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Title: The trial and trepidations of ethnographic research

What is ethnography?

Ethnography is a method that focuses on the everyday lives of the participants, with the aim of exploring actual social practices in a more realistic environment and obtaining a detailed/in-depth understanding of the variables of interest, often in a small number of people rather than a few variables in a big representative sample (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2002; McQueen & Knussen, 1999). Ethnographic is chosen where there is a need to explore in more detail and in a more naturalistic setting the cultural and social meanings that pervade the everyday lives of people especially in context that are understudied such as non-Western and minoritized populations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2002). The primary researcher can reside or visit the setting/communities for the whole duration of the study. When combined with other methodologies, ethnographic research allows testing and understanding accounts collected through other approaches, as well as observing how they manifest in the participants everyday lives and within their social and cultural context.

Ethnographic methodologies can vary in their level of structure: some are open to all observations that the researchers is able to perceive and capture, while other approaches are more focused and even include asking specific questions on the topics of interest to the researcher. One is more indirect and the latter is more direct, but both can be crucial in investigating existing theoretical understanding while allowing the participants to guide the knowledge. In fact, some researchers (including myself) combine the two: the researcher asks questions on meanings and behaviours at some times while only observing in the context where the phenomena of interests happen at other times. Combining the two approaches can help overcome some of the challenges of data collection in ethnographic open observations which often include verbal and nonverbal communication and different forms of social interaction being observed in detail. As I discuss some challenges and strengths of ethnographic research, I will make reference to two large ethnographic studies I led, which combined ethnographic, interview and survey data collection. The first took place in Kosova after the war 2003-2006 (Kellezi, 2006; Kellezi & Reicher, 2012), and the second inside four immigration removal centres in the UK between 2010-2012 (Bosworth & Kellezi 2016; 2017).

Some key strengths and challenges

Ethnography can be especially powerful when establishing trust is vital and difficult such as when the topic of research is sensitive, personal and difficult to express in words. For example, in my research on gender based violence after the Kosova war, it become clear that gender violence experiences had become unspeakable although well known. The ethnographic approach allowed establishing trust because of the longer contact, observing how the unspeakable was acted in the interaction of families and communities, how it was managed and spoken about (in most cases avoided).

Another strength of ethnographic research is the immersion into real life social interactions. This enables observing real life phenomena as it happens, and even capturing some sensations and experiences. With careful reflection, researchers' own sensations and experiences can enhance understanding of the experience being investigated. For example, when researching the life inside immigration detention, my own visits to the detention centre provided a background knowledge of the physical environment: noises, smells, confinement and sense of safety. Although in no way could these sensations capture the depth of the experiences of the detainees, all these sensations were present when I listened to their accounts and analysed the data. Similarly, when traveling around Kosova after the war on my own, I had to be aware of my safety as a woman, and the way I was perceived by others (my clothes, accent, single status and behaviour was often commented on openly), which was a useful insight into the experiences of women.

Accessing the ethnographic site can be unusual because of the researcher's role (observation) and length of access (months and even years). This can be facilitated by clear communication, gatekeepers, the researcher identity and understanding of cultural and contextual norms. Gatekeepers can be essential in obtaining permission and gaining trust from the participants, but also in identifying participants who can and are willing to take part in research. This can help the safeguard the well-being of the participants. The identity of the researcher can be a key point in the first and subsequent interaction. For example, during my research in Kosova in 2003-2006 (4-7 years after the Kosova War), being Albanian from Albania was often part of the introductory conversation with the participants, as most were refugees in Albania. This allowed a very natural introduction between the two parties. Cultural norms also facilitated the interaction as the researcher on many occasions was explicitly welcomed amongst the families of the participants. Kanun itself (the Albanian traditional law; Meçi, 2002) makes reference to the importance of "welcoming", which is considered one of the most defining characteristics of Kosova Albanians.

Data recording can be very difficult in ethnography as often the researcher captures part of interactions and fragmented conversations. Everything heard, viewed, or felt in relation to others can be recorded at time of occurrence (or later depending on the context preferably at the end of the day). In certain situations, it might not be appropriate or possible to ask clarifying questions of participants, therefore clarifying questions can be asked to other members of the community, when there were no confidentiality issues. As we have discussed in detail elsewhere (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017), data collected can be messy and fragmented so it is important to write reflection notes and allow time in the field for as an in-depth understanding of the context as possible.

For topics relating to distress, trauma and confinement especially, it is important to pay attention to personal and collective integrity. Part of this is recognising the value of establishing trust and ensure participants understand what participation in research requires. Managing expectations is very important and can be difficult to achieve (e.g. can you advocate on their behalf?). Sometimes, expectations need to be managed at the same time as is the case of the immigration detention research where we had to manage expectations of detainees, gatekeepers, centres staff and centre management who had facilitated the research (Kellezi et al 2021).

Given the level of involvement in ethnography, it is not surprising that the impact on the researcher can also be more intense. Existing ethical guidelines do not provide clear advice

on when to pause our research or understanding when our own emotional distress would interfere with ethical and safe decisions in the field. Regular supervision can be essential especially for less experienced researchers or those that travel away for fieldwork and are separated from family and friends, as can the focus on not harming participants and to monitor signs of distress.

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