

9-1-2010

## Ethnography Essentials: A Review

Robin Cooper

*Nova Southeastern University*, [robicoop@nova.edu](mailto:robicoop@nova.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Cooper, R. (2010). Ethnography Essentials: A Review. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(5), 1296-1299. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol15/iss5/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits

**NSU**  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

**LEARN MORE**

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

## Ethnography Essentials: A Review

### **Abstract**

Julian M. Murchison has written a thorough and thoroughly practical resource for the newcomer to ethnography. In his new book, *Ethnography Essentials: Designing, Conducting, and Presenting Your Research*, he guides the novice ethnographer through the research process from conceptualization through presentation of findings. The text also includes discussion of some of the developments and debates within the field of ethnography.

### **Keywords**

Ethnography, Ethnographic Maps, Qualitative Research

### **Creative Commons License**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

## ***Ethnography Essentials: A Review***

Robin Cooper

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA

---

*Julian M. Murchison has written a thorough and thoroughly practical resource for the newcomer to ethnography. In his new book, *Ethnography Essentials: Designing, Conducting, and Presenting Your Research*, he guides the novice ethnographer through the research process from conceptualization through presentation of findings. The text also includes discussion of some of the developments and debates within the field of ethnography. Key Words: Ethnography, Ethnographic Maps, Qualitative Research*

---

I began to read *Ethnography Essentials: Designing, Conducting, and Presenting Your Research* by Julian M. Murchison (2010) as I sat in the Fort Lauderdale airport waiting to board a plane. I opened the book with anticipation because it had been sitting on my desk for weeks while I waited for an opportunity to read it. Finally, I had a day of flying before me perfectly suited to reading. And the timing seemed perfect, because I was on my way to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference at Cedarville University in Ohio (<http://www.cedarville.edu/event/eqrc/index.htm>). I figured the book would get me in the right frame of mind and help me to appreciate the presentations of ethnographic studies I would be hearing over the next few days.

As I began reading, I was delighted to find that Murchison (2010) has written a thorough and thoroughly practical resource for the newcomer to ethnography. In his new book, he guides the novice ethnographer through the research process from conceptualization of a study through the reporting of findings. By way of introduction Murchison explains that the seeds of the book lay in the syllabus of a course he taught called Ethnographic Research and Writing, and the text has the step-by-step guidance any student would wish for.

Before getting into the specific steps of designing an ethnographic research project, Murchison lays out the focus of ethnography as a distinct research strategy, provides a brief history of ethnography, and discusses the ethnographer as the research instrument. (You can read the opening chapter of *Ethnography Essentials* and learn more about the author at <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470343893.html>.) The opening chapter also includes discussion of some of the developments and debates within the field of ethnography. An early example of this is his explanation of the critique of the common practice among ethnographers to refer to the research site as “the field”. Murchison explains,

That idea has been rightfully criticized in terms of its tendency to distance and exoticize the objects of study in relationship to researchers and centers of knowledge. This critique has also raised questions about whether people perceive and act differently in “the field” compared to other human environments that they inhabit. Finally, it has raised questions about the

whole idea of traveling or moving into the field and assumptions about the researcher's role as an outsider; more recently there have been a number of important calls for "insider ethnography," with the ethnographer studying a cultural or social unit of which he is already a part. (p. 14)

After arriving at the Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference, I attended a paper presentation of just such an insider ethnography. Jonathan Vaughn (2010), a graduate sociology student at the Ohio State University, shared his intriguing findings regarding worker motivation based on fifteen interviews and five years of participant observation he conducted while working as a customer service supervisor in a shipping company. Vaughn's rich findings helped to exemplify for me what Murchison's call for this style of ethnography could bring to qualitative research.

Having provided his readers with the foundations of ethnography, Murchison (2010) proceeds to cover the early stages of the research process in detail, including choosing a topic, developing research questions, and writing a research proposal. In addition to explaining the requirements of these stages of the research process, Murchison offers insights that will be especially useful to budding qualitative researchers. For example, in discussing the process of choosing a research topic, he encourages researchers to look beyond the obvious, noting,

The power of ethnography is rooted in its ability to get past stereotypes, assumptions, and veneers to the complex inner workings. Building a research project that aims to identify and explore these complexities from the beginning by looking to investigate the nonobvious provides a strong foundation for research. (p. 27)

In the second part of the book, Murchison (2010) walks readers through the steps involved in ethnographic data collection. This section of the text will be extremely valuable to anyone planning to conduct this form of data collection, as it is filled with useful information related to participant observation and interviewing in field sites. Murchison also offers practical tips regarding what ethnographers should keep in mind and pay attention to during the data collection phase of the research. For example, he points out the importance of carefully noting both repeated behaviors and also unique incidents. He states,

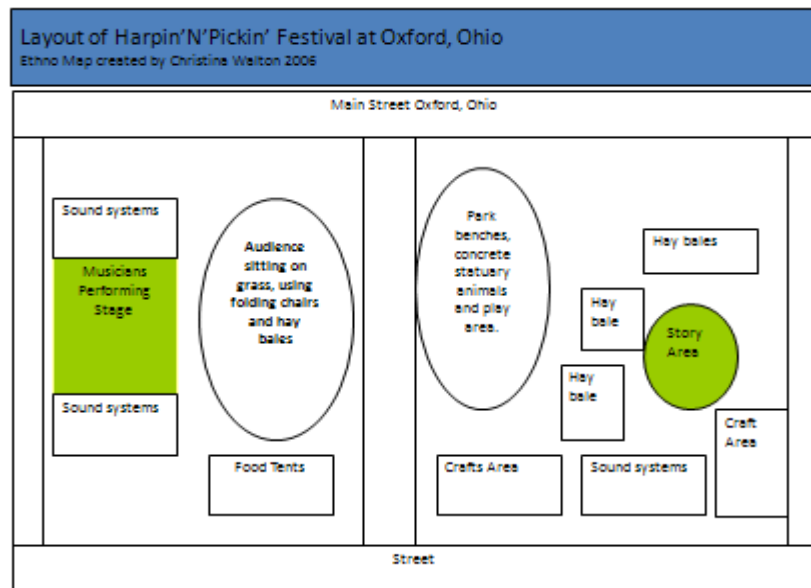
A good ethnographer recognizes that there are patterns of behavior, shared sets of symbols, and structures that shape possibilities, but she also recognizes individual interests and idiosyncrasies, the role of creativity and improvisation, conflict, and the ways that social position can produce and reflect significant variety in the group. Therefore, you should plan to deal with both the regular and the extraordinary dimensions of your topic. (p. 95)

Just as the book offers detailed guidance regarding data collection, it likewise includes thorough directions on data analysis in ethnographic research. This includes suggestions regarding organizing field notes, identifying key themes, and beginning to

write up sections of analysis while the research is still ongoing. Murchison (2010) also addresses the question of whether or not to seek feedback on one's early findings with informants. He notes,

Many early ethnographers made the mistake of assuming that their informants were incapable of critical analysis of their own social and cultural situations. The argument was that as insiders they lacked the distance or perspective to see the larger picture. A closer and more realistic examination shows that people in all sorts of different circumstances routinely analyze and critically examine the social and cultural worlds of which they are a part. If the ethnographer can tap into that analysis and criticism, the ethnography will be much stronger than it would otherwise be. (p. 123)

To me, one of the most interesting parts of *Ethnography Essentials* is the description of how one can make use of ethnographic maps, charts and tables in the course of data analysis. Murchison (2010) points out that charts and tables can be used to organize information, portray relationships, and indicate categories. Researchers can use maps not only to portray geographic spaces relevant to the research project, but they can also make use of maps of interior spaces and conceptual maps. Having particularly enjoyed the discussion of ethnographic maps in my reading of the book, I was pleased during the conference to attend a paper presentation in which a researcher employed this very tool. Dr. Christina Walton (2010) of Ashland University presented her findings based on thirteen months of ethnographic research among Appalachian professional storytellers. In the course of her presentation, she showed a map of the layout of a festival where storytellers performed, their voices frequently drowned out by the musicians on the large stage nearby. She kindly agreed to my inclusion of the map in this book review.



In the final part of his book, Murchison (2010) discusses the direct link between analysis and writing in the ethnographic tradition. He emphasizes the importance of writing from the data rather than accepting a superficial interpretation or imposing one's preconceived ideas upon the data. Murchison points out, "A good ethnography will provide the sort of order and structure that will allow the reader to grasp the key ideas and findings, but it should also aim to communicate as much of the complexity of informants' lives, actions, and ideas as possible" (p. 181). He includes very specific and practical guidance for students and novice ethnographers regarding how to move from data to theory and how to choose an appropriate style in which to present one's findings.

As it turned out, Murchison's text made for excellent reading on my trip, and did indeed contribute to my appreciation of the reports of ethnographic studies I heard at the conference. With its detail and practicality, *Ethnography Essentials* is a book to which budding ethnographers are sure to turn again and again.

### References

- Murchison, J. M. (2010). *Ethnography essentials: Designing, conducting, and presenting your research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Vaughn, J. (2010). *The firefighter, the babysitter, and the sacrificial lamb: Identity and consent among customer service supervisors*. Paper presented at the 22nd Annual Ethnographic & Qualitative Research Conference, Cedarville, OH.
- Walton, C. (2010). *Professional storytellers celebrate life history moments through story*. Paper presented at the 22nd Annual Ethnographic & Qualitative Research Conference, Cedarville, OH.

---

### Author Note

Robin Cooper, Ph.D., is Managing Editor and an Associate Editor for *The Qualitative Report* and an Associate Editor for *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. She is an adjunct professor in the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Nova Southeastern University's Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences and in NSU's Department of Multidisciplinary Studies, where she teaches in the Qualitative Research Graduate Program. Robin's research interests include cross-cultural conflict resolution, ethnic and national identity, gender and social control, and qualitative research. She may be contacted at robicoop@nova.edu.

Copyright 2010: Robin Cooper and Nova Southeastern University

### Article Citation

- Cooper, R. (2010). Ethnography essentials: A review. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(5), 1296-1299. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-5/murchison.pdf>
-