

Through diversification and re-contextualisation across disciplines, ethnographies have shrunk in scale from 'macro' studies covering holistic cultures over long periods to 'micro' or 'mini' studies carried out over weeks or months rather than years. However, despite many variations and interpretations of ethnography, there are trademark features to consider when taking an ethnographic approach, such as naturalism, contextualisation, multi-data sources, a small number of cases emic-etic perspectives and ethical implications.

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