

An ethnographic study in nursing: A review

Chuntana Rogerson*

Abstract

An ethnographic approach is a type of qualitative research which is based on writing about people, to see and understand their real world, by the researcher for gathering deep descriptions and rich ethnographic data about their lives. The ethnographic method is gaining more popularity in nursing studies, especially in applied ethnography within a nursing field, with nursing routine and nursing experiences, using multiple data collection methods to complete a realistic pictures of the nursing cultural phenomena. In Thailand, the two main ethnographic studies that have been used focus on cultural behaviors and cultural performance aspects. With the diverse health care culture in the context of cultural differences in Thailand, an ethnographic approach is recommended in order to understand our patients, health professionals, and nursing care, which has real potential to make remarkably significant improvements to nurses, nursing and healthcare practices in Thailand. This paper articulates a concise knowledge about the use of ethnographic studies in general and highlights the information of using an ethnographic approach in nursing and healthcare. It is hoped this journal article provides sufficient explanatory information to support anyone considering undertaking ethnographic research in the future.

Keywords: ethnographic study, nursing

*Boromarajonani College of Nursing Sawanpracharak Nakhonsawan Faculty of Nursing, Praboromrajchanok Institute, Thailand, Email: chuntana@bcnsprnw.ac.th

Received: April 25, 2020

Revised: July 25, 2020

Accepted: August 4, 2020

การศึกษาเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาทางการแพทย์พยาบาล

จันทนา โรเจอร์สัน*

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณนา หรือการศึกษาความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรม (Ethnographic study) เป็นการศึกษาวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพชนิดหนึ่งที่ศึกษาเกี่ยวกับชีวิตมนุษย์ นักวิจัยศึกษาข้อมูลวิจัยด้วยตนเอง โดยต้องพาตนเองให้เข้าไปสู่ชุมชนที่ต้องการศึกษา เพื่อให้ได้มาซึ่งความจริงที่เกิดขึ้นและข้อมูลคุณภาพ ในทางการแพทย์พยาบาลได้นำการศึกษาความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมนี้มาประยุกต์ใช้ในการศึกษาวิจัยในที่ทำงาน งานประจำ และประสบการณ์ทางการแพทย์พยาบาล ด้วยวิธีการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลที่หลากหลายเพื่อได้มาซึ่งความสมบูรณ์ของข้อมูลที่ต้องการศึกษา และนำเสนอผลวิจัยด้วยปรากฏการณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมที่เกิดขึ้น ในประเทศไทยการศึกษาความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมสามารถแบ่งเป็น 2 ประเด็นหลัก ได้แก่การศึกษา พฤติกรรมทางวัฒนธรรมและการศึกษาความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งในประเทศไทยมีวัฒนธรรมการดูแลสุขภาพที่หลากหลาย ตามความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรม การศึกษาวิจัยด้วยวิธีนี้จะช่วยให้ผู้วิจัยสามารถทำความเข้าใจกับผู้ป่วย ผู้เชี่ยวชาญด้านสุขภาพ หรือการปฏิบัติทางการแพทย์พยาบาล เพื่อนำข้อมูลมาปรับปรุงการพยาบาลและการดูแลสุขภาพให้สอดคล้องกับบริบทที่แตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรมในประเทศไทย บทความนี้ได้รวบรวมความรู้ที่เกี่ยวกับการศึกษาความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรม และการนำไปใช้ทางการแพทย์พยาบาลและการดูแลสุขภาพ ซึ่งผู้เขียนหวังว่าจะมีประโยชน์กับผู้สนใจศึกษาความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมทางการแพทย์พยาบาลต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: การศึกษาเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณนา การพยาบาล

*วิทยาลัยพยาบาลบรมราชชนนีสวรรค์ประชารักษ์ นครสวรรค์, คณะพยาบาลศาสตร์ สถาบันพระบรมราชชนก,

Email: chuntana@bcnsprnw.ac.th

What is ethnographic study?

Ethnographic study is a type of qualitative research and is the primary research method traditionally used in cultural anthropology, where the discipline of the study is connected with human culture.¹ Ethnography literally means writing about people living or working in a specific place/community/institute with specific ways of living/belief/working. Studying the character of naturally occurring human behaviors can be achieved by firsthand contact with it, not by inferences from artificial settings like experiments.² The ethnographic method enables the researcher to get closer to the inside and have better access to the real world and provides thick descriptions and deep rich ethnographic data.³ Ethnography presents an approach for the studying of cultures of virtual worlds and what is ordinary about them rather than extraordinary by immersing themselves within the culture of interest.⁴ In other words, ethnography is concerned with learning about people by learning from people.⁵ Later, ethnography has gradually changed from studying other cultures in distant lands and less well-developed societies, to undertaking ethnography in local settings or near communities, observing everyday life activities, nature of the group, interests, attitudes, beliefs or even healthcare. The researcher can conduct the study by

spending periods of time with participants, rather than immersing themselves in the setting for an extended period of time to conduct the study.

Ethnographic purpose

Ethnographic study is useful to conduct in the beginning of a study as the purpose is to develop an early and deeper understanding of the actual aspects in order to support the future research design, such as the way of life from the native point of view by focusing on usual behaviors in daily living,⁶ patterns of a culture-sharing group,⁷ or the beliefs, language, behaviors and issues facing the group, in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs and language of a social group or an individual or individuals within the group.⁸

Ethnographic types

There are many types of ethnography from traditional to applied ethnography such as: the **realist ethnography**, a traditional approach used by cultural anthropologists, which is an objective account of the situation typically written facts by the researcher as the third-person point of view reporting participants' information learned from the site; the **critical ethnography** study about the shared pattern of a group, typically identify

a specific issue; the **confessional ethnography** which is the report of the ethnographer's fieldwork experiences.⁸ If regarding the philosophy of ethnography, the **macroethnography** is concerned with a broadly defined culture and the **microethnography**, known as focused **ethnography**, which focuses on a specific aspect of a cultural group, in a particular settings, often used in nursing studies performing within the researcher's own working environment whereby participants are conveniently available.⁹ For example, the study of a nursing team's culture and leadership on a specific unit was studied to gain insight into the shared experiences of the team members, the structure of their experiences, the relationships among team members, the leadership and the environment in which it operates.

Ethnographic perspectives

In using an ethnographic approach, researchers assume to gain a comprehensive and complete picture of a social group. There are two kinds of perspective in ethnography, emic and etic perspectives. The **emic** perspective is an insider's or native's perspective of reality,⁷ the views of the participants,⁸ which is the reality seen, experienced, understood, and expressed from the individual's point of view using the local language to characterize the experiences.¹⁰ In other

words, it is the way that members of the culture envision their world to the outsider.⁸ The etic perspective is the information/language representing the ethnographic researcher's interpretation. It also refers to the language used by the external, social, or scientific perspective of the same reality. Most ethnographers start collecting data from the emic perspective and then try to make sense of what they have collected in terms of both the native's view and the researcher's scientific analysis. Quality ethnography requires both an emic and etic perspective to complete a perfect picture of the cultural phenomena.⁷

Ethnographic researcher's role

Ethnography as with all qualitative research is dependent on the researcher to act as the research instrument.¹¹ The influence of the researcher is demonstrated through the approach to the research design, data collection and interpretation of the research.⁵ Historically, when research was conducted in an unfamiliar culture, such as the study about a tribe, data would be collected by direct participant observation from the culture under study. Therefore, it was important that researchers immersed or engaged themselves into the community to better understand and interpret the activities, beliefs and responses of that group. Later, in contemporary ethnography, the researchers changed to study near

communities, with their routine activities and in any cluster of people who shared the same characteristics. To understand the pattern of a cultural group studied, an ethnographer would spend considerable time with the group by going in to the field, live with them or frequently visit, or work with the people being studied as part of the group.¹ Additionally, as the researchers will be both a human instrument and an ethnographer, all personal biases and preconceptions prior to entering the study need to be eliminated.⁹ Therefore reflexivity, considering the issues of doing as a researcher, should be considered carefully.¹²

Reflexivity in ethnography

Reflexivity in an ethnographic study requires the researchers to be aware of how their own experiences and knowledge could intrude on any aspect of the research, particularly the construction of meaning from the data collected.¹³ Reflexivity allows the researchers to add credibility and expresses their own personal views and insights about the phenomena. The act of reflexivity needs the reader to accept the statement as honest and credible in the researchers' efforts to tell the truth in conducting the research. Researchers would demonstrate confidence in reflexivity by practicing writing their own historical reports and the context of the study to

signify their role as the researcher, as well as writing diaries which can be useful in capturing reflexive thoughts and observations throughout the process of the study. Using reflexivity on the ethnographic written product will represent the reality of the participants, and show that the researchers are part of the ethnographic written product.¹⁰

Ethnographic data collection

Ethnographic data can be gathered from multiple data collection methods to achieve as rich and detailed a holistic description of the culture and members as possible. Ethnographers rely on a variety of data sources, including observation, in-depth interviews, and collecting artifacts such as charts, photographs, and letters. Ethnographic researchers are noted to keep an open mind about the groups or cultures they are studying⁷ and should not disturb the natural behaviors of the participants in their everyday life.⁶ It is because not only has the ethnographer an effect on the issues being studied but also the field has an effect on the researchers.¹⁰ The data can be collected from the various key informants who are often the researcher's main link to the inside, or the researchers are immersed in the day-to-day lives of the group participants who are helping the researcher understand the culture.⁸ For example, researchers who put themselves

forward to work with a nursing team in order to study them. The keys to success for ethnographers in collecting data are the concerns of what members of the culture do, what people say and what people make and use¹ and write the information down.⁸ As the ethnographic research uses multiple methods to make an in-depth understanding resulting with multiple forms of information findings, the triangulation techniques are used to test one source of data against another providing an alternative to validation, such as using interviewing data compare with the observational data.⁷ In nursing research, particularly focused ethnographic study where nurse ethnographers conducting in familiar contexts, such as healthcare settings, the researcher should be aware of their own experiences that could affect the analysis of data by not transferring any of their own beliefs into the collected data, not judge the participants' behaviors or beliefs by their own assumptions applicable in nursing practice.¹⁴

Ethnographic data analysis

In ethnography, the data analyzed produce rich and thick descriptions of the cultural reality including extensive verbatim quotes,¹⁵ using either content analysis, thematic analysis, time line, matrix analysis or typology. The analysis should begin as soon as the first data were collected. It start from familiarizing/organizing the findings,

reading through all the findings and making notes, describe finding into code and themes by describing the social setting, actors, events, or draw pictures of the setting, analyze/classify data into code and themes with well supported by evidence in the data, and forming an interpretation by interpreting and making sense of the findings about how the culture works, and display the findings through figures, charts, tables, diagrams, or sketches.⁸

Ethnographic limitations

The limitations in using an ethnographic approach involve the issues of collecting data. Ethnography requires a significant investment in time when conducting the participant observation and interviews, which tends to impact on the sample size, as there are usually constraint on the researcher's time and funding available to undertake the research. However, with applied ethnography with the tight deadlines and funding, the time spent in fieldwork tends to be briefer than usual in ethnographic research and also adapting ethnography with the team ethnographer rather than a solitary ethnographer. The challenges is the time required to gain access and be accepted or trusted at the research sites and the duration and complexity of data collection.¹³ Another issue is that it is difficult to generalize, as researching a specific culture or community may not produce results that are transferrable

to be used with other populations, as they are specific to that culture.

Ethnographic study in nursing

The ethnographic method is gaining more popularity in nursing studies, especially when information is new and unfamiliar, or when the information required is too complex to be elicited by questionnaires.³ With the nature of an ethnographic approach that attempts to explain rather than measure, offer insight rather than generalizable findings, and generate rather than tests hypothesis, in nursing research, an ethnographic approach can be used to achieve the objective of a clear understanding of human needs and conditions for improving the quality of care,¹⁶ clarify various behaviors and people's experiences,¹⁷ evaluating and improving the quality of the program, and describing and monitoring the process of change, enhancing nursing practice, answering questions important to nurses, exploring their familiar or experienced issues, or addressing additional relevant issues.⁵ In nursing, applied ethnography has often been used to study within a nursing field, with nursing routine and the researcher's experiences in the nursing subjects, using multiple data collection methods seeking information from the insider and outsider perspectives to see that phenomenon within the context in which it takes place to complete a perfect picture of the nursing

cultural phenomena. In Thailand, most ethnographic studies in nursing involve participant observations, in-depth interviews or focus group discussion. In Thailand, there have been two main ethnographic studies. One focused on the cultural behaviors in patients, parents, caregivers, nurses or nurse students, such as the Thai families caring practice for infants with congenital heart disease prior to cardiac surgery.¹⁸ The second one studied the cultural performance aspects of nurses, nursing, nursing systems at the different workplaces, situations, responsibility, levels, or settings, such as the community care system for people with disabilities¹⁹ and the cultural care of infants from the Phuthai's family in Nakhon Phanom province.²⁰

In conclusion, ethnography is very useful to consider at the beginning of a project in order to support future studies. Ethnographic approaches can be applied to any health issues, especially, in Thailand with diverse health care culture in the context of cultural differences. Ethnographic approach is recommended in order to understand our patients, health professionals, or the nursing care which has real potential to make a remarkably significant improvements to nurses, nursing and healthcare practices in Thailand.

References

1. Polit DF, Beck CT. Nursing research: generating and assessing evidence for nursing

- practice (9th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Wolters Kluwer/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 2012.
2. Hammersley M, Atkinson P. *Ethnography: principles in practice* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge; 2007.
3. Brewer JD. *Ethnography*. Buckingham: Open University Press; 2000.
4. Boellstorff T, Nardi B, Pearce C, Taylor TL. *Ethnography and Virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press; 2012.
5. Cruz EV, Higginbottom G. The use of focused ethnography in nursing research. *Nurse Res*. 2013;20(4):36-43.
6. Bloor M, Wood F. *Keywords in qualitative methods*. London: Sage Publications Ltd; 2006.
7. Fetterman DM. *Ethnography: step-by-step* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications; 2010.
8. Creswell J. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd; 2013.
9. Higginbottom GMA, Pillay JJ, Boadu NY. Guidance on performing focused ethnographies with an emphasis on healthcare research. *Qual Rep*. 2013;18(17):1-16.
10. Draper J. *Ethnography: principles, practice and potential*. *Nurs Stand*. 2015;29 (36):36-41.
11. Pope C. Conducting ethnography in medical settings. *Med Educ*. 2005;39:1180-7
12. Allen D. Ethnomethodological insights into insider-outsider relationships in nursing ethnographies of healthcare settings. *Nurs Inq*. 2004;11(1):14-24.
13. Gelling L. Complexities of ethnography. *Nurse Res*. 2014;22(1):6-7.
14. de Melo LP, Stofel NS, Gualda DM, de Campos EA. Nurses' experiences of ethnographic fieldwork. *Nurse Res*. 2014; 22(1):14-9.
15. Mantzoukas S. Exploring ethnographic genres and developing validity appraisal tools. *J Res Nurs*. 2010;17(5):420-5.
16. Smith C, Gallo A. Applications of performance ethnography in nursing. *Qualitative Health Research*. 2007;17(4):521-8.
17. Richards L, Morse JM. *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications; 2007.
18. Srichantaranit A, Chontawan R, Yenbut J, Ray L, Laohaprasittiporn D, Wanitkun S. Thai's families caring practice for infant with congenital heart disease prior to cardiac surgery. *Pacific Rim International Journal of Nurse Research*. 2010;14(1): 61-78. (in Thai).
19. Pilayon B, Nuntaboot K. Community care system for the disabilities. *Journal of Nursing Science and Health*. 2017;40(2): 32-42. (in Thai).
20. Eamkusolkiet R. Cultural care for infants of the Phuthai's family in Nakhon Phanom Province. *Journal of Boromarajonani College of Nursing, Bangkok*. 2018; 34(2): 74-85. (in Thai).