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URBAN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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Introduction

Over fifteen years ago, scholar Loretta Lees wrote of the 'ethnographic void' in urban geography, and made a plea for critical ethnographic approaches from urban geographers (Lees 2003). Since then, geographers have been increasingly using ethnographic methods to investigate numerous critical urban issues, including homelessness, gentrification, policing, migration, activism, poverty and youth subcultures, among others. Ethnography allows for in-depth examinations of social life and is well suited for unravelling the politics of survival at the micro scale, particularly given rising global inequalities. As a research method, it can help scholars make sense of everyday experiences in order to provide greater insight into the complexities of urban life.

In this chapter I discuss some of the main issues surrounding *doing* ethnography. Based upon my own experiences conducting extensive and in-depth research with street vendors and beggars in Ecuador's largest cities (see Swanson 2010), I discuss some of the strengths and limitations of ethnography. In doing so, I hope to provide guidance for those of you embarking upon the exciting, yet often daunting, task of undertaking your own dissertation research. I frame this chapter around the theme of urban poverty and marginality, a pressing topic in so many cities around the world, particularly where gaps between the rich and poor continue to rise. Before delving into specifics regarding how to do ethnography, however, I briefly discuss how geographers have approached ethnographic research. I suggest that the way

geographers *do* ethnography is not entirely consistent with traditional methods employed by anthropologists and sociologists.

Ethnographic research in geography

Ethnography often involves unequal power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. For instance, while some may focus on homeless youth in New York City (Gibson 2011), others may focus on federal bureaucrats in Vancouver (Mountz 2010), both of which reflect situations where there are obvious power imbalances. Beginning in the late 1960s, scholars began to explore these unequal power dynamics more critically, particularly in the discipline of anthropology. This shift was especially spurred on by the 1967 publication of revered ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski's personal fieldwork diaries. Malinowski was a scholar who spent years researching culture, magic and exchange systems among the Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific. Since the publication of his first book in 1922, his vigorous research methods became the model for ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in terms of participant observation. During his research he realized that actions do not always match intent, meaning people often say one thing, but do another entirely. He argued that by living with a group, spending time with them and integrating oneself into their culture, researchers become better able to experience culture as an 'insider', thus gaining greater insight. This was a significant shift from the so-called armchair anthropologists of before who had long theorized about cultures from afar, in keeping with colonial and imperial traditions. Yet, when Malinowski's private thoughts were published after his death, his diaries revealed him to be a 'crabbed, self-preoccupied, hypochondriacal narcissist, whose fellow-feeling for the people he lived with was limited in the extreme' (Geertz 1967: 12). His diaries demonstrated quite clearly that the way he chose to represent himself in his scholarly texts was altogether different than reality. Hence began the crisis of representation.

Scholars came to realize that writing about culture involved representations that were necessarily partial, partisan and problematic (Goodall 2000). They realized that rather than providing unbiased depictions of cultures, ethnographers cannot help but provide incomplete and subjective representations. Clifford (1986) went so far as to call ethnographies 'partial truths', or even fictions, due to inevitable omissions and the silencing of certain voices. These scholars also recognized that ethnographic writing is profoundly shaped by the ethnographers' positionality, or by their individual social locations and life experiences. For instance, Malinowski's research would have produced very different results had it been conducted by a native Trobriand Islander as opposed to a young Polish interloper. Thereafter, scholars tried to distance themselves from the presumed objective, ethnographic gaze to write more self-reflexive and openly subjective ethnographies. Or, as stated

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by Goodall (2000: 78), scholars 'began turning our gaze away from those whom we were studying to the process we used to study and write, and within that turning, we came full circle, back to ourselves'.

This self-reflexive turn had a particularly strong impact on feminist geography. In a 1994 special issue of *The Professional Geographer*, scholars Cindi Katz, Kim England, Heidi Nast, Audrey Kobayashi and Melissa Gilbert wrote influential papers concerning the ethics and power dynamics involved in field research. They encouraged researchers to recognize and problematize the cultural baggage, biases and uneven balances of power that are inherent in research. They pushed researchers to collaborate with and learn from their participants, a fundamentally different approach than in the past. These scholars also raised key questions concerning the ethical outcomes of research and our responsibilities to those with whom we work. These types of concerns have had profound impacts upon academic disciplines today, particularly as evidenced through university ethics committees and institutional review boards that are tasked to review student and faculty research proposals.

Recognizing the uneven power balances in research pushed scholars to question some of the larger structural factors shaping these personal and political inequalities, particularly in cities. While sociologists have been concerned with urban inequality since at least the turn of the twentieth century (Park and Burgess 1925), increasing concentrations of poverty and marginality at the end of the twentieth century reinvigorated academic debates on the issue. Critical urban scholars, including Loïc Wacquant (2004), Philippe Bourgois (2003), Katherine Newman (1999), Mitchell Duneier (1999) and Michael Burawoy and his graduate students (2001), published powerful, moving and deeply reflexive ethnographies, which had a tremendous impact on the ways in which urban poverty and marginality are perceived. For instance, Newman, who writes to dispel myths surrounding the working poor in Harlem, New York, begins her book with a poignant and sobering account of the struggles of young Jamal and Kathy as they try to make ends meet on Jamal's meagre Burger Barn salary. Her work explores the social and structural conditions that make it so difficult for poor families to get ahead in the USA. Wacquant, a French sociologist, spent three years training at a boxing gym in a Chicago 'ghetto' in order to understand the exploitation and social ostracization of African Americans. In an emotionally intense ethnography, Bourgois describes how he spent four years living in East Harlem, and hanging out in a crackhouse, in order to explore poverty and ethnic segregation in one of the most expensive cities in the world. His account is, at times, brutal because he believes that '[t]he depth and overwhelming pain and terror of the experience of poverty and racism in the United States needs to be talked about openly and confronted squarely, even if that makes us uncomfortable' (Bourgois 2003: 18).

Geographers have been slower to engage in urban ethnography, despite calls to the contrary (Fairbanks 2012; Herbert 2000; Jackson 1985; Lees 2003). This could be because geographers approach ethnography in ways that are different from

anthropologists and sociologists, to the extent that many are reluctant to label their work 'ethnographic', strictly speaking. For instance, geographers tend to use mixed methods (for example, combining participant observation and interviews with geo-spatial techniques), conduct fieldwork over several short but intensive periods of time (as opposed to living in the field for up to three years), and often publish their work in peer-reviewed journal articles rather than in books. In fact, a few have proposed relabelling the ethnographic work that geographers do as *geo-ethnography* (see Anderson 2012; Matthews et al. 2005; Till 2005), since our methods do not always sit easily within traditionally defined norms of ethnography. Although limited in number, geographers have produced a range of fascinating and important ethnographies in cities, including work on urban policing in Los Angeles (Herbert 1997), global migrants in London (Wills et al. 2010), slum settlements in Delhi (Datta 2011), street-vendor struggles in Mexico City (Crossa 2009), human rights activism in Buenos Aires (Bosco 2006), world-class city making in Delhi (Ghertner 2011), prisons and race in Los Angeles (Gilmore 2007), street kids in New York City (Gibson 2011), and Indian diasporas and urban development in Kolkata (Bose 2007), to name a few. What makes these ethnographies geographic is that they cut across scales to explore complex local–global interconnections. For instance, in discussing transnational migrants in the city of London, May et al. (2007: 161) state that

> instead of holding apart the 'global' and the 'local', we need to embrace a relational view of scale: examining the variety of scales at which processes shaping global city labour markets unfold, and the manner in which processes operating at one scale help constitute processes operating at another.

The body of geographic scholarship using urban ethnography – or perhaps geo-ethnography – continues to grow. More recent research topics include community and citizenship in a metropolitan LBGT church (Seitz 2017), mixed-income public housing in Toronto (August 2016), activism and policing in Mexico City (Crane 2015), indigenous youth and health in San Diego (Wood et al. 2018), and water politics in Bangalore (Ranganathan 2014). Using geographic tools and techniques, geographers are reshaping ethnography in ways that may allow for more nuanced understandings of how social and spatial relations are expressed across scales in an increasingly complex world.

Preparing for research

Given this background to ethnography, the question remains: how do we prepare for and *do* ethnography? As noted by DeLyser and Starrs (2001), knowing how to conduct field research is not an innate skill. Yet, teaching ethnography is tricky since

so many lessons learned no longer apply once we enter the field. Bernard Nietschmann, a renowned geography professor at the University of California, Berkeley from 1977 to 2000, offered the following advice to graduate students (2001: 177):

1 Prior to leaving for the field, carefully draw up a plot plan, list of materials, etc.
2 Immediately upon arriving at the field, throw away item No. 1 above. Now that you've seen the field, it obviously won't work anyway.

Now, don't throw away your proposals just yet! Clearly, having a carefully planned proposal, with core research questions, will help guide your research throughout the length of your fieldwork. But it is important to recognize that some of your questions and plans may change once you actually begin your fieldwork. When I began my doctoral fieldwork in Quito, Ecuador, I arrived with the intention of staying for nine months, but I ended up staying for eighteen. My research proposal detailed a rigorous plan to work with migrant street-working children, and outlined a series of people and organizations to liaise with when I arrived. Of course, once I saw the field, my research plans changed. The core substance of my research remained the same; what differed were the specifics. While my research proposal was broadly titled 'Globalization and Childhood: A Case Study of Street and Working Children in Quito, Ecuador', my final dissertation was more about urban restructuring and exclusion; gender and public space; migrant youth identities and childhood; racialization of indigenous peoples; and begging and informal sector strategies. Globalization and childhood were themes that ran through my work, but I discovered new themes as well. This is why *doing* ethnography is important. Theorizing about the nature of urban poverty from the classroom, for instance, is an altogether different experience than going out into the community, talking to people about their experiences, participating in community events, and experiencing first hand how inequality takes shape on the ground. Through these ethnographic experiences, researchers often realize that the questions they were asking at the beginning of their projects were the wrong questions. This is an important step in undertaking solid, ethnographic research.

Another caveat for doing ethnography is that you must be willing to spend a significant amount of time with the people and society you are studying. While I spent eighteen months in the field, few undergraduate or master's students will have this luxury of time. For this reason, ethnography may not be an appropriate method for everyone. For instance, a one-week class field trip to Mallorca is an insufficient amount of time to build an ethnographic project. However, ethnography may be appropriate if you have already built trust within a particular community at home. For instance, perhaps you are a roller derby fanatic and have been involved in this sub-culture for years. For your dissertation, you would like to study girl culture, power and politics as they take shape in London's roller derby world. In this case,

you may already have gatekeepers, key contacts and an established reputation within your chosen community, thus garnering you a significant level of trust. Ethnography may be an appropriate research method in this type of scenario.

Doing research

The time has come to begin your fieldwork, but where and how do you begin? If you are at all like me, you may find starting projects difficult. When I began my doctoral fieldwork, I had never been to Ecuador before. I had previously travelled around South America, including to a number of Andean countries, but Ecuador was new to me. This was because I had switched my research focus from child waste pickers in Vietnam to street-working children in Ecuador during the second year of my PhD programme (which was a fairly substantial change of focus!). This meant that I had a steep learning curve upon arrival in Ecuador. Perhaps for this reason, I became very tentative. Time began to pass by quickly and I had little to show in return. While I had convinced myself that I was becoming acclimatized to Ecuadorian culture, becoming better at Spanish, and that I was engaging in extensive participant observation (all true), my time in Ecuador was limited, and my advisers were beginning to wonder what was going on. I received pleading messages from them such as, 'Kate, I am concerned about you. I see you are working very hard at different things but you are not being strategic about developing logical connections in your research plan.' This was true. I was dabbling in many areas but was not being strategic. In fact, I was somewhat overwhelmed and unsure where to begin. Part of my hesitation stemmed from a fear that no one would want to talk to me, or that I would take up too much of people's time or, possibly worse, that I would ask bad questions. I figured that the more time I spent absorbing local culture and reading secondary literature sources, the more prepared I would become. However, research projects run on a timeline, so this was clearly not a viable long-term strategy. (Note: this is an especially important point for undergraduate and master's students, who have less time in which to produce their dissertations!) Eventually, I mustered up the nerve to pick up the phone and begin calling my list of potential key informants. For me, that first phone call and subsequent appointment were a crucial step, as I knew this meant that I was committed: I *would* be interviewing someone important within the next week, and there was no turning back. Of course, sometimes I did get rejected, sometimes I did take up too much of people's time, and sometimes I definitely did ask bad questions. In fact, the first interview I did was with a representative from CONAIE, Ecuador's leading indigenous political organization, and it ended with him giving me a brochure about the organization and telling me to go home and study it! But the more interviews I did, the more skilled I became at asking questions and navigating the social dynamics involved in an interview (see Chapter 4, this volume). My greatest surprise during

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this process was that I learned that people liked talking to me and, in fact, many loved telling me all about themselves and their views on the world. If you think about it, people rarely have opportunities to talk exclusively about themselves and their thoughts, and I found that many really relished this opportunity. The more questions I asked, the more they warmed up and the conversation flowed. Once I discovered this, I became much more confident and my research progressed rapidly. But before you can get to this point, you have to make that first phone call, or send that first email, or introduce yourself to that intimidating-looking person at the community meeting. You will make blunders to begin with, but this is normal; like anything, the more you practise, the better you get.

Making appointments with officials was one thing, but approaching random working children on the streets was another. My first few attempts to approach children were interesting, but it was clear that these children had no reason to trust me. For this reason, I needed a good gatekeeper or someone who could provide me with entrance into this community. Finding a good gatekeeper is critical, as this person can make or break your research. The gatekeeper you choose must be someone who is trusted, who has a strong social network, and who is willing to introduce you to those you wish to work with. For instance, say you are interested in researching gang culture and violence. Due to strict hierarchies within this subculture, it matters a lot who you choose as your gatekeeper. Do you choose someone from a non-governmental organization, who actively works to get young people out of gangs? If you choose this route, the young people you meet with will likely be those who are trying to leave or have already left the gang, and may paint a very negative portrait of their experiences. This will represent a particular truth. What if you have access to someone in a gang? This would provide a very different portrait of gang life, although it could put you at a greater risk of actually experiencing violence. Dennis Rodgers (2007: 455), an anthropologist conducting research on poverty and violence in Managua, Nicaragua, describes how he managed to befriend one of his community's more prominent gang members, and eventually became initiated into the gang through three rites involving varying degrees of violence and criminality. In doing so, however, he gained an entirely different understanding of gang life. He states:

> becoming a member of the gang and adopting certain behaviour patterns allowed me to understand much more viscerally particular aspects of gang life. I might well never have understood the nature of the love that the *pandilleros* [gang members] felt for their neighbourhood, for example, because it was something that lay outside my intellectual horizons.

The point here is not to encourage you to go out and join a gang in the name of research; rather, it is to consider how different types of gatekeepers fundamentally shape the outcomes of research. Your gatekeeper's positionality and biases will affect

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the ways in which you are perceived, and how people respond to your research questions. Only after you have spent significant time with a community will people begin to trust you for your own merits.

In my case, I spent three months working with one organization before I realized that it would not be able to provide me with access to the children I was interested in. I wanted to learn more about the young indigenous children who begged and sold *chicles* – or chewing gum – in the city's main tourist districts. By asking a lot of questions, I eventually found Janeth who was directing a programme for indigenous street vendors and beggars in Quito. She and her small organization were the only ones working with this group of youth and I was lucky to have found her. She had many years of experience working at a shelter for indigenous migrants in Quito, and she was also directing a few development projects in a group of rural communities where most of these indigenous migrants were from. After we met and I told her about my research interests, she invited me to work with her both in the rural communities and on the streets of Quito. Since she was underfunded, she needed help. Due to her years of experience working with migrants, Janeth was able to provide access in crucial ways. In fact, I do not think I could have completed my project without her. The only difficulty was that her politics were explicitly anti-begging, as she was trying to provide young people with alternative means of earning income. However, I was trying to present myself as neutral and non-judgemental. Because of my connection to Janeth, most community members assumed that my politics were the same as hers, meaning that few would talk to me about their involvement in begging – at least, to begin with. It was a long time before people trusted me enough to open up.

Once you have secured your gatekeeper and have been invited into a community, you must learn how to observe. This is easier said than done. In our society, we often busy ourselves when we are alone and rarely let our eyes and minds roam. For instance, when you are alone, how often do you simply sit and watch life go by? How long do you leave your phone in your pocket without checking it for texts, news or connecting with friends? Alternatively, perhaps you prefer to bury your head in a book, rather than sit awkwardly by yourself. Some people are better at being alone with their thoughts than others, but for many people it is a difficult task. In order to practise observing, I urge you to begin detaching your eyes from your gadgets when you are out and about and begin watching the world around you with fresh eyes. In doing so, you may begin to look at things differently and notice other things that you have never paid attention to before.

Ethnography involves participant observation, which is a practice that recognizes that what people say is often inconsistent with what they do. For instance, in my research young people often told me that they never begged, yet I would later see them begging on street corners. Participant observation means learning how to participate within a community, but also being able to step back and analyse events as they occur. Some people choose to fully immerse themselves in a particular culture

or community, whereas others prefer a role more on the sidelines. By participating in a community, researchers are often able to understand the social dynamics, power relations, perceptions, struggles and experiences of the group at a depth that they may not have been able to otherwise. For myself, my role as a participant increased as community members became more comfortable with me and as I became more comfortable with them. My weeks involved both visiting the rural communities and accompanying Janeth during her street outreach work in Quito. During this process I learned that the vast majority of indigenous women and children begging and selling *chicles* in Quito were from one small community in particular, named Calhuasí. Men and older boys also migrated from this community to work as shoe shiners, and sometimes to sell goods on buses. By spending a large amount of time in their village, I was able to gain significant trust, which was crucial to my success on the streets. I eventually reached a stage where a family agreed to host me in their home in Calhuasí for a period of one month. This was groundbreaking as it allowed me to become more fully integrated into the community, to the extent that I was even asked to be a *comadre* (which literally means 'co-mother', but in practice is more similar to the role of a godmother) to a young child. Thereafter, when Calhuaseños saw me (and my dog, as I moved to the community with my dog), on the streets, they immediately recognized me as a familiar and friendly face. Young people, my dog and I would often 'hang out' in a city park, playing Frisbee or talking about their experiences on the streets. Sometimes they would use my recorder to sing songs and giggle while they played back their performances. Eventually, many young people started coming to my apartment to visit, as I lived close to a corner where many worked. During this time, we would chat, eat and look at pictures of their families and friends on my laptop. These became great impromptu interview situations, as many were eager to tell me all about their lives.

An important issue during any ethnographic project is the matter of informed consent. This is particularly important when working with young people and marginalized groups. Prior to interviewing people, whether formally or informally, you must be explicit concerning what your research project is about, the expected outcomes, and any possible risks (or benefits) to participants. Your participants must voluntarily choose to be part of your project and must be deemed capable of making this informed decision. If you are working with minors, for instance, you might need to seek the consent of their parents or guardians, or be able to prove that they are emancipated minors (in the case of some street children, for instance). Unequal power dynamics are another issue that can shape research in unexpected ways. Many research projects on poverty necessarily focus on marginalized groups. Yet, those who direct these research projects are often from more privileged middle-income and upper-income backgrounds. Race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, ability and other identity markers can also critically inform positions of power within research projects. For instance, in my work the unequal power dynamics were difficult to ignore; I was a privileged, white Westerner, able to jet around the

world to study impoverished, racialized, indigenous beggars in Ecuador. At the micro scale my power was sometimes subverted in unexpected ways, for instance when I was treated like a child due to my presumed incompetence regarding household maintenance. In one instance, the parents of my Calhuaseño host family left for three days but chose to put their 12-year-old daughter in charge instead of me. On another occasion, an 8-year-old boy was directed to cook my lunch in his mother's absence (see Swanson 2008). Nevertheless, the reality was that in the grand scheme of things, my positionality allowed me great privilege and access to spaces and information that others may not have been able to attain. Being aware of these power dynamics is crucial in order to conduct ethical research, and help you anticipate how your positionality might affect your research plans. Most universities have ethics committees or institutional review boards that can provide detailed guidance on how to obtain informed consent, and sometimes how to navigate unequal power relations.

Writing up research

During your research it is vital that you take extensive field notes every single day you are in the field. If you do not write things down, you will forget them. Allow me to repeat that: you *will* forget things. Write *everything* down. I would further advise you to type up your notes at the end of every day and flesh them out with further details. I worked in Ecuador with an anthropologist who was very disciplined about her field notes and would spend at least two hours a night typing them up when they were still fresh in her mind, regardless of what else was happening in her life. She made this task her priority. This saved her hours and hours of tedious work typing up and making sense of her notes later, as I had to do. Being disciplined about this is important because your field notes will become the raw data of your project. As noted by Goodall (2000: 86, original emphasis):

> fieldnotes are less about what you initially 'see' and 'experience' than they are about *connecting* those fieldwork details to larger and more self-reflexive issues. Which is to say that what fieldnotes represent is one part recorded observations and experiences and two parts interpretation, or how you learn to *hear in* and *through* all of that.

In other words, your field notes represent your first step towards making sense of the cultural world you are studying.

The next step is to weave this into a richly written account. Many ethnographers rely heavily upon first-person quotes, which help stories come to life through the words of their informants. These quotes add character, tone and richness. Others use

impressionistic styles and write in a way that demands attention. For instance, Hoffman (2008: 123) begins his urban ethnography regarding the life of a young man in Freetown, Sierra Leone, as follows:

> Mohammed breaks rocks. It is 'work' only in that it fills his days and demands much of his slender body. Smashing stone into gravel with a small hammer is one of the tasks Mohammed performs for the right to remain a squatter, a caretaker of someone else's land. What money Mohammed has comes in other unreliable and hard-won ways: hustling on the streets of Freetown; performing odd jobs for mechanics or welders; or, his most lucrative activity these days, running *djamba* [marijuana] to the Liberian border.

Hoffman draws the reader in with his prose, but also hints at the rich themes at the centre of his ethnography. He continues in a self-reflexive manner by bringing himself into the story and describing his relationship to Mohammed. This comes back to your positionality: in writing your ethnography you must understand how your identity shapes your research results and the interpretation of these results. For many, this is difficult work. As noted by Heynen (2006: 928), 'most of us have been trained to write in the third person, to be objective, to be uncritical and apolitical, to not put more of ourselves in our work. We have been trained to keep the pain and suffering of the world at arm's length.' This is not the case with ethnography; instead we are encouraged to put more of ourselves into our work, be subjective, be explicit about how our positionality shapes our representations, and to put our personal politics up front.

Conclusion

Many of us hope that our research results will be significant enough to matter, or to somehow make a difference in the world. For those concerned with social justice, poverty and marginality, ethnography is a particularly potent methodology. By spending time with people and experiencing their day-to-day realities, ethnographic research has rich potential to unravel myths and challenge assumptions and stereotypes. However, ethnography is not without limits. As Gowan (2010: 19) notes, 'the awkward intimacies of ethnographic method have a tendency to bring up excruciating dilemmas, pressing us to wrestle particularly intensely with questions of representation, reciprocity, accountability and other "power effects"'. These experiences can be emotionally intense. Some argue that doing research on emotionally difficult topics – such as gangs, violence or displacement – can sometimes lead to secondary trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (Warden 2013). These awkward intimacies and dilemmas can also last long term, as ethnographers often become very close to their research participants. For instance, I conducted my

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research in Ecuador fifteen years ago, yet I am still in contact with some of those I worked with, many of whom have now migrated to New York City. Research relationships generally do not end when the funding runs out, and ethnographers must be prepared to make long-term personal and emotional commitments. For some, this is a strength, whereas for others, it is a weakness. Another critique of ethnography is that research results can sometimes be interpreted in unintended ways, particularly for research focused on marginalized groups. Ethnographers must be very sensitive to the political implications of writing about the lives of the poor and marginalized, lest their results be misinterpreted. Regardless of whether you are 'studying up' or 'studying down', it is crucial to think through the ethical implications of your findings. What broader impacts will your research have? How will your results be used? In sum, ethnography is a powerful methodological tool and one that is under-utilized in geography. By using our social–spatial training, geographers are well situated to produce engaging and innovative geo-ethnographies to reshape discourses of poverty and marginality in cities around the world.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1 What are the advantages of ethnography?

Ethnographic methods allow researchers to produce in-depth accounts of particular issues in ways that more quantitative research cannot. Using ethnography, researchers can capture individual voices and stories to create richly written narratives, weaving theory and empirics together.

2 What are the disadvantages of ethnography?

Ethnography rarely produces statistically significant results, as it aims for depth rather than breadth of data. Some argue that, because of this, little conclusive scientific evidence can be gleaned from ethnographic data. However, ethnography is not designed to produce this sort of knowledge; rather, it is ideally suited for in-depth case studies that can inform broader theory.

3 Should I use ethnography in my research project?

Ethnography is appropriate when you intend to spend a sustained amount of time with a particular group of people, sub-culture or society. Ethnography requires trust and this can rarely be obtained over a period of two or three weeks. Rather, you must be willing to invest time and energy in order to build up long-term relationships, which will result in better access and insight.

4 When is ethnography inappropriate?

Ethnography is inappropriate when you have a limited amount of time, such as during short class field trips. It may be appropriate to use ethnographic methods during these field trips (such as participant observation, interviews, diaries, field notes, photos, etc.) but you will not be in the field long enough to have conducted an 'ethnography'. Ethnography is also inappropriate if you cannot gain the confidence of the community, sub-culture or society you are interested in. Some communities are mistrustful of outsiders, particularly researchers, and it may be very difficult for you to gain entrance. Will your research be useful to this community? How will you be invited into this community? What skill or ability can you offer in exchange? Reciprocity is crucial in ethnographic research, particularly in terms of building strong relationships. If you cannot gain a community's trust, you may need to find a different research method, or perhaps a different research topic.

5 What field research techniques do ethnographers use?

Ethnographers use a range of techniques. Participant observation is a key technique, along with qualitative interviews and secondary data collection. Other techniques vary but can include photography, mapping, diaries, notes, videos, questionnaires, focus groups, surveys, and participatory action research, among others. The key to ethnography is to spend a sustained amount of time with people in order to immerse yourself within a particular society or culture.

Follow-Up References

Desmond, M. (2016) *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

In this powerful urban ethnography, Desmond, the winner of a McArthur Genius Award, argues that the lack of affordable housing is one of the most important drivers of inequality in the USA. To conduct his research, he spent five months living in a Milwaukee trailer park and nine months living in a Milwaukee rooming house in the inner city. Additionally, he interviewed 250 tenants in eviction court, surveyed over a thousand renters in Milwaukee, and analysed hundreds of thousands of eviction court records.

Goodall, H.L., Jr (2000) *Writing the New Ethnography*. New York, NY: Altamira Press.

This is a fun, well-written book that outlines the process of doing and writing up ethnographic research. At the end of every chapter there are a series of helpful writing

exercises on various topics, including framing a research question, developing a voice, and ethics in research and writing, among others.

Herbert, S. (2000) For ethnography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 24: 550–68.

Herbert challenges a number of common criticisms of ethnography in this paper, including: 'that it is unscientific; that it is too limited to enable generalization; and that it fails to consider its inherent representational practices'. After countering each of these claims, he concludes by encouraging geographers to engage in more and more rigorous ethnography.

Swanson, K. (2008) Witches, children and Kiva-the-research-dog: striking problems encountered in the field. *Area*, 40: 55–64.

This is a methods paper wherein I discuss some of the problems and issues that I encountered during my ethnographic fieldwork in Ecuador, particularly concerning power, privilege and vulnerability. I also reflect upon a particularly unorthodox research method: using my dog as a research assistant.

Watson, A. and Till, K. (2010) Ethnography and participant observation. In D. DeLyser, S. Herber, S. Aitken, M. Crang and L. McDowell (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Geography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 121–37.

Watson and Till review the literature on geography and ethnography in this chapter, while also discussing how they have used ethnography in their own research and writing. For those interested in qualitative research in geography more generally, this Sage *Handbook* is highly valuable and provides helpful guidance and thoughts on autoethnography, interviewing, archival research and discourse analysis, among other topics.

References

Anderson, C. (2012) Lost in space? Ethnography and the disparate geographies of social process. *The Professional Geographer*, 64: 276–85.

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