

Why Not Consider Ethnography as a Research Method in Systemic Psychotherapy Research?

Inga-Britt Krause PhD, Tavistock & Portman NHS Foundation Trust

‘There are the hard sciences and there are the difficult sciences’ *Bateson*

1. What is ethnography?

- ‘Field’/site based –multi-sited
- Assembly of actors, places, practices, artifacts, ideas
- Participation (observing, engaged)
- Listening, interviewing, asking, doing)
- Become known to those we study

In ethnography researchers ask questions beyond immediate concerns of the research question, seek to locate cultural influences on persons, listen beyond immediate experiences, and change the research questions in light of this data. It is **different from grounded theory** because it assumes no particular stance towards theory; from **ethno methodology** because the study situated in broader social, cultural and historical patterns and from **general text based qualitative methods** because there is no exclusive emphasis on text

2. History

- One of the oldest qualitative methods
- Symbolic interactionism (Chicago 20s/30s)
- Interpretivism
- Emic-etic

We highlight that all persons including researchers have a situated understanding. Ethnography makes the following assumptions about the world: It is **symbolic** (persons understand themselves and others as symbolic beings), **discursive** (actor acts in context and at same time defines context), **idealist** (not facts but consciousness about facts) and **formalist** (interest is in general forms which consciousness employs to organise, interpret and name experience).



Spirit mediums who also solve family disputes and works as healers in North West Nepal.

4. Why suited to systemic psychotherapy?

- Impulse to collaborate
- Double agency (double discourses)
- Socialising interactive self is the foundation for research
- Hypotheses not for testing
- Incompleteness of scale
- Temporality of emergence and becoming



White western (British or American) family with their systemic psychotherapist.

The ethnographer is in tune with **second order approaches** while also being able to collaborate with quantitative researchers (help ask valid questions). The ethnographer is active and this is in tune with **critical enquiry**. The insistence on multiple perspectives is in tune with **positioning theory**. The ethnographic method should appeal both in terms of possibilities of variation in research design and the data it can produce. ‘**Naven**’ is an ethnographic study carried out by Bateson, this work brought us **schismogenesis**.

5. Why suited to user perspectives?

- Negotiates emic/etic perspectives
- Emergent research questions
- Aims to understand ‘experience-near’
- Values and highlights inconsistencies /contradictions
- Produces unique and unexpected questions

Disciplined approach to user perspectives because research is not based on one or two users’ points of view. Models of understanding are based on research subjects’ own. Ethnography is good for collaboration with other research methods. **Emergent** quality (**recursive, reflexive** research process).

6. How to do it

- Purposive adaptable research question
- Research narrowly, think broadly
- Physical, virtual or combinations of both as fieldsites
- Method chosen to suit study
- Participant observation
- Taking care –ethics
- Variable length (weeks, 3 months, 6 months, years)
- Systematic recording

Fieldsite may be one site, multi-site, follow an event, follow an activity, follow people, follow artifact, follow metaphor, internet gaming, dreams, ancestors, imagination, future, chat rooms, therapy rooms, therapy process. **Participant observation** recognises the subject position of the researcher, (race, ethnicity, gender etc.). Ethnographer conducts a patient careful study remaining in close and continuous relations with the social situation, makes sense of subject position of others against their context and background, seeks to understand shared meanings and inter-relations between practices and social contexts. **Recordings** include scratch notes, longer notes within 24 hours, interviews, surveys, and personal reflections. The ethnographer is interested in mistakes, in ‘dead time’, in data about which she does not know the meaning. **Coding** takes place after research process is complete. The ethnographer uses a **variety of theories** (theory should be responsive to data and research interests) Emphasis on **partiality, incompleteness, perspective, merography**).

3. Validity

- Scientific (phenomena in their natural environment)
- Description and explanation
- Empiricism (taking place in every-day life)
- Critical realism (there are constraints)
- Process and becoming
- Ecological validity (100 % response rate)

Ethnography is **non-reductive** (emphasis on complexity, systematicity, inconsistency, incompleteness, clarity and vagueness of everyday understanding). It recognises **constraints** (for example unstable societies do not survive long term and there are human universals (humans must reproduce, feed etc)). It resembles **merology** (overlapping and partial perspectives and processes), but must be approached with commitment and patience.

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