

## ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: A COMPREHENSIVE METHODOLOGICAL REVIEW

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### Abstract

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that involves studying people in their natural environments to understand cultural occurrences, behaviors, and social interactions. The study of ethnography involves recognizing and describing the culture of a group or individual.

**Objectives:** The main objective of this methodology paper is to illustrate and clarify the ethnographic research process. The definitions of methodology, key elements, stages of the research process, including planning, gathering data, recording, and analyzing, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of conducting ethnographic research, were described.

**Methods:** The database library was used to search the pertinent literature, and searches were conducted using PubMed, Google Scholar, PakMediNet, and keywords such as ethnography, qualitative inquiry, features of ethnography, steps of ethnography, and types of ethnographic data collection.

**Results:** Ethnography can provide insights into the comprehensive analysis of experiences, values, and beliefs about culture.

**Conclusion:** The methods for data gathering and the framework for data analysis are explained through the use of ethnographic methods. This study assessed methodological issues related to employing an ethnographic approach in a research study.

### INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is defined as "the first-hand experience and exploration of a specific social or cultural setting based on participant observation. The defining component of the ethnographic approach remains observation and participation (depending on the circumstances and analytic objective). Ethnography focuses on fieldwork and may employ data collection techniques such as observation, focus groups, and interviews, either in combination or alone, to investigate, explain,

and/or characterize a situation, community, environment, or culture. Ethnography has been utilized in nursing research for many years and is considered a valid method for investigating patients' perspectives and experiences, healthcare systems, policy, and nursing as a profession<sup>1</sup>. A longer stay with the group being studied is required of the ethnographer. To comprehend the people in the study, that entails living together, working together, praying together, and enjoying

free time together. Ethnography has a few unique qualities. Firstly, it is carried out in real-world environments. In addition, it is individualized because the researcher is both a participant and an observer in the lives of the study's subjects. Thirdly, it enables data triangulation over a prolonged period using a variety of methods, including an inductive approach and a long-term commitment from the researcher. Finally, ethnography can be described as dialogical since the subjects of the study can provide input on interpretations and conclusions drawn from it <sup>2</sup>.

### Origin and historical perspective

Ethnography was based on the traders and missionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who travelled for religious propagation, trade, or colonization. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ethnographers started visiting the lands and conducting ethnographic research. The ethnographers of the Chicago School started ethnographic research of urban industrial society (e.g., drug dealers, street gangs, and prostitutes) in the United States. The ethnographic research style was also heavily influenced by different paradigms in vogue at the time, such as semiotic, behaviouristic, and holistic. Six Cultures research employs a behavioristic style that is more deductive than inductive, and it investigates the ethnographer's claims. Postmodern and poststructural concerns emerged in the mid-1980s, challenging the colonial movement's assumptions <sup>3</sup>.

### Ethnographic approaches

**I. Concurrent ethnography** involves observing a technological system, or "rapid prototype," alongside its anthropological observations. This allows for iterative loops, such as field research—debriefing—design of a prototype—field research, which are repeated multiple times. The interaction between a human and an object or an interface is the primary focus of the observations.

**II. Quick and dirty ethnography:** Generally, this describes brief trips into the field.

**III.** These ethnographies lack detail, which makes them "dirty." An outline of a predetermined area can be obtained with this procedure.

**IV. Evaluative ethnography:** It is carried out following implementation.

**V.** Of a novel system or technique. It is concentrated. Interviews in various formats are used as the primary technique.

**VI. Analyses of past ethnographic research:** It is referred to as "re-examination of previous studies." As such, there has been no fieldwork, and the research is entirely desk-based <sup>4</sup>.

### Forms of ethnographic research

There are various forms of Ethnographic Research, including Life History Ethnography, Confessional Ethnography, Critical Ethnography, Feminist Ethnography, and Realist Ethnography. Out of all these two, the most popular forms are listed below

#### I. Realist Ethnography Research

#### II. Critical Ethnography Research.

**I. Realist Ethnography Research:** It is designed by Van Maanen and is also called traditional Ethnography research. The primary consideration of this type of research is the individual out of the group, which is why this kind of research is known as an objective cum traditional cultural ethnography study.

**II. Critical Ethnography:** It is concerned with marginalized groups or groups of individuals in society. In Critical Ethnography, researchers are critical cum political because they take a stand of opposition to the disadvantaged section of society with special reference to the scheduled tribe and cast. In this, the researcher may encounter many critical situations while interacting with the tribal community or tribe to obtain information. In this, the researcher has the intellectual versatility to formulate an inductive hypothesis. He can correlate the observed situation with the real situation <sup>5</sup>.

### Steps of the ethnographic research

**I.** The first step in conducting research is choosing or identifying a problem, so problem definition is aided by the review of pertinent literature.

**II.** After reading relevant literature, the researcher decides on a broad field to investigate.

III. After selecting a broad area, the researcher should concentrate on a particular research problem.

IV. Another crucial step is the formulation of a hypothesis based on the objective of the study. Because ethnographic research is wholly qualitative, the investigator develops "inductive" hypotheses that are subject to modification or adaptation in response to the circumstances or surroundings.

V. Choosing the population is a crucial next step. After selecting a population and cataloguing every unit, the researcher builds a sample frame based on the population's characteristics.

VI. Using the sampling frame, the researcher observes and engages with the sample. Researchers usually use participant observation to collect unique data (cultural aspects of the sample frame).

VII. The researcher employs special instruments and methods to carry out ethnographic research. A timetable, rating system, audio and video recordings, interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and opinion surveys are a few examples.

VIII. After that, the researcher wants to analyze the data.

XI. Interpretation and generalizability.

XII. Findings and recommendations <sup>6</sup>.

### Methods and procedures of ethnographic research

Qualitative data from inductive methods, detailed descriptions, and in-depth inquiries are used in ethnographic research. Through close observation, an ethnographic researcher can gather comprehensive, detailed information about specific cultural events. Information obtained through questionnaires, opinion surveys, open-ended conversations, in-depth observation, or unstructured interviews; the majority of the data are descriptive in nature or verbal or symbolic materials.

The following kinds of information are usually obtained through participant observation:

I. A detailed and captivating description.

II. Develop comprehension and empathy.

III. Flexible and receptive.

IV. Gathering data for extensive fieldwork includes participant observation, open-ended interviews, and symbols. Ethnographic research aims to provide a detailed and intricate description of the culture of a group or an individual. The ethnography researcher keeps an eye on marriage, customs, attire, food preparation, and other aspects of culture. These cultural components are expressed by the researcher in light of their real-world circumstances <sup>6</sup>.

### Characteristics of ethnographic research

There are several characteristics of the Ethnography Research, out of which some important characteristics are described below.

I. Ethnography is a long-term research method that usually takes months or even a year to complete. As a result, the researcher can establish rapport with the subjects and learn a great deal about their culture. This can help understand how factors such as historical events, shifts in social norms, or the introduction of new technologies influence the group's culture.

II. Participant observation, descriptive surveys, interviews, and interactions are some of the individual techniques used in ethnographic research.

III. It describes a rigorous and methodical procedure for collecting information on a wide range of observable variables over an extended period of time in a naturalistic environment.

IV. In addition to interviewing members of the group or community, participant observation serves as the primary means of gathering data for ethnographic research. It can last from one month to a year.

V. The Emic perspective: In this approach, ethnographers focus on how the people who make up the culture under consideration understand it.

VI. The etic perspective: This is the method by which an ethnographer analyzes various behaviours or phenomena connected to the culture they are researching and gains insight into how outsiders perceive the culture.

VII. The symbols: Ethnographic researchers use any material, such as apparel, technology, artwork, and architectural design, as symbols to understand cultural behaviour.

VIII. Tacit knowledge: This is the insignificant, hidden specifics of cultural advantages and presumptions.

IX. In ethnographic research, the researcher's analysis of qualitative data yields the hypothesis. If a hypothesis proves correct while data are being gathered, it is abandoned at any stage of the investigation, and a new one is developed.

X. An ethnographer observes the characteristics, behaviours, and interactions of the original members to collect and analyze data based on observations <sup>5</sup>.

### Features of ethnographic research methods

Ethnography is an active research method used to understand social conditions, approaches, interpersonal relationships, and roles within the larger cultural structure. Traditional methods for conducting ethnographic research involve "critical" and "interpretive" analyses. The theoretical foundations of anthropology, such as "Naturalism" and "Deep Holism," can be inferred using this method. These two techniques evaluate human behaviour within the context of the entire behavioural and semantic system.

Ethnographers closely observe and participate in the lives of those they are studying to identify patterns in their lived experiences. This suggests that observation is essential and has a significant impact. There are some distinctive features of ethnography. First of all, it is conducted on location, in actual settings. It is also unique because the researcher is involved in the study subjects' lives as both an observer and a participant. Third, it allows for the collection of data for triangulation over time using a variety of methods, including the researcher's inductive, comprehensive, and long-term commitment. Lastly, ethnography can be characterized as dialogical, since the study's subjects are involved in the interpretations and conclusions drawn from it <sup>7</sup>.

### Component and execution of ethnography methods

"Observing" and "listening" to people are the primary focus of ethnography, enabling understanding of their concepts and how they influence behaviour.

A person who studies ethnography shows interest in many different social contexts. The key to conducting ethnography is "doing the research within the field"; this entails spending time with people who are connected to the study topic, observing, conversing, asking questions, and taking notes. This approach allows the researcher to identify a core set of theoretical concepts and gain a close-to-real-world understanding with the aid of experience-based data <sup>6</sup>.

### Methods of data collection in ethnographic research

There are three main ways to collect data for ethnography: through observation, interviews, and archival research. During the interview, the researcher must interact with the study participants and supply information. Examining previously existing materials that have been formally and informally stored for research, service, or other purposes is known as archival research <sup>2</sup>. There are several steps involved in conducting ethnographic field research. The first step is problem formulation, which is putting the issue that the researcher is interested in solving into words and outlining the primary focus of the investigation. For the second stage, a selection of research settings is required. The best location and approach to begin the investigation must be known to the investigator. In the third stage, access and formal permission are required before a researcher can begin research. To proceed to the fourth stage, the researcher must pretend to be a study group member and introduce themselves to the group. For the fifth stage, a researcher also needs to gather and record data using a variety of techniques.

Furthermore, this method helps triangulate the various findings to obtain more accurate and trustworthy data. "Using multiple methods, such as observation, interviews, and recordings, will lead to a more valid, reliable, and diverse construction of realities <sup>7</sup>.

### Nature of ethnographic data collection

Ethnographers' perceptions of people's lives are shaped by their personal and philosophical



perspectives, as well as the mutual relationships they develop.

### **Key elements of field work**

#### **Initiating Fieldwork**

Unlike other survey methods, such as focus groups and interviews, ethnographic observations require a high degree of participation and understanding from participants <sup>4</sup>.

#### **Seeking participants**

Obtaining and maintaining the trust of the group of participants takes significant effort. The two stages of entering the field are "getting on," or establishing social access with the participants, and "getting in," or obtaining physical access to the location. If this is not done, the lack of depth in the data may result in an inadequate understanding of the phenomenon <sup>2</sup>.

#### **Interpretation and presentation of data**

Reproduction, reconstruction, and representation of empirical material are interdependent in ethnography. Data analysis begins before fieldwork and doesn't end while fieldwork is being done, claim Hammersley and Atkinson. This is done both formally, with analytical notes and memoranda, and informally, with the ethnographer's ideas and instincts. Instead of being a sequential process, they see "analyses" in ethnography as a concurrent, iterative, and evolving one.

An ethnographer can conduct participant observations or interviews to obtain data, which they can then analyze. Data analysis evolves together, informing each other. The ethnography is a conversation in which the researcher's theoretical and personal viewpoints influence the findings <sup>3</sup>.

### **Ethnography and data transparency**

#### **I. Recording and collecting data**

Ethnographers' primary source of information was handwritten field notes. Fearing that overt note-taking would sour relationships and alter participants' behaviour, ethnographers often only recorded observations in private spaces where participants couldn't see them, such as the

bathroom. Alternatively, they relied solely on memory to reconstruct interactions after leaving the field. Technological developments provide ethnographers with a range of instruments for collecting data, such as a real tape recorder. With the development of handheld or smartphone-integrated video cameras, ethnographers can now gather data in real time.

#### **II. Anonymizing**

Ethnographers have an ethical duty to ensure that research subjects experience the least amount of harm. To shield participants from humiliation or punishment, ethnographers often ensure participants' identities remain confidential. It is demonstrated that anonymization, as a blanket methodological habit, has impoverished ethnographic research. In contrast, the degree of anonymisation will need to be decided on a case-by-case basis <sup>8</sup>.

#### **Data analysis**

According to Roper and Shapira, there are several methods for conducting ethnographic analyses. The first strategy is called "coding for descriptive labels," and it involves grouping words in writing into appropriate categories or labels before grouping, contrasting, and identifying patterns within them.

To reduce the data volume to a manageable size, first-level coding is performed. To effectively categorize a broad range of phenomena, including relationships and social structure, viewpoints, meanings, activities, events, and phrases, it is best to establish fundamental domains before beginning the coding process. The second strategy is sorting for patterns, which requires the researcher to group descriptive labels into smaller sets before developing themes from those groups and identifying potential information connections. The third tactic is to look for outliers, or instances, circumstances, locations, and events that don't match the rest of the data. The fourth tactic involves reviewing the body of literature to generalise theories and constructs. The final strategy is memoing with reflective remarks, which helps the researcher monitor their assumptions, biases, and opinions as they work

through the case. When conducting high-quality ethnographic research, researchers should prioritize three key factors: reliability, validity, and responsiveness. The term "reactivity" refers to the degree to which your presence as a researcher influences the behaviour of the subjects you are studying and has the potential to cause them to act in different ways. Getting to know other people's lives can help a researcher minimize reactivity. If the researcher observes behaviours that persist over time and across a variety of social contexts, the data are internally consistent. The misinformation, evasions, lies, and omissions can be disseminated as information, so in field research, reliability relies on researcher knowledge, awareness, questions, and looking at events and actions from different angles, it is recommended to verify member validation by presenting the field results to the participants in the study and obtaining their feedback on the findings' suitability and accuracy <sup>2</sup>.

### **Rigor**

Three specific ethnographic components—fieldwork, prolonged time spent in the field, and awareness of linguistic and cultural norms—can improve the rigour of research. An extended duration of immersion is required for ethnography, during which the ethnographer engages with the community, observes, builds relationships, and participates in daily life.

To achieve rigour, which is defined as accuracy, authenticity, and thoroughness, ethnographic stories must feature a wide range of voices <sup>6</sup>.

### **Relevance**

The objective of conducting pertinent service research is to create useful, even beneficial, research that is comprehensible to academics as well as to clients, companies, communities, and societies <sup>6</sup>.

### **Flexibility**

This method is adaptable and open-ended because fieldwork is full of unexpected events. One of ethnography's primary benefits is its adaptability, which facilitates the identification and discovery

of novel concepts and ideas, as well as the reconstruction of theories currently in use <sup>6</sup>.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflectivity is an essential part of knowledge development in general, and perhaps even more so in ethnography. In a broad sense, reflexivity is the process of critically analyzing one's own narrative styles and thought processes. Researchers need to approach their work with an open mind and reflexivity to produce stories about other people's lives and behaviors that are believable <sup>9</sup>.

### **Writing and evaluation of ethnographic research**

Ethnography represents the field and suggests that it concerns not only the process of conducting the research but also the maintenance of the research report, often written in prose rather than in academic research reports. The research process can only be called ethnography when the research report follows ethnographic representation, emphasizing cultural interpretation <sup>10</sup>.

### **Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability**

Regarding people's perceptions of ethnographic studies, it is recognized that the researcher's prior beliefs and knowledge about the research setting and background, how he investigates the phenomena, the methodology by which he collects, and the analytic tools he uses affect his research. Reliability is a matter of concern for qualitative researchers. Goetz and LeCompte classified reliability as 'internal and external reliability. It would not be expected from other researchers in the same situation to replicate their research with a precisely similar conceptualization'. In natural science, replication "is not always possible".

Ethnographic research provides a thorough insight into the experiences and viewpoints of a particular group or culture, but these findings may not be generalizable to other groups or cultures <sup>7</sup>.

### **Merits and demerits of ethnographic research**

**Merits:** Ethnographic research provides greater clarity and deep knowledge of the practices and cultures of study settings, which would otherwise be difficult to obtain. Ethnographers spend

significant time interacting with and observing participants, and they can study a wide variety of issues, including educational issues in depth. Furthermore, findings from ethnography help generate new knowledge and improve understanding. Ethnography is a collaborative process that can be beneficial and helps to build stronger relationships between participants and the researcher. Marginalized groups can be given a voice through ethnography by providing them with a platform to share their experience.

**Demerits:** Loopholes are present in all research methodologies. It is expensive and time-consuming, and requires extensive time in the field, and can also require travelling to different locations. If resources are limited, it can pose a significant challenge. Additionally, findings are difficult to generalize, as one setting differs from another. Ethnographers, being human beings, can be susceptible to bias as their findings may be influenced by their beliefs and experiences. Significant time is required to build a relationship with gatekeepers to approach participants <sup>11</sup>.

**Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses of ethnographic research**

Design	Strength	Weakness
Ethnography	Authors are directly involved, taking interviews and making keen observations of participants.	There is a lack of breadth, as it typically focuses on a single phenomenon or situation, leading to limited generalizability.
	In-depth and detailed findings are provided.	Too much time-consuming.
	New avenues of research can be explored	Difficulty in getting precise and concise conclusions.  A researcher must have an in-depth knowledge of the problem.

### Application of ethnography

Studies on health and education can benefit from an array of types and subjects of ethnography, such as "culture ethnography," "auto-ethnography," or even a variety of subjects like "school ethnography," "university ethnography," "tribe ethnography," "city architecture ethnography," "the press ethnography," "the internet ethnography," "food ethnography," "fashion ethnography," "study ethnography," "medicine ethnography," and all of the above.

It is essential to discuss the value of ethnography in education and health. Studies in these two areas have been conducted both in Iran and worldwide, and the results are discussed below:

### Ethnography in educational studies

Education ethnography aims to provide a thorough understanding of the educational system

by describing and elucidating the experiences. It can discuss academic culture and schooling, with a focus on educational experiences at school or university.

In actuality, "school culture" refers to the shared beliefs, symbols, and interpretations among parents, teachers, students, and other staff members within the larger community. Members of society determine the value of issues to the group and shape their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours through the culture implemented in the school.

### Ethnography in healthcare studies

The use of ethnography and other qualitative research techniques in the health sector has been beneficial. Qualitative health research focuses on the expression and discovery of the "health-illness" continuum, as well as on concerns related to

healthcare and policy-making. They consider certain principles, such as identifying a purposeful sample, selecting appropriate data-gathering techniques, taking a theoretical-analytical approach to the data, and ultimately producing believable results, to be crucial for the best possible execution of qualitative research projects. Generally speaking, they think that qualitative research can play a significant role in societal,

organisational, team, or individual health assessments; assessments that have the potential to hinder or significantly increase the success of a health program's implementation. Moreover, the outcomes of qualitative health research can serve as a solid foundation for the development of proper assessment instruments that take the context into account <sup>6</sup>.

**Table 2: Description of included studies**

S. No	Authors	Year	Country	Key Findings	Conclusion
1.	Ryan GS et al.	2017	USA	Nursing literature shows ethnographic approaches.	Nursing knowledge can significantly benefit from ethnographic studies.
2.	Hamidani K et al.	2019	Malaysia	Ethnographic inquiry explored cultural issues.	Ethnographic approaches can generate deep insight into new topics.
3.	M Dewabn et al.	2018	Malaysia	It builds productive relationships with participants by understanding their opinions.	Ethnographic research should prioritize building quality relationships with participants and recognizing their subjective voices and views.
4.	Müller F et al.	2021	Switzerland	Ethnography enhances cultural research.	It investigates the cultural underpinnings of participants.
5.	Sharma HL et al.	2019	India	Immersion in social life is more critical in ethnography.	Ethnography is always participatory, with the researcher taking part.
6.	Kian M Beach et al.	2019	Iran	It helps explore beliefs, values, and experiences related to academic trends.	The ethnographic method is an effective research technique for investigating the cultural, educational, or health beliefs of societies.
7.	Hassan MK et al.	2019	Ireland	The taxonomy is an impartial technique of categorizing lies.	The Lie ARM is a helpful tool for staff members to evaluate their work.
8.	AK Murphy et al.	2021	USA	Structured approaches provide minimal but adequate anonymization and better documentation.	"Data transparency" in ethnography needs to be reinterpreted to allow for reanalysis rather than replication or open data in general.



9.	Von K et al.	2020	Finland	Cultural codes can enhance the rigor of research.	Ethnography demands adaptability and fosters a reflective mind.
10.	Olsen B et al.	2020	USA	"Revolution" results from a change in logic from functional to consumer.	Understanding sales from the customer's perspective.
11.	Adhikari ED et al.	2023	Nepal	It is time-consuming and context-specific.	Ethnography can be a practical approach for discovering new cultural knowledge and providing marginalized populations a voice.
12.	Nixon A et al.	2020	Kenya	Ethnography highlights the actual use of technologies in authentic contexts.	Ethnography provides in-depth contextual insights into technology use.

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