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# A Guide to Conducting Ethnographic Research: A Review of Ethnography: Step-by-Step (3rd ed.) by David M. Fetterman

Maribel Del Rio-Roberts

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

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## A Guide to Conducting Ethnographic Research: A Review of Ethnography: Step-by-Step (3rd ed.) by David M. Fetterman

### **Abstract**

Ethnography: Step-by-Step (3rd ed.) is a book that introduces novice researchers to the practice of ethnographic research. It provides an overview of ethnography, a discussion of methods and techniques utilized in the field, a guide to the use of ethnographic equipment, and basic tenets of the process of analyzing data. In addition, it provides important strategies for writing up the results and a valuable discussion of ethics.

### **Keywords**

Ethnography and Qualitative Research

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**A Guide to Conducting Ethnographic Research:  
A Review of *Ethnography: Step-by-Step* (3rd ed.)  
by David M. Fetterman**

Maribel Del Rio-Roberts  
Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, USA

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*Ethnography: Step-by-Step* (3rd ed.) is a book that introduces novice researchers to the practice of ethnographic research. It provides an overview of ethnography, a discussion of methods and techniques utilized in the field, a guide to the use of ethnographic equipment, and basic tenets of the process of analyzing data. In addition, it provides important strategies for writing up the results and a valuable discussion of ethics. **Key Words:** *Ethnography and Qualitative Research*

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In order to make qualitative research applicable to different fields of study, it is necessary to expose researchers to a variety of different methods available for conducting qualitative research. Ethnography is an approach that is particularly useful to anthropologists and sociologists. David Fetterman (2010) does a nice job in his book *Ethnography: Step-by-Step* (3rd ed.) of introducing the reader to the practice of ethnography and outlining the basic steps for novice researchers interested in ethnographic research.

Overall, Fetterman's (2010) writing style is clear and concise and engages the reader by making it easy for the reader to understand relatively dry material by incorporating vivid examples from his own work as well as the work of others in the field. In fact, one of the strengths of the text is Fetterman's illustration of the concepts throughout his discussion of the different aspects of ethnographic research and their applicability to your own research. Furthermore, the author includes inspirational quotes at the beginning of each chapter that I found quite enjoyable.

The first chapter of the book begins with an overview of ethnographic research and what type of research questions would be appropriate for this research approach, as well as the importance of having an underlying theory prior to beginning your ethnographic research. Subsequently, in Chapter 2 Fetterman (2010) goes on to discuss the major guiding principles in ethnography including culture, focus on holistic perspective, contextualization, the differences between the emic and etic perspectives, and the effects of inter-cultural and intra-cultural differences. In addition, he addresses the power of symbols and rituals, considering the appropriateness of a micro- or macro-level focus, and the importance of operationalizing the conditions of the study. Fetterman emphasizes that ethnographic research with set time constraints set by funding agencies or groups are not truly ethnographic but rather simply using ethnographic techniques.

In order to appeal to the reader, Fetterman (2010) discusses the process of acquiring ethnographic knowledge and the cyclical steps involved in this process. I thoroughly enjoyed how the author related the ethnographic research cycle to the human

life cycle, with each part of the research process linked to a stage in the human life cycle. For example, Fetterman correlates fieldwork to the stages of adolescence and adulthood; initially fieldwork is like adolescence for both the researcher and the project. Fetterman goes on to state that since the researcher must learn a new language, cultural information, and cultural practices, “this period is marked by tremendous excitement, frustration, and confusion. The ethnographer endures personal and professional turmoil as part of the learning experience” (p. 142).

I found Fetterman’s (2010) description of the differences between survey questions and specific questions and the benefits and limitations of using each to be quite useful. He also makes a point to discuss the importance of silence in interviewing and how this process can also provide useful information when analyzed in its context. In his discussion of different data gathering techniques, I was surprised to learn that projective techniques are often used in ethnographic research. Although Fetterman cautions that information obtained via projective techniques should never stand alone, as a practicing clinical psychologist it concerns me that individuals that have not received adequate training on how to interpret these measures may be doing so inappropriately. Therefore, I believe it is important that qualitative researchers who decide to incorporate these measures into their data collection tools either receive adequate training or consult with a professional familiar with these measures in order to prevent invalidating research findings as a result of incorrect interpretations.

Fetterman (2010) dedicates a chapter to the discussion of equipment that can be used to assist in the qualitative research process. The traditionally-used methods of pen and paper and digital voice recorders are discussed, as well as more innovative instruments such as Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), GPS navigation tools, laptop computers, desktop computers, database software, cameras, and digital camcorders. The author elaborates extensively on the use of the internet in ethnographic research and states that “the Internet is one of the most powerful resources available to ethnographers. It can be used to conduct searches about a topic, create a map to the site, analyze census data, conduct interviews by chatting or videoconferencing” (Fetterman, p. 82). A discussion of the benefits of online surveys and blogs is also included. The practice of ethnographic research has changed substantially since the introduction of the internet and technology to facilitate the process.

Furthermore, Fetterman (2010) integrates a discussion of data analysis and the importance of the researcher’s ability to think about and process information in a meaningful way, the role of triangulation and looking at patterns in the research, as well as analyzing key events. An explanation of the utility of maps, flowcharts, matrices, and conducting a content analysis are helpful in comprehending how they contribute to the process of analyzing ethnographic data. The benefits of starting the writing process beginning with the research proposal, the importance of field notes, the value of memoranda and interim reports, and other advantageous strategies for writing up the results I found extremely useful. Finally, Fetterman concludes with a chapter on ethics and crucial aspects to consider when conducting ethnographic research.

Overall, I found the text to be highly enjoyable, and feel that Fetterman (2010) is able to convey tedious material in a noteworthy manner that will appeal to both novice and experienced ethnographic researchers. I very much recommend this book as an

introductory guide to conducting ethnographic research, and I believe that others will find it as practical and valuable as I have.

Lastly, I encourage you to visit the Sage site for this book and download the preface and first chapter to get an idea for yourself regarding Fetterman's engaging style and approach. You can find the book's web page on the Sage site at <http://www.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book230715&#tabview=title>. The Sage web page also includes new features found in the third edition as well as other related resources available at Sage. In addition, you may also want to scan through the book on the Google Book site because that source provides a large portion of the book: <http://books.google.com/books?id=1WeNnyv4RYEC&pg=PP1&dq=inauthor:%22David+M.+Fetterman%22&cd=1#v=onepage&q=&f=false>.

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### Author Note

Dr. Maribel Del Rio-Roberts is a Program Professor of Human Services at Nova Southeastern University's Fischler School of Education and Human Services in South Florida. She is a Licensed Florida Psychologist who specializes in clinical child psychology, pediatric psychology, infant mental health, and parent and teacher training. She is also a supervisor of Psychology trainees at the Center for Assessment and Intervention (CAI). In addition, Dr. Del Rio-Roberts is a co-principal investigator on several university-based grants. She is the author of *The Playful Minds Coping Skills Program: A Treatment for Pediatric Oncology Patients*. She can be contacted at 1750 N.E. 167th Street, Technology Building, 4th Floor, North Miami Beach, FL 33162; Telephone: 954-262-8529; Email: mdelrio@nova.edu

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