Doing ethnography

Dr. Alison Barnes, LCC
Disclaimer:

I am not an anthropologist.
Ethnography: **What, why, how?**

Ethnographic research is a qualitative method.

It is used to understand the culture, norms, values, and social environment of a particular group.

It is not just about what people say concerning their everyday lives, it is about what they do.
Ethnography: What, why & how?

Ethnographic methods enable a direct connection between the researcher, place and its representation—an immediate encounter with ‘real world messiness’.

Crang & Cook, 2007: 14

Observation is a key method—the researcher effectively becomes part of the site/group they are studying over an extended period of time.
Ethnography: What, why & how?

The researcher participates ‘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 emerging focus of inquiry’.

*Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 1*

Within the participant observation process the researcher needs to retain an outsider’s perspective in order to enable the process of analysis.
Reflexivity

Ideas of ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ perhaps connect to dated, colonial practices of exploration.

Contemporary ethnographers are reflexive, aware of the potential power dynamic inherent in the relationship between researcher and the researched, and engage people as participants rather than position them as subjects.

Ethnographers are also participating and observing—reflexivity is also about being aware of one’s own position or perspective and how this may affect the research.
Truth?

Ethnographic research inevitably produces intersubjective, ‘inherently partial’ truths.

*Clifford, 1986: 7; Duncan & Ley, 1993: 4*

We all see the world through our own eyes, and therefore construct our own ‘truths’.

Our perspective will be affected by a range of factors, for example, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or class and this is the same for both the researcher and the participants.
Criticality

Practicing ethnography ‘at home’ enables its most ‘critical possibilities’ to be revealed.

*Highmore, 2002: 87*

In observing something that is familiar to us we need to ‘step back’ from it in order to reflect on it as if it were unfamiliar—to try and defamiliarise the type of everyday activities that we might otherwise take for granted.
Ethnographic methods

Traditionally, ethnographers keep field notes or diaries.

These contain everything from quickly taken notes whilst observing something unfold, to longer, more reflective pieces written after the event.

A range of texts offer suggestions for how to approach field notes and combine various layers of description in order build a detailed picture of the site of study. For example Crang & Cook, 2007: 51; Cloke et al, 2004: 200.
Ethnographic methods

Ethnographers use a wide range of other collaborative strategies to gather ‘data’.

They also often adapt and develop these in the course of the research depending on the different contexts and participants.

Sarah Pink suggests there is ‘now no standard way of doing ethnography that is universally practiced’.

Pink, 2015: 4
Recording strategies

Salience hierarchy: Here the ethnographer simply starts by describing what strikes them as the most interesting observation within the setting.

Wolfinger, 2002: 89

Floating observation: The researcher maintains their ‘responsiveness, not focusing one’s attention upon any specific object’ and allowing chance encounters to emerge.

Petonnet, 1982: 47
Workshop 1…

Spend five minutes writing ‘field notes’ about what you can observe in this group and space right now.

There is no right or wrong way to do this…

When the five minutes are up we’ll share some examples.
Visual ethnography

Until the late 1980s, the ethnographic literature relating to photography positioned it as unmediated and capable of offering an objective, realist image of everyday life and place.

We now realise that an image is no more or less subjective than a written text.

Ethnographers continue to explore the creation and use of imagery as an ethnographic method in its own right.
Visual ethnography

Every photograph can hold different significance for, and be interpreted differently by, different people at different times. 

*Pink, 2013: 35*

Photographic images are therefore perhaps best seen as ‘representations of aspects of culture’.

*Pink, 2007: 75*
Visual ethnography

However, photographs taken as part of fieldwork can also act as triggers for reflexive thinking, therefore photography is a productive analytical tool in different contexts and at different stages of the ethnographic process.

Pink, 2013: 85
Sensory ethnography

Much like the ‘spatial turn’ and the ‘practice turn’, there is an increasing interest in the senses amongst scholars and practitioners within the social sciences, arts and humanities.

Pink, 2015: xi

Taking an interdisciplinary approach to place, the multisensorality of experience, perception, memory, knowing and practice, Pink proposes an approach to undertaking and representing research that centres on sensory ways of experiencing everyday life and place.
Workshop 2a...

Pick a destination out of the hat.

Using the ‘salience hierarchy’ approach identify something that is happening/visible and write field notes about it.

Do this in the way that feels most appropriate to you—it could be a series of notes or a more extended piece.

Do this for 10 mins.

REALLY LOOK and mine the space for information.
Workshop 2b...

Explore how you might record this experience in ways other than words—what could build a more multisensory ‘picture’?

What might also be useful to analyse in relation to understanding what is going on?

Experiment with some different types of media—use your phone, but also more low tech options.

Do this for 20 mins then come back.
Ethnographic narratives

Traditionally, the result of ethnographic research is a written ethnography.

There are three main ethnographic writing styles: code writing, autoethnographic writing and montage writing.

The coding process highlights elements of interest, or patterns within the content. The results enable the researcher to analyse the data in new and different ways.
Ethnographic narratives

Autoethnographic writing evokes a more personal relationship between the researcher, participants and readers.

Montage writing juxtaposes and combines different elements of data to illustrate the fact that various fragmentary parts of the ethnographic material do not necessarily fit together seamlessly to create a ‘whole’.

Crang & Cook, 2007: 151
Ethnographic placemaking

Ethnographic place-making functions on three levels.

The first level is place as it is experienced in the field.

In the gathering and analysis of research materials and in the production of an ethnography the researcher engages in ethnographic place-making on the second level—the materials act as triggers for memories of the research and our embodied experiences of the site.
Ethnographic placemaking

The reader brings their own experiences and imagination to the ‘text’ and therefore effectively creates their own understandings and re-creates place.

*Pink, 2015: 125*

Thus, when a reader or viewer engages with this representation, place is effectively remade on a third level.
Engaging an audience

Ethnographers should aspire to develop texts and representations of everyday life and place that engage their readers, allow them to imagine themselves in a particular scenario and result in some kind of impact or empathy.

*Pink, 2015: 59*

Pink’s view of ethnography is one that others can bring their own disciplinary theories and practices to. So as artists and designers can we use our ability with a range of media to develop ethnographic narratives that engage the reader?
References


References
