Analysing Ethnographic Research Methods: The Importance of Retaining Immersion During the Analytic Process Using Research From UK-Based Learning Disability Social Care Settings
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Student Guide

Introduction

This exemplar describes the methodological and analytical interplay between fieldnotes and interviews in ethnographic research. It provides extracts from interview transcripts and fieldnotes from fieldwork that took place in learning disability support settings based in the South West of England. The fieldwork was conducted for just over nine months from July 2014 to April 2015. The research aimed to explore how government policy relating to independence and community inclusion was experienced by people working and living in learning disability social care support settings. The fieldwork material is provided by Dr. Carys Banks and is taken from her doctoral thesis which she completed at the University of Bath in 2018.

Contemporary social care policy aims to reduce the exclusion and inequalities that people with learning disabilities experience by empowering them, as much as possible, with independence and equal access to community life. For instance,
there has been a large emphasis on enabling people with learning disabilities to become both active and responsible members of society: as active consumers with the ability to choose and purchase their care and support services in the marketplace, as well as responsible citizens with political rights in relation to the state (Department of Health, 2001; 2009).

Yet, despite these efforts to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities, many people continue to remain excluded and isolated from society (Rickard & Donkin, 2018). Furthermore, health and care services continue to be plagued by cases uncovering fundamental failings, which at worse, have led to terrible abuses of people with learning disabilities (Bubb, 2014; Department of Health, 2012). To unpick further the complexities of empowering people with learning disabilities, the researcher used ethnography to understand the ways that government policy objectives were being experienced by people themselves in everyday practice.

**Defining Ethnographic Fieldnotes and Interviews as Part of Participant Observation**

Given that this research project aimed to observe and understand people’s everyday experiences, ethnography was deemed to be most appropriate in achieving this. Through the ethnographic approach, the ethnographer attempts to immerse themselves within other people’s lives in order to experience, as much as possible, the world through their eyes (Willis & Trondman, 2000). This is a methodological approach often referred to as participant observation and describes the process of both observing and doing as others do in order to get as close as possible to understanding their experiences and understanding of the world around with a view to enabling this to be expressed – or at least approximated – through the ethnographer’s interpretations. Being immersed in the research setting in this way and over a long period enables the ethnographer to be privy to a myriad of interactions between people, including those that might not
be captured through other study designs, such as ones using interview alone.

Two methods often used as part of participant observation are fieldnotes and interviews, which I will now describe below.

Ethnographers define fieldnote writing in a variety of ways. My own variant determines fieldnotes as a means by which the ethnographer records observations and interpretations of people and events made in the field (Mulkay, 1985). I also subscribe to the methodological logic that, to build up thickly layered accounts of the ethnographer’s experiences and observations, it is useful to write fieldnotes after every visit to the field, and that to capture as much detail as possible, it is important that they are written up immediately after each day of fieldwork (Jackson, 1990). Other more practical aspects relating to fieldnote writing from my own perspective include the following: for the purposes of immersion in the field, it is generally best practice to write fieldnotes when away from people and events. However, in some fieldwork contexts, for example, during meeting-style settings, it may be feasible to write fieldnotes whilst in the field. Finally, I find it useful to title all fieldnote entries with location, time, and date of the visit.

I define interviews as either formal interview or informal interview. Using interviews as a research method allows the ethnographer to capture interviewees’ perspectives and gives them some time and space to consider what the researcher has asked them (O’Reilly, 2009). I follow the definition of formal interviews as being conducted at a pre-arranged time and place during the fieldwork. These interviews are commonly recorded either using an encrypted audio recorder or with manual notes taken during the interview (O’Reilly, 2012). For informal interviews, I follow the definition of their being conversations that take place during the natural flow of interactions during fieldwork, which are later recorded in fieldnotes (O’Reilly, 2012). The ethnographer can consider and
prepare a broad set of semi-structured questions prior to engaging in formal and informal interviews. For formal interviews, the ethnographer can choose whether to write down these questions and take them to the interview, but with informal interviews, in order to retain as much as possible the natural flow of life in the setting, I follow the advice that questions/ideas be memorised rather than written down (Silverman, 2007). Interview questions should be based on a combination of ideas and knowledge that the ethnographer brings to the field as well as with what has emerged from the participant observation.

Ethnographic Interviews and Fieldnote Writing With People With Learning Disabilities and Support Workers in Social Care Support Settings

As outlined above, the ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for just over nine months, from July 2014 until April 2015. The aim of the research was to develop further understanding of how government policy pertaining to independence and community inclusion was being experienced in the everyday practice of learning disability support settings. The research took place within two learning disability social care provider organisations based in the South West of England where I spent time with people with learning disabilities and staff members in a range of settings, including home and day services. I also spent time with independent community organisations, including an advocacy service and a café supporting people with volunteering opportunities.

The way that participant observation can provide the ethnographer with access to a range of complex and nuanced expressions and communicative practices is beneficial for gaining insight into all lived experiences. However, for this research, it took on a special significance in terms of how I was able to observe and engage with people with learning disabilities. There is much evidence to show that many people with learning disabilities can deeply reflect on their lives as well as express
their wishes in meaningful ways (Johnson, 2009; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). Indeed, during my fieldwork, I often experienced first-hand people's ability to do this. Yet, there is evidence to show that many people with learning disabilities do, to varying degrees, experience difficulty in verbally conveying their lived experiences, especially ones that are emotionally complex (Jahoda, Wilson, Stalker, & Cairney, 2010). To this end, participant observation, which does not solely rely on people verbally accounting for themselves, was a vital means by which to capture life as it was really happening and in all its complexities for people with learning disabilities.

Analysis

Retaining Immersion With the Field Into the Analytical Stages of Research

With ethnographic research, it is of the utmost importance for the ethnographer to see – or at least approximate – the world through the eyes of people themselves, which is achieved through immersion into people's worlds by observing and doing as they do, referred to above as participant observation. Given this importance of immersion in the fieldwork stages, it then follows that retaining this immersion into the stages of analyses is of equal import. The methods used to collect material during fieldwork, such as fieldnotes and interviews, require different analytical tools and so also involve different ways to continue the sensory experience of retaining a sense of the context from which they emerged (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I will now provide descriptions of how these tools can be utilised with a view to retaining as much immersion as possible within the original field context.

Throughout the fieldwork, I engaged in participant observation at all stages. After every visit, I recorded my experiences and observations in fieldnotes, which I then coded and analysed. I used this material to inform the direction of the semi-
structured formal and informal interviews. The interview material was then collated with the fieldnote material with a view to building up thick layers of interpretation of people’s lives.

Given the importance of staying close to the original field context, I felt that adopting an in-depth thematic analysis approach was appropriate for this aim (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998; Emerson et al., 2011), as this approach favours the “summary and analysis of qualitative data through the use of extended phrases and/or sentences rather than shorter codes” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 208). Broadly, this involved reading and re-reading fieldnotes and listening repeatedly to recorded interviews, during which time I would highlight text in fieldnotes and make notes from the interviews.

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**Analysing Fieldnotes (Written Material)**

Here, I refer to coding as “the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants’ narratives and interpreted by the ethnographer. This process enables the ethnographer to begin to understand the world from each participant’s perspective” (Sutton & Austin, 2015). There were several stages that made up the processes of coding. However, I did not adopt a strict instrumental set of guidelines to follow, which could be done for example by following a version of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Instead, I interpreted coding to be an “exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas to follow” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8).

Codes were separated into groups, which were based around the following: when they occurred, the policy they related to, how I observed others interpret them, the conceptual theme/idea they related to and my own interpretation of this. Over time, these different groups came together to form a map of what I was observing and experiencing. When it felt appropriate, for the purposes of clarifying my own ideas, I would display these themes in visual diagrams. As well as providing
clarity, this also helped me to build up a clearer picture of how groups fitted within the bigger picture of developing themes. Visual diagrams were made up of details pertaining to ethnographic material, which would then be assigned conceptual ideas. For example, a visual diagram pertaining to my experience of accompanying a participant to an employment training service was assigned a conceptual idea relating to economic empowerment.

In the very early stages of analysis, these processes of basic coding are useful and essential in iteratively building up a picture, through words and descriptions, of the participant observation. As the participant observation progresses, however, the ethnographer needs to begin engaging in more focused and defined conceptualising. After this, the processes of coding evolve into longer descriptions of concepts and themes, including connections and dissonances between these. It is essential that this move from basic coding towards in-depth conceptualising takes place as it allows the ethnographer to keep the ideas and themes that emerged during analytical stages interlocked within the context of the field rather than extracting them as discrete words and phrases (Emerson et al., 2011).

Within my ethnographic research, the process of separating observations and interpretations into groups began to develop further and these groups began to form into defined themes, which eventually became overarching themes. An example of this process occurred in relation to the themes of responsibility and people with learning disabilities getting into trouble (see data exemplar below). These themes were developed out of observations of some people with learning disabilities breaking the rules within their support settings and how this was responded to and framed by the staff supporting them. In triangulating these with my own observations and with wider literature, these themes were then connected to the broader concept of capacity, in terms of what this means for people with learning disabilities, and what this might indicate about relationships between citizens and the state within the context of social care. The themes developed from
these processes were then taken back into the field to see whether they matched with what was occurring. If they were found not to, I assessed why this might be. For instance, whether the occurrence I recorded was an isolated but legitimate interpretation, or whether I had misunderstood what had been observed. These processes of developing ideas and themes occurred continually throughout the fieldwork.

**Analysing Interviews (Aural Material)**

The ideas that emerged from the fieldnotes formed the basis of the semi-structured formal and informal interviews, which were conducted towards the latter stages of the fieldwork. The decision was made to conduct interviews towards the end of fieldwork as this gave me time in the field to develop ideas and questions that emerged out of what was being observed and experienced. In this sense, interviews were used as a methodological tool to drill down on to points of significance that emerged throughout the fieldwork stages.

Again, the need to retain the findings within their emergent context shaped the way that I analytically approached the content of the interviews. Initially, I began coding and analysing the interviews I had recorded by hand, using thematic analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998; Emerson et al., 2011). However, I found that working from transcripts removed my embodied experience of the contexts in which the interviews took place. Merrill and West (2009) state that engaging with the written transcriptions is an important aspect of analysis when working with small extracts. However, for larger pieces of recorded conversation, they contend that there can be “a danger of unreadability, and getting lost in the detail of language use” (p. 125). They go on to say that some “aspects of an interview can get lost in transcription, including the music of speech as well as subliminal information” (p. 125). Although Merrill and West suggest this can be countered by both listening to as well as reading transcripts, I have
followed the approach taken by Kleinman and Copp (1993) who argue for the importance of engaging with the personal and emotional aspects of fieldwork. I argue that retaining these aspects during the analysis requires one to relive, as much as possible, the nature of interactions during interviews, which could best be achieved by listening to the audio recordings. Indeed, this analytical stance could be aligned with Erving Goffman’s approach to working with collected research material, when he comments that the point is “not to, of course, just listen to what they talk about, but to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond to their situation” (Goffman, 1989, p. 125). Crucially, I felt that such “grunts” and “groans” could only have been experienced in aural form and so I listened to recordings repeatedly, writing down on a separate word document points of significance, connections or dissonances.

Summary

The example above has described the methodological and analytical interplay between ethnographic fieldnotes and interviews. It focuses on the importance of applying and analysing these methods in ways that retain a sensory experience of the field into the stages of analyses. For example, this can be seen within how the analysis started with descriptive coding and moved towards more conceptual insights as both the fieldwork and analysis developed and unfolded over time. It also shows how these developments inform the study design itself in terms of the decision to conduct interviews towards the end of fieldwork, which gave me as the ethnographer time in the field to develop ideas and questions that emerged out of what was being observed and experienced.

Reflective Questions

1. Why do you think that combining fieldnotes and interviews is an effective way of developing a layered interpretation of the field?
2. What do you think the methodological risks are in applying an open-ended approach to analysing ethnographic material?

3. Can you see how the theme of responsibility emerged from the interview extracts provided, and did you interpret the material in any other ways?

4. Using the fieldnote extracts provided below, think about how you would apply basic coding which would then develop into conceptualisations of overarching themes.

Further Readings


References


