

**Engaging with 21st century methodologies in
contemporary education research:
Developing a multi-sited, distance, online ethnography.**

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Abstract

21st century telecommunications have spawned new developments in anthropological research. Researchers now utilise online tools and investigate virtual social phenomena. A research project at the University of Tasmania required the development of a tailored methodology to investigate real-world activities across multiple education institutions and associated on-line communities. The study employed a blend of traditional and contemporary approaches assembled from established methodologies. Considerations influencing the development of the methodology are presented with the intention of informing future researchers of valid methodological design. Ontological and epistemological concerns are addressed to establish a framework for 21st century ethnographical methodologies.

Keywords; Ethnography, Phenomenography, Online Ethnography, Distance Ethnography. Multi-sited Ethnography

Introduction

The birth of the internet along with developments in global socio-cultural phenomena have spawned progresses in social science research methodologies designed to utilise and also to investigate and understand these new phenomena. A study conducted by researchers at the University of Tasmania required the development of a specialised methodology in order to investigate the activities of a combination of on-line and real-world education communities across multiple sites. This paper will outline the considerations influencing the development of the methodological approaches with the intention of informing ethnographic design considerations of future researchers in similar studies. The case study discussed is a qualitative study using inductive thematic analysis to investigate cultural and community practice outcomes of music pedagogies employed by 23 tertiary education institutions in Australia.

Paradigmatic considerations

Social science studies are grounded on a variety of considerations that contribute to the research process including theory, strategy, epistemology and ontology (Bryman, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Understanding of theory, and the relationship between theory and the execution of research, is important as it provides a rationale for the methods employed and a framework within which the findings can be interpreted. Categorisation of research within these theoretical spaces is important as it informs the reader where the study fits in the current body of research and from what perspectives the findings may be viewed, providing a framework for the knowledge being examined and how we know it is relevant.

Ontology & Epistemology

Philosophical ontology is the branch of meta-physics that studies the concepts of existence (Jacquette, 2014). A branch of applied ontology, social ontology, concerns the nature of social entities (Bryman, 2016). Social entities are real things that are not necessarily physical in nature.

They can be meta-physical entities that exist as a result of social activity. These entities may be personal and internal, or may be social constructs. The case study is grounded in a constructionist ontological framework as it is built upon the perspective that social organisation is supposed rather than imposed, and culture is ‘an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction’ (Bryman, 2016, p. 20). Contemporary ontologies concerning online communities must also address the possibilities of influence from algorithms employed by service providers as an influential factor.

A foundational epistemological issue in social science research is whether the social world can, or even should, be subject to the same research practices as the natural sciences (Bryman, 2016). However, contemporary advances in ethnography using digital technologies, and studying virtual social phenomena have challenged epistemological assumptions regarding ethnographic knowledge (Postill, 2016).

Ethnographic research

Originally, ethnography was the domain of anthropologists studying remote cultures via participant observation in the field. Typical ethnographic data collection methods include field notes, surveys, interviews and discussion groups, as well as collection of documents and artefacts (Bryman, 2016; Sarantakos, 2013). As technology progressed, recordings of interviews and discussion groups, as well as artistic performances, began to be included. Recordings made in the field are re-playable permanent records and not subject to observational constrictions while in the field. They can also be observed by third parties for review.

Originally, ethnography was developed to study cultures other than the researchers’ own. However, in the latter decades of the twentieth century ethnography was adopted by researchers studying local cultures and sub-cultural movements, notably feminism (Davis & Craven, 2016; Perez, 2007; Sarantakos, 2013), and racism (Hurstun, 1990). The objectives of ethnography are to understand social meanings and activities (Brewer, 2000) and to portray the experiences of the subjects (Creswell, 2014). Sarantakos (2013) states ‘ethnographic research aims to emancipate,

empower and liberate people' (p. 219). By giving a voice to previously unheard cultures or sub-cultures, either distant remote people groups, or local activists, these people are empowered to improve their socio-cultural positioning. In the case study these were local communities of music students and graduates.

Distance Ethnography

Historically, 'distance' in ethnographic research has inferred removing the researcher from their home culture and physical immersion in distant environs (Agar, 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Malinowski, 1932; Van Maanen, 2011). In such cases the term 'distance' refers to the distance the researcher travels between their home environ and the one being studied. However, the term 'distance' in ethnography can now refer to the distance between the researcher and the environ under investigation.

Distance ethnographies were employed by the U.S. Office of Naval Research during World War Two as a tool for understanding the culture of Eastern European and Asian societies (Mead & Métraux, 2000). Data in these studies were collected in the form of 'a variety of cultural products' (p. xvi) and interviews of immigrants. Postill (2016) argues there is nothing inherently inferior or illegitimate in conducting ethnographic studies remotely. He discusses advances in distance ethnography and influences of modern tele-communications concluding: 'the overlooked practice of remote ethnography is likely to gain more visibility and methodological sophistication in the coming years' (p. 8).

Any new developments in research methods which challenge established valid traditions will attract concern regarding legitimacy. Postill (2016) addresses concerns about distance ethnography stating:

Yes: it is indeed legitimate to conduct anthropological fieldwork from afar. For one thing, anthropological research is a technologically plural, open endeavor – we use whatever technical means will help us gain insights into the lives and deeds of our research participants. (p. 8)

Distance ethnographic approaches using digital technologies do not aim to replace long-term immersion in a society, as they do not aim to produce traditional ethnographic knowledge. New forms of immersion and a new epistemology has emerged.

Various external data collection methods are used by distance ethnographers. This includes collecting artefacts and collecting data from human participants in the form of online surveys and interviews via telecommunication. Group sessions with multiple participants in various locations can be conducted using these technologies and bring together distant persons to form a community experience. It has been noted that distance ethnographies are not new. However, an advantage of distance ethnography, conducted using 21st century communications technology, is studies can be conducted in real time using up-to-date data (Postill, 2016).

Online Ethnography

Bengtsson (2014) states; 'Space has been restructured by digital media' (p. 862) and argues for a revision of distance in the discussion surrounding ethnographic methods. Postill and Pink (2012) state that traditional concepts of community, culture and networks have become 'messy' with contemporary digital practices (p. 132). They claim in the context of the ethnographic study of social media, new approaches are needed, particularly when the activities are interwoven with off-line activities. The on-line/off-line boundaries of 21st century education communities are ambiguous as they often include both virtual and real-world activities. The continual development and morphing of digital technologies, and how they are being used, has impacted these communities (Boellstorff, 2015; Calefato, Iaffaldano, & Lanubile, 2017; Calefato, Iaffaldano Lanubile & Maiorano, 2018; Postill & Pink, 2012; Waldron, 2013).

Online ethnographies have also been the employ of researchers examining their own culture (Bengtsson, 2014). Postil (2008) states; 'As the numbers of internet users worldwide continue to grow, the internet is becoming more local' (p. 413). This phenomenon brings with it its own ontological and epistemological challenges particularly around the definition of 'local'. Communities and their associated practices are increasingly no longer geographically bound.

Thus, it can now be a requirement in the 21st century to use tele-communications to research a single socio-cultural phenomenon.

Ethnographic Immersion

Traditional ethnographic approaches study patterns of behaviour (Creswell, 2014) and interpret life meaning (Sarantakos, 2013) through immersive observation (Bryman, 2016) in the natural field (Sarantakos, 2013; Creswell, 2014) with the researcher participating directly in the setting (Brewer, 2000). The case study embraced the objectives of ethnography, however, it did not employ the physically immersive approaches of these traditional definitions of ethnography. Its approach was external, embracing practices of non-participatory inquiry. The 'field' under examination is both a physical field, albeit a multi-sited one separated by vast distances, as well as a virtual field that exists in online communities of Australian music course students and graduates.

Concurrent with the progressive adoption of ethnographies via communication technologies, there has been criticism of the concepts and practices involved. This criticism typically concentrates on the lack of traditional immersive experience in the process. Genzuck (2003) describes traditional ethnographic immersion as experiencing the environment:

...the researcher shares as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the people in the observed setting. The purpose of such participation is to develop an insider's view of what is happening. This means that the researcher not only sees what is happening but "feels" what it is like to be part of the group. (p. 2)

Immersive experience at a distance can be gained through methods designed and employed by ethnographers unable to reach their fields due to war or natural disasters. This can now be further enhanced by progress in tele-communications. Using digital methodologies to investigate digital socio-cultural activities and online communities is self-evidently contextually appropriate, and a growing body of literature has been developed in recent times to address this phenomenon (Ardévol, 2012; Beaulieu, 2004; Beaulieu & Simakova, 2006; Boellstorff, 2015; Burrell, 2009; Hine, 2000, 2009; Kozinets, 2010; Postill, 2008, 2009, 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012). Postill (2016) claims it is now rare for ethnographers not to use telematic media as a resource.

Gray (2016), working from her home in Dublin, used social media to conduct ethnographic research on social movements in Russia. Through the use of online technologies, she was able to stay in touch with events in real time and observe activities in various locations. She describes her experience as a temporal immersion. Her immersive experience included physically experiencing tension while observing protests unfolding on her screen. She discusses some ontological foundations of experience and memory-making:

Social media is experienced—and remembered—in *the body* in ways that challenge the distinctions we might otherwise make between virtual and physical encounters. Such online research experiences will become increasingly inescapable, and anthropologists must find ways to incorporate them into their repertoires. (p.502)

She describes following the street demonstrations online as ‘experiencing’ them and states ‘I remember the demonstrations *as if* I had experienced them firsthand, as if *I had been* there in body’ (p. 506, emphasis hers). She states her body has created experiences she recalls as ‘memories’ of the events built from the data. She cautions ethnographers to avoid making false claims to physical presence. However, using Gray’s experience as an example it can be argued this immersion in the data can be regarded as an equally immersive experience as being present in the field. In the case study, the primary researcher encountered similar immersive experiences, most notably while conducting interviews, reading education institutions’ documents and visiting associated social media sites.

Multi-sited Ethnography

Examining cultural phenomena embedded in larger social or geographical orders, multi-sited research uses traditional and contemporary methodologies to gain insight on local and trans-local social constructs. The use of multi-sited research is a growing trend in social anthropological strategies (Marcus, 1995). Social factors present in the 21st century influencing the need for multi-sited ethnographies include improved, and reduced costs of, transport and communications technologies. In discussing multi-sited ethnography Marcus (2011) claims anthropologists have been trying to do something quite different with ethnography in recent decades; “There is

something about the way traditional units or objects of study present themselves nowadays, e.g. culture, cultures, community, subjects, and the near revolution in theory, that has immensely complicated the way these classic terms are understood” (p. 16-17).

Reliability, Authenticity & Validity

One concern in conducting research that employs contemporary design is ensuring reliability and validity. Reliability is concerned with consistency of measures, and validity is concerned with applicability of measures (Bryman, 2016). Reliability and validity markers for traditional ethnographies still apply to contemporary methodologies using online, distance and multi-sited practices.

External reliability is the extent to which a study could be replicated to produce the same results (Bryman, 2016). Replicability is a necessary factor in hard sciences where universality across time and space is assumed, however, in social sciences the assumptions are to the contrary. Two studies of the same culture separated by time or distance are expected to return different results. Longitudinal research is often undertaken for the purpose of identifying and measuring social change (Bryman, 2016). It is the aim of social science research to understand contextualised phenomena. Thus, reliability and validity are not measured by similarity of results, but similarity of methods.

A further method of reliability that exists in online ethnographies is routine (Postill & Pink, 2012). This involves the researcher regularly updating themselves with current activities of online communities being examined. Subscribing to online communities’ social media pages, community newsletters and blogs are methods researchers can use to remain up to date and informed of current activities. It can also help in the immersion aspects of conducting online research with content in the form of photographs and videos of events and activities. Routine in distance and online ethnographic research correlates to factors of reliability listed by existing literature on traditional ethnography including stability, consistency (Sarantakos, 2013) and prolonged field time (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative empirical research, particularly in the social sciences, has been subject to criticism and sceptical views on the objective validity of the findings (Diefenbach, 2009). During his defence of qualitative practices and their validity Patton (2014) gives direction to researchers stating there are no rules except the researcher must do their very best, employing their full intellect to fairly represent the data and to communicate what the data reveal. This still applies to ethnographic practices using communications technologies and investigating socio-cultural phenomena across multiple sites, both virtual and real-world.

Conclusion

An ethnographic study on education communities in Australia found no pre-existing methodologies were suitable. A methodology was designed by blending aspects of proven methods into a new appropriate formula. By adopting proven aspects of common practice reliability, authenticity and validity can be ensured.

Paradigmatic issues concerning theory, ontology and epistemology were discussed as well as contemporary research designs including multi-sited, distance and on-line ethnographies. The purpose of this paper is to disseminate the contemporary research design in order to inform future researchers in similar studies of established valid methodological practice. It is expected these practices will be further developed by future researchers investigating similar areas and incorporating new methodological practices as communication technologies continue to develop and influence social science ontological and epistemological frameworks.

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