The word *ethnography* literally means ‘writing about people’, and it is the interest in what some would regard as distinctive about people that has led to a boom in all sorts of ethnographic varieties over the last 40 years. The distinctive features revolve around the notions of people as meaning-makers, around an emphasis on understanding how people interpret their worlds, and the need to understand the particular cultural worlds in which people live and which they both construct and utilize.

Certain key ideas follow from this: that social behaviour cannot be reduced to predictable ‘variables’ along the lines of the natural sciences (Blumer, 1967); that people actively collaborate in the construction and maintenance of the cultural meanings which inform their actions; and that researchers therefore need to find ways of engaging with those meanings and the processes through which they are constructed. It also follows that ethnographic work tends by its very ambitions and nature to focus on a limited range of cases, often only one case or social setting. A central purpose behind ethnography therefore is to get involved in this or that social world, to find out how its participants see that world, and to be able as researchers to describe how its culture ticks. The particular ‘culture’ could be a hospital ward (Roth, 1963), a school (Woods, 1979), or any society (or grouping within society). We can see here the strong links with anthropological traditions. For some researchers, it can only be ‘proper’ ethnography if the researcher is a participant observer in the everyday lives of whichever society or group s/he is studying. You will, however, find the term ethnography linked to a wide range of studies, not all of which make extensive or even any use of participant observation in the strong sense of the term. However, whether the researcher spends years living with this or that group or is attempting via interviews to access and understand interpretations, it is clear that the researcher as a ‘human instrument’ brings to bear (unavoidably) his or her own interpretations and cultural orientations into the picture.

What links many of these approaches then is a reaction to positivism and associated purely quantitative approaches to the study of social life. The key link is with the emergence of ‘interpretative’ theoretical ideas of one form or another. Ethnographic studies have been informed by symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, critical theory, feminism and some postmodernist strands. There is a large variety of texts about ethnography or with sections on ethnography, some of them suggesting that ethnography is a specific method and others making more of ethnography as a school of thought. There have also been many attempts to operate with an ethnographic orientation as an insider-researcher, action researcher or practitioner researcher and this has of course led to considerable debate about these distinctive researcher identities and ambitions within ethnographic work. Our own ‘story from the field’ which follows was driven by a strong problem resolution and services improvement interest. Given this variety, it is not surprising that in the *Handbook of Ethnography* (Atkinson et al., 2001) the editors see their central goal as ‘mapping ethnographic diversity’. There certainly is diversity and there is no real substitute for reading three or four different ethnographies, rooted in differing theoretical branches, if you wish to get an initial feeling for the range and variety of ethnographic work.
It is in the detailed descriptions and analyses of what people say and do (primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, using qualitative data) that ethnographers have revelled. In early ethnographic work especially we find exhortations that ethnography stands or falls on the provision of ‘rich’ details of cultural scenes, on what some have called ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1988), through which the reader can develop a strong sense of the particular realities involved (we come close again here to the notion of ethnography as sharing with anthropology an inescapable parallel with travellers’ journeys, and a subscription to validity claims through persuasive illumination). An extensive literature has built up here concerning how we might value the knowledge claims made in ethnographic work. Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1989) talk of ‘transferability’ (and other writers have opted for terms such as ‘plausibility’ or ‘verisimilitude’) regarding those criteria which are rooted in convincing the reader through drawing her or him into the world of the participants and sensing the believability of that world. Other knowledge value criteria are more to do with credibility deriving from matters to do with the nature of the reported research process (e.g. how long in the field, mix of data sources, account of the decision-making research process, adequate attention to reflexivity issues, the checking out of interpretations with participants, etc.). In some texts on ethnography you will also find references to how researchers need to avoid going into the field with specific hypotheses, how these and theory more generally emerge over time through interrelated processes of data-gathering and analysis. Much ethnographic work emphasizes the role of theory generation, of the discovery of theory, and this too can be viewed as a reaction to the positivist focus on the testing of theory and on verification and refutation. There are strong links here with the work on and debates around the so-called discovery of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Ethnographic research in health has often had a specific focus on improving aspects of service delivery or organization: exploring, for example, how cultural beliefs and practices might impact on concepts of health, illness and treatment, how health professionals’ ethnocentrism might affect the perceptions of clients or other health workers, and what factors affect the acceptability of certain health interventions (e.g. Savage, 2000). In contrast, much of the UK work in the early days of the emergence of ethnographic approaches to schools and classrooms spoke of the need to explore the world of the classroom, to document the perspectives of teachers and pupils, to generate rich case studies. This is in principle not so different from the early ambitions of work done within the Chicago school, particularly the urban ethnographies tied to occupational sociology. Several of these early ethnographic studies were informed also by a concern to ‘tell the story’, or let the voices be heard, of less fortunate or marginal members, or less visible members, within society. Occasionally the goal of accessing the less visible social worlds has almost seemed an end in itself, bringing with it accompanying accusations of being motivated by little more than curiosity about the bizarre or the exotic. In common with critiques of the social psychologically oriented symbolic interactionism linked to Mead (Blumer, 1966), much early ethnographic work also led to some criticism for the neglect of the influence of broader political and economic structures. This led to approaches which attempted to link a ‘bottom-up’ interest in participants’ meanings with broader structural and political dimensions. Out of this much of the work of the ‘critical ethnographers’ was born, with a particular interest in linking ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ approaches (Anderson, 1989; Shacklock and Smyth, 1998).

Hardly surprisingly, many of the early ethnographic studies and exhortations are regarded as methodologically somewhat naive and perhaps even romantic in their attempts to capture the ‘natural’ worlds of their ‘subjects’. Many of the more recent theoretical persuasions informing ethnographic work, including feminist approaches, have struggled with the ‘role’ of the ethnographic researcher, the researcher’s ‘self’ (Behar, 1996) and the researcher as author (Lather, 1996). Issues here concern how to, for example, disrupt the power of the researcher and author, and how to enable participants’ voices to be heard in ways which are not too strongly filtered through the researcher’s lens (Fine and Weiss, 1998). Central here (and this is where we move beyond a straightforward ‘naturalism’) are ideas associated with ‘reflexivity’, with the recognition that we are part of the social worlds we are studying and that the researchers’ own interpretative processes and authorial position need to be taken account of. As our contribution to ‘stories from the field’ illustrates, the issues to do with ‘outsider’ status are multidimensional, and re-emerge again and again at differing moments in the research process. These concerns for how we can approach the understanding of and reporting of differing cultures within or
outside our ‘own’ society (as an ‘outsider’) have been struggled with for a long time (e.g. from a phenomenological angle, the work of Schutz in ‘The stranger’, 1964).

It may be helpful to avoid imagining that there is some solution or resolution to being ‘the human instrument’; rather, take careful note of how others, and you yourself, go about doing ethnographic work. Part of this must of course involve attention to the ethics and the politics of ethnographic research. Once we accept the notion of a ‘human instrument’, it becomes clear how complex and multifaceted the task is. Much has been written about ‘entering the field’, about negotiating entry and gaining access. A lot has also been written about the role of ‘key informants’ and on how the researcher may be perceived in relation to the internal hierarchies and micro-politics of the group or organization under study. Not so much has been written about emotional ups and downs, about leaving the field or about what participants may have gained or lost through the ethnographers’ work (though here it is worth looking at the commentary by Sparkes, 1998). Coffey (1999) reminds us how personal the ethnographic research process can be and points to some of those neglected dimensions such as the role of the emotions and the sexual status of the researcher. Likewise, it may not be especially useful to attempt to define the precise boundaries of what is and what is not ethnography. However, it can be seen that it is essential to have some understanding of the epistemological bases of ethnographic work and to build up some acquaintance with a range of ethnographic studies. Reading ethnographies is almost always more interesting than reading about them anyway . . . and reading most ethnographies since the late 1970s will serve to illustrate what Geertz (1988) described as the ‘blurred genres’ operating, setting the stage for the continuing troubles and dilemmas regarding how to represent the experience of others (and how to legitimize our attempts).

Implications for research design

We do seem to have moved beyond the notion that just because ethnographic work is inherently unpredictable, there is no point in thinking about research design and you should just get stuck in. Much ethnographic work is concerned with developing theoretical ideas rather than testing out existing hypotheses, but it is silly to imagine that you should (or could) ‘enter the field’ with a blank mind.

Initial questions could be fairly specific such as an interest in just what teachers and pupils view as appropriate or inappropriate behaviour in the playground, or somewhat more general, such as what makes a ‘good’ patient from the point of view of nurses. Whether or not this interest stemmed from a personal experience or something in the literature, the initial question can be pursued and perhaps sharpened initially through both further reading and also documenting some of your own thoughts/feelings/assumptions in the territory. It is here that you are already beginning to address ‘reflexivity’ issues and starting on what many would regard as an essential tool in any ethnographic work, some form of research diary or journal.

Any ethnographer needs to be open to research problem reformulation. Just what is practically possible can often shape ethnographic work, as can ‘early days in the field’ as you begin to sample particular settings involving particular participants at particular times. It is important to recognize that you are always ‘sampling’, to document how you are sampling and as the ethnography develops to plan your sampling more explicitly. This planning can be shaped by an interest in checking out a particular idea, for example that views on appropriate playground behaviour may change somewhat at different times of day, or your developing interest in how nurses share experiences and stories about ‘difficult’ patients. We can see in these examples, both a sharpening of focus and a shifting of focus. It should be apparent that ethnography is a constant process of decision-making, that openness to smaller or very major changes in research design is crucial, and that data-gathering and data-analysis are interrelated and ongoing throughout most ethnographic research.

Having read a number of ethnographies, you will be aware of the wide range of formats and styles: those which try to separate out quite sharply the ‘description or narrative’ from the ‘analysis’; those which interpenetrate the researchers’ and other participants’ accounts; those which structure the text around a form of ‘natural history’ of the research; or those which organize the text by major analytical themes, and so on. It is a conventional wisdom, for ethnography perhaps more than any other methodology, to allocate yourself considerable time after leaving the field for writing up, for gaining some distance from the material and revisiting it. However, you do need to attend to your own commitments, as the research develops, in terms of audience and
participants’ possible participation, and that means thinking through the resources your research is building up for final text production and the voices to be heard.

Stories from the Field – ethnographic interviews: an outsider looking in

Juliet Goldbart

This story from the field is an account of research, using ethnographic interviewing, to explore the appropriacy of Western approaches to early intervention to families in urban India, conducted in collaboration with colleagues from the Indian Institute for Cerebral Palsy (IICP) in Kolkata. Early intervention is the provision of therapy, support and other services to infants and young children with developmental disabilities or chronic medical conditions with or through their family members. The driving force behind this project, and much of the research I do, is a desire to improve the services offered to families with a child with a severe disability.

It is not uncommon in ethnography for researchers to be outsiders to the community or culture being described. In this project, however, I was doubly an outsider. I had just three weeks’ lecturing experience in India when the project started. I worked closely with Swapna Mukherjee, an experienced teacher of children with disabilities in Kolkata, and without her and other Indian colleagues, it would have been impossible for me to participate in the project, let alone make sense of the findings, as the issues we were exploring were essentially cultural. As a British born and educated psychologist with 15 years’ experience of lecturing to speech and language therapy students, and a school governor, I am an insider in UK health and education systems. I also have children, though neither of them has major special educational needs requiring long-term specialist management. Thus I have little experience of having to fight for services for my children as is the reality for many parents of children with severe impairments both in the UK (e.g. Paradice and Adewusi, 2002) and in countries of the South (e.g. McConkey et al., 2000). Consequently, I felt that there were several problematic issues around my involvement, which I will discuss later.

In this project, the ethnographic work was carried out to inform a wider study evaluating a service for families of children with cerebral palsy on the outskirts of Kolkata. Services for families with children with severe disabilities are not widely available in India. Those services that have developed, particularly in urban settings, have tended to adopt Western models of service delivery (Peshawaria and Menon, 1991). It seemed to us that this was predicated on many assumptions about Indian life and culture which needed to be explored before Western models could be assumed to be appropriate. Following the work of O’Toole (1989), who examined similar issues in Guyana, we wanted to look at:

- parents’ expectations for developmental milestones such as sitting and walking;
- parents’ beliefs concerning the amenability to teaching of key developmental skills and parents’ roles in this teaching;
- whether parents have sufficient time available to carry out teaching or therapy with their children.

In Western approaches to early intervention, play is seen as a highly important context for developing cognition and communication (e.g. Brodin, 1999). Evidence on perceptions of play in India was inconsistent, perhaps because of the great diversity of family life in India. This led to a fourth topic:

- what toys the family have and how parents spend their time with their child with disabilities.

We adapted O’Toole’s work into a series of open-ended questions which could be presented as a questionnaire or as an interview. The preferred language of the majority of our participants was Bengali. The questions, therefore, were translated from English into Bengali by Swapna. In order to check that the terms used were as close as possible to the original, the questions were then independently back-translated into English and the resulting version was discussed and amended until we were all satisfied that the original meanings were being conveyed accurately by the translation. We were particularly concerned about the way that the term ‘toys’ was translated. From research we had read, we knew that we needed a word that did not convey only commercially produced toys. Our informants suggested that the Bengali word ‘khalna’, meaning ‘plaything’, would allow parents to include reference to household
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equipment, like pans and spoons, or natural objects, such as sticks and stones, as well as purchased items such as dolls, toy animals and cars.

There were other issues that I struggled with. One was my concern over my unwanted status as ‘Western expert’ and the power imbalance that this introduced into my interactions with my Indian co-researchers. This was reinforced by my role as higher degree supervisor for two of my IICP colleagues. Being used to a relatively non-hierarchical university department where first names were used by staff and students alike, I had to work to remember to use titles when talking to and about others, but failure to do this would have been seen as rude. I struggled quite successfully against being called Ma’am by ‘junior’ colleagues, but it was two years before anyone told me that my nickname among the Institute’s drivers was ‘Bullet Memsahib’ — coined, apparently, because ‘Juliet’ is difficult to pronounce in Bengali and I walked faster than any woman they had ever met!

In order to work successfully in a culture not my own and through a language I knew little of, my IICP colleagues and I had to move to a point where we felt more like co-workers. I think that we did this by recognizing and valuing each others’ areas of expertise, both within and outside the project. The parents who were to be the participants helped greatly by being willing to extend their friendship and their confidence in Swapna to me.

My second concern was around the assumptions I knew I was at risk of making in setting up the research, both my own and those I inherited from Western research literature. These related to areas like the role of women, attitudes towards disability and links between housing and economic status. This made ethnographic interviewing a particularly valuable research method as it allows interviewees to explain their answers from their own perspectives.

My third concern was the risk of making cultural misapprehensions in interpreting the findings. To address this we fed back the findings to two groups of around ten participants and asked for their views (see below).

The study generated a great array of findings. They are available in three papers — Goldbart and Mukherjee (1999a, 1999b, 2000), so I will only give a few examples here. First, parents’ norms for some developmental milestones were closely aligned to those from Western sources. This was particularly true for ‘sitting unsupported’ and ‘walking unaided’ which could be seen as having a basis in physical development. However, there were important differences in some milestones which are significant in early intervention programmes. For example, ‘talking’ was expected by participants far earlier than Western norms. Parents in the feedback group suggested that traditionally, in India, the strings of intonated babble that babies produce from around eight months were viewed as words. So, particularly for older parents, babies’ babble is the start of talking, a perspective that would fit with contemporary views on the linguistic nature of babbling (Holowka and Petitto, 2002).

Explanations for the earlier expectations for dressing without help are more obvious. In Kolkata, where the temperature rarely drops below 18C, children typically wear underpants, a slip-on dress or pull-on shorts and tee-shirt with sandals. It is hardly surprising that they can dress independently earlier than children who have to wrestle with buttons and zips, tights or long trousers. Unlike talking and dressing, parents expected independent toileting later than Western norms. Toilet facilities for families in the study varied hugely; from homes with several bathrooms, each with a plumbed-in toilet, to homes with no running water where children were held over an open sewer to defecate. Our parent discussants felt that learning to use an Indian-style toilet and washing oneself with a jug of water was more difficult than coping with a Western-style toilet and wiping oneself with toilet paper. So, though successful toilet training was very important to them, parents expected it to be a gradual process. Intervention programmes designed for India would have to take these issues into account.

The 56 participating parents, predominantly but not exclusively mothers, were asked who in the household carried out a range of domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, shopping and childcare. Their responses demonstrated that mothers, some of whom were in full-time employment, carried a heavy responsibility for domestic tasks. Female relatives, particularly in joint or extended families, and in the more affluent families, paid servants, helped, particularly in cooking and cleaning. However, fathers and other male relatives hardly participated in household tasks, with the notable exception of shopping, for which they were largely responsible. Precise data on how this compares to Western households is not available but there would seem to be limits on what can be expected of mothers in terms of participation in home-based teaching and therapy programmes, particularly where the mother is a wage earner without domestic help.
All respondents identified at least two playthings. Their nature varied greatly, from a rattle made from a discarded shampoo bottle filled with stone chippings to computer games, though the most commonly cited were bats and balls, toy vehicles and dolls. The majority of parents spontaneously identified playing as something they did with their child. Together, these findings made us confident that play-based intervention would be feasible for many families.

To guard against the results of the study being misinterpreted through my Western eyes, key issues were discussed with volunteer groups of parents. Their reflections were invaluable. For example, I suggested naively that being part of a joint family was advantageous for project parents as there were more people with whom to share domestic responsibilities. This idea was refuted by simple maths – there are also more people to cook and clean for in joint families! Furthermore, mothers, particularly mothers of a child with a disability, may have a low status in the complex social network of a joint family, needing permission from parents-in-law to attend an intervention project. From this, the IICP staff decided to hold ‘family days’ where relatives would be invited to see the project, with the hope that this would enhance their approval of mothers’ participation.

My positive spin on family roles – ‘well at least your husbands do the shopping’ – was met with wry smiles and a swift response that this was a ploy to control what was cooked and served in the house. However, there was some disagreement amongst the parents on what they felt men’s role should be in the family. About a third felt strongly that their partners worked long hours and did not participate in household activities by mutual consent. Their overtime paid for domestic help or the labour-saving devices, like washing machines, that made their lives as mothers of children with severe disabilities far easier.

Through ethnographic interviewing we gained a rich insight into the lives and beliefs of the parents participating in the project. They gave us information which should enhance the service offered to them and many other families with a child with disability in India. While many aspects of Western early intervention seem to be appropriate to this part of India, there were some significant issues of cultural divergence which would need to be addressed for intervention approaches to be congruent with the lives of the families for which they were intended.

Annotated bibliography


An extensive book pursuing a variety of current issues and dilemmas to do with representation and epistemology regarding ethnography. It is the sort of text you go hunting in, rather than attempting to read it through. This handbook conveys, deliberately so, the variety of ethnographic forms and substantive interests.


Participation in the essential but gendered chore of dung collecting provides Besio with a context for a partial defence of postcolonial ethnography. By conceptualizing her research as located within a contact zone, Besio explores the conflicts faced by researchers, particularly feminist researchers, in postcolonial settings. A challenging, witty paper.


A very powerful account of the troubles and dilemmas of fieldwork in the authors’ attempts to write for, with and about poor and working-class informants in the USA.


Hammer argues that we need far richer information on families if we are going to offer intervention which is congruent with their daily lives, and provides examples of how to achieve this.
One of the best known and widely used basic texts on ethnography. It is a well-structured text working through matters such as research design, access, analysis, writing, etc., with lots of examples from the ethnographic literature.

This is a fascinating and vivid account of childhood in rural Liberia, illustrating the more anthropological ‘wing’ of ethnography. Lancy describes his use of participant observation and other methods to document how Kpelle children learn to be successful members of their society.

This is one of a series of books which report on a longitudinal study of children’s experience of schooling. It is very readable and illustrates one approach to the conduct and reporting of ethnographic work over a considerable period of time.

An ethnography on the induction and training of doctors. It provides interesting new insights into the medical fraternity and ties back to the work of Howard Becker and Erving Goffman.

This is a very readable and sensible textbook on how to go about doing ethnography in schools. The theoretical perspective is that of symbolic interactionism and it contains lots of examples [many from the author’s own studies].

**Further references**


