

# An introduction to the origins, history and principles of ethnography

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**Abstract**

Background Ethnography is embedded in the history of research and has been considered a methodology in its own right. Its long history means those new to ethnography may find it complex to navigate the differing perspectives and its historical context. Philosophical perspectives further compound the complexities of understanding and making decisions about method.

Aim To introduce the historical context of ethnography and its wide-ranging and differing perspectives.

Discussion This paper provides an overview of the historical context of ethnography and discusses the different approaches to ethnography based on philosophical paradigms. Examples of ethnographic research in nursing literature are used to illustrate how these different approaches and types of ethnography can be used in nursing.

Conclusion **[Q1 Please provide an abstract conclusion]**

Implications for practice **[Q2 Please provide an abstract implications for practice]**

**ethnography, critical ethnography, social anthropology, positivist ethnography, netnography, nursing research**

## **Introduction**

Ethnography can be defined as ‘the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation. Observation and participation (according to circumstance and the analytic purpose at hand) remain the characteristic feature of the ethnographic approach’ (Atkinson et al 2001).

Ethnography focuses on work in the field, and may use techniques for collecting data such as observation, focus groups and interviews, either in combination or individually, to explore, explain and/or describe a situation, community, environment or culture. Ethnography has been used for many years in nursing research, and is deemed a valid way to explore patients’ perspectives and experiences, healthcare systems, policy, and nursing as a profession (Robertson and Boyle 1984, Hodgson 2000, Cruz and Higginbottom 2013, Robinson 2013).

Ethnographic research fits into two core categories: ethnography informed by historic, social and/or cultural changes; and ethnography informed by philosophical values (Figure 1). Philosophical influencers demonstrate how ethnographic study and associated methods of collecting data may be aligned to specific philosophical values. Conversely, history has influenced the processes and methods of ethnographic study – a researcher will align with philosophical principles and use methods developed through ethnography’s evolution that align to these values. For example, while virtual ethnography is part of a historic progression caused by changes in society and technology, it can still be used by a positivist or feminist researcher.

This paper will be presented in two parts. First, it will discuss the role of social anthropology, the Chicago School’s influence on the development of ethnography as a methodology, and virtual ethnography as a more recent development caused by historic, cultural and social change (Figure 1). In the second part, it will discuss philosophical paradigms that have used ethnographic approaches – positivist ethnography, critical ethnography, critical realist ethnography (CRE) and post-modern/constructivist ethnography.

Figure 1 illustrates the historical context of ethnographic study. It provides an overview of the main perspectives in ethnographic study since its first recognition in the 1800s and will guide discussion in the paper.

## **The evolution of ethnography**

### **Anthropology**

Ethnography originated in early anthropology in the 1800s. The roots of ethnography can be traced back to colonisation of the ‘New World’, when anthropologists became interested in exploring races and cultures outside Europe. The primary focus was to study ‘primitive’, unindustrialised peoples and cultures using written description and records, as well as photography (Kelly and Gibbons 2008, Lambert et al 2011, Rees and Gatenby 2014). Ethnographers typically spent months or years conducting research, during which they were ‘detached’ from those they were observing. They were then seen as the authority on the cultures they

observed and the conclusions they drew. Being detached meant researchers observing without their beliefs and values influencing them. However, Fetterman (2010) argued that this approach relied heavily on researchers' ability to describe and explain communities in richness and complexity. The method was therefore often influenced by the researchers' preconceptions of and prejudices concerning cultures other than their own.

### **Malinowski's social anthropology**

Malinowski (1922) was the first person to describe ethnographic study more explicitly through detailed enquiry into the communities of New Guinea (Rees and Gatenby 2014). This was termed social anthropology and was characterised by the concept of the 'marginal native' or 'professional stranger' – the researcher becoming embedded in a culture and conducting extensive participant observation to develop a deeper understanding of that culture's social norms and structures. Malinowski emphasised 'holism' in obtaining natives' points of view and their visions of their world through a rigorous scientific approach that also incorporated a degree of reflexivity. Holism involves looking beneath the surface of what is observed, not simply measuring, but considering the wider issues and interactions that occur in a community and society.

Malinowski's approach originated in anthropology and so valued systematic, detailed and methodological approaches to observation and collecting data. However, despite the focus on being 'detached' from the culture being observed, Malinowski also kept a journal that outlined his perspectives, feelings and opinions about the community and its members. In publishing this, he challenged the concept of objectivity in ethnographic study – the scientific findings of his study were often in conflict with the subjective reflections in his journal (Nazaruk 2011).

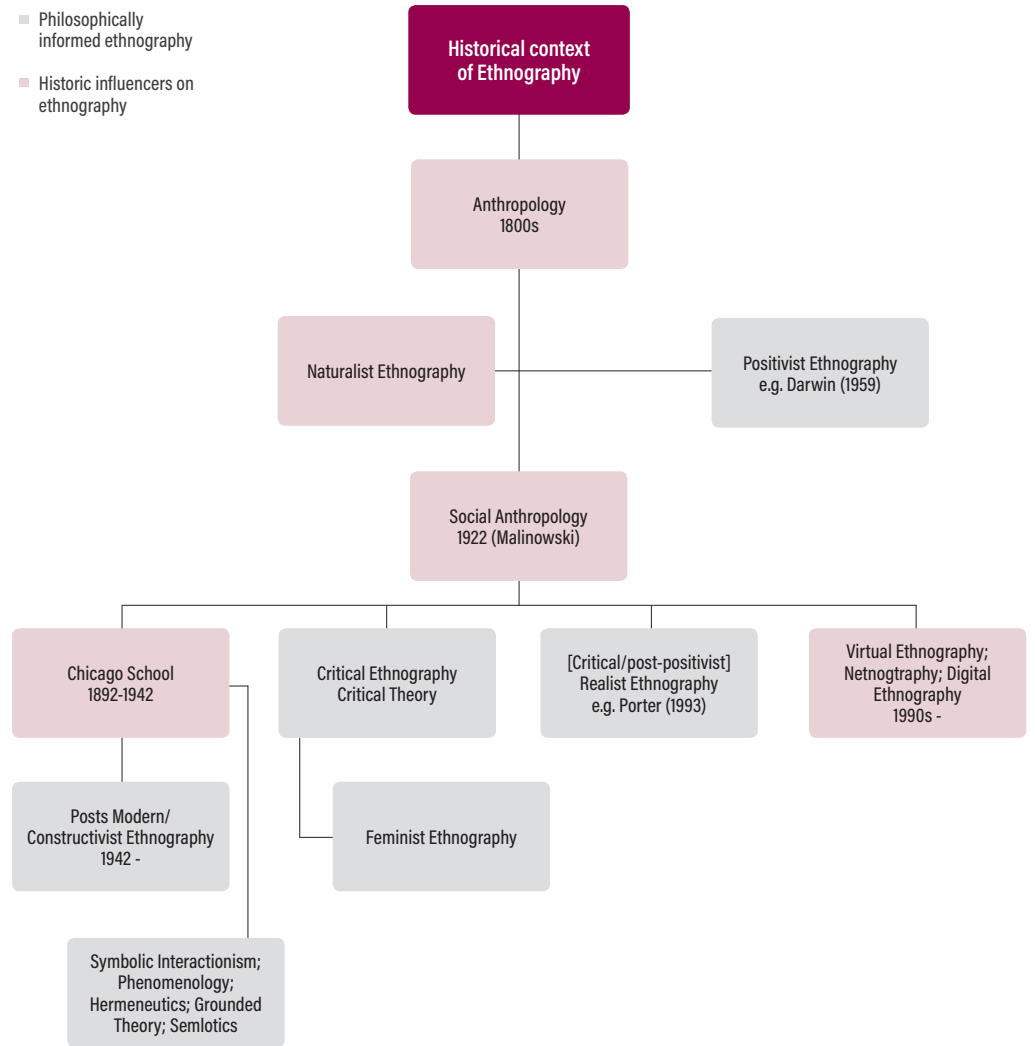
Hence, Malinowski's 'reflexive turn' and 'reflexivity' were created, based on the principle that as researchers can never distance or disengage themselves, their values or their beliefs from what they are studying, they should reflect on these values and consider how they affect the process and findings of research. These then informed the evolution of qualitative, critical, critical realist and virtual ethnographic study.

### **The Chicago School**

The Chicago School researchers were Park and Burgess (1921) [Q3 Please provide the full reference at the end]. Their students and associates aimed to study society 'as it is', and advocated fieldwork in which the researcher observes face-to-face, everyday interactions by going out and seeing the world. Each core researcher took his or her own stance regarding research methods and descriptive narrative, but these were similar in that 'each sociologist analysed the everyday life, communities and symbolic interactions characteristic of a specific group' (Deegan 2001).

Much of the Chicago School work had no strict criteria, but emphasised openness to people, data, places and theory (Deegan 2001). Park and Burgess's students based their work on the original ethnographies of their supervisors and used statistical data, combined with qualitative approaches, to examine the urban context (Mowrer 1927, Ackerson 1931, Kluever 1933, Faris and Warren Dunham 1939, Anderson 1940). This in turn led to several programmes of research that contributed grounded theoretical knowledge in these fields; the students who followed them reinforced patterns that emerged through their research.

Figure I. Different kinds of ethnography



The Chicago School made no explicit affiliation to a research philosophy. However, Mead (1934), a member of the Chicago School, proposed that 'each person becomes human through interaction with others. Institutional patterns are learned in communities dependent on shared language and symbols. Human intelligence is vital for reflective behavior...' This was later called Chicago Symbolic Interactionism and was more akin to the post-modern, interpretivist forms of ethnography that will be discussed in the second part of this article.

Atkinson et al (2007 [Q4 2001?]) presented the range of international perspectives of ethnographic study that exist, such as critical ethnography, ethnomethodology and feminist ethnography. However, the Chicago School and Park and Burgess (1921 [Q5 Please provide the full reference at the end]) were pivotal in establishing ethnography as a credible method of enquiry in sociology and the social sciences. There are authors who state the importance of philosophically-driven research (for example, Collier 1994 [Q6 Please provide the full reference at the end], Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Arguably, ethnographic research should be informed by a set of values and principles, to rationalise and justify the research's design. These principles then inform decisions about methods and analysis, and may be deemed to enhance the credibility or scientific rigour of the research. The lack of philosophical values in some of the historic influencers on ethnography [Q7 Their studies or the people themselves?] has been criticised by those who believe that research should be philosophically informed (Rees and Gatenby 2014).

#### **Virtual ethnography**

The internet has become increasingly accessible and popular in the past three decades, and now has a plethora of functions and uses. Online gaming has also rapidly expanded, enabling groups, communities and individuals across the globe to interact in virtual worlds. Consequently, the terms 'digital ethnography', 'netnography', 'online ethnography' and 'virtual ethnography' have emerged. Angrosio and Rosenberg (2001) highlighted that the internet and online interaction is communication mediated rather than geographically linked or through long established ties [Q8 Please can you explain what you mean by this?].

Netnography is a portmanteau of 'internet' and 'ethnography' (Bowler 2010). Gatson (2001) suggested a range of online and virtual approaches to ethnography with a final addition from Boellstorff et al (2012):

- Traditional field methods applied online
- Online **auto-ethnography** [Q9 Briefly explain auto-ethnography]
- Multi-sited ethnography
- Virtual ethnography

Participant observation in the field is a core component of almost all approaches to ethnography. Hence, online observation could be considered the application of traditional ethnographic methods to a less defined boundary of 'space'. The first study to use ethnographic methods online was Rheingold (2000), in which the researcher described his experiences of creating an online community and the links between online and offline environments. This work transcended [Q10 How?] traditional field methods as well as auto-ethnography.

Multi-sited ethnography sources data using observation and other traditional ethnographic methods such as focus groups, interviewing or surveying (Bryman

2008). It could be argued that online multi-sited ethnography is simply multi-sited ethnography applied to different spaces or 'fields'. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) and Crang and Cook (2007) did not strictly define what constitutes a space or boundary of place in ethnographic research, just that it should be appropriate to the phenomenon being studied.

Boellstorff et al (2012) described virtual ethnography as having several core characteristics. Virtual worlds are places where participants traverse and interact with each other; they are multi-user, synchronous environments and continue to exist when users are not 'in' them. Users have online personae identified by avatars or similar. Boellstorff et al (2012) rejected online discussion forums and social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter as virtual worlds, because they do not have all the required characteristics; Hine (2000) presented virtual ethnography as a new way of bringing ethnographic features into the domain of the online cultures being studied. These two different definitions of virtual ethnography have one main common aspect: the research is conducted almost completely online. Social media sites offer ethnographic study the chance to further develop and expand in its application, enabling researchers to further explore, explain and understand social media networks and their influence on society, groups, communities and individuals.

This is particularly important to nursing and healthcare, with increasing roles and opportunities for engaging, listening to and observing patients online (Ryan 2013). This growing focus on social media engagement, digital health and telemedicine will increasingly provide opportunities for ethnographic research that seeks to explore the use of such technologies.

### **Ethnographic approaches informed by philosophical paradigms**

Howell (2013) proposed that three philosophical approaches are core to ethnography: positivist, critical and post-modern/constructivist.

#### **Positivist ethnography**

'Positivist ethnography' advocates objectivity about and distance from the matter being studied. Here, as objectivity requires researchers to remain as detached as possible, results are focused on facts rather than the researcher's beliefs and values (Payne and Payne 2004). The main focus of positivist ethnography is the search for rationales, causes [Q11 For/of what?] and generalisable laws that may be applied to people's behaviour. The researcher retains power and authority over the research, remaining 'superior' to the community being studied (Howell 2013); the researcher's views are deemed the most important.

There is a frequent misconception that positivist research must always use experimental or quantitative methods (Phillips and Burbules 2000). This is not the case – there were characteristics of positivism in the work of early anthropologists, Malinowski and certain members of the Chicago School, with statistical and qualitative methods used complementarily. Furthermore, certain types of positivist ethnographic studies have significantly progressed our knowledge of nature, such as Darwin (1859).

Most nursing research tends towards more post-modern or critical approaches to ethnography. This could be linked to the influence of the Chicago School in the development of ethnographic study (Heyl 2001). Ethnographic interviews and

acknowledgement of the influence of researchers' values, beliefs and perceptions on research are commonly viewed as crucial in understanding patients' experiences, perceptions and behaviours. Hence, post-modern and critical approaches to ethnography are commonly seen as more congruent with the art of nursing practice, principles and values.

#### **Post-modern/constructivist ethnography**

Post-modern approaches emphasise that reality is created through people's interactions, perceptions and experiences of the social world. In this way, the world is constructed socially or by individuals. Conversely, this means there are multiple realities subject to continuous change. As a result, some of the first post-modern ethnographers relied on analysis of participants' perspectives and interpretations of their experiences of the world (for example, Schutz (1970)). To achieve this, researchers must immerse themselves in the communities, societies or lives of the participants, to reproduce the various realities seen by each (Denzin 1989, Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

While post-modernist ethnographers reject positivist approaches because they do not acknowledge social complexity and claim to make 'generalisable' laws, post-modern ethnography shares characteristics of critical ethnography, as it focuses on participants and is highly subjective (Crang and Cook 2007). Conversely, it does not seek generalisability but instead aims to improve knowledge of a culture by using a 'thick description'.

Geertz (1973) said: 'What we call our data are really our own constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.' This emphasises the interpretative and therefore highly subjective nature of post-modern ethnography.

Post-modern and constructivist approaches to ethnography are of benefit to nursing research in that they value the perceptions, feelings and experiences of participants. This could be considered to be aligned to the principles of nursing, allowing nurse researchers to understand the experiences of patients, which may help them to understand their behaviours or to deliver care more effectively (Robinson 2013). Post-modern ethnography can be used to study nursing as a profession, nurse education, or the experiences, perceptions or behaviours of patients, groups of patients or communities.

Coughlin (2013) explored the perceptions of nurses and patients during hospitalisation. Observation and interviews were used to study the interactions between patients, families and nurses. This enabled the researcher to explore themes and topics that neither quantitative measures nor positivist enquiry could achieve. The importance of subjectivity in this approach highlighted the differences between the nurses' and patients' perspectives, which informed the way in which care could be improved during hospital admission.

#### **Critical ethnography**

Not to be confused with critical realist ethnography, critical ethnography may be informed by either critical theory or more traditional Chicago School ethnography (Thomas 1993, Howell 2013). Like critical realists, critical ethnographers do more than describe a situation or form a narrative. However, critical ethnography considers how participants and communities are represented, and the constraints

and repressive aspects of injustice, inequality and control (Madison 2012). It relies on a high degree of reflexivity by the researcher. Furthermore, critical ethnography moves away from some of the more traditional anthropological and positivist approaches by seeking to remove the 'authority' of the researcher.

Howell (2013) outlined five important characteristics of interpretation in critical ethnography:

- Reflection and evaluation of purpose and intent.
- Identification of consequences and potential harm.
- Creation and maintenance of dialogue and collaboration between researcher and researched.
- Specification of relationships between localism and generality in relation to the human condition.
- Consideration of how the research may ensure equity and make a difference in terms of liberty and justice.

There is an obvious focus here on social change and action through raising awareness of oppressive power structures that are taken for granted, to challenge them and bring about change, so arguably critical ethnography has a political purpose (Thomas 1993). Similarly, feminist ethnography complements the principles of critical ethnography but focuses on emancipating women by challenging gendered assumptions. It has played a role in developing new theories of structures such as race and class that were previously influenced by male-orientated science (Afshar and Maynard 1994).

Critical ethnography emphasises the effects of the research rather than the search for ultimate truth. Characteristically, it should be informed by theory but approached with an open mind. This might be seen as inconsistent, particularly for certain types of feminist research where there are already value-laden assumptions about oppressive gendered power structures – Howell (2013) proposed that a researcher cannot possibly have theoretical preconceptions and still approach research with an open mind. This is illustrated in work such as Happel (2012), which studied how an all-girls club reinforced binary gender formations and assumed that gender, race and class were oppressive rather than enabling.

These assumptions about power are often criticised for their lack of objectivity and reflexivity. Stacey (1988) further argued that research with these perspectives is almost always steered by personal feelings, beliefs and values; if the researcher begins with negative assumptions about structures, this may bias the research into apparently confirming these assumptions.

Smyth and Holmes (2005) provided an overview of how to use Carspecken's critical ethnography [Q12 What is this?] in nursing research, and emphasised the role of philosophy and method. Critical ethnography in nursing may enable the researcher to explore political influences and power relationships in the broader context of healthcare or more local teams and communities (Parissopoulos 2014). Conversely, critical ethnography has been used to explore and explain the power relationships and effect of policy on nursing as a profession, for example Batch and Windsor (2015) used critical ethnography through observation, field notes, focus groups and interviews, to explore relationships between casual or non-standard workers and nurses. This enabled the researchers to explain the systemic structures and cultural aspects of contemporary nursing. The results indicated that the medical



profession, combined with traditional stereotypes of nurses, affects the experiences of casual workers.

### **Realist ethnography**

Realist philosophers have negotiated the differences between the positivist and constructivist paradigms in the concept of meaning by proposing that the processes that produce social phenomena have natural and social explanations (Bhaskar 1989[Q13 2003?]). Mental, physical and social experiences interact and are interdependent.

Ethnography is traditionally the observation and description of cultures in groups. The concept of culture is therefore important. However, arguably it is misunderstood across other disciplines. Maxwell (2012) suggested that culture, despite being the primary focus of ethnography, is difficult to define but that most disciplines acknowledge culture to be beliefs or values shared by members of a community or social group. Maxwell (2012) defined culture as: 'A domain of phenomena that are real, rather than abstractions; both symbolic-meaningful (ie part of the mental rather than physical perspective) and collective (that is, a property of groups rather than of single individuals); that cannot be reduced to individual behaviour or thought or subsumed in social structure; and that is causally interrelated with both behaviour and social structure.'

In this way it can be seen that culture is an interaction between the mind and social experiences that is not always consciously produced, and its influence might be observed in the common behaviours in and across groups. It is not just about what is happening but why it is happening.

The significance of this for ethnography is that from a constructivist or positivist standpoint, traditional ethnographic methods can never go into sufficient depth to explain why a culture and associated behaviours exist (Danermark et al 2002). Critical realist ethnography may be appropriate when a study requires going beyond telling stories, taking behavioural observations and perceptions of participants at face value. Critical realist ethnography starts in the same place as more traditional methods, with the perceptions and experiences of individuals. Porter (1993) and Sharpe (2005) proposed that critical realist ethnography considers the micro level (the individual) and acknowledges how this fits into a macro (wider/social) context, but also seeks to explain why the phenomenon being studied behaves in the way it does.

Therefore, critical realist ethnography acknowledges people's perceptions and experiences, but uses this as a starting point for further enquiry through observation, theory and evidence. This means it can negotiate the conflict between positivist and post-modern ethnographic approaches by using the post-modernists' emphasis on subjective meaning, and the structure and rigour of their methods. But critical theorists need to identify possible underlying power structures, if they are to ever challenge and change behaviours and attitudes they believe need to be addressed.

Porter (1993) is one of the most well-known critical realist ethnographic studies in nursing. It used covert participant observation – the participants did not know the observation was occurring – and field notes to explore the concepts and

relationships between nursing, medicine and racism. This enabled an explanation of how racism affects relationships across the nursing and medical profession.

Conversely, Porter and Ryan (1996) explored with a case study the concept of the gap between theory and practice in nursing. This illustrates how intensive, smaller scale designs can be used in critical realist ethnographic research in nursing.

## Conclusion

Post-modern/constructivism is an approach commonly used in ethnographic study. This approach values the 'thick description' of communities and cultures and the perspectives and experiences of participants. It has been criticised for subjectivity and the risk of bias. Situated between positivist and post-modern ethnography is post-positivist (realist) ethnography. This focuses on finding the most plausible explanations for why actions, behaviours or events occur, valuing modified objectivity. Following the rise of the internet, online gaming and social media, the concept of 'virtual' or netnography has become more common and is likely to develop as technology advances.

This paper has presented an overview of the historical context of ethnographic study, with a discussion of the components and principles of social anthropology, positivist ethnography, critical ethnography and critical realist ethnography. In doing so, it has provided an introduction to ethnography throughout its progression and development to serve as a starting point for those who are new to ethnography or want to undertake ethnographic study, while providing a critical view of the differing perspectives in it.

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