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Ethnography
Origins, features, accountability, and criticality

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Ethnography is an account of someone’s observation of and experience with a community and their cultural practices in specific contexts. It usually is aimed at offering a ‘thick’ description and interpretation of what is happening in the community at a particular time and place. As such it was originally intended as a research method when the community and their social practices were relatively unknown or inaccessible. It is nowadays widely used interchangeably with various forms of observational or qualitative methods, causing considerable confusion and reducing the value of ethnographic research in understanding social practices in the contemporary world. This chapter aims to outline the origin and development of ethnography, discuss the key features of ethnography as an analytical framework, explore how it can be used in applied linguistics, consider the ethical and accountability issues of doing ethnography, and highlight the significance of the ethnographic research in the era of big data and reproducibility crisis.

Origins and development of ethnography

Whilst ethnography is most often associated with the discipline of anthropology, its origin was in history. Herodotus, known as the Father of History, studied the cultural practices of various peoples beyond the Hellenic realm, which earned him the title ‘philobarbarian’, and is often attributed to have produced the first works of ‘ethnographia’. The German-born historian Gerhard Friedrich Müller, also known as Fyodor Ivanovich Miller, who co-founded the Russian Academy of Sciences, took part in the second phase of the Great Northern Expedition, or the second Kamchatka expedition, between 1733 and 1743, which aimed to map the eastern reaches of Siberia. He and the fellow scientists and artists on the expedition collected data on the people and cultures of the ethnic groups they ‘discovered’ in eastern Siberia. Müller in particular was interested in describing and categorizing clothing, religions and rituals of the communities he encountered on the expedition. This was seen as a major ethnographic work. On his return from Siberia, Müller became historiographer to the Russian empire and sought to write a general account of Russian history based on extensive examinations of the documentary sources. His approach is often described as the ethnographic approach to history. The introduction of the term ‘ethnography’ into the academic discourse is said to have been done by August Ludwig von Schlözer, another German historian of Russian history from Göttingen.
and Müller’s assistant at the Academy, and Christoph Wilhelm Jacob Gatterer, a Göttingen historian of natural history (Vermeulen, 2008).

Whilst these historians used observation, field notes, and documentary analysis to study historical facts, it is the cultural and social anthropologists who developed ethnography as a method both to collect data and to analyse and interpret the cultural practices in communities in the modern world. For example, Edward Burnett Tylor, an English anthropologist and a founder of cultural anthropology, studied the beliefs and practices of people he encountered and observed during his 1856 trip to Mexico and used the data to argue for his theory of human evolution, which consisted of universal stages of development of society and religion. The American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan was also interested in social evolution. He studied kinship and social structure of the north-eastern Native American confederacy of Iroquois or People of the Longhouse, and produced a detailed account of what he described as a matrilineal clan which he argued played a crucial part of the evolution of human society. However, it was the 20th century anthropologists who developed the idea of cultural relativism that a person’s beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on that person’s own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another that has become an essential philosophy of ethnography and a central tool in rejecting Western claims to universality and the salvage of non-Western cultures. Franz Boas, for example, called for attention to be paid specifically to language as a means of categorizing experiences, hypothesizing that the existence of different languages suggested that people categorized, and thus experienced, language differently (e.g. Boas, 1982). This hypothesis was later expanded into the still controversial theory of ‘linguistic relativity’ (Lucy, 1997; McWhorter, 2016). Boas emphasized the use of informants for empirical evidence. Bronislaw Malinowski advocated that an ethnographer should be engrossed with the work for long periods of time in the field and engage in participant observation (see Curdt-Christiansen, this volume) by living with the informant and experiencing their way of life. He urged researchers to observe a situation without imposing any deductive structure or framework upon it and to view everything as strange or unique (Malinowski, 1944). Nevertheless, none of them claimed that their accounts of the social practices of the communities that they observed were entirely objective. They tried to interpret what they saw from the point of view of the community members, yet the interpretation of what has been observed was still the observer’s.

Since the 20th century, ethnography has been used in many disciplines in the social sciences. Anthropologists continue to produce archetypical ethnographies of particular people and cultures that are at least in part based on emic views of values, traditions, and everyday practices. They strongly encourage researchers to spend substantial periods of time to develop extensive familiarity with the community they are studying. Sociologists who are particularly interested in studying structures and processes, everyday life, and human interaction in urban areas of developed and developing countries combine ethnographic methods of participation observation and interviews with surveys and statistical analysis of demographic and economic trends to understand social changes and problems to inform planning and policy making. Some call themselves ‘urban anthropologists’ or ‘urban sociologists’. Out of this work came symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), which argues that individuals create symbolic worlds through their interactions with one another, and these worlds in return shape individuals’ behaviours. As an analytical framework, symbolic interactionism helps to understand how society is preserved and created through repeated interactions between individuals, and how individuals act on the premise of a shared understanding of meaning within their social context. Studying everyday social interaction and behaviour of individuals is therefore central to understanding broader and higher scale social processes and structures. A related yet different sociological approach is ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), which places much more emphasis on
the precise methods participants in a social interaction use in conversational exchanges to make sense of the social world and to manage interpersonal relationships and social structures. Although it has ‘ethno’ (people) in the term, ethnomethodology does not actually use typical ethnographic methods in data collection or analysis, but a more technical conversation analysis (see Prior & Talmy, this volume) of sequential organization of talk-in-interaction. Nevertheless, some ethnographers apply conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Gail, 1974) to part of their data to reveal the details of how meaning is negotiated and structures emerge.

With the social and technological changes since the 1970s, ethnographic research methods have begun to be widely used by scholars in communication, media and cultural studies who are interested in describing and interpreting the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of specific culture-sharing groups. Such groups may be based on shared geography (e.g. online, neighbourhood), identity (e.g. gender, sexuality, race, age), faith, interests (e.g. music, digital game, sporting and recreational activity) or language. Ethnography offers a way of analysing and understanding what Coulon (1995, p. v) called “reality-generating mechanisms of everyday life”, i.e. how ordinary methods, practices and performances construct the ordinary actions used by ordinary people in the accomplishments of their identities through specific social grouping. They argue that we must not take these ordinary, everyday behaviours for granted, because they are all socially conditioned and meaningful in specific contexts. A plethora of new ethnographies has also appeared in the literature, including, for example, digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008), online ethnography (Markham, 2005), internet ethnography (Sade-Beck, 2004), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2008), visual and sensory ethnography (Pink, 2013, 2015), multimodal ethnography (Dicks, Soyinka, & Coffey, 2006), walking ethnographies (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008), mobile ethnography (Novoa, 2015), feminist ethnographies (Skeggs, 2001), etc. These represent techniques of collecting and analysing specific types of data. The philosophy of the ethnographical approach remains broadly the same.

As a way of understanding the particularities of the social life of individuals and social groups, ethnography has also been used in business and management studies, economics, health sciences, politics, social policy, criminology, and other disciplines. I will discuss its use in applied linguistics and language education later. The multidisciplinary applications of ethnography have resulted in two broad but rather different types of approaches: what we might call ‘realistic’ ethnography, and critical ethnography. Realistic ethnography is an account by the ethnographer that is aimed to be as truthful as possible to what was observed in situ. It is usually written from a third-person perspective and in a measured style ostensibly uncontaminated by the ethnographer’s own predisposition and judgment. The community members’ perspectives are reproduced through carefully selected quotations, using local categories (i.e. categories that are observed to be used in the community in question). The ethnography is also aimed to be as holistic as possible. Critical ethnography, in contrast, is produced by researchers who are more explicit in the political views and ideological positions they advocate (see further Starfield, this volume). The important components of a critical ethnography include a value-laden introduction challenging the status quo that addresses concerns about power and control, and provides members of the community in question an opportunity to speak for themselves and to take action. A critical ethnographer is typically interested in issues of power, empowerment, inequality, inequity, dominance, repression, hegemony, marginalization, minoritisation, and victimization (see Chun, this volume).

**Essential features of ethnography**

By and large, doing ethnography involves the following processes: i) having a clear interest in a specific cultural practice of a social group or a social phenomenon; ii) immersing oneself
in everyday social interaction to observe the practice or the phenomenon in context over a substantial period of time, and to take in as many of the variations and possible; iii) collecting evidence of how the members of the community make sense of their own practice or the social phenomenon; and iv) presenting an account of one’s observation. The research interest could come from one’s own experience, including one’s reading of other people’s work so that the interest may be theoretically motivated, and/or one’s political and ideological stance in the case of doing critical ethnography. In becoming immersed in the observation process, the ethnographer usually assumes a specific social role in the community and participates in its activities. It is never a passive process of observing and recording; the ethnographer asks questions, sometimes probingly, to understand the members’ own perspectives. Critical ethnographers may even encourage specific social actions. At the end of the day, though, an ethnography is a detailed and systematic account constructed by the ethnographer and presented to others to inform them of the meaning of a specific practice or of a phenomenon in the community in question. Critical ethnographies are often presented for lobbying purposes or to prompt specific reactions from society.

Ethnography is not a single data collection method. Indeed an ethnography typically involves many different kinds of data, collected through various means, including, for example, participant observation, field notes, audio and video recording of interaction, interviews, documents, maps and drawings, pictures of artefacts, signs and symbols, etc. The ethnography could be written or audio-visually presented, and could incorporate quantitative and second-hand data. The key difference between ethnographic methods and experimental methods, for instance, is that ethnographical data are what is normally and ordinarily available to the ethnographer as well as members of the community under observation in naturally occurring situations. They are not specially designed by and showcased for the researcher. As an analytical approach, ethnography is not aimed at generalizing the findings; instead, it focuses on a very few cases, often just one, and considers them/it in depth regarding the context. It therefore emphasizes exploring social phenomena and interpreting their meanings rather than testing hypotheses. The ethnographer does make certain assumptions about the community and the phenomenon they intend to study. These assumptions provide an orienting framework for the fieldwork and are more often about how to interpret the meaning of a practice or a phenomenon which needs to be proven by the community members’ own interpretations. The ethnographer also uses categories that the members of the community themselves would use in their observation and analysis, and not a priori categories. Ethnographers can and often do study concepts, but are generally more interested in the cultural roots of the concepts and how concepts are interpreted and understood by social groups in cultural contexts. For example, categories such as age, gender, and social class can vary considerably from community to community, and concepts such as freedom, respect, and equality can be understood in very different ways in different cultures.

Ethnography is often described as a holistic method, which means that the analytical focus is on the interconnectedness of different parts. As every part contributes to the meaning of the whole, it is the quality of the contribution, by virtue of its relationship with other parts, rather than the quantity that matters. In the meantime, ‘holistic’ should not be misunderstood as comprehensive. Ethnography goes for the thickness of the interpretation of meanings, not for the completeness of the scope of coverage. Very often more analytical attention is given to a particular aspect of a phenomenon because a deeper understanding of it is significant in the understanding of the whole phenomenon. Therefore, in ethnography one often finds detailed description and lengthy discussion of personal, affective, and instantaneous behaviour and action on particular occasions that are deemed to be compelling. Doing ethnography then depends heavily on the
ethnographer’s own stance, interest, capacity to notice, and perspective on interpretation. Contrary to popular assumption, ethnography is not aimed at an objective account of what is happening in a specific situation; it is a subjective interpretation of what the ethnographer has been able to observe. The ethnographer may endeavour to let the participants speak in their own voices, but we cannot avoid the fact that the participants’ voices are mediated by the ethnographer.

**Ethnography in and for applied linguistics**

As can be seen from the discussion so far, language has always featured prominently in ethnographic research. Linguistic practices provide great data for understanding cultural traditions and values, social structures and relations, and individuals’ cognitive processes of meaning negotiation as well as their emotions, attitudes, and subjectivities. At the same time, ethnography offers a method of understanding human communication works. Hymes (1964) developed a framework called the ‘ethnography of communication’, which specifically uses ethnography to investigate human communication. It gives dual emphasis to the communicative form, which goes beyond spoken and written language, and the wider context of the social and cultural practices and beliefs of the members of a particular culture or community. It aims to reveal the speaker’s ‘communicative competence’; that is, their ability to “select, from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behaviour in specific encounters” (Gumperz, 1972, p. 205). As Saville-Troike (1996, p. 363) says:

> Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what nonverbal behaviors are appropriate in various contexts, what the routines for turn-taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, how to enforce discipline, and the like – in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative dimensions in particular social settings.

The ethnography of communication conceptualizes communication as a continuous flow of culturally specific information and offers detailed analysis of the moment-to-moment communicative acts in culturally specific contexts. Meanings must be understood regarding the context in which a communicative act occurs.

Extending the work of ethnography of communication, a group of socially oriented, broad-based applied linguists in the UK developed linguistic ethnography under the aegis of the UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum (UK LEF), which has been running since the end of the 1990s. Their theoretical viewpoints are as follows (Rampton, 2007, p. 585):

- The contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. Meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories, and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically.
- Analysis of the internal organisation of verbal (and other kinds of semiotic) data is essential to understanding its significance and position in the world. Meaning is far more than just the ‘expression of ideas’, and biography, identifications, stance, and nuance are extensively signalled in the linguistic and textual fine-grain.
These views are shared by many sociolinguists and applied linguists worldwide. Examples of linguistic ethnography work that is particularly relevant to applied linguistics and language education can be found in ‘new literacy studies’, language learning and language use in and beyond the classroom, sociolinguistics of diversity and equality, and multilingual and multimodal communication in professional and institutional contexts.

New literacy studies is typically associated with the work of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and Brian Street (1984), but also includes the work of Bloome and Green (1991), Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič (2000), Gee (2007), and Baynham and Prinsloo (2009). These scholars argue that literacy is a social practice and as such it needs to be understood in relation to the social groups and communities who are engaged in the practice. They use ethnography to investigate how people’s uses of literacy derive meaning and power through their embeddedness within social practice, and critique the dominant models of literacy as a neutral set of skills and competencies. They place much more analytical focus on the relationship between local literacy practices and events and the broader socio-political structures and forces. By replacing decontextualised and individualistic psychological conceptions of literacy with ethnographic accounts in specific social and cultural contexts and highlighting the role of power, new literacy studies not only initiated a critical social turn in literacy research but also influenced a wider shift of interest in applied linguistics generally to the processual views of language and social action, constructionist views of text and context, and distributed views of identity.

Applied linguists also find ethnography a useful tool in understanding language learning and language use in and beyond the classroom. Since the 1960s, there has been an awareness that the language classroom has its own ecologies. The teacher’s and the pupils’ background and experience interact with policy, teaching material, physical conditions, etc. to create a particular environment or eco-system for knowledge construction (e.g. Sommer, 1967). Any change to any element in the eco-system could have a significant impact on teaching and learning practices. Ethnography is a useful tool to study the teacher’s and the pupils’ experiences and practices in the language classroom. This perspective led to a substantial body of literature on classroom interaction, including the interactions of students’ thoughts and behaviours with teachers’ management of academic goals and learning tasks and the interaction with learning technologies (Erickson, 1996; Flewitt, 2011; Jewitt, 2008; Robinson, 2005). More recent work includes ethnographic studies of classroom ecologies of multilingual and multicultural classrooms, focussing on issues of language of instruction and access to information (Creese & Martin, 2008; Hélot & Laoire, 2011).

Language teachers have always been interested in developing learners’ intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence through language learning. Doing ethnography has proven to be particularly relevant to language and intercultural learning because “it stimulates the process of exploring, describing and understanding an unknown culture by means of actual ethnographic enquiry, contrastive analysis of real cultural groups” (Damen, 1987, pp. 54–56). Like most ethnographic studies that involve the teacher and the learner, the teacher can observe and document either their own experiences of teaching overseas or teaching culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students, in which case it would be an autoethnography (see Starfield, this volume). Alternatively, the teacher can be the ethnographer observing and documenting the learners’ experiences of intercultural learning, for example, during study abroad programmes or collaborative learning with culturally diverse co-learners. The learners would also use auto-ethnography to reflect on their own experiences of language and intercultural learning and to enhance their intercultural awareness.

Some ethnographic studies of language teaching and learning focus on specific learning tasks and processes. Contributors to Starfield, Paltridge, and Tardy (2016), for instance, used
ethnography to investigate learners’ experiences with the process of academic writing. Others use ethnography of learning experiences to investigate the development of identities and subjectivities. Duff (2002) studied language use and socialization in an ethnically mixed Canadian secondary school. By examining both the macro- and the micro-contexts of communication within one content area, social studies, she revealed the contradictions and tensions in the classroom discourse and in the teacher’s attempts in fostering respect for cultural identity and difference, and the effects of these on the students’ own construction and articulation of identity. Hornberger (1988) carried out a two-year ethnographic study of language ideology and language attitudes in rural Quechua-speaking communities and their schools in Peru and documented in fine detail their language and literacy practices that revealed attitudes toward oral and written Spanish and Quechua and toward regional/stylistic variation within Quechua. She discussed her observations in relation to language planning and policy in Peru. Such diverse applications demonstrated the power of ethnography as an analytical framework.

With the growing awareness of the impact of migration, applied linguists in recent years have joined sociolinguists in studying linguistic and cultural diversity in contemporary society using ethnography as a research perspective. This work can take place in schools and classrooms, but most often in communities and non-school contexts. Rampton’s (1995) work on crossing – the use of Panjabi by adolescents of African-Caribbean and Anglo descent, the use of Creole by adolescents with Panjabi and Anglo backgrounds, and the use of stylized Indian English in and out of schools – is an exemplary sociolinguistic ethnography of language, ethnicity, and youth in late modernity England, through a detailed examination of how the intricate processes of language sharing and exchange help to overcome race stratification and contribute to a new sense of mixed youth, class, and neighbourhood community. Similarly, Blackledge and Creese (2010) offer an ethnography of multilingual practices of young people in complementary schools in four cities in England, critically examining issues such as nationalism, heritage, culture, identity negotiation, ideology, and power. Heller (2006) explored issues of changing language policy, bilingualism, identity, power, ideology and gender from the point of view of the minority speaker through an ethnography of the linguistic practices of pupils of minority languages in Canadian schools.

More recently, there have been significant developments in the ethnographic studies of multilingual and multimodal communication in everyday social interaction as well as in professional and institutional contexts. A special issue in Social Semiotics (Zhu, Otsuji, & Pennycook, 2017) contains a number of multimodal and multisensory ethnographies of social interactions in a street market and small shops in Mumbai, a subway in Cape Town, a greengrocer in Copenhagen, Bangladeshi-run stores in Tokyo and Sydney, a Polish-run shop in London, Afghan- and Iranian-run stores in a Sydney suburb, and markets in Hong Kong. The studies look at the intersecting modes of multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory semiosis, including the body, space, gesture, senses, and objects, as well as language including sign language. They not only address theoretical and conceptual issues such as space, sign, embodiment, and language, but also contain a great deal of methodological innovation that should inform future ethnographic research in applied linguistics.

**Ethical and accountability issues**

Ethnography requires fieldwork, which in turn requires working closely with people in naturally occurring contexts. Ethnographers tend to spend a considerable period of time with the people in the field and assume specific social roles in the community. They become participants as much as being observers. These actions help to mitigate any imposition and interference by
the ethnographer’s presence. Members of the community become willing participants, who are happy to be studied and volunteer information and points of view which may be inaccessible to other outsiders. In the meantime, ethnographers are usually very careful not to alter the daily schedule of social activities of the people in the community, to protect the identity of the participants even if they have given their permission for their faces and actions to be recorded and shown, and to exclude sensitive and confidential information from reporting. Nevertheless, there are ethical and accountability issues that an ethnographer need to consider and address. As Coffey (1999) pointed out, doing ethnography in itself is a social practice. The fieldwork and the presentation of the ethnographic account construct, reproduce and implicate selves, relationships and personal identities. Ethnography is not an objective, impersonal approach. Subjectivity plays a key role in the construction and maintenance of field relations and the construction of the ethnographic account. A holistic ethnography therefore needs a ‘thoroughly reflexive analysis of ethnographic subjectivity’, what Coffey called ‘the ethnographic self’. Reflexivity will enable us to see that the ethnographer is a person like any other, possessing a physical, emotional and sexual self which influences everything they do. An ethnography therefore needs to include an honest account of the ethnographer, their trajectory, stance, motivation and skills so that the reader of the ethnography could see how much of the description and interpretation is influenced by the ethnographer’s personal views.

Some ethnographers, especially those who do critical ethnography, explicitly incorporate the views of the participants with their own. They do not see ethnography aiming to achieve neutrality and objectivity; rather, it is a critical account of what can be observable from a particular point of view. They see the purpose of ethnography to be a catalyst for social critique and action. Fine (1993) argues that the formal, standardised and idealised ethical guidelines for research are rooted in positivist and post-positivist epistemologies that cannot be adequately applied to ethnography. The ethnographer in Fine’s view has the moral obligation to speak from a particular standpoint for a particular interest. They must be open with funders, colleagues, persons studied or providing information, and relevant parties affected by the work about the purposes, potential impacts, and sources of support for the work. They must also be aware that the closest ethnographers can ever get to reality is an approximate truth. What is depicted in ethnography can never be the whole picture. Moreover, everything is open to multiple interpretations and misunderstandings. An ethnographic account is therefore always experiential and personal.

The criteria used to evaluate the quality of research need to be interpreted and operationalised differently for ethnography than other types of research. For instance, the rigour of an ethnography lies primarily in the interpretation of the data and the arguments put forward, rather than in the design of the project or the quantity of the data. A good ethnography should not only provide valuable information about a community and their cultural practices that may have been unknown to outsiders before, but also need to offer interpretations that can be used to observe, interpret, and understand other practices and phenomena or the same practice and phenomenon in a different way. It may lead to different ways of doing research, asking new and/or different questions, and in the case of critical ethnography, prompt actions in particular ways that may have significant social impacts. As discussed above, ethnography typically is a personal account of what has been observed from a particular perspective. As such, reproducibility (see Marsden, this volume) of the account is not an objective of doing ethnography. Descriptive adequacy, rather than accuracy, is what ethnographers hope to achieve, and adequacy is measured by the scope, richness and depth of the description and analysis. No one ethnographic account can be said to be more accurate than another because of its personal and experiential nature. Nevertheless, it is possible to limit personal bias in observation,
description and interpretation through specific methods such as team ethnography, in which several ethnographers of different genders, ages, experiences and stances observe, describe, and analyse the same practice or phenomenon and compare their descriptions and interpretations. Team ethnography can potentially represent multiple voices too. Fundamentally though, a good ethnography should show sufficient self-awareness on behalf of the ethnographer and contain sufficient information about the ethnographer’s personal background, experience, relationship with the people in the field, and ideological stance for the reader to make judgments about the points of view being articulated through the ethnographic account.

Significance of ethnographic research

Ethnography is an account of personal encounters with cultural practices of a particular community, who have been observed live in the field in their natural habitat. It is aimed at interpreting the observable and the observed in a specific way which can inspire readers of the ethnography to think, see and act differently. Ethnography is conducted by researchers who are in the day-to-day, face-to-face contact with the people they are studying and who in the meantime bring their own experience and points of view to bear on the research process. There is no single way or method of doing ethnography. Typically, ethnographers respond to the needs of the fieldwork and apply a range of different techniques of collecting data. As the most important data for an ethnography are natural cultural practices, observing and recording audio-visually are the main data collection methods. Doing ethnography requires substantial time commitment; it expects the ethnographer to interact with people they are studying for an extended period of time and to enjoy the process. The key purpose is to understand the meaning of specific practices and their significance to members of the community. The data thus collected are then interpreted through a combination of documenting what was observed as systematically and holistically as possible and the ethnographer’s own analysis. Ethnography is therefore inductive in that it is an accumulation of descriptive detail to build explanatory theories rather than structured to test hypotheses derived from existing theories or models (see McKinley, this volume). The interpretative process is dialogic in two senses: ethnographers usually engage the members of the community whose practices have been under scrutiny to offer their points of view and to say if the ethnographer’s interpretation may or may not make sense; and the interpretation by the ethnography in the final output – the ethnography is open to further interpretation by its readers. The ethnography itself is typically a narrative account, but it can contain quantitative data and documentary analysis.

In the era of big data and reproducibility crisis, ethnography has the advantage of offering more nuanced and critical interpretations of the meaning of what has been observed and of confronting concepts and notions that are taken for granted. Ethnography is resolutely personal; it is not meant for generalization, but to offer a personal interpretation of a personal observation. But in doing so, it taps into the intuitive and deep human understanding that goes far beyond what quantitative and experimental research can do in terms of extracting meanings. Of course, doing ethnography requires a high degree of sensitivity. This not only includes exercising discretion and caution to avoid offending, alienating, or harming those being observed, but also being aware of the potential impact of bringing one’s own experience to bear in pursuing certain questions and in interpreting data, which can lead to biases in directions of enquiry and analysis. But in an age when speed and quantity seem to take over our social lives, the fact that doing ethnography requires much more time and thought and has the potential to offer a much richer account and thought-provoking interpretation gives more meaning to our research.
References


