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Strategies for Data Gathering and Reporting Voices from the Field: A Review of Applied Ethnography: Guidelines for Field Research

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Abstract

The importance of applied research cannot be underestimated in this era of evidence - based implementation of intervention programs in health, community development, education, agriculture and other applied disciplines. Research reports of many qualitative studies have turned out short on quality due to poor data gathering techniques, analysis and write - up of findings. "Applied ethnography: guidelines for field research" is an authoritative narrative answering to this serious methodological flaws in applied research within ethnographic context. It presents rich and deep practical field experiences applicable in all qualitative research undertakings that demonstrate skills in planning field research ; from gaining entry to the community, diverse techniques in data gathering, analysis and ethnographic report writing; it is every researcher's dream field companion.

Keywords

Ethnography, Social Mapping, The Notebook, "Free listing and Pile sorting," Research Teams

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Strategies for Data Gathering and Reporting Voices from the Field: A Review of *Applied Ethnography: Guidelines for Field Research*

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The importance of applied research cannot be underestimated in this era of evidence-based implementation of intervention programs in health, community development, education, agriculture and other applied disciplines. Research reports of many qualitative studies have turned out short on quality due to poor data gathering techniques, analysis and write-up of findings. “Applied ethnography: guidelines for field research” is an authoritative narrative answering to this serious methodological flaws in applied research within ethnographic context. It presents rich and deep practical field experiences applicable in all qualitative research undertakings that demonstrate skills in planning field research; from gaining entry to the community, diverse techniques in data gathering, analysis and ethnographic report writing; it is every researcher’s dream field companion. Keywords: Ethnography, Social Mapping, The Notebook, “Free listing and Pile sorting,” Research Teams

Introduction

Learning never ends! In my doctoral research effort, I made an attempt of using aspects of ethnographic research concepts in learning and answering questions related to my topic of interest on the impact of antiretroviral therapy on children with HIV in the local context; but after reading this new book on field strategies in applied ethnography, I feel I could have done one better; I could have come out with a richer and deeper description of voices of the people that I came in touch with, nevertheless, I am now a motivated, upcoming researcher aiming to perform better ethnographic research.

More than ever, many intervention programs employed to improve social conditions of disadvantaged communities especially in developing countries, call for practices that utilise evidence-based planning and implementation of community development programs. Research practices such as applied research, action research and now implementation science are all geared towards generation of solid evidence to improve practice of community interventions and provide practitioners with the best information there is to maximise on limited funding available for development projects.

However, solid evidence to improve practice has often fallen on hard times in that the designs and methods of deriving evidence from field sites have been subject of heated debates in many professional, academic and or research institutions for their methodological accuracy and reliability to support informed interventions.

Such professional debates with open and flexible minds as has always been known, are healthy in giving different perspectives on the all-important questions of research methods and their suitability for data gathering, analysis and use. This also happens to be the premise of this written report on research field experience employed in diverse fields and programs by Professor Pelto.

Why this book

I got drawn to this book, because I strongly relate to ethnographic research experience from my own doctoral work; I wanted to find out if I had done things right and whether this new ideas would give me a thing or two that could be of future use; I was in for a big shock; this is a gold mine of field research practice with a totally different flavour. The contribution of Professor Pelto in this new series is immeasurable!

In the beginning preface, Pelto in his literary endeavours reminds us to always keep in step with the changing landscape of research practice; he states that: "...a great deal has changed in the world of social science research. In smaller pieces that I have written, and in my teaching of research methodology, in a variety of contexts, I have made many changes in my approaches to field data gathering" (p. 7). This perhaps, illustrate to us that research craft is a dynamic system of theorising and testing of what works best in new dispensations, and using them to generate best practices in social interventions.

If one has been unaware like me, in this book, I discovered that Left Coast Press Inc. in a series dubbed "Developing Qualitative Inquiry", has been churning out several books by leaders in qualitative inquiry addressing topics and issues in qualitative methods; and this "Applied Ethnography: Guidelines for field research" is the twelfth in the series, hence this has been a revelation to me to follow the discussions in this very useful field. While admittedly, I have not lain my hands on the last eleven works, this latest edition make me believe that they are indeed worth checking if their titles listed in this book is anything to go by.

To appreciate this work, one has to initially absorb the tone of the book that is richly described in the preface; in that way, the reading experience that follows would be very enlightening to the reader. The main "voice" in this initial presentation is on the evolution of ethnographic research practice in which many visible changes have taken place, but noteworthy is also the unwavering constant of the need for "the qualitative-quantitative mix" in ethnographic research which Professor Pelto emphasized 5 decades ago; additionally also, the enduring principle that: "our work (ethnography) is a scientific attempt to add to useful knowledge." Most importantly, our professor adds that: "But today we all recognise that knowledge is practically never a final product. Additional research will suggest modifications in 'what we know'" (p. 7).

The title of this book could have been: "Ethnography through the times;" and who better to tell the story than an experienced ethnographer, the "Maestro" who practiced and lived it through most of his adult life? To further understand the importance of this book especially for followers of ethnography, the preface introduces very salient features of ethnographic evolution and practice; his key aim was to give useful information, examples, and guidelines for applied ethnographic research while trying to reflect on some trends and new research situations in the international scene; (Pelto, 2013, p. 14). The salient issues in this regard are for example "participatory" research approaches: that is to what extent do we engage and empower the local community members to participate in our ethnographic research as in participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and the method of social mapping strongly associated with it? Secondly there is the "computer revolution" i.e. changes in the technology of research; here Pelto opines: "It is hard to imagine that there might be research groups somewhere on the planet who are writing their data on paper by hand and not doing computerized analysis," (p. 8); thirdly is the all-important worldwide networking of ethnographic research: he enthused how researchers globally from north and south are being linked by Internet; how resource-poor countries such as Malawi, Nepal etc. are coming up as important multidisciplinary research sites; how increasing numbers of southern researchers are being trained in social science research in Europe, US, Australia etc., and in a major way

how international development agencies such as WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank, etc. are carrying out research in developing countries, in the process empowering and enhancing technical skills in those locations. This leads to the final aspect of hiring of local teams of field researchers; it comes about as a need to improve data collection by the locals who know the place and language of communication, and as such, the locals are trained in skills such as in-depth and open-ended interviewing, or aspects of social mapping.

In “mapping” out this book, one finds three phases or metaphorically a three course meal, namely, the preface and chapter one makes up the “starter,” chapter two to eighteen is the “main course” and finally chapter nineteen is the “dessert and coffee.” Chapter one relates closely to the preface, and calls for absorbing its content just as much. I was through the rich references, firmly placed in the frame of mind to follow the proceedings by the in-depth overview of ethnography and its current application in the disciplines of education, community health, nursing and other health fields, marketing research etc. Here, it is noteworthy that “ethnographic market research” is getting mainstreamed, with “ethnographic” taking specialized meaning in marketing, as emphasized by the quote from McFarland (2001) while comparing focus group and ethnography: “focus group, anthropologists argue, set an artificial stage, while ethnographic research reaches much deeper into the social fabric. If companies understand a group’s social context, they can better understand and even predict their product needs and attitudes towards products in future” (p. 29).

In this section also, Professor Pelto underscores the methodological discourse of the “qualitative-quantitative mix” and the theoretical underpinnings of ethnographic research; this is an important inclusion as it helps the researcher to situate their work in the right context. Here we get to understand where quantitative use is applicable, appreciate the epistemological and ontological nature of our work, that is, where do we place “realism and positivism versus relativism and interpretivism;” how do we apply inductive versus deductive research as well as inductive versus grounded theory? Of great interest in this work is the concept of abduction research logic as well as ideographic and nomothetic theory that offer features of ethnographic research.

All these discussions help in appreciating more the methodological shift to “Mixed methods” research; and in this regard, Professor Pelto points out that: “Applied ethnography is however a scientific activity, and for the research to be useful, the data gathering and analysis must be rigorous and thorough as time and resources permit,” (p. 41).

Following on, is the main course of the book starting with chapter two; here I found interesting overview of the steps of applied ethnography, the “bare-bones” which can be modified to suit the nature of the study, but the outline may remain more or less the same, noting that: “ethnographic field research is intended to be flexible and exploratory especially in the beginning phases,” (p. 43). I also found the detail description of the ethical issues in ethnographic field research very enlightening; this should help one to be free in collecting meaningful data with certain degree of confidence.

Importantly in this section (p. 51), is the recommended manual by Gittelshohn et al. (1998): *Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP): Ethnographic methods to Investigate Women’s Health*; (available at: <http://archive.unu.edu/unupress/food2/UIN01E/UIN01E00.HTM>); I find this manual indeed a great piece of work that demonstrate many fieldwork tools and flexibility in using them for good effect; it is indeed an example of the many references recommended by Dr. Pelto throughout the book and are all worth checking; it is not in PDF form, but it is still usable. This section directly feeds into chapter sixteen which offers rich information on guidelines for a range of applied short-term ethnographic research such as Rapid Appraisal Procedures, Participatory Rural Appraisal, Rapid Rural Assessment and Focused Ethnographic Studies; all these are being implemented in various research contexts,

intended to provide concrete data about, for example, patterns of specific problems in health beliefs, treatment seeking, farming practices, water management etc.

In chapter three, the depth of ways to reach your target community and respondents is richly illustrated; it is known that in field research, some respondents or communities are easy to access, while others need additional “sweet-talking” etc. to gain trust to do your field study; it ends with an interesting 8-point guidelines for individual researchers seeking entry and research cooperation. I found this helpful in emphasizing the need of being careful not to take your research community for granted, as you may not succeed in collecting good information, if the community refuse to cooperate.

In the same vein, mapping, that is, social and sketch mappings are discussed in chapter four and fifteen; I learned of these useful techniques that aid understanding research sites (i.e., “getting a lay of the land,” p. 73); here you will find out how gaining knowledge of the community through some of the gatekeepers is of great use through social mapping, transect-walk and sketch mapping of the site for rich data collection; however a researcher has to be aware of community reaction to this kind of activity to avoid getting bad reception. Chapter fifteen offers mapping in real practice by researchers for example, participatory, place-name and mobility (for NGOs outreach workers) mappings as well as the use of mapping in rapid assessment of land use and hard to reach communities such as injection drug users and sex workers.

Following through in chapter five, are the methods of gathering information from key informants and group discussions; I found the detail “applied” descriptions of the methods very powerful; I also discovered the “phased assertion,” (p. 96) a special interviewing technique, very revealing and potentially useful. I noted this chapter is linked to chapter nine that emphasizes techniques of in-depth interviewing; the description of “Case Interviews,” (p. 157) is very useful especially the difference with key informant interviews; here also the techniques of in-depth interviews is very rich with the probing techniques on offer. Further techniques of interview is seen in chapters ten, eleven and fourteen; in chapters 10 and 11, there is “Free Lists”, “Pile Sorting” and rating techniques; on free lists, the concept of “salience” and “familiar” is highlighted on the start list of a specific cultural domain or topic. While pile sorting helps to determine from the free lists what items are of importance to follow in later interviews (i.e., how high or low is the rating?), see page 197 for guidelines on pile sorting. Free listing is “easy” to perform and can be done in the earlier stages of fieldwork. Chapter 14 presents “Hypothetical scenarios,” (p. 237); the application is described in nutrition and other health situations to maximum effect especially in sensitive situations; it definitely adds to the repertoire of mixed method strategies.

In matters of credibility and data reliability of ethnographic fieldwork, chapter six details how to make or break the trustworthiness of your work and report; “capturing data is the most difficult tasks of ethnographic fieldwork” notes Dr. Pelto (p. 103); note taking and other recording as well as managing the data are very crucial and central in the validity of ethnographic work which researchers need to remember. It is poignantly captured in the quote: “If you don’t write it, it’s gone;” it is the main step in which you will present “the voices of the people,” (p. 11). A number of techniques and instruments to aid this process are richly described.

The next section on chapter seven and thirteen is of special recognition on the place of observation in ethnographic research; it notes that ‘participant observation provided the foundation of ethnographic research’, but evolution in this field has seen some changes in its application albeit in different forms due to time constraints and changes in strategies of applied research. Rich discussions with a seminal experience of the author himself in Lapland, shows the “being there” experience of participant observation which facilitates informal and formal interviews to fully describe the most important aspects of people’s

cultural behaviours, (p. 129). In chapter thirteen, on structured observation of behaviours and events, I find a detail narrative of the innovations and changes that have occurred over time to deal with challenges in quality of interview data: the “social desirability effect,” (p. 219), and the changes in behaviour during direct observation, “Reactivity,” (p. 231). Adding to the richness, are various techniques of observations applied in various contexts such as spot-checks and diaries adapting to the need of the field work.

At this point, I find chapter eight also highlights the evolution in ethnographic research; in earlier days with qualitative descriptive approach, sampling was not such an issue, but with shift towards qualitative-quantitative mix, the need for sampling gained currency; here then, we see a description of various sampling approaches from random sampling in quantitative design to snow-balling in qualitative design; others such as quota, unusual sampling strategy etc. bring to light the phenomenon of “triangulation,” (p. 154), to strengthen credibility in ethnographic research; this is reinforced by the author’s suggestion of three key reasons to pay attention to for effective sampling, (p. 156).

Once the ethnographic data is done collecting, the need for analysis commences; however the theoretical underpinning of data analysis, calls for understanding the fact that applied ethnographic research is descriptive and meant for practical use within the limited locations where the data collection takes place, (p. 199); it is also related to increased requirements of research funders for theory driven intervention programs. Otherwise chapter twelve presents features of ethnographic data analysis; i.e. analysis start at initiation of data gathering in the field; this starts with identifying key language and categories in key domain (e.g., food and persons in the site). Pages 208-209 for example offer useful guidelines on managing text data. One key aspect of analysis here is “Coding” (p. 209), which helps in identifying categories of information for later retrieval and use. As mentioned earlier, “computer revolution” has allowed for use of computer software such as Atlas.ti for text data analysis and for better understanding of the findings through the generated themes. The main issue in this analysis section is that whatever the situation, there is need for concrete, clearly defined data language, which calls for training of data gatherers to use clear, precise language in describing events and in interviewing informants, (p. 214).

In appreciating the preceding discussions, it is clear that ethnographic research is done by a team of persons with varied skills and needs; chapter seventeen brings us to this important matter of research teams and training in applied ethnographic research. In research funding circles now days, it is clearly known that one of the key requirements is how the proposed research team is composed; an application risks being rejected on having a poorly constituted team. In this book, mention is made of how applied field projects are implemented through partnerships with international NGOs, academic institutions, and or government agencies with local NGO and or other local organisations, (p. 281). Whether it is a solo ethnographer (rare now) or ethnographic research by non-academic organisations, the need for training on research protocol and field methods is crucial. But team formation in most of the current ethnographic research is governed by a number of conditions such as the duration of the research and the demand of the protocol objectives, language barriers (which would then need locals), the participatory nature of ethnographic etc. (p. 293). Hence research team formation is an important aspect of fieldwork especially if a multi-disciplinary team is needed as per the funders’ terms of reference.

Once data is collected and analysed in ethnographic research, it is then time for writing the report; chapter eighteen presents and emphasizes the steps of doing so using the following phrases: “keeping it grounded and inductive, sticking close to the data as well as presenting the voices of the people,” (p. 295). The writing experience of Wolcott (1973) referred to here, offers a good example of sticking close to the data, but Dr. Pelto points out three basic rules of writing ethnographic products (p. 301): Follow the inductive, “discovery

of new information”; provide a number of small and not so-small quotes, as you intend to bring out “the voices of the study people;” and finally leave much of the literature review and theoretical discussion to the end of the paper or report. Here it is noteworthy that, the format of the writing is standard, however it is important to present your report based on the need of the research funder.

The penultimate chapter is a revision of ethnography through the times, Professor Pelto, offers insight into evolution of ethnography; he notes that: “The patterns of research now in the 21st century are much different from the usual ethnographic studies 50 or more years ago” (p. 311). Here the works of Chambers (1983) offers the basis of ethnographic research discourse in the communities; “the three cultures,” shows the who is who in the field between, academicians, practitioners and the local communities. This importantly, point at the current need for better collaboration between “cultures” in the best possible interventions for the community; it is also noted that the electronic revolution has changed the landscape of ethnographic research now, which include the use and application of mobile phones to innovate ethnographic practice.

But crucially, notes Professor Pelto (p. 321), as the need for ethnographic research gain more use among NGOs, it is important to note that applied ethnography is a complex mixture of structured and less structured methods in which distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches are elusive and often misleading; and systematic practice of ethnography require consistent rigour to produce important findings in crucial community interventions.

Now, at \$ 28.63 for the Paperback and \$ 89.30 Hardcover, this 352 page book is an affordable and a much needed companion for field researchers to consult and debate the appropriateness of research methods in various research contexts that they find themselves in. For its depth in field experiences and rich real life examples in innovation in research methods, I wish to strongly concur with Professor Pelto in recommending this book for applied research people in the south and north, (p. 14); it is ideal for program managers (e.g., in the HIV/AIDS, in designing new intervention); it is also intended for academic researchers and graduate students doing master’s and doctoral thesis research; scholars from education, rural development, healthcare disciplines and other social science departments are all richly catered for in this work. Ultimately, persons involved in training programs and providing technical assistance in development interventions would greatly benefit from this rich narrative.

Finally in conclusion, I strongly believe that in reading this book I have been greatly inspired by the wonderful rich narratives of ethnographic experience, more especially the field diversity and the “new” techniques that I was not aware of in my earlier endeavours in ethnographic research. In this regard, I would like to share with you some thoughts that brain-waved through my mind while reading through:

If a novice wanted to do a good ethnographic field study, he or she should contact Pelto in person, by phone or least of all by e-mail appointment; but if none of these are possible, then read this book.

The strength of this book lies in the illustration of the various repertoires of techniques, not only the run of the mill, but other useful apparently uncommon ones that Professor Pelto laboured to describe in some detail with concrete references worth checking, as one is likely to apply some of these methods.

As a budding ethnographic researcher, I could not have found a perfect personal companion to consult at every turn of my prospective research activities, growth and development.

I also wish make some remarks and suggestions after reading this work: first to the author that this is a classic precursor or harbinger to a new work: “Ethnographic Tools and Methods for Dummies”; this should give new arrivals the opportunity to sharpen their field skills and do professional field research; in this work, guidelines have been given, but a dummy book would be great to use while referring to this very text that already narrates field experiences from varied disciplines. I noted, for instance in chapter 10 while presenting “Free Lists,” it is one of important methods of ethnographic research, but the description did not come out clearly, so a first timer would not understand what it is even if it feels a “simple” method of data gathering.

Additionally for the authorship, I wish to pass a word of compliment to Ms Dunja Pelto for offering great interludes to reading this work; her sketches are great in their presentations; I felt they could be a good way to anonymize real life human pictures from the field. I always looked forward to seeing the next episode.

To prospective users, all training institutions should have a few copies in their library shelves to support research skill training; ethnographic and other qualitative researchers should have one as their fieldwork companion, while for action and implementation science researchers, development agencies, a copy or two for their staffers would go a long way.

To sum it all for me, this is a work for improving field practice and evidence generation to give back to communities the best intervention outcomes and improve livelihoods.

Reference

Pelto, P. J. (2013). *Applied ethnography: Guidelines for field research* (Developing of Qualitative Inquiry Series, Book 12). Walnut Creek, CA. Left Coast Press Inc.

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