

APPROACHES TO
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:
THEORY & ITS PRACTICAL
APPLICATION
A GUIDE FOR DISSERTATION STUDENTS

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CHAPTER 3

ETHNOGRAPHY: VISIONS & VERSIONS

Marian Crowley-Henry

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography, as with all research approaches, continues to evolve and develop, as new research agendas present themselves and as researchers – faced with limitations of time and access – come to terms with working with whatever tools may be available to them at any given point in time. This chapter presents an overview of traditional and contemporary literature concerning ethnography and participant observation in social research.

Ethnography is concerned with the study of a particular culture and relies, either partially or mainly, on participant observation (where the researcher immerses himself / herself in the customs and lives of the sample population under exploration and notes his / her observations in extensive fieldnotes). Given that all research approaches can be presented from different aspects, it should be noted from the outset that this chapter is written from the perspective of a hermeneutic researcher. Hermeneutics refers to an interpretive methodology, where the researcher commits to interpreting texts taking his / her previous experience and role in the research into consideration, as well as the data collected from observation, interviews, etc. Due to the integral part the hermeneutic researcher plays in his / her research undertaking, the chapter is purposely written in the first person.

Ethnography has evolved as a research approach since the classic ethnography period (as exemplified by ethnographers,¹ such as Margaret Mead's study about adolescents in Samoa (2001 [1928])) to the placement

¹ Note that the terms 'ethnographer' and 'ethnographic researcher' are used interchangeably in this chapter.

of all qualitative research as ethnographic (Mason, 2002). The initial sections of this chapter map out some of the different major ethnographic approaches, as they have evolved over time. Next, the key elements in a research undertaking, which render a particular study 'ethnographic', are shared. The chapter includes concrete examples of an ethnographic study I undertook over a three-year period (2002-2005) in the South of France (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007; 2009) to enable students to grasp the content and approach of a particular recent ethnographic research study in practice. Finally, recommendations for researchers interested in undertaking ethnographic research are shared. Given the variation in the underlying assumptions of the different ethnographic approaches considered in this chapter, it is stressed that ethnographic researchers should be clear as to where their ethnographic affiliations lie and lucidly include their ontological,² epistemological and methodological justification for embarking on their respective ethnographic journey.

Ethnography is a particular research *approach*, as opposed to being a particular method of research. Indeed, an ethnographic study can use several different methods, depending on the aim of the research and the methodological positioning of the researcher with regards to how the relevant research question(s) can be answered. Typical methods include interviews (structured or exploratory), observation (keeping diaries, writing fieldnotes), collecting narratives, undertaking document and / or historical research, participation in the context (and accumulating first-hand, contextual information about the culture or population sample in question). Given the variety of methods and data collection tools open to ethnographers, ethnography can be malleable to suit a particular research agenda, provided it is made clear how the researcher is using the approach in his / her particular research undertaking. The underlying elements of ethnography are the specificity of its study of a particular culture / sub-culture or population, and the use of observation in amassing field and contextual notes pertaining to (and used in the analysis and interpretation of) that culture / sub-culture or population.

Ethnography has its origins in anthropology, with the initial aim being to study exotic and unfamiliar cultures. Ethnographic research 'takes place in the natural setting of the everyday activities of the subjects under investigation' (Gill & Johnson, 1991: 124). 'Inquiry from the inside'

² A description of the terms 'ontology', 'epistemology' and 'methodology', and their inter-linkages, is shared in the endnotes at the end of the chapter.

assumes 'that the researcher can best come to know the reality of an organization by *being there* – by becoming immersed in the stream of events and activities, by becoming part of the phenomena of study' (Evered & Louis, 1991: 11, italics in original). Fetterman (1998: 2) describes the ethnographer as:

... interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider's, perspective. The ethnographer is both storyteller and scientist; the closer the reader of an ethnography comes to understanding the native's point of view, the better the story and the better the science.

The ethnographic approach has evolved to 'encompass such a range of perspectives and activities that the idea of adhering to *an* ethnographical position, as though there were only one, is faintly ridiculous' (Mason, 2002: 55; italics in original). Ethnography, in practice, has evolved from the classic approach, where it was assumed the researcher could retain objectivity when exploring a new culture, to reflexive ethnography, where the role and background of the researcher is included as an integral element of the ethnographic undertaking. The following paragraphs give an overview of differing approaches in ethnography.

ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES

Cultural & Social Anthropology

Ethnography has evolved from the field of anthropology (Junker, 1960). Sanjek (2000) distinguishes between cultural and social anthropology as a potential approach in studying people. He describes the approach and aim of *cultural* anthropology as being to focus on the meaning contained in people's heads, whereas *social* anthropology is characterised by its focus on the meanings constructed from social arrangements and speech in action (Sanjek, 2000: 280; see also Junker, 1960). Participant observation and 'naturally occurring speech in action' (Sanjek, 2000: 281) would fall more under the social anthropology heading than would interviews and instruments seeking to find meaning in people's heads, which would be placed under the cultural anthropology direction of study.

For instance, the ethnographic research I conducted between 2002 and 2005 would fall under cultural anthropology, as the objective of that particular piece of research was interpretive. That is, the focus of that

particular study was to find meaning in the minds of the sample *vis-à-vis* their identity and career construction as 'foreigners' or non-nationals living permanently in the South of France. This was done through in-depth, qualitative, exploratory interviews, supplemented by contemporaneous contextual information gathered by maintaining fieldnotes, while I (the author / researcher), myself, was a member of that community (prior to, during and immediately following the interview process). The interviews and contextual notes were then interpreted by me (hermeneutically), in light of the more complete picture (from the interviewees' narratives and interview data, from the contextual fieldnotes, from my own experiences as a member of the sub-population under investigation), in order to present as comprehensive a text as possible pertaining to the sample in question.

Classic Ethnography

Mead (2001[1928]) and Clifford (1988) are exemplars of the 'classic realist ethnographic text' (Denzin, 1997: xiii). In classic ethnography, the researcher enters a completely foreign culture, far removed from his / her own; remains there for some time, observing the natives³ and taking copious field-notes; then returns to the home country culture where he / she shares the knowledge and observations made during the period of time spent in the exotic location with readers from the same home culture where he / she originates (Van Maanen, 1988). This approach assumes an objectivity, whereby the ethnographer is able to put aside any

³ There is a continuum between participation and observation, depending on the extent of the researcher's involvement in the study. In observation, the researcher remains aloof, and notes traits and characteristics peculiar to a particular sub-culture. In participant observation, the researcher actively engages in the rituals of the culture under investigation. He / she lives in the particular culture for an extended period of time; he / she 'goes native'. The primary advantage of participant observation is in being able to collect a richness and depth of data as regards being part of the culture (as an insider) that would not be possible simply from observation as an outsider. The primary disadvantage is that the culture under investigation may resent the intrusion into their lives. Furthermore, depending on the methodological tendencies of the researcher, participant observation may be seen negatively as clouding objectivity, rendering a more subjective account of the experience in 'going native'. Alternatively, hermeneutic researchers would argue that only in participating and experiencing a culture first-hand is a researcher adequately skilled in meeting the task of reporting about a culture.

preconceived perceptions or unconscious prejudices, in order to relate the facts concerning the new culture in an unbiased way. The classic ethnographer remains an outsider in the study.

Sanjek's (2000) fieldwork dissertation, studying ethnic relations among residents of a city block in Accra, the capital of Ghana, West Africa, is a more contemporary example of ethnography engaged in describing an exotic culture. In his study, Sanjek (2000: 281) conducted detailed interviews with 40 informants, but also 'grounded this network study in neighborhood residence over a year and a half, participant observation in the locations people traveled to throughout the city, and the everyday conversations that found their way into my fieldnotes'.

Urban Ethnography

Notably, from the 1960s, 'urban ethnography' replaced classic ethnography as the trend in ethnographic research, with the Chicago School widely accredited for this evolution. Where classic ethnography was engaged in anthropological fieldwork, researching primitive, exotic, foreign cultures, urban ethnography was concerned with sociological fieldwork, studying sub-populations within a single country's national culture.

The Chicago School encouraged '[s]tudents ... to bring anthropology home by learning of the vigorous, dense, heterogeneous cultures located just beyond the university gates' (Van Maanen, 1988: 18). Whyte's (1993[1943]) *Street Corner Society* is exemplary of urban ethnography. In his study from 1937 to 1940, Whyte lived in a Boston inner city Italian slum, 'Cornerville', and mixed with young urban gang members, being a participant observer and taking fieldnotes of his observations. In urban ethnographic texts, 'deviant subculture' co-existing in the same country, state, or even city, is the unit of research.

The urban ethnographer engages with the sub-culture in much the same way as classic ethnographers. He / she conducts interviews, observes and engages in sub-cultural activities (such as Whyte getting involved in the bowling prize contest in the 'Cornerville' slum) and keeps fieldnotes. However, urban ethnographers consider their subjective involvement as an aid in understanding the objective elements and recordings of the study (objective observations and fieldnotes concerning elements, such as key players, key relationships and key characteristics). Whyte (1993: Appendix A: 279) explains that when:

... the researcher is living for an extended period in the community he is studying, his personal life is inextricably mixed with his research. A real explanation, then, of how the research was done necessarily involves a rather personal account of how the researcher lived during the period of study.

While relationships may build up with members of the sample under scrutiny during the course of the study, the researcher remains an 'outsider', and on leaving the study breaks the ties / links to the sample, reporting about her / his activities, rituals and ways of life in an objective manner.

My own ethnographic study can be categorised as urban ethnography, since it considered a sub-culture: the non-French, Western / First World foreign residents who had decided to live in the South of France on a potentially permanent basis and to follow their careers as French residents. For my study, I focused on a geographical case study, Sophia Antipolis, in the South of France, where I myself was a member of the community I was exploring (an active participant). All my observations and interviews took place in this location. Moving from classic to urban ethnography, the role of the researcher in the study becomes more integral. The next section considers the movement toward an even more subjective / reflexive role of the ethnographer in ethnography.

Critical & Reflexive Ethnography

In traditional classic ethnographic texts, it is assumed and accepted that the researcher is able to provide an unbiased 'indepth, holistic analysis of structure and processes of culture' (McQueen & Knussen, 2002: 22). Malinowski (1961[1922]) describes the ethnographer's job as to '[f]ind out the typical ways of thinking and feeling, corresponding to the institutions and culture of a given community and [to] formulate the results in the most convincing way' (1961[1922]: 3; also quoted in Van Maanen, 1995: 6; Denzin, 1997: xv-xvi). This thinking shows the realist nature of classic ethnography, where the background, experience and motivations of the ethnographer are ignored as irrelevant, or are considered not to influence or colour the resulting ethnographic reports and texts.

However, the supposed objectivity that is synonymous with classic ethnographic texts has come under fire. Denzin (1997: xiii) propounds that 'it is no longer possible to take for granted what is meant by ethnography. The classic realist ethnographic text is now under attack'. Classic

ethnography's focus on the scientific⁴ approach, with the researcher's supposed impartiality or objectivity, has met with critique from social science researchers, who argue that the social world consists of multiple realities, rather than one single objective one. Thus, it is posited that a major limitation of traditional ethnography approaches was the failure to include detailed information regarding the researcher / ethnographer in question and his / her journey in understanding through the course of the study and participant observation. The extent any research can be impartial has been questioned, for the researcher makes personal decisions and choices on sampling, method of data collection and analysis, and core theories to highlight in any given research undertaking.

Ethnography is a study of culture and of people's lived experiences in that respective culture. The ethnographer normally comes from a culture other than that which he / she is researching. It is the ethnographer's oft unconscious, but, nevertheless, pre-conceived beliefs, based on his / her past experiences, that shape the direction of the research. Thus, the possibility of any ethnographer being able to give one 'true', objective picture of an exotic or under-examined sub-culture's lived reality is hotly contested among present day academics (Denzin, 1997; Sanjek, 2000).

Contemporary discussions on ethnography consider the researcher's role as an integral part of the research process and should be contemplated upon in depth as part of the research study. As Barth (1975: 226; quoted in Sanjek, 2000: 282) declares: 'My strong suspicion is that the bodies of native explanation that we find in anthropological literature are often created as an artefact of the anthropologist's activity'. Thus, in keeping with Whyte's (1993: 249) earlier quote, it is imperative that the researcher's role and background are included, in order to present a more complete picture of the research methodology and motivations of the study. The moving perspectives that the ethnographer encounters on his / her journey during the ethnographic study should be recorded and included as integral

⁴ To differentiate between scientific and scientific: A scientific approach prioritises method over discovery. The assumption is that only science can render absolute truth; that the only way to investigate the world is through the established methods and procedures of science (such as Mathematics or Physics), thereby ignoring more philosophically qualitative approaches. The scientific method, on the other hand, is but one method that can be used in (social) research. It does not claim to be the only true, valid method. Scientific methods are, however, based on rigor and relative detachment from the object under investigation.

components (along with fieldnotes and interview transcripts) in analysing and interpreting the ethnographic texts. The researcher's contemplations of his / her role and part in the study is considered and reflected upon, highlighting the reflexivity of the approach. This reflexive component of contemporary ethnography can be classified under critical or reflexive ethnography. In comparison with classic ethnography, in critical ethnography the role of the researcher in the process of inquiry and the other structural and contextual factors (such as the political and economic situation, temporal relativity, emphasising the specific period of time in which the study is conducted) are considered just as relevant as the actual ethnographic fieldwork and observation of the sample / culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Denzin, 1997; Sanjek, 2000). The inclusion of reflexive reporting in ethnographic texts can allow a more transparent view of the culture under investigation to emerge because the role of the researcher as participant is addressed as an integral component of the study, and is, thereby, problematised and not ignored.

In reflexive ethnography, the ontological and epistemological⁵ position of the ethnographer is integral to the research. It is necessary, therefore, to gain a deeper insight about the writer / ethnographer / researcher in order to be able to view and understand a more comprehensive picture of the ethnographic texts / study. The role of the researcher in qualitative research has been stressed by Lincoln & Denzin (1994). The self-contemplative and reflexive nature of qualitative research is both espoused and stressed in interpretive ethnography. This imbedded reflexivity in ethnographic research is aptly summarised by Emerson *et al.* (1995: 3):

No field researcher can be a completely neutral, detached observer, outside and independent of the observed phenomena (Pollner & Emerson, 1988). Rather, as the ethnographer engages in the lives and concerns of those studied, his perspective 'is intertwined with the phenomenon which does not have objective characteristics independent of the observer's perspective and method' (Mishler 1979: 10). The ethnographer cannot take in everything; rather, he will, in conjunction with those in the setting, develop certain perspectives by engaging in some activities and relationships rather than others. ... the task of the ethnographer is not to determine the 'truth' but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives.

⁵ Refer to the endnotes at the end of the chapter for a glossary explaining terms such as 'ontology' and 'epistemology'.

Critical and reflexive ethnography suitably describe my ethnographic study. Given that I was a member of the population under investigation (that is, I was a non-national, from a Western / First World country, residing in the South of France on a potentially permanent basis and maintaining a professional career), my identification with the sample could not go unmentioned. While critics would argue such involvement detracts from the objectivity of a study, I counter-argue that it was my insider status that enabled my access to the respondents and their willingness to open up and share intimate life events with me. For instance, members of my sample recounted specific, difficult life circumstances, such as redundancies, miscarriages, deaths in the family, which affected their acculturation to France and their identity reconstruction as 'locally-residing foreigners'. My study includes a full chapter detailing my role in the research, outlining my position from the onset, during and after the interviewing and participant observation process, when I was more removed from the culture. I would contest that such depth of reflexive writing serves to provide a full, rich account of the sub-culture, from my perspective and the interviewees' perspectives, as well as from contemporaneous contextual fieldnotes pertinent to the time. For instance, during part of my fieldwork, there were national elections in France, where the results for the area in question showed a strong far-right-wing (nationalist) affinity to Jean-Marie Le Pen. The anti-foreigner feeling that my sample perceived from the results was tangible in their narratives. They told me how 'funny' they felt that their French neighbours or colleagues could be so anti-foreigner with regards to African or non-Western immigrants (many stemming from previous French colonies), while claiming to be in favour of Western immigrants, such as my sample. This classification of immigrants, based on their countries of origin, was discriminatory and left my sample ill-at-ease. Nonetheless, they were committed to remaining foreign residents, due to the lifestyle offered in the area (weather, environment (Alps for skiing, Mediterranean for beaches), French social policies concerning 35-hour week, childcare, etc.) and the fact that they had not directly experienced adverse discrimination.

Conclusions to Ethnographic Approaches

The ethnographic positions presented in the preceding paragraphs explain and promote the rise in critical ethnographic approaches in qualitative research. Critical ethnography is case- and researcher- specific. However, discussion persists on how different approaches to ethnography can

forward social research, taking those elements from the varying ethnographic approaches in order to best suit the particular research sample and / or agenda. This flexibility is encouraging, but also confusing for students considering ethnography as a potential research approach; it necessitates a deep, considered reflexivity on behalf of the researcher / ethnographer in order to justify her / his own individual ethnographic approach and position.

Students do not need to undertake a longitudinal study if they want to adopt an ethnographic approach. An ethnographic approach can consist of shorter periods of participant observation in a particular sub-cultural context. For instance, if exploring the motivations of employees in a particular firm, the student (if he / she has been granted access to that firm) could visit that firm on a number of occasions, going to meetings and / or lunch with employees in order to build up observations concerning what it is like to be an employee in that firm. The important aspect is that the researcher engages with the sample under investigation and notes his / her observations as meetings with the sample progress. The next section gives some practical guidelines on what ethnographic research involves.

POSITIONING RESEARCH AS ETHNOGRAPHIC

This section describes the features common across ethnographic approaches. It is noteworthy that, in contemporary qualitative research, approaches may be widely described as ethnographic (Mason, 2002). However, I argue that, in order to position a research undertaking as ethnographic, the researcher needs to understand the alternative ethnographic approaches and the implications of following a particular direction over another.

Hammersley (1992) highlights the general features of the ethnographic research approach as follows:

- ◆ People's behaviour is studied in their normal environment, not under experimental conditions.
- ◆ Data is collected from different sources, with observation and relatively informal conversations the primary ones.
- ◆ The focus is generally a single setting or group.
- ◆ The analysis involves interpretation of meaning.

These features are echoed by Denzin & Lincoln (1998a: xvi), who note that ethnographic 'methods are characterized by the collection of relatively unstructured empirical materials, a small number of cases, and a writing and style of analysis that are primarily interpretive, involving descriptions of phenomena'. Ethnography is primarily about **describing** cultures.

In my own ethnographic study, I went further than simply describing the sample under investigation which I term 'bounded transnationals' (Crowley-Henry, 2008), and comparing them to other international assignee categories. I also used and interpreted the data collected to inductively build-up models and frameworks concerning the identification (evolving identity construction as members of a non-national community) of the sample. I went into the field wanting to research the particular group of self-initiated international assignees that remains in the host country environment for a potentially permanent duration (that is, the bounded transnational community). I did not have any pre-defined theories or concepts to test or prove on going into the field. I simply wanted to collect the experiences and stories from the interviewees regarding their lives in the area, and how they feel their lives (and careers) had progressed since they moved to the area. It was only after extensive examination of the narratives and uncovering patterns in the interviews that I began to pull together elements that built up, from my research, a framework of the bounded transnational's career influences. Then, when looking more at career literature and international human resource management literature, I was able to categorise some of the concepts that emerged from my findings with labels that other researchers had coined to explain similar phenomena. The inductive nature of my study, which was admittedly more longitudinal than many, specifically undergraduate, research dissertations are practically able to be, is specific to my particular research journey.

The aim of the ethnographer is paramount in determining the direction the ethnographic study is going to take – purely descriptive or also seeking to offer explanation for why a particular culture is how it is. It is important, and may be a requirement, for some dissertation students that they at least attempt to explain and / or develop the research question or phenomenon under exploration during the analysis and interpretation of the findings stage of their research.

In describing ethnography, Hammersley & Atkinson (1995: 1-2, emphasis added):

... see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or set of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. Equally though, ... there is a sense in which all social researchers are participant observers and, as a result, the boundaries around ethnography are necessarily unclear.

It is this blurring of boundaries between ethnography and qualitative research that presents confusion and requires researcher contemplation when classifying a particular piece of research as ethnographic. The following paragraphs consider key features apparent in ethnographic approaches in more detail.

Context

The relevance of context is paramount across ethnographic research positions (Denzin, 1997; Sanjek, 2000). Denzin (1997: xiii, emphasis added) notes the importance of the actual context from undertaking the fieldwork to the final ethnographic text produced:

Ethnographic texts are the primary texts given for the interpretive, ethnographic project. These texts are always dialogical – the site at which the voices of the other, alongside the voices of the author, come alive and interact with one another. Thus, the voices that are seen and heard (if only imaginatively) in the text are themselves textural, performative accomplishments. *These accomplishments have a prior life in the context of where they were produced.* Texts... are easily reproduced; contexts are not.

Including the social context provides a more rounded description of the culture under scrutiny. Omitting this information reduces the relevance of the findings, as they must be considered in light of the temporal context in which they occurred.

In my ethnographic study, I collated contemporaneous contextual fieldnotes (concerning policies, economic and political circumstances at the point of time I was conducting the fieldwork). I included those fieldnotes in presenting a description of the sample in question, concerning their motivations to remain resident in the South of France, as well as their hesitation in moving to another location or returning to their home countries. The next paragraph is an example of a fieldnote I made during the study:

The legal working hours in France were 35 hours a week for all companies. Any overtime in excess of these 35 hours must be compensated by time off in lieu (so called RTT days). In addition employees are entitled to a minimum 25 days annual leave. With the RTT days on top of annual vacation, total annual leave of over 50 days is not uncommon. This is a major incentive for the sample in their desire to remain in France, where they can avail of such policies.

By including fieldnotes, such as the above, the reader is made aware of the temporal and social context during which the study was conducted, which, for my specific research, impacts upon the desire of the sample to remain resident in the South of France. Were such fieldnotes not included, a comprehensive picture of the sample's motivations to remain in France would not have emerged.

A further fieldnote entry concerns the Sophia Professional Women's Network (SPWN):

The Sophia Professional Women's Network is a branch of the International Professional Women's Network, a network promoting women professionals. [Catherine⁶] co-founded the group in Sophia Antipolis with [Mary]. She uses her own time to organise the events, and is not paid for the post. She attends international conferences on women's issues, again at her own expense. It is her hobby as such, as well as a means of integrating with other non-French professional women in the area.

The following paragraphs present some of my observational fieldnote entries. These fieldnotes are specific observations noted in parallel with the interview process, which, together with the narratives, enabled me to interpret the transcripts from different perspectives.

Both [Shaun] and [Gordon] speak about how they feel like foreigners in the general day-to-day, going about your business, part of life – whether it be comments about their French accent or level, or just nuances regarding their foreign status – they perceive themselves as different and as being seen in some ways negatively by members of the French public.

Similar to [Sarah], [Alice] did not want to get into the International Women's group. She did not feel comfortable there – drinking coffee, etc. She was a professional woman who had put her career on hold for

⁶ Catherine and Mary are pseudonyms for two members in my research sample. Note that all interviewee names used for example purposes are pseudonyms.

child-rearing and until she found a suitable position. She did not fit the profile of women in that particular group / club.

Tendency among all interviewees who had previously worked in London, that they described and did not appreciate the commuter-centric environment, where the objective, overtly-conspicuous career was the number 1 priority, with people judged by others according to the objective career (salary and status) that they have.

[Tracy] had au pairs, [Kate] has a local child-minder / cleaner – someone to trust with the children, to fill in the ‘parental space’, while they concentrate on their careers and giving all to their careers. The support systems that they organised themselves enabled their objective career focus.

Some observation notes from my meeting with [Tracy]:

She used to work for [Clare] and there were some issues when she wanted to be promoted to senior manager to run the European Business Centre in the organisation. But they appear to be on friendly terms again now. She [Tracy] had tears in her eyes on the occasions I brought up about her not feeling happy in her job or not feeling valued. I got a sense of isolation from her. Perhaps on recounting her personal story, from becoming a young widow with young children, to the lack of support from her in-laws, to moving from the USA to France with her children, it hit a nerve with regards to how she had to do it alone. She is very career-driven. I get the feeling that she puts her career first, children first, and maybe herself always down the line... She is happy with her life – lovely, happy children, great job / career, nice house, nice friends in a nice environment ... Just I feel that, maybe on deeper level, there is still some sadness. As I expect there always will be, having lost her husband so young and really having coped alone with the children, without close family support nearby.

As can be seen from the above exemplars, some observations can be short one-liners regarding commonalities perceived from different interviews. Others then, as the final extract, can be much longer and work together with the particular interviewee’s narrative in building up a more accurate description of someone’s experiences and choices, albeit as perceived and interpreted by the researcher.

Using the information gathered through participant observation and fieldnotes (such as exemplified above) when analysing and interpreting the sample’s identification enabled me to develop a more comprehensive systems framework, which included a number of elements with regards to identity construction. Undertaking participant observation is only useful if

the information garnered during the process is included in analysing the data and in interpreting the information in order to present the findings.

Fieldwork / Participant Observation

Fieldwork refers:

... to observation of people *in situ*; finding them where they are, staying with them in some role which, while acceptable to them, will allow both intimate observation of certain parts of their behavior, and reporting it in ways useful to social science but not harmful to those observed. (Hughes, 1960: iii).

Fieldwork is often interchanged with participant observation. Participant observation has been described as when the 'ethnographer participates in the daily routines of this setting, develops ongoing relations with the people in it, and observes all the while what is going on' (Emerson *et al.*, 1995: 1). McQueen & Knussen (2002: 23) refer to it as 'observation of a group or society of which the observer has become a part'. Participant observation is a key element of ethnographic research (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). With participant observation, the researcher is committed 'to intimate, repeated, and prolonged involvement in the life and community of the respondent' (McCracken, 1988: 7). The researcher is a participant in, and accepted as part of, the culture that is under observation (Trochim, 2000). Hughes (1960: ix) compares the ethnologist and the sociologist, where the 'ethnologist was always an exotic to the people he studied' and the 'sociologist observed and reported upon a segment of his own world'. The sociologist was 'reporting observations made, not as a complete stranger, but in some measure as a member of an in-group' (Hughes, 1960: ix). With participant observation:

... [t]he ethnographer discovers the multiple 'truths' that operate in the social world – the stories people tell one another about the things that matter to them ... These stories move people to action, and they rest on a distinction between fact and truth. Truth and facts are socially constructed, and people build stories around the meanings of truth. (Denzin, 1997: xv).

In practice, there are wide variations between the degree of participation and fieldwork with which contemporary ethnographers engage in a particular research undertaking. Turnbull (1999) calls her study of middle managers' responses to a change programme in a large engineering

company ethnographic. She visited the organisation in question on a number of occasions, conducting interviews and observing meetings, but her involvement with the participants was never that of an insider. Nonetheless, her study fits the four criteria given by Hammersley (1992, noted above) in determining a research study as ethnographic. Turnbull's (1992) approach is one that students conducting even minor dissertations can adopt. On the other hand, I was an insider during the course of my data collection; I was a member of the international community I was investigating. As such, participant observation was an integral component of my study. It was, perhaps, leaving the area and no longer being a member of the international community that enabled my further reflection on the interviews that had been conducted and the fieldnotes that had been gathered, and that further served in my reflexivity concerning the study. Previous perceptions I had had when a member of the community could then be seen more from the standpoint of a more neutral observer. It is this depth and reflexivity that has added much value to my particular ethnographic study, serving to un-bias it as much as possible, in offering different perspectives to the reader of my ethnographic texts.

The next section considers immersion in ethnography in more detail. In general, anthropological studies (ethnography) tend to have a longer duration in the field (up to several years) than their sociological counterparts, which may last less than a couple of weeks. The variation in fieldwork and immersion (see next section) renders a detailed description of the study's duration as vital information for the readers of ethnographic texts, in order that those readers fully understand the degree of immersion and fieldwork that was involved.

Immersion

The degree of immersion in the study is a further element of fieldwork / participant observation. Goffman (1989: 125, as quoted in Emerson *et al.*, 1995: 2) describes ethnography as:

... subjecting yourself, your own body and your personality, and your own social situation to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation.

Such 'immersion' allows the ethnographer to experience, first-hand, the everyday tasks and routines of the sample or culture in question. In reality, however, the extent to which an ethnographic researcher can immerse

himself / herself in the research setting and with the research sample varies (see section 1.3 (ii)). Access into the respective 'social', 'work' or 'ethnic' situation may be restricted, limiting the researcher's immersion in the context. However, the research may still present important findings and be termed ethnographic due to the depth of information uncovered in the process.

Insider – Outsider

In ethnography:

... [e]ven with intensive resocialization, the ethnographer never becomes a member in the same sense that those 'naturally' in the setting are members. The fieldworker plans on leaving the setting after a relatively brief stay, and his experience of local life is colored by this transience. ... In these ways, research and writing commitments qualify ethnographic immersion, making the fieldworker at least something of an outsider and, at an extreme, a cultural alien. (Emerson *et al.*, 1995: 4).

There is a fine line between the ethnographer as insider and as outsider. As an outsider, it would suggest that the ethnographer would not be privy to the same level of understanding as the true insider. However, in line with classic ethnography, the suggestion persists from some authors that the ethnographer maintains a different position to the sample of the population under examination. I argue that, in reflexive ethnography, the insider position of the ethnographer is paramount in finding out as much as possible about the sample in question. However, this is only valuable research as long as the researcher details in full his / her background, thoughts and role in the process.

MY ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY: ACADEMIC DISCUSSION ON AN EMPIRICAL UNDERTAKING

The discussion, as presented in the preceding paragraphs, on the evolving nature of ethnographic approaches is ongoing. This chapter, so far, has shown how the approach has developed from cultural anthropology to social research, where the researcher has unquestionably become a vital piece of the jigsaw in building up a representative picture of a particular culture or sub-culture. It has also presented the common elements in

ethnographic research. This section provides more information on the ethnographic study I conducted, in order to provide concrete examples of what can be found out by using an ethnographic approach.

My research took place in France. In line with urban ethnography, the population sub-sample under investigation was a distinct grouping of international assignees, who relocated to the country for a potentially permanent duration. The research in question was a qualitative undertaking, an attempt to learn about the identity and career construction of a sample of foreign assignees, something that has not been studied in the literature. They have moved to a 'foreign' country for different reasons, but have chosen to remain in that host country for lifestyle, rather than career or economic, reasons. They are not economic migrants, would not term themselves 'emigrants', nor are they expatriates in the widely-accepted description of expatriates (as individuals sent *by their organisation* on an international assignment of a *temporary* duration). In the study in question, they were termed 'bounded transnationals' (Crowley-Henry, 2008).

The empirical research took place over a three-year period. I lived in that international community prior to (since September 2000), during (mid-2002 to early 2005) and immediately after (to mid-2005) the collection of qualitative data, namely through conducting exploratory, semi-structured interviews with individuals within that sample. To that extent, I was already an 'insider' of the international community before conducting the interviews and actively taking fieldnotes. For the period of time from 2000 to mid-2002, I was a participant observer, but it was only on commencement of the research project that formal research observations and fieldnotes were made. While my closeness to the community could be perceived as a bias or limitation to the research, the reflexivity of the study, including the observations on my removal from the community, present an in-depth account of life as a bounded transnational. Being part of the community enabled access to the sample and allowed me to amass a wealth of contextual information concerning the political, social and cultural conditions prevalent at the particular point in time the research took place. This contextual information positions the research in a particular context, which is impossible to replicate exactly. Fetterman (1998: 2) praises the process of contextualisation as a means of reducing researcher bias.

In my research study, I adhered to Emerson *et al.*'s (1995) description of ethnography as 'immersion' in the research subject. I was an active member of the international community in question. However, the depth

of involvement in the everyday lives of the members of the sample I interviewed was neither an aim of the research nor a practical undertaking. Thus, there are limits to the degree of 'immersion' in the study. The research undertaking's methods of data collection were in-depth interviews, insider participant observation and contextual data. While I joined the community in question in the year 2000, the formal study commenced in 2002 and lasted for three years (2005), when I left the area. On interviewing respondents (commencement in July 2002), I supplemented their transcripts with any other contextual or observational data pertinent to the time of the interview. In addition, I kept a private journal, documenting my own perceptions as the study progressed. I used the interview transcripts as the core data, while the contextual fieldnotes were used in order to support argument development and model building, given the specificity of the case. Being an insider was an advantage, not a limitation of the study. It facilitated placing the narrative texts in a particular social and temporal context, along with being able to analyse and interpret the material from particular perspectives.

For instance, my discussions with females in the sample showed how perceptions varied regarding gender discrimination in their respective organisations. One particular female respondent felt that the glass ceiling was most prevalent in French culture, despite working for a multinational organisation. She expressed her anguish at not having been promoted in recent years, despite receiving exceedingly good performance reviews. However, another woman (working for the same organisation) reported that she was promoted immediately on returning to work after maternity leave (several years previously). Knowing the employment context at the time (recessionary), I was able to interpret both narratives (both true) accordingly. I wrote up the female's perception of gender discrimination, but was able to include background to this (such as: her manager was French (or not); the nationality / culture of the female in question; the labour climate at the time), thus providing as holistic a picture of the situation as possible to allow the reader to make up his / her own mind regarding the issue.

The next paragraph gives an extract from an interview transcript collected during my study, whereby another female respondent shares her experiences with gender discrimination in a professional capacity in France:

Marian: Have you had any experience in France about trying to get in anywhere without having a Grande École⁷ background, or have you come up against that at all?

Respondent A: No, No. I've come up against other people telling me that it's existent.

Marian: But you haven't seen it yourself?

Respondent A: No. I haven't seen it. It doesn't exist in ... It didn't exist in, you know, the two organisations I know most closely here are [Organisation 1⁸] and [Organisation 2], and it doesn't exist in either of those. It may a little bit in the Paris office, probably does, but internationally not, where if you come from somewhere else you're forgiven for not having it [a Grande École education]. But I have heard ... I know of a couple of people who left and I'll cite the name [Organisation 3] for example, because they came to the point when they realised that not having Grande École, the next level they just would not get to and they left and joined other organisations because of that. So, it's anecdotal, but I haven't personally ever experienced it. But I think that's partly the point of it [being] cultural and a question of [me] not willing to join a French organisation.

The transcript shared above shows how contextually relevant the issue of potential gender discrimination in the workplace is. While Respondent A has never personally experienced discrimination, she has heard about it from others and notes that some organisations may be less tolerant of it than others. She, interestingly, names the same firm as the respondent who had claimed she was suffering from gender discrimination in her firm. Using the information from the interview transcript (above) and from other interviews, together with participant observation and fieldnotes on the importance and relevance of social status in France (such as the Grande École education), enabled me to build up and develop areas, such as identity and discrimination, into more complex systems than just a personal response from one respondent. Being part of the community facilitated access, understanding and interpretation of the interviews.

Being an insider also meant depth of self-analysis and reflexivity were prerequisite components of the final research piece. By virtue of membership status, I was a participant observer. However, for the purpose

⁷ In France, many influential political and business people have come through the traditional educational system of Grandes Écoles, which are private third level institutions ranked according to their profile and prestige.

⁸ The names of the organisations she mentioned have been removed for anonymity and confidentiality reasons.

of the data collection for the research undertaking, I followed Whyte's (1993: 305) example, in that 'I tried to avoid influencing the group, because I wanted to study the situation as unaffected by my presence as possible'. This stance toward interviewing is common in qualitative research undertakings, where the researcher attempts to reduce the degree of interviewer bias as much as possible. Thus, the interviews collected were recorded and transcribed in full, without prejudice. In interpretation, the different perspectives (mine, interviewees', taking the contextual circumstances into account) work together in triangulating the findings so that a more comprehensive account is presented.

Fetterman (1998: 9) argues that '[i]n many applied settings, long-term continuous fieldwork is neither possible nor desirable'. He compares an ethnographic study he undertook himself, where:

... I visited sites for two-week periods every few months during a three-year study. This approach allowed me to conduct intensive fieldwork, pull back and make sense of what I had observed and recorded, and then return to the field to test my hypotheses. The effort was successful because I was able to see patterns of behavior over time. In many applied contexts, limited resources compel the researcher to apply ethnographic techniques in a contract deadline time-frame rather than to conduct a full-blown ethnography.

His study is similar to many management research undertakings, where researchers can access a company for intensive, albeit brief, periods of time, using the breaks between the fieldwork to consider, reflexively, what was learnt on each occasion. Such breaks allow the researcher the opportunity to reflect upon the study's progress and enable him / her to test consistency and validity of the outcomes and of her perspective in each subsequent period in the field. This emphasises that individual specificity of the case under exploration is essential in determining what methods and approaches best suit that particular case or research study. For student mini dissertations, a scaled-down ethnographic study could be most appropriate, whereby the student visits a particular site or community for short periods of time, takes fieldnotes of his / her observations while at that site or community and supplements them with interview and other contextual information in analysing and interpreting how that particular group works.

Given the perspectives outlined in this chapter, my study can be classified as a cultural anthropological study. It would fit into the

sociological school of ethnography – urban ethnography (studying a sub-group within a national cultural setting), and reflexive ethnography (where the role of the researcher in the interpretation of the material collected is paramount). While I provide a detailed personal account concerning my involvement in the study as an integral component of the research methodology, the research is not auto-ethnographic (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Russell, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), as my own experiences are not related in the findings or analysis. Rather, the insider contextual knowledge serves to add context to the interview data, with an acknowledgement that my own experiences and background shaped the direction of the study.

To conclude this section, I would like to express why one should engage in ethnographic research: what can ethnography allow you to find out, as a researcher? As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the research approach undertaken depends on what the researcher wants to find out. From my own personal experience, taking an ethnographic approach facilitated my development of the bounded transnational population as a sub-category of international assignees that had not received academic attention in the past. In using the interview transcripts, fieldnotes and observations, I was able to build up a comprehensive picture of what / who is a bounded transnational, of the bounded transnational sub-culture. This is in line with the aim of classic through urban ethnography.

One of my primary findings was a categorisation of international assignees, including the bounded transnational, which academics and researchers can use to differentiate the previously heterogeneous label of 'international assignee'. A further finding is an empirically-developed career framework of the bounded transnational sample, which includes objective and subjective career elements, as well as contingency influences (temporal, structural, economical, familial, and serendipitous). From that framework, I was able to develop the protean career concept (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007, 2009) to encompass identification (Bauman, 2001) and career construction influences in a globalisation context. The reflexive and holistic nature of ethnographic research enabled that theory development.

Discussing the Extremes of Ethnographic Research

With ethnographic studies embracing from an objective, classic to an interpretivist, reflexive approach, it would seem that adopting a standard ethnographic research position is difficult. In essence, the individuality of the ethnographic texts is what makes ethnography so interesting. In

reading about other cultural groupings, one is compelled to consider the findings presented in the texts, the position of the researcher / ethnographer, and to reflect upon the study from one's own perspective. Whyte (1993: 289) stresses the uniqueness of the ethnographic approach:

I am not suggesting that my approach to Street Corner Society should be followed by other researchers. To some extent my approach must be unique to myself, to the particular situation, and to the state of knowledge existing when I began research.

All ethnographic research uses participant observation (and fieldnotes) as a means of data collection. This can be supplemented with interview data and through document sources in order to build up a detailed picture of a particular culture or sub-culture in society (Atkinson *et al.*, 2001; Mason, 2002). This illustrates the multi-method possibilities that ethnography offers.

LIMITATIONS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Critics of ethnography argue that, because it usually involves a relatively small sample size, the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population (Gill & Johnson, 1991). In response to such critics, this limitation is shared by all qualitative research, with qualitative researchers reasoning that the depth and richness of qualitative findings outweigh the constraints of trying to generalise across time and context, which, in any case, qualitative researchers would argue is not reliable, given the proposition that all research (quantitative or qualitative) is context-, researcher-, and temporally-specific.

Sanjek (2000) considers the challenges that face modern ethnographers working in urban sites, notably dealing with vast numbers of people, vast sites of participant observation. He recommends taking a holistic approach when exploring a particular sub-culture and including contextual and temporal details (political, economical, and historical), which make the particular piece of ethnographic research specific. However, Sanjek (2000) warns that, if ethnographers try to include too much information, (that is, do participant observation, get historical / political / social / cultural knowledge and comparative theories), it may be to the detriment of participant observation: 'This could lead to ethnographies that were more frame than picture – a result that might be characterized as "thin

description”, or “history without people” (Sanjek, 2000: 282). A compromise is required in order to ensure adequate description and information frame the picture of the actual people being investigated.

Bias is a limitation of all research. Emerson *et al.* (1995: 3) do not believe that ‘consequential presence’ is a negative bias, but, rather, the ‘very source of that learning and observation’. A further response to the bias limitation is reflexive ethnography, whereby the ethnographer presents as complete a picture from his / her angle as he / she does of the sub-population or culture under investigation. The section above that outlined my personal ethnographic study emphasised the necessity in documenting the researcher’s perceptions during the course of the fieldwork in order to limit researcher bias.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents my perspectives concerning the ethnographic approach in social science research undertakings. It does not claim to be the definitive perspective in this evolving area. The early sections of the chapter presented an overview of differing concepts in ethnography, from the classic to the reflexive approach. As a qualitative researcher, I admit a bias toward the reflexive ethnographic approach, which I show in my own research. The positioning of a research undertaking, which I undertook as ethnographic, is discussed in depth in the latter part of the chapter, along with suggestions for students who would like to undertake an ethnographic study. Taking the loose description of ethnography (for instance, Hammersley, 1992), there is no question that much qualitative research can be termed ethnographic. However, I would consider such grouping of research under the ethnographic heading as misleading. Researchers should carefully consider how their study fits into ethnographic approaches before committing their respective research to that domain. For the study outlined in this chapter, elements of urban and reflexive ethnography are identified, reified by my involvement with the context and sample over the period of the study.

ENDNOTES

- ◆ **Ontology:** In philosophy, ontology refers to how a researcher considers the nature of reality and truth. Some may believe that reality and truth are external and exist, regardless of human interaction, while others may

believe that reality and truth are socially-constructed, leading to each individual having a different interpretation of reality and truth. Along this dichotomy, there is a continuum depending on the particular ontological framework of a particular researcher.

- ◆ **Epistemology:** In philosophy, epistemology refers to how a researcher considers knowledge, or how a researcher can know 'reality' or 'truth'. For some researchers, the only way to 'know' may be in following scientific research approaches. For others, it may be through transactions, such as language and semiotics. As with ontology, there is an epistemological continuum along which researchers position themselves.
- ◆ **Methodology:** The connection between ontology, epistemology and methodology should be explained in a research undertaking. Based on the researcher's particular ontology and epistemology, he / she will be guided to follow a methodology that he / she believes best informs knowledge (epistemology) in order to make sense of reality (ontology). Some researchers may conduct scientific research, believing in the ability to objectify truth; others may conduct interpretive research, focusing on individual cases in order to explain phenomena.
- ◆ **Positivism:** This refers to a philosophy espousing that knowledge is objective, generalisable and quantifiable, and that such knowledge is best investigated through observation and measurement (as in scientific experiments).
- ◆ **Hermeneutics:** This refers to an interpretive methodology where the researcher commits to interpreting texts, taking his / her previous experience and role in the research into consideration, as well as the data collected from observation, interviews, etc.
- ◆ **Naturalism** refers to the belief that reality can be investigated through scientific methods.

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