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How to Conduct a Mini-Ethnographic Case Study: A Guide for Novice Researchers

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Abstract

The authors present how to construct a mini-ethnographic case study design with the benefit of an ethnographic approach bounded within a case study protocol that is more feasible for a student researcher with limited time and finances. The novice researcher should choose a design that enables one to best answer the research question. Secondly, one should choose the design that assists the researcher in reaching data saturation. Finally, the novice researcher must choose the design in which one can complete the study within a reasonable time frame with minimal cost. This is particularly important for student researchers. One can blend study designs to be able to use the best of each design that can mitigate the limitations of each as well. The authors are experienced ethnographers who currently chair dissertation committees where a student has chosen a mini-ethnographic case study design.

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A Guide for Novice Researchers

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The authors present how to construct a mini-ethnographic case study design with the benefit of an ethnographic approach bounded within a case study protocol that is more feasible for a student researcher with limited time and finances. The novice researcher should choose a design that enables one to best answer the research question. Secondly, one should choose the design that assists the researcher in reaching data saturation. Finally, the novice researcher must choose the design in which one can complete the study within a reasonable time frame with minimal cost. This is particularly important for student researchers. One can blend study designs to be able to use the best of each design that can mitigate the limitations of each as well. The authors are experienced ethnographers who currently chair dissertation committees where a student has chosen a mini-ethnographic case study design. Keywords: Culture, Ethnography, Mini-Ethnography, Case Study Design, Triangulation, Data Saturation

One of the most important components of the work is the study design. One can have a well written *Problem Statement,* conceptual framework, *Literature Review*, and other sub-sections; however, as Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated, the researcher should choose the design that has the best chance of answering the research questions. For some, a phenomenological study design may be optimal because of the nature of the participants as well as exploring the lived experiences of others (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For others, a case study design would be best to identify operational links between events over time (Andrade, 2009; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). Further, novice researchers might consider ethnography to explore the feelings, beliefs, and meanings of relationships between people as they interact within their culture or as they react to others in response to a changing phenomenon (Fields & Kafai, 2009).

The novice researcher should choose a design that enables one to best answer the research question (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Secondly, one should choose the design that assists the researcher in reaching data saturation. Finally, the researcher must choose the design in which one can complete the study within a reasonable time frame with minimal cost. This is particularly important for student researchers. As one considers how to conduct the research, it is best to keep in mind the different designs that will have an impact on the research. Selecting a research topic is much more than deciding what one wants to study. It must also consider *how* one will conduct the study that takes into account any time, energy, and financial constraints for students in a doctoral program.

An appropriate research study design is the path to a well-written scholarly rich doctoral study; hence, the secret to writing an excellent proposal and study. Moreover, the methodology used within the qualitative research paradigm must best address the research problem (Denzin, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). One purpose of a study is to advance the theory (Imenda, 2014), which can be done through either filling a gap (Vlok, 2012) or confirming already existing evidence (Ayoko & Pekerti, 2008). Advancing the theory then accomplished by an exhaustive literature review, an empirical study to gather the evidence, and then comparing the

existing body of knowledge to the study results (Chernyak-Hai & Tziner, 2014; Secomb & Smith, 2011). The overall purpose of any study is this: to answer the research question.

Ethnography

Qualitative researchers explore how people make sense of their world. A qualitative researcher seeks to define and interpret unclear phenomena through non-numerical methods of measurement that focus on meaning and insight (Kakabadse & Steane, 2010). Exploratory research designs are conducted to clarify ambiguity and discover potential such as new product development (Kurt, Inman, & Argo, 2011) as well as ideas for later research. Qualitative research techniques help researchers define and interpret the ambiguities that exploratory research designs address (Thomas & Quinlan, 2014). Exploratory research can include interpretations of information gathered during investigations that consist of unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews, and direct observation of people, places, and phenomena (Dowlatshahi, 2010; Mansourian, 2008). Finally, exploratory research is used when the problem statement is unclear or inarticulate (Dowlatshahi, 2010).

Ethnography is "the description and interpretation of a culture or social group" (Holloway et al., 2010, p. 76); it is an in-depth study of a culture and studies everyday behavior of participants. Ethnography began with the ancient Greeks and Romans in their descriptions of the Punic Wars and the Civil Wars (Holloway et al., 2010). The current paradigm wars between quantitative and qualitative research appear to be over and that presently the two methods complement each other rather than in opposition to each other (Holloway et al., 2010). Moreover, the concepts of validity and reliability have different meanings for the two (Holloway et al., 2010). Furthermore, fieldwork is an important component of qualitative work as the researchers becomes immersed in the culture being studied (Holloway et al., 2010). Finally, Holloway et al. (2010) wrote of the importance of triangulation to ensure reliability and validity of the data and results, the need and prevalence of gatekeepers, the importance of key informants, and the ethical concerns of covert observation and the appropriate use of the word "I" to signal the researcher's involvement in the field and subsequent influence on data collection and analysis.

Constructivists posit that individuals contrive knowledge, understanding, and meaning from interactions within the world (Highfield & Bisman, 2012). Constructivist researchers rely on feedback from participants to extrapolate inductive interpretations. Furthermore, the world is made of multiple realities rather than a static state; therefore, all realities are relevant and valid (Heit & Rotello, 2010; Highfield & Bisman, 2012). A qualitative approach is often a constructivist worldview that consists of ethnography and observation of behavior, wherein the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of the participants to identify shared meaning, culture, and behavior. Constructivism includes the generation of theory to understand.

Ethnography is within the field of anthropology (Fusch, Fusch, Booker, & Fusch, 2016). The field of anthropology is the forgotten science of behavioral studies due to factors specific to this discipline (Fusch et al., 2016). Anthropology is an inexact science with no formal rules, a combination of art and science, due to its emphasis on ethnography (Fusch et al., 2016). The anthropologist becomes the participant/observer in the studied culture, looking out from the participants' eyes, to study and better understand humans and human activity (Fusch, 2013). Particularly, research involves observing and interacting using qualitative methods as opposed to using quantitative statistical models in other disciplines (Fusch, 2013).

Perhaps anthropology's greatest contribution to the concept of Organizational Behavior theory and research is its emphasis on the ability to facilitate understanding between peoples in other countries or organizations (Fusch, 2013), by noting differences in values, attitudes, and

behavior (Fusch, 2013). Rather than focusing on the individual, as in other disciplines, the focus here is on the macro level, as in group processes and organization. This is particularly important in today's workplace as people and organizations learn to manage diversity and globalization, whether working in another country or becoming a member of a virtual team (Fusch, 2013).

Ethnography as a research method is also used in medical studies as well as marketing research (Kelly & Gibbons, 2008; Mendez, 2009; Swinghurst, Greenhalgh, Russell, & Myall, 2011). For example, integrated marketing communications (IMC) is a comprehensive plan that combines a variety of communications disciplines for maximum impact in the marketplace (Mendez, 2009). Using such a 360-degree view approach to customer contact with a company, marketers present a consistent and clear message "communicated through different channels to produce one same result" (Mendez, 2009, p. 636). In this way, companies can employ a holistic method that surrounds a consumer with the firm's products and integrates their goods or services within the consumer's lifestyle (Mendez, 2009).

Ethnography is a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the cultural interactions and meanings in the lives of a group of people (Barbour, 2010). For qualitative field research, ethnography involves learning the feelings, beliefs, and meanings of relationships between people as they interact within their culture or as they react to others in response to a changing phenomenon, for the research takes place within the culture being studied (Fields & Kafai, 2009). The researcher operates between multiple worlds engaging in research, which includes the cultural world of the study participants as well as the world of one's own perspective (Dibley, 2011). A researcher's cultural and experiential background will also contain biases, values, and ideologies that can affect the interpretation of a study (Bernard, 2012). It then becomes imperative that interpretation of the cultural phenomena represent that of participants and not of the researcher (Dibley, 2011). Hearing and understanding the perspective of others may be one of the most difficult dilemmas that face the researcher (Fields & Kafai, 2009). The better a researcher is able to recognize his/her personal view of the world and to discern the presence of personal lenses, the better one is able to hear and interpret the behavior and reflections of others (Fields & Kafai, 2009).

Also, ethnographic research is particularly susceptible to researcher bias because the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Jackson, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For qualitative field research, ethnography involves learning the feelings, beliefs, and meanings of relationships between people as they interact within their culture or as they react to others in response to a changing phenomenon for the research takes place within the culture being studied (Dennis, 2010). The researcher enters the culture and becomes the primary data collection instrument (Jackson, 1990) in an effort to understand the culture and then disseminates the researcher's interpretations to those outside the culture (Amerson, 2011).

Mini-ethnography. A mini-ethnography, also known as a focused ethnography, is used when a field under investigation focuses on a specific or a narrow area of inquiry (White, 2009), particularly when time or monetary constraints are evident. Mini-ethnographies are prevalent within the medical field as well as marketing research and generally occur in less time than that of a full-scale ethnography (White, 2009) and range in time frames of weeks (Alfonso, Nickelson, & Cohen, 2012), to less than a year (Robillard, 2010; Sandall, 2010; Yang et al., 2011). The intent of mini-ethnography is for a researcher to understand the cultural norms, values, and roles as pertaining to what is remembered by participants (White, 2009) as opposed to phenomenology which addresses lived experience, grounded theory which identifies new theory to explain phenomenon, or content analysis which studies human communication including websites, newspapers, paintings, or books (Engward, 2013; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013).

Typically, the classic ethnographic study can take years to complete because the researcher must become enmeshed in the culture in order to obtain the type of data the researcher wants (Storesund & McMurray, 2009). Culture data is much more complex than one's usual data from a study (Storesund & McMurray, 2009). Traditional ethnography can take a great deal of time to accomplish, which is why it is not encouraged as a design choice for doctoral students (Storesund & McMurray, 2009). The time length (and finances to stay in the field) is probably why the mini-ethnography came into being (Storesund & McMurray, 2009). Mini-ethnographies can be conducted within a week, a month, or up to a year (Storesund & McMurray, 2009). Data saturation is somewhat relative with an ethnographic design depending on the length of the study because the study is typically on-going for a number of years (Fusch, 2013). With a mini-ethnography, of course, data saturation is reached far sooner because the research is bounded in time and space by a case study design (Fusch, 2013).

Case Study

Qualitative case study design evolved out of ethnographic design—the first qualitative study design which originated with Herodotus and Thucydides in ancient Greece. In an answer to the paradigm wars in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Robert Yin responded by structuring case study design as a mixed methods approach that included elements of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Case studies are the preferred strategy used by researchers when asking how, what, or why questions (Amerson, 2011; Andrade, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). These types of studies identify operational links between events over time (Andrade, 2009; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014) and bound the study in time and space. Case studies may be exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive and may involve one organization and location or multiple organizations and locations for a comparative case study design (Yin, 2014). Contemporary case study design is much like historical case study design—both have specific boundaries, but within those boundaries there is a great deal of room for personal design: interviews, direct observation, document review, focus group sessions, journaling, participant observation, and more (Amerson, 2011).

Stake and Yin. Stake (2010) took a somewhat nuanced approach to the case study design and used the conceptual framework as a guide (Stake, 2010). For the novice researcher, it is a great beginning to the case study design (Stake, 2010). Moreover, Yin (2014) does tend to go into a lot of detail that most novice researchers could find overwhelming and not particularly useful. Ultimately, Stake is a good beginning and Yin may be more applicable as one's understanding of the case study design grows (Stake, 2010; Yin, 2014). Either way, both are excellent seminal sources as support for the proposal and study.

Why Choose a Blended Design: Mini-Ethnography and Case Study Design

One can blend study designs to be able to use the best of each design that can mitigate the limitations of each as well. Blended designs use the best of both worlds. A mini-ethnographic case study design uses data collection methods from both designs yet bounds the research in time and space. This type of blended design also allows researchers to explore causality links, which is not typical for ethnographies. Finally, the use of a mini-ethnographic case study design enables researchers to generate as well as study theory in real world applications.

In contrast, mixed methods is often described as *methodological pluralism* in that the use of both will result in a broader perspective of the research topic (Azorin & Cameron, 2010) as opposed to what are known as mono-methods—qualitative or quantitative (Baran, 2010).

Often a mixed methods case study will begin with a qualitative method to identify and narrow down the problem. Then the quantitative method is used to answer the research question. This process can be reversed as well. Another approach is the use of a blended design. Typically, students think of blending as using a mixed methods approach to research design; however, some students do not see that one can blend designs through utilizing a phenomenological interview design with a case study approach. Another way to look at blending designs is to use a mini-ethnographic case study design. One has the benefit of an ethnographic approach that is bounded within a case study protocol that is more feasible for a student researcher with limited time and finances.

Subjectivity and researcher bias are both prevalent in mini-ethnography and in case study design. The approach to mitigate is the same for each. Jackson (1990) discussed subjectivity in qualitative research and in particular cultural anthropology in her self-professed non-random sample of seventy anthropologists. The concept of "I am a fieldnote" or "I am the research instrument" focuses on the self in qualitative research (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). Researchers bring their personal milieu and values, which demonstrates subjectivity and relationships between insider/outsider and researcher/participant, further noting that some see this as strength; others see it as a weakness (Draper & Swift, 2011). These relationships are present in all social research, both intentionally and unintentionally (Fields & Kafai, 2009). From a positivist perspective, the personal was seen as less relevant than "the facts out there" (Jackson, 1990, p. 111) and derives from the British teaching of keeping one's own personal experience private. Jackson wrote that the personal reactions of Western anthropologists to native cultures should be of interest to researchers in addition to the study at hand. The data includes the researcher's personal perspectives and biases (Lockett, Currie, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2014; Marshall, 2014).

A researcher's cultural and experiential background will also contain biases, values, and ideologies that can affect the interpretation of a study (Bernard, 2012). It then becomes imperative that interpretation of the cultural phenomena represent that of participants and not of the researcher (Holloway, Brown, & Shipway, 2010). Hearing and understanding the perspective of others may be one of the most difficult dilemmas that face the researcher (Fields & Kafai, 2009). The better a researcher is able to recognize his/her personal view of the world and to discern the presence of personal lenses, the better one is able to hear and interpret the behavior and reflections of others (Fields & Kafai, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Draper and Swift (2011) made two important points in their work: a) there is no universal accepted design for data collection and b) the researcher plays a central, key role in the data collection phase of the study. Fields and Kafai (2009) also made these points in their discussion of ethnographic research designs. It is imperative that interpretations represent those of the participants and not of the researcher (Fields & Kafai, 2009).

What is important is that the researcher mitigates bias through the data collection methods that are appropriate for the study design through the use of triangulation. Denzin (2012) suggested data triangulation for correlating people, time, and space; investigator triangulation for correlating the findings from multiple researchers in a study; theory triangulation for using and correlating multiple theoretical strategies; and methodological triangulation for correlating data from multiple data collection methods. Methodological triangulation adds depth to the data that is collected. Denzin (2012) made the point that it is somewhat like looking through a crystal to perceive all the facets/viewpoints of the data. Moreover, he posited that triangulation should be reframed as *crystal refraction* (many points of light) to extrapolate the meaning inherent in the data and thereby mitigating one's bias.

The use of methodological triangulation (multiple methods of data collection) is one method (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Lloyd, 2011). Methodological triangulation adds depth to the data that is collected. Denzin (2012) made the point that it is somewhat like looking

through a crystal to perceive all the facets/viewpoints of the data. Moreover, he posited that triangulation should be reframed as *crystal refraction* (many points of light) to extrapolate the meaning inherent in the data and thereby mitigating one's bias. The importance of triangulation cannot be underestimated to ensure reliability and validity of the data and results (Chenail, 2011). A research study has validity when the data is accurate and truthful (Roe & Just, 2009). Validity exists when the inferences have a reasonable probability for actually occurring and can be tied back to the conceptual framework of the study (Roe & Just, 2009). Validity in qualitative research consists of external as well as construct validity (Amerson, 2011). External validity (a quantitative term) is represented in a qualitative study by the ability of a study's conclusions to be transferred to other studies (Aastrup & Halldorsson, 2013). This should be possible regardless of populations, settings, or times (Aastrup & Halldorsson, 2013). A study has construct validity if the inferences that are made can be tied to the conceptual framework of the study (Amerson, 2011). Threats to external validity occur when the results can be attributed to other causes not explored in the study (Burchett, Mayhew, Lavis, & Dobrow 2013). Moreover, threats to construct validity are demonstrated by researcher bias and relying on a single measurement instrument (Amerson, 2011). Construct validity is proven by using multiple sources of data (triangulation), preserving the chain of evidence, and allowing key informants to review the data (Amerson, 2011). External validity is demonstrated by the ability of the study to be replicated, known as transferability in qualitative studies (Roe & Just, 2009).

Methodology for the Mini-Ethnographic Case Study Design

The common data collection methods often consist of fieldwork (Dennis, 2010; Jackson, 1990) with direct observation (Gordon, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Salem, 2008), a focus group (Packer-Muti, 2010), a reflective journal (Sangasubana, 2011), and unstructured interviews (Bernard, 2012; Blow, Sprenkle, & Davis, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2012) for triangulation (cross-examination) purposes (Denzin, 2009). For qualitative researchers, member checking is a means by which researchers can validate meaning, not word choice, with participants by asking a clarifying question such as *is this what you meant?* in order to ensure that one does not leaves gaps in understanding the phenomenon (Carlson, 2010). Sometimes participants will agree with what they originally said; sometimes participants want to expand on their original response (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Member checking is an important component to enhance the validity of the study results (Carlson, 2010).

Hearing and understanding the perspective of others may be one of the most difficult dilemmas that face the researcher (Fields & Kafai, 2009). The use of jargon and insider wording can make it difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to ascertain what the participant *means* (Brett et al., 2007). Through the participant review method of validation (also known as *member checking*), one can ascertain the meaning of certain jargon words (Brett et al., 2007). Moreover, the researcher should share any interpretations with the study participants to ensure that the words were correctly interpreted as well as filling in gaps to enhance understanding of the intent of the jargon (Holloway et al., 2010).

Direct observation. Direct observation is used by both mini-ethnographers and case study researchers. A direct observer is the research instrument and becomes the data collection instrument (Gordon, 2011; Holloway et al., 2010; Landau & Drori, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Salem, 2008). With oneself as a lens, a researcher observes and interacts with members of a culture in order to understand the culture, and then disseminates the researcher's interpretations to those outside the culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010).

There are some limitations to direct observation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Salem, 2008). The researcher is the research instrument, and cannot separate oneself from the

research. It includes the researcher's personal perspectives and biases (Snow, Morrill, & Anderson, 2003; Wolcott, 2009). To enhance objectivity and to strive to overcome the bias limitation, researchers using direct observation should identify their position up front and be open about their perspectives (Holloway et al., 2010; Landau & Drori, 2008). A researcher can also have participants validate that the researcher has correctly interpreted the phenomenon (Holloway et al., 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Wolcott, 2009). It is important that a novice researcher recognizes their own personal role in the study and mitigates any concerns during data collection (Denzin, 2009). Another concern is that the data collected should be as in-depth and rich as possible (Denzin, 2009). For example, during direct observation of participants, this may include information regarding body language, the surroundings, and even background noise (Denzin, 2009). As Denzin (2009) pointed out, there are no common descriptions of a participants' world; therefore, as novice researchers, it is important to record everything one can during data collection.

Field notes. Field notes are assembled during the observation phase of data collection and are not limited to traditional ethnography. Field notes can be collected in a short span of time, which make them particularly useful for mini-ethnographies and case study design. Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2008) built on Richardson's seminal work and identified four types of notes that ethnographers use while in the field. These notes included observation notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal notes (Dennis, 2010; Jackson, 1990; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). Observation notes are the field notes that the researcher will make during the time in the field to capture what one observes and hears (Dennis, 2010; Jackson, 1990).

A researcher uses methodological notes as memos to oneself to ensure that one records what one sees and hears to help identify themes and patterns in the data. A researcher can combine the idea of theoretical notes with the methodological notes to include conceptual thoughts, hypothesis and ideas that arise during the research (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008; Sangasubana, 2011). In contrast to observation notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal notes, Walford (2009) interviewed four ethnographers and identified four different methods for taking field notes. Walford argued from his findings that there was not a singular note taking strategy in ethnographic research.

The advantages of taking copious notes can assist as the later coding of themes and ideas that reoccur during the fieldwork (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). Similar to the limitations of the participant observations, field notes also must take into account that the researcher is the research instrument, and cannot separate themselves from the research (Dennis, 2010; Jackson, 1990; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010; Winters, Cudney, & Sullivan, 2010). It includes the researcher's personal perspectives and biases (Jackson, 1990). By taking copious notes and writing down everything that the researcher sees and hears, thoughts about the study, and interpretations, the researcher is able to identify key themes and issues to enhance the validity of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008; Sangasubana, 2011; Snow et al., 2003; Wolcott, 2009).

Reflective journal. Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2008) identified personal notes as personal feelings and statements about the research, which can also be a reflective journal. Sangasubana (2011) suggested writing personal impressions and feelings from the researcher's experiences in the field to help identify personal bias that may impact the researcher's interpretation of the data. Through spending the time reflecting during the days away from the site, the reflective journal assists the researcher to understand perspectives and interpretation of the culture (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010; Sangasubana, 2011). Moreover, the use of reflective journaling is not limited to long periods of times spent in the field collecting data. A reflective journal is not linked to specific time frames; its employment

is especially useful for mini-ethnographies and case study design where the researcher reflects on any data gathered in a short time.

Sometimes field notes are representing by journaling (Ortlipp, 2008). Journaling is also an excellent method to identify themes and patterns in the data (Ortlipp, 2008). Journaling is also known as a reflective process; one writes down everything seen and heard and then, once away from the research site, reflects on that information to again identify themes and patterns from the observations (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011; Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012; Snyder, 2012). Journaling is an integral part of qualitative research (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011; Hayman et al., 2012; Snyder, 2012). Direct observation notes are typically kept separate from the reflective journal because the journal is one's reflection on all the data from the study. The journal contains thoughts, opinions, musings, discussion, and reflections on the process and the participants. It is a written representation of one's personal *lens* about the study. Moreover, the reflective journal is more than just direct observation notes—it is a synthesis of all the data (Fusch, 2013).

A limitation of the reflective journal is that the researcher is still the data collection instrument and cannot separate oneself from the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The advantage can also be a disadvantage. A researcher should spend time in reflection to ensure that what one is interpreting is that of the culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008; Sangasubana, 2011).

Informal/unstructured interviews. Interviews are used in both mini-ethnographies and case study design. The researcher determines whom to interview and what questions needed to be answered or clarified (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Wolcott, 2009). Participants are asked questions as to how, what, or why to elicit their perspectives, thoughts, and opinions.

Informal interviews provide the researcher a strategy to discuss concepts, questions, and gain clarification for observations, field notes, and the reflective journal (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010; Ortlipp, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Informal interviews tend to occur throughout the fieldwork and help reinforce the researcher's role in the study (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The potential disadvantage of informal interviews in a traditional ethnography, where the researcher spends a great deal of time in the culture, is that as the participants get to know the researcher; the researcher must take care not to project one's ideas onto the participants so that the participants discuss their own perceptions of the phenomenon (Wolcott, 2009). The researcher cannot separate oneself from the research (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008; Sangasubana, 2011; Wolcott, 2009). For a mini-ethnography, the researcher spends less time in the field interacting with participants; therefore, there is not enough time for participants to know the researcher and the researcher has limited time to project their own bias into the study. The same can be said for case study design.

Researcher bias/worldview is a concern whether from the standpoint of the researcher or the participant (Chenail, 2011). Chenail pointed out that the establishment and implementation of an interview protocol is important to mitigate bias especially if the researcher is also a member of the population pool being studied. Miscommunication between participants and researchers can especially arise from misunderstandings between the two (Chenail, 2011). This is especially apparent during an interview process where cultural differences can manifest in communication, which makes the use of an interview protocol important (Amerson, 2011).

It would be impossible to remove all bias because one is a human being. Rather, one *mitigates* bias as best as one can (Amerson, 2011; Chenail, 2011). This is demonstrated through the use of an interview protocol, member checking, data saturation, and other strategies to mitigate the use of one personal *lens* during the data collection process of the study (Dibley, 2011). Driving participants to predetermined conclusions speaks to the same concepts (Dibley, 2011).

Nonverbal communication is important to understand the full meaning of a participant's response (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). It is too easy to misunderstand what is meant when the researcher does not know the cultural context (Abolafia, 2010). This is where sensemaking comes in—to ensure that each understands what is meant (Abolafia, 2010). Sensemaking involves establishing communication in complex environments where there are no common definitions between people (Abolafia, 2010). This is especially critical when the researcher is interviewing a participant from a sub-culture that is not familiar to most (Abolafia, 2010). Moreover, sensemaking has also been defined as *a shared narrative construction* (Abolafia, 2010) or *collective negotiation*, where two or more people find a common ground within which to communicate. Researchers should be able to ensure that there is a common understanding about concepts that are addressed by participants (Carlson, 2010) to ensure that one has captured the words that the participant has spoken; it is another matter to ensure that one has captured the meaning. Sensemaking is important for mini-ethnographies and case study design where the time is limited to come to a common understanding. Sensemaking has a somewhat accelerated process which is why often mini-ethnographic case study design researchers conduct their studies within cultures where they are already members.

Unstructured interviews are problematic for mini-ethnographers because of the nature of their composition, which is why structured interviews are a preferred strategy. Unstructured interviews have limitations and concerns regarding time constraints, failure to recognize and account for non-verbal cues, failure to understand and account for metaphors, and lack of reflexivity on the part of the interviewer (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). This can be mitigated through the ability of the researcher to write from different perspectives and different genres in order to enhance understanding in that the thought processes one goes through when using metaphor provides the writer with multiple lenses or crystals (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008). One does not necessarily triangulate; one *crystallizes* thorough recognizing that there are many sides from which to approach a concept (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008). Good data collection and analysis procedures and sharing interpretations with participants throughout the study are important (Andrade, 2009; Yin, 2014); for the data to be relevant it must pass the test of participant confirmations (Holloway et al., 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Wolcott, 2009), also known as member checking. Essentially, it goes beyond Denzin's (2009) triangulation theory and employs crystallization methodology by correlating data from many sources.

Focus groups. Focus group interviews are used in both mini-ethnography as well as case study design, although they are more typical for case study research. Focus group interviews can be a useful for mini-ethnographies because one can elicit a great deal of data in a shorter time frame than individual interviews. A focus group interview is a flexible, unstructured dialogue between the members of a group and an experienced facilitator/moderator that meets in a convenient location (Brockman, Nunez, & Basu, 2010; Jayawardana & O'Donnell, 2009; Packer-Muti, 2010). The focus group interview is a way to elicit multiple perspectives on a given topic but may not be as effective for sensitive areas (Nepomuceno & Porto, 2010). In particular, participants are asked how and what types of question to elicit their thoughts, perspectives, and opinions. Moreover, an experienced focus group facilitator can be retained to conduct the focus group so that the researcher could conduct direct observation of the participants through notetaking.

To promote the focus group and encourage participation, one offers an incentive of a soft drink and pizza for participation, as well as fresh fruit, cheese, and vegetables to account for the dietary restrictions of some participants. The use of incentives can be effective on response rates, particularly if the incentive is awarded at the time of the session (Larson & Sachau, 2009; Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006; Sánchez-Fernández, Muñoz-Leiva, Montoro-Ríos, & Ibáñez-Zapata, 2010). For focus groups it is recommended that the size of the group include

between six and 12 participants, so that the group is small enough for all members to talk and share their thoughts, and yet large enough to create a diverse group (Lasch et al., 2010; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010).

Focus groups have limitations pertaining to a propensity for groupthink in that members pressure others to conform to group consensus (Dimitroff, Schmidt, & Bond, 2005). Furthermore, a focus group session that elicits useful information can be dependent on the skills of the facilitator as well as the failure to monitor subgroups with the focus group (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010).

Limitations to a Mini-Ethnographic Case Study Design

In addition to the usual concerns and limitations with ethnography as a research method, the mini ethnography has specific concerns such as being embedded, few participants, and the transferability of the study results. Certainly, many of the reasons why one would choose a traditional ethnographic design would not make for strong reasoning to choose a mini-ethnographic case study. Becoming embedded in the culture is a challenge due to time constraints (Fusch, 2013). The issue of few participants is related to concerns about the richness and thickness of the data (Abrams, 2010). Finally, transferability can be a concern because mini-ethnographies tend to be very specific about the topic; therefore, the study results may not be transferable to other research sites (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Being embedded. One of the important tenets in ethnographic research is the ability of the researcher to become embedded in the culture that is being studied. It is the opportunity to become a member of the culture in order to collect data (Fusch, 2013). Knowing that one is embedded in the culture is illustrated in a number of ways—both explicit and implicit. Explicit is indicated by certain rites such as membership cards, for example. Implicit is more subtle in that one watches and looks for indications that are more casual but no less important than explicit. Being embedded is not necessarily linked to the amount of time spent at the research site.

In one of the author's mini-ethnographic case study research, being embedded was implicit (Fusch, 2013). At the manufacturing facility where she conducted her research, the employees parked their personal vehicles by seniority—the longer one was at the company, the closer they parked to the building and the shorter their walk to work. The shorter time one worked there, the farther out one parked in the large lot. Employees were also very protective of their chosen parking spaces—one did not park in someone else's acknowledged space for any reason. If that person were absent from the workplace that day (or week), the spot was left open until they returned.

When conducting fieldwork, the author would begin early in the morning when the shift began. She chose a parking space towards the back of the lot as designated by her "seniority" (or lack thereof). Shortly after beginning her fieldwork, in the second week of the 30 days she was on site, two new employees were hired to account for the increased workload beginning for the Christmas holiday sales rush coming up. The two new hires parked farther back on the lot than she did as indicated by their seniority status. One morning she was late getting to the research site. She assumed that when she arrived that someone would take her parking spot since she was not employed at the facility; instead, she was a researcher there for a short time. When she drove onto the lot she found that every parking space was taken—except for hers, which indicates being implicitly embedded. The lesson here to be learned is to be mindful of indications where one is indeed embedded in a short amount of time.

Few participants. In qualitative studies, one does not use a statistical sample—one uses purposive sampling such as snowball sampling or census sampling (Abrams, 2010; Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, & Nigam, 2013). One is not looking for a representative sample;

instead, the sample is one that represents the particular participants who have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to answer the research question (Abrams, 2010). The concept of few participants is one that is unique to qualitative research. Moreover, one should focus on quality (rich) as opposed to quantity (thick) data. In light of that, one would also recognize that a quick 10 minute interview does not represent rich data. Instead, one would interview one participant for a longer length of time or multiple times to ensure that one has rich *and* thick data. Some would say that the interview would be more representative of a phenomenological long interview with probing questions and more. Again, the focus here is on quality rather than quantity—rich over thick data.

One is not looking for a representative sample; instead, the sample is one that represents the particular participants who have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to answer the research question (Abrams, 2010). One should choose the sample size that has the best opportunity for the researcher to reach data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). A large sample size does not guarantee one will reach data saturation, nor does a small sample size—rather, it is what (or whom) constitutes the sample size (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012).

Abrams (2010) is a good source for an overview of qualitative sampling including the underlying methodology, assumptions, characteristics, and assessment standards. Qualitative studies are unique in that all relevant participants are interviewed rather than a specified number (Ando, Cousins, & Young, 2014; Fusch & Fusch, 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015) or through large samples sizes as in quantitative research (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). Bernard (2012) stated that the number of interviews needed for a qualitative study to attain data saturation was a number he could not quantify, but that the researcher takes what he can get. It can be stated that data saturation is reached when there was enough information to replicate the study (Anderson, 2010; Walker, 2012), when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained et al., 2006), and when further coding was no longer feasible (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) as discussed by Fusch and Ness (2015). It is also important to keep in mind that methodological triangulation assists in reaching data saturation. Also, know that case study design is unique in that the population and the sample are the same—one is using census sampling—where one gathers data on everyone in the sample. The data would reach saturation the same as when interviewing many participants—no new data, no new themes, no new information, ability to replicate the study—the standards are the same regardless of the number of participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Transferability. Generalizability is a quantitative term/concept and transferability is a qualitative term/concept. A key distinction between generalizability and transferability is that qualitative researchers leave transferability up to the reader to decide (Porte, 2013). This is because qualitative studies are very unique and the data may not *transfer* to another study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Porte, 2013). Therefore, good data collection and analysis procedures and sharing interpretations with participants throughout the study are important (Andrade, 2009; Yin, 2014) to assist in the transferability of the study results to mitigate any concerns about generalizability.

Four Examples of Mini-Ethnographic Case Studies

In their study of nurse perceptions regarding a culture of quality within an ICU unit, Storesund and McMurray (2009) used a mini-ethnographic case study design. The ethnographic lens looked at the culture of the unit; the case study design part explored and identified causal links in a real-life context. Typically, ethnographic researchers do not look for causality; however, the use of the case study design enabled Storesund and McMurray to look for links between real world events in their study results. The data collection methods used by the researchers included semistructured interviews as well as field notes during the

observation phase. Binding the study in time and space allowed the researchers to complete their study.

Thompson (2016) conducted a mini-ethnographic case study to explore the culture of digitally savvy young children through the case of one 4-year old child. The ethnographic lens explored the culture of young children who are considered to be what is termed as *touch-screen natives*; the case study design portion limited the study to one participant. The data collection methods employed by Thompson (2016) included direct observation, field notes, and reflective journaling. In this example, Thompson (2016) explored and discussed a macro perspective of the culture of young children as well as a micro perspective of one particular child.

Case studies used in international business courses curriculum use ethnographic data collection methods to explore the culture of a specific company. Moore (2011) discussed how ethnography is often paired with case study design in international business research to allow the study of multiple perspectives of a cultural phenomenon. Her example used an ethnographic case study design for research about the BMW MINI firm. The data collection methods included interviews, participant observation, and archival research. In this particular study, Moore (2011) used the case study design to bound the research in time and space to illustrate an example of the culture of one individual company.

Finally, Fusch and Fusch (2015) conducted a mini-ethnographic case study design research to ascertain the skills used by first line supervisors to resolve task, process, and relationship conflicts on the manufacturing production line. Viewing the data through the leader-member exchange theory lens, they found that supervisors tailored their response to meet the needs of the production line workers according to age, gender, task, and the existence of inner and outer circle members. The data collection methods included interviews, direct observation, fieldwork, journaling, a focus group interview, and archival research. The design approach assisted in bounding the mini-ethnographic research in time and space through a case study design.

Conclusion

Popper (1963) believed that as humans we are constantly experiencing new things in life; therefore, beliefs change with experience. For researchers, experience adds to the continuing discovery of the truth (facts) by means of a well-designed empirical study. Before a research project can begin, the novice researcher must know in what direction to proceed. A researcher should choose a research methodology, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches (De Mast & Bergman, 2006). The researcher can then posit the type of data to be collected, theorize what it may mean, what relationships (if any) may be inferred between variables/participants, posit the origin of phenomena, select suitable research methods, tools, and techniques, as well as explore further data collection as needed (Floden, 2009). The research methodology should be such that accounts for potential threats to validity through triangulation of data collection, appropriate variable labeling, and accounting for potential researcher bias (Fusch, 2013) to ensure validity of the study results (Golafshani, 2003).

The novice researcher should choose a study design that enables one to best answer the research question. Secondly, one should choose the design that assists the researcher in reaching data saturation. Finally, the novice researcher must choose the design in which one can complete the study within a reasonable time frame with minimal cost. This is particularly important for student researchers. An appropriate research study design is the path to a well-written scholarly rich doctoral study (Fusch, 2013). As one can see, each has a certain perspective on the world which has an impact on study design and the findings of the research.

Each novice researcher should keep this in mind when pondering what study design one will use for their own research during the dissertation journey. Choose wisely.

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