Understanding Practitioner Ethnography

*Thomas David Barton provides an overview of practitioner ethnography, a research approach that provides practitioners with a way of exploring the culture of their workplace. He compares practitioner and traditional ethnography and looks at the pros and cons of the method*

**Introduction**

The primary intention of this paper is to describe a qualitative research method, explore associated theoretical issues, and enable readers to identify key issues that will assist them when using this approach in research. The discussion opens with a broad summary of the methodology and tools of cultural (anthropological) ethnography and then focuses on the method variant known as practitioner ethnography. There is consideration of the specifics of this method, discussion of its use in practice, and review of issues that arise from data, findings, relevance, and subsequent generalisability. The role of practitioner ethnographers is outlined, with a focus on their involvement in the investigation and interpretation of individual, group, organisational or cultural behaviour, and in the interpretation of human experience (Leininger 1985, Porter 1996).

**Traditions of ethnography**

From the outset, the prospective ethnographer should have an understanding of the origin of the discipline, its emergence from the early work of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and understand the later influence of the Chicago School of Sociology on social ethnography and the scope of the
practice based research

methodological approach (Baillie 1995, Smith 1988). They should also be able to identify that more recently anthropologists have used ethnography in the study of race and culture, while social scientists have used it to study cultures in the context of complex organisations and occupational structures. In addition, prospective ethnographers should be familiar with the three general features of ethnography that have shaped it (Laugharne 1995). Firstly, there is ‘naturalism’, a process of studying people in a natural setting that limits the effect of the researcher on the natural world being examined. Secondly, there is ‘holism’, a gestalt process where the group is acknowledged to be more than a simple product of its individual members. A philosophy diametrically opposed to reductionism, holism accepts the complexity of social organisation and order. Thirdly, there is ‘culture’, a purposeful concept that enables understanding of group identity and group regulation. These insights will enable a logical and appropriate choice of ethnographic method as applied to the researcher’s area of investigation.

Thus, ethnography is a wide-ranging methodology that provides the prospective investigator with options. It is a flexible tool associated with exploratory inductive research, ranging in its use from simple social and cultural evaluations to investigation and analysis of complex propositions (Genzuk 2003). A well-designed ethnography will enable the researcher to provide insightful descriptions, test established social and cultural theories, or develop new theory. It is a methodology proved in practice, and has been widely used in the induction and investigation of social and cultural constructs associated with health and illness. For example, Glasser and Strauss (1965) explored awareness of dying in hospital, Becker et al (1961) studied the cultural transitions of student doctors, and Goffman (1961) explored culture in mental health hospitals.

Nevertheless, it is important that ethnographers acknowledge methodological limitations. Ethnography has been perceived as limited by a tradition of methodological purism that, while driven by academic specialisation and rigorous research method, lacked practitioner involvement (Hammersley 1992). Consequently, although ethnography was a methodology favoured by academics in the investigation of human experience of health and illness, particularly in investigating health organisations and related professional
groups, its traditional ‘specialist’ method did not help practitioners with decision-making or change (Harvey 1987, Finch 1986).

However, an alternative ethnographic method has emerged that provides a more direct application to practice for the researcher who is also a practitioner in the field; a method that is practical, related to policy and strategy, and above all highly interactive. ‘Practitioner ethnography’ is distinct from the traditions of ‘specialist’ ethnography, and this new method is particularly suited to the exploration of health and illness (where there was an expectation of consequent action and change). “[Investigation of health and illness] is research to be closely tailored to the needs of practitioners (of one kind or the other), but it is argued that this can only be achieved if the practitioners participate in the research process, effectively taking it over themselves.” (Hammersley 1992)

This review focuses on practitioner ethnography, providing a contrast with the more traditional concept of specialist ethnography. Both are models of method (data collection), and yet they reveal polarities of application in practice. They are closely related to each other, and are intimately associated with the varied concepts of participant observation and reflexivity.

The nature of ethnographic data
Ethnography is an investigative approach that researchers can adapt responsively to practical, emotional and intimate activities. As social and cultural health and illness are diverse and complex, it is ethnography’s flexibility that makes it a tool of choice for researchers when collecting data on human interaction and experience. Ethnographers immerse themselves in the respondents’ world, aim to explore data objectively, and yet simultaneously acknowledge their involvement with the data. Ideas and theories can arise from their participation and observation, and data can be empirical and inductive (Laugharne 1995). Thus, ethnographic data adds to our knowledge and enables interpretation of the social and cultural system from which it was derived, giving meaning to the lived reality of individuals and social groups.

Ethnographic data is rooted in method and revealing in its description of reality. The place of the researcher in this process is thus central (Anderson 1996). As researchers are the primary data collection instrument in an eth-
nography, a consequence is inevitably the nature of their relationships with the samples (Choudhry 1998, Jokinen 2002). That relationship between the ethnographer and the sample is typified by a participant observation, a stranger (non-member) to friend (member) continuum (Leininger 1987).

The collection of ethnographic data: methods and issues
The ethnographer observes the natural environment being investigated, and is the primary tool in ethnographic data collection (Laugharne 1995). Ethnographers involve themselves to varying degrees in the lived world of the sample in ways that enable data collection from a range of sources. For example, participation and non-participation are techniques used by ethnographers that encompass a range of data collection tools, such as field notes or interviews. The researcher may use these in a number of ways, leading to a variety of different data sets from the same or different sample groups. Subjects may be interviewed singularly or in groups, and subjects can be specifically targeted to gain insights into their lives (Berkwits and Inui 1998). In addition, less commonly used data retrieval techniques can be used, including archive reviewing, gathering of life histories, case studies and the examination of artefacts (Martens 1998). These different tools allow the ethnographer to collect data in diverse ways, and this enables analytical contrast and comparison.

Participant observation
Participant observation is a data collection tool. It differs from non-participation by requiring clear interactive exposure with the sample. As an ethnographic method, it offers a ranging process of data collection, a continuum from the complete observer to the complete participant. These two polarities are characterised by the ethnographer’s degree of interaction with the sample’s world. The complete observer is physically present (participating) in the world of the sample: an onlooker who observes human activity as it happens, but limited in personal contact and interaction with the sample. By contrast, the complete participant is an ethnographer who integrates into and purposely interacts with the sample’s world. A practical variant of this arises when the complete participant is an existing member
of the sample group. This is referred to as ‘practitioner ethnography’. Thus, for prospective ethnographers, the style of participant observation they select is a consequence of not only the methodological foundation or their preferred method, but is significantly influenced by their role in the setting to be investigated.

A question of relevance

It is from the concerns of practicality, application and outcome, particularly pertaining to health and illness, that practitioner ethnography has arisen. It contrasts (and may be distinguished from) the more traditional approach of specialist ethnography. For example, although specialist ethnographers interact with the sample and data, they are not necessarily practitioners in the field and may have limited or no previous knowledge or experience of that reality. Specialist ethnographers are characterised by social scientists such as Hughes (1984) and Becker et al (1961).

By contrast, practitioner ethnographers are members of the group being investigated. They are more than just participants: they live and have lived the experience that they want to investigate. In research related to health and illness, practitioner ethnographers are clinical practitioners, health managers, and health educators; they are front-line practitioners. Thus, what is important for the prospective practitioner ethnographer is not just the nature of the research, but its intent and the particular dynamic between the data, the self, and the relationship with practice.

Specifically, specialist and practitioner ethnography are approaches contrasted by the view that research should have practical and direct relevance for practitioners and a potential to effect change in practice. For example, traditional specialist ethnographers, regardless of their degree of participation, use their role of observer to integrate into the lived world of the sample and then interpret data from their specialist perspectives. However, this type of specialist ethnographer observation will inevitably yield results that are indirect and general, leading to claims of irrelevance and a lack of practical application to problem solving (Hammersley 1992). Acknowledging this issue of relevance has particular significance for prospective practitioner ethnographers and more recent research related to health and illness, as there is
increasingly an expectation of substantive outcomes that will influence clinical practice, health related strategies and wider policy-making.

The practitioner ethnographer is a member of the investigated phenomena, a practitioner in the field, a reactive part of the event with insider knowledge and an historical perspective. Research outcomes are consequently more direct and specific, they have practical relevance, and they can address practical problems. In healthcare research, practitioner ethnographers will use their unique insights into the world of clinical practice to access data, and are can then use subsequent research findings to innovate or change practice.

Finally, an objective ethnographic perspective would see specialist and practitioner ethnography of equal value, addressing different aspects of a wide research agenda where outcome was essentially relevant when viewed in terms of its context. While there are clearly differences between the two approaches, rigid distinctions can be unhelpful when many who undertake such research activity will have dual roles, being both practitioners and specialists. Thus, the use of practitioner ethnography or specialist ethnography rests not on so much on the role of individual researchers but more in the context of the investigation.

**Reflexivity and practitioner ethnography**

Reflexivity is a process of induction of meaning that arises from practitioner ethnographers’ analysis of data while simultaneously acknowledging their own influences from their insider role on that data. Thus, reflexivity is the insightful reflection that the ethnographer uses to illuminate and influence the sample’s experience (Nightingale and Cromby 1999). In studies, practitioner ethnographers must account for their reflexive relationships with the sample and they must acknowledge in their analysis and discussion questions about subjectivity and objectivity.

Ethnographers have to balance their lived insider perspective against that of their observer (data collection) role. Those contrasting positions reveal a marginality that, if correctly managed, enables them to understand the lived experience, and more importantly to describe and articulate that experience for others (Genzuk 2003). That place of marginality presents different perspectives and challenges for different researchers. For example, specialist eth-
nographers begin their study as outsiders (Atkinson 1979), and then have to develop a relationship with the sample that they are investigating. They have to integrate with their sample and develop a relationship that enables the data collection and analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). However, the marginal position of practitioner ethnographers is quite different. Influencing their position of marginality is an involvement with the sample that is rich with an existing subjectivity of actions, interactions, emotions, culture, symbols and rituals (Morgan and Drury 2003).

Practitioner ethnographers must be aware of and acknowledge the connection between their intimate understanding of the research aim and their relationship with the research sample, and must consider how this may affect the outcome (Manias and Street 2001). They will have to examine their own cultural values while also examining and evaluating the cultural values of others. Indeed this multiple cultural challenge assists in the understanding of the culture of the group examined, self-awareness of their own belief systems and how that may differ from those of the sample studied enabling a richer analysis and discourse (Laughharn 1995).

However, there is another interpretation of reflexivity and its role in ethnographic analysis that sees the art of storytelling as a central reflexive activity and outcome (Pellatt 2003). This highlights the nature of reflexivity not only as a responsive concept that acknowledges the interpretation of cultural and social context, but also as a concept that articulates the lived experience for others (Coffey 1999). Thus, this process of storytelling is fundamental to reflexivity and practitioner ethnography. In the ethnographic account, the ethnographer will need to tell the story in such a way that the experience of the individual or the social group becomes a living and credible entity that serves to further our understanding of that social cultural construct (Hand 2003).

**The validity (or trustworthiness) of practitioner ethnography**

For the practitioner ethnographer, concerns over validity are fundamental, and are not only grounded in relevance, but also in credibility (Maggs-Rapport 2001). For example, in healthcare research, if the consumer of the research sees nothing credible in research findings, then validity (and
relevance) is lost. Three activities are used in establishing credibility in any ethnography (Lincoln and Guba 1985):

- **Prolonged engagement** – this assists with building a relationship between the researcher and the informants and a shared perception that would not be possible through brief contact alone.

- **Persistent observation** – this enables the immersion of the researcher in the world of the respondents.

- **Triangulation** – the use of multiple measures and data sources.

Practitioner ethnographers, by their very nature, will fulfil the demands of prolonged engagement and persistent observation. It is the activity of triangulation that challenges them. Triangulating data collection to give foundation to validity is viewed positively in the literature (Woods and Catanzaro 1988, LoBiondo-Wood and Haber 1990, Hammersley 1992, Denzin and Lincoln 1994, Fetterman 1998). That positive view sees triangulation as a process that supports the valid interpretation of data as it arises and in later analysis.

However, triangulation can be a cumbersome process, a hindrance that disrupts the developing perceptions of ethnographers as they try to use diverse data collection methods (Silverman 1994). For example, as data arises in the context of a lived reality, any attempt to validate that from a different context or viewpoint could be potentially flawed. In this view, each data package is considered a discrete entity in its own right. However, Baillie (1995) opposed this, seeing multi-method triangulation as a process rooted in the holistic philosophy of ethnography, providing a valid and broad perspective that enhances credibility and thus the relevance of findings. From this perspective, practitioner ethnographers have the advantage of their intimate insights of the lived reality, which allow them to move with relative ease between different data collection methods and make more contextual judgments about different data perspectives. Nevertheless, this demands that practitioner ethnographers achieve a position of marginality that is not easy to maintain, as they strive for objectivity in a role beset by subjective experiences (Morgan and Drury 2003). Objective reviews of their experiences and objective analysis of the data they collect may only be possible in the light of the prolonged and careful analysis of the data after the data collection has finished. Finally,
validity may be ultimately judged by the later opinion of insiders and outsiders and their interpretation of the data and findings (Maggs-Rapport 2000).

**The generalisability of practitioner ethnography**

The practitioner ethnographer must be concerned with the ‘generalisability’ of their findings to the wider social milieu. Generalisability is a measure of external reliability; it is a term that refers to the extent to which findings of a research study apply to other groups, situations or settings (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994, Morgan and Drury 2003). It is important that practitioner ethnography findings are evaluated in terms of their generalisability. For example, some question whether generalisability is possible in qualitative research, as data is focused on individuals and not on aggregates (Grbich 1999). However, Maxwell (1992) countered this, seeing findings derived from qualitative data as feasibly generalised to other comparable or similar situations.

The practitioner ethnographer must acknowledge and account in their analysis for the two core components of ethnographic generalisability: empirical generalisation and theoretical inference. These can have implications in the interpretations and practical outcomes of findings.

**Empirical generalisations**

There are four broad categories of empirical generalisation that the practitioner ethnographer must consider (Hammersley 1992):

- **Typical singular empirical generalisations.** These generalisations are suggested when a particular setting is typical of a larger social construct or aggregate.
- **Atypical singular empirical generalisation.** This is suggested when the relevance of generalisations need not be based on typicality. By this, it is meant that observed experiences are unusual or atypical to those seen in similar situations.
- **Multiple empirical generalisations.** In some instances, such multiple generalisations may occur, and it is possible that findings from each are generalisable to different settings and situations.
- **Chronological empirical generalisation.** These may be transferable to other settings in time.
When generalising research findings to other social groups, an important feature of that transferability is the identification of the nature and nuances of the target groups. Thus, it is important that the practitioner ethnographer considers the time and place of the events when attempting to generalise to a wider population and that they acknowledge the significance of the wider social context. To suggest that inductive studies can be generalised to larger populations may be legitimate only if context and timing is carefully considered (Morgan and Drury 2003).

**Theoretical inference**

Processes that are more complex can also reveal generalisability. Inferences can arise from research findings that validate, refute or extend existing social theories. Thus, phenomena observed on a small scale by the practitioner ethnographer can have implications for aggregate phenomena and wide theoretical ideas. That would occur when making logical generalisations to theoretical comprehension of similar types of phenomena. The applicability of such theoretical inference from one setting to another depends on the likelihood that the known theory will accord with the context of the research finding as estimated by those wishing to apply the findings. The responsibility for making this link lies with the researcher, who must provide an adequate description that is sufficiently detailed. In addition, the responsibility for theoretical inference lies with the reader, who must evaluate research findings and make judgments on their applicability in other settings (Fossey et al 2002).

**Conclusion**

This review has focused on the specifics of the ethnographic method of practitioner ethnography and issues that the ethnographer will need to address in the design and eventual undertaking of their research. Some background information has been provided, along with details of the nature of practitioner ethnography, its relevance, validity, and generalisability.

Practitioner ethnography is highly interactive, and this makes it a significant method for research that seeks to not only investigate practice, but also to instigate change. It is thus a method to be promoted in the dynamic world of health and illness, enabling the practitioner in the field to rigorously examine
and act on their own area of practice. However, practitioner ethnography also presents many challenges to the prospective researcher, and these challenges must be carefully considered and accounted for throughout the design and research process.

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