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# The What, Where, How and Why: A Review of Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography

Jetlexis Carlos

*Nova Southeastern University*, [jetlexis@gmail.com](mailto:jetlexis@gmail.com)

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## The What, Where, How and Why: A Review of Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography

### **Abstract**

In *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*, Raymond Madden presents ethnography in a way that is easily understood by describing real life experiences from both his own work and others working in the field. This book is a great resource to guide those who wish to conduct ethnographic research or need a learning tool to understand the underlying nature of ethnographic research. Madden links the way ethnographic research is done to how ethnographic research is thought about. It is a great introduction to the “what,” “where,” “how,” and “why” of practicing of ethnography.

### **Keywords**

Ethnographic, Raymond Madden, Ethnography, Research

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## **The What, Where, How, and Why: A Review of *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography***

Jetlexis Carlos

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA

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*In Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography, Raymond Madden presents ethnography in a way that is easily understood by describing real life experiences from both his own work and others working in the field. This book is a great resource to guide those who wish to conduct ethnographic research or need a learning tool to understand the underlying nature of ethnographic research. Madden links the way ethnographic research is done to how ethnographic research is thought about. It is a great introduction to the “what,” “where,” “how,” and “why” of practicing of ethnography. Keywords: Ethnographic, Raymond Madden, Ethnography, Research*

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*Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography* provides an excellent introduction to the world of ethnographic research. Raymond Madden, the author, is an anthropologist and a senior lecturer in Anthropology at La Trobe University in Australia. He completed his doctoral fieldwork in Victoria, Australia, focusing on the Aboriginal Australian population and his most recent research work is with people and their greyhounds. He draws the real-life experiences from both his own work and others working in the field to enliven the guidance he shares in the book.

Madden (2017) describes ethnography as “a story that is backed up by reliable qualitative data” (p. 6). That explanation exemplifies the book as a whole. Madden walks us through the basics of ethnography in a story-like manner by using personal experiences to give the readers insight. This allows for readers to learn while enjoying the personal touches. This also makes for an easier read and understanding. It is not just textbook definitions but also stories, so you are able to learn without feeling overloaded by information.

*Being Ethnographic* is comprised of four sections. Part one gives background information such as key concepts and definitions. Part two describes how to do ethnographic work. Madden covers topics such as talking, being, and looking with the people being studied. Part three explains how to write about ethnographic work. Madden describes a three-phase approach, splitting this into “writing down” field notes, “writing out” data, and “writing up” interpretation. In the last part, part four, Madden suggests how the field of ethnography can be expanded. Madden does a great job describing the limitations of ethnography and how the field can continue to expand into other areas such as cyber ethnography and non-human ethnography. He offers some gap areas that can be further researched.

This book covers many aspects of the field of ethnographic research. Madden discussed the what, where, how, and why of ethnography. The beginning of the book introduces “what” ethnographic research is, covering methodology and ethics, along with basic characteristics of this type of research, both practical and textual. Madden covers the “where” in Chapter 2, when describing what an ethnographic field site is. This chapter gives a glimpse into how field sites are chosen. There are many aspects to consider when choosing a field site and Madden is able to give some insight on specific aspects to think about before choosing.

A big part of this book is focused on the “how.” Two portions of the book are dedicated to how ethnographic research is done. In Part one Madden explains how researchers use themselves as a tool in the research work, through the use of reflexivity. Later, in Part two, we are shown how to do ethnographic work. We are walked through how to talk to people,

specifically how to understand the differences and similarities of negotiation, conversation, and interviewing. These strategies highlight the importance of the researcher's participation. In Part two, we walk through how to look at people. While we may have the assumption that looking is simply observing, we would be mistaken. There are different ways to look at the people you will be writing about.

This leads me into the other portion of the "how." In Part three, Madden gives directions on how you can write. There are particularly helpful strategies on how to write in the field and he gives examples of what this would actually look like. There is emphasis on the skills to writing good field notes for the active daily activities and end of the day consolidated notes. He then describes how to analyze and interpret collected data and how to write out what was interpreted. Madden is very specific on the "how" of this book, giving insightful tips and practical advice.

Madden discusses the "why" in the introduction when we hear his story. It's even called "Why Ethnography?" We learn some history and the ongoing relevance of this field through glimpses into his personal experiences. At the end of the book, Madden states how ethnography "is still as relevant a way to understand the human condition as it ever was" (2017, p. 191).

Madden gives snippets of each chapter in the introduction. This is great in case readers would like to skip around; they can seek out information that is most relevant to them and read that chapter, then go back to the others when time permits. This is also crucial because the book covers a range of information that can be overwhelming.

Throughout the chapters, Madden has sprinkled "Top Tips." These tips connect to what he is discussing within the chapter. There are a few tips for each chapter. I particularly enjoyed reading the top tips as little bits of advice or knowledge. Each chapter also contains a summary, questions, and a "Being Ethnographic" section at the end. These are great overview tools. The summary is a condensed version of the chapter. As a student, if you read the chapter in advance and need to go back later to remember specific information, you could read the summary.

In the Questions section, Madden lists excellent questions for critical thinking. This allows for discussion in the classroom, for assignments, or if the reader would like to go a step further with the information in the chapter. With that in mind, Madden not only gives a list of recommended readings but also explains briefly what valuable information each reading has to offer. The reader then has more information to decide whether they would like to read any of the options. The last section, "Being Ethnographic," offers a couple of lines summing up. The title of this section ties in with the title of the book. These little golden nuggets are only a couple sentences long, similar to a chapter's "Top Tips." They provide a great way to end each chapter in a consistent manner.

Madden states that the key target of this book is looking at the "relationship between the way we 'do' ethnography with the way we 'think about' ethnography" (2017, p. 6). I believe he was able to hit that target, for all the reasons stated above. He gives the reader not only the basic background but also practical methods for conducting ethnographic research. He also challenges the direction that the field can go. He captured both the way ethnography is practiced, as well as, the way we can think about it as well.

As a doctoral student in my first year, this book was valuable to me because I found an encompassing introduction to ethnography. While I am not yet in my dissertation stage, reading this enlightening book got me thinking about the process and how I can utilize what it exposed me to. Many times while reading, I would write down notes about possible dissertation ideas or flag pages that I could use at a later time. The real-life examples helped me see how ethnographic research could possibly look. This also allowed me to think creatively about how I may be able to apply these methods to my own research in marriage and family therapy. It led me to think about communicating with clients, peers, and faculty. Being knowledgeable

about how we communicate and gather information is good for conducting therapy interviews that sound more like conversations.

I think this book can provide practical information to researchers in any field who conduct research or interviews. Many different ideas in this book can be used by other disciplines, such as marriage and family therapy, social work, and mental health counseling. Any field that conducts research or interacts with others in the form of counseling or interviewing can benefit from the tools and tips offered. The reader does not need any background knowledge of ethnographic research to utilize this book.

Madden did a great job creating a book that covers many topics about the what, where, how, and why of ethnography. This book would be useful in all social science disciplines as an introduction to this form of research. While it may be daunting to view such a vast range of information in one book, Madden has designed and written this book in a way that alleviates anxiety. Whether you are looking for an introduction to ethnography or would like a reference book to use in ethnographic research, Madden has you covered.

### References

Madden, R. (2017). *Being ethnographic: A guide to the theory and practice of ethnography*. London, UK: Sage Publishing.

### Author Note

Jetlexis Carlos, M.S., is presently a first year Ph.D. student at Nova Southeastern University's Family Therapy Program. She is pursuing her licensure for Marriage and Family Therapy. Her interests are couple's communication as well as leadership within the marriage and family therapy field. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to [jetlexis@gmail.com](mailto:jetlexis@gmail.com) or [jc3848@mynsu.nova.edu](mailto:jc3848@mynsu.nova.edu).

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