

The language of research (part 6): research methodologies — ethnography

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Culture
- ▶ Emic
- ▶ Group
- ▶ Participant observation
- ▶ Qualitative
- ▶ Social group

Previous papers in this series have explored quantitative methodologies and some of the terminology associated with research. In this paper we will explore ethnography, the first of the qualitative methodologies that this series will decode. We should start by recalling the difference between a methodology and a method. The methodology is the general research approach (the blueprint for the way in which the research is done) and reflects the academic and philosophical underpinnings of the research. The method refers to the specific data collection tool, or tools, used in the research.

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

Ethnography is derived from anthropology; literally the study of humans. The word anthropology is taken from the Greek *anthropos* (human) and *logia* (study). This gives us a clue to the fact that ethnography is about people. The derivation of the word ethnography is also Greek: *ethnos* (people, nation, folk) *grapho* (I write). So ethnography literally means “I write about folk/people/nations”. In this sense we can see that ethnography is about capturing something about what it means to be ‘people’ as opposed to ‘a person’.

Ethnographic research therefore sets out to describe, and apply some form of interpretation to, the composition and behaviours of social groups (people). The purpose of ethnographic research is to discover and understand the social and psychological culture existing within a group of people. Within ethnography, culture is defined as the collective understanding and influences of shared behaviours and understandings and the deeper influences on the meaning the group being studied place on this.

The essence of data collection in ethnography is that the researcher gains an understanding of the world as the members of the group see it. In qualitative research this is called the emic, or insiders’ view (Creswell, 2012). This notion of emic is common to all qualitative methodologies

that explore the world, and its meaning from the point of view of the people being studied and not that of the researcher (Moule, 2015).

Ethnography is a fairly commonly used qualitative research methodology in nursing, health and social care. It has features that make it suitable for researching nursing and healthcare delivery, and healthcare settings in particular. Key among the unique features of ethnography is the fact that it seeks to explore the collective understanding of a group of people; whereas the other methodologies might try to do this, but do so by gathering the together the sum of the experiences/understanding of the people under study.

Another distinguishing feature of ethnography is the fact it takes considerable time to collect the data for the study (Creswell, 2012). While many qualitative research projects can capture data quickly via interviews and focus groups, ethnography requires the researcher to spend a long period with the group being studied in order to gain a good understanding of the culture. For example, if a researcher wanted to understand what a team of lymphoedema nurses feel about treating people with lymphoedema, then s/he could ask them individually. If the researcher wanted to study how lymphoedema nurses interact with patients, s/he could watch them caring for patients. However, in order to get to understand the shared understandings, and culture, of the team the researcher would need to become part of the team for a period of time and both talk to and observe the team at work.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In order to achieve this observation and interaction with the subjects of research, classically the researcher joins the group and becomes a participant observer. Participant observation does exactly what it suggests. The person becomes part of the group, participating in what the group does while at the same time observing what the group does. As s/he is part of

the group, the researcher will both influence how the group interacts and behaves as well as being influenced by the way in which the group itself behaves and interacts. This again is one of the features of qualitative research that is so different to quantitative research; that is, the researcher is him- or herself a tool of data collection, while in quantitative research the researcher stays aloof from the process and applies a degree of objectivity to what s/he does in order to maintain the validity and reliability of the process and eliminate bias (Parahoo, 2006).

It is worth considering what it means to be a participant observer and the impact this has for a group member who is also an ethnographic researcher. The researcher can immerse him- or herself in the group being studied to varying degrees as s/he engages in participant observation. Tedlock (2000) identifies how the ethnographer might consider him- or herself as:

- » 'Going native': becoming part of the group by way of thought and behaviour
- » 'Marginal native': taking on some of the characteristics and sharing some of the beliefs of the group
- » 'Maintaining some distance': demonstrating some characteristics of the rest of the group but maintaining a fair degree of distance and objectivity
- » 'Professional stranger': working with but not really becoming one of the group, maintaining considerable objectivity.

Tedlock's (2000) descriptors of the levels of participant observation researchers employ suggests there is a whole range levels of engagement that constitute ethnographic research. These levels range from total immersion and the potential for a lack of any form of objectivity (but potentially a truer understanding of the culture of the group) as seen in 'going native' right through to the almost totally objective 'professional stranger', who may not be able to understand at the emic level what it means to be a member of the group under study (Ellis, 2013). Whichever way the researcher chooses, or is drawn, to behave will depend on the nature of the research and the group(s) s/he is studying and what it is s/he wants to study and understand about the group(s).

It is common in nursing for the nurse to choose to study a group to which s/he already belongs. Taking the lymphoedema team example, therefore, it would be quite usual for a member


of the lymphoedema team already in post to choose to study the culture of his or her own team. There are some benefits in this sort of approach to study in that the researcher does not have to seek access to the study subjects and s/he understands some of the language of the group and the meaning the group applies to words and phrases. One of the difficulties with ethnography, however, is in maintaining enough objectivity to identify meaning in words and behaviour and not to miss it because it is all just too familiar.

Ethnographers also face the difficulty of always being on duty. They cannot do the day job without applying themselves to data collection. This means other team members might become wary of them and alter their behaviours when the researcher is around. There is always the problem of consent when a study is long term and ongoing, in that consent should be treated as a live process but the ethnographer cannot constantly remind their subjects that s/he is data collecting for fear of altering their behaviours.

Practically data collection in ethnography is everything and anything the ethnographer thinks s/he might collect in order to make sense of the group s/he is studying. This means writing up observations made while with the group (for example when working in the lymphoedema clinic), interviewing members of the group (both formally and informally), taking pictures of items that are of importance to the group and have some meaning for who they are and what they do, etc.

Much of these data have to be collected and reflected on contemporaneously (in real time) otherwise the ethnographer will not be able to keep up with the data collection and will become overwhelmed. This requires the researcher to be both reflective and reflexive; that is s/he needs to try to make sense of what s/he has seen (reflective) and try to understand the impact of his/her presence on the group and culture of the group.

CONCLUSION

This paper has identified some of the key characteristics of ethnographic research. Ethnography seeks to comprehend the culture and shared understanding of a group of people as explored in their natural setting. It has demonstrated that the tools of data collection and the level of immersion in the study will vary widely between researchers, and that the ethnographer needs to be alert to all possibilities throughout the data collection period. 

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