2017

Shared worlds: multi-sited ethnography and nursing research

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Publication Details

Abstract

**Background** Ethnography, originally developed for the study of supposedly small-scale societies, is now faced with an increasingly mobile, changing and globalised world. Cultural identities can exist without reference to a specific location and extend beyond regional and national boundaries. It is therefore no longer imperative that the sole object of the ethnographer’s practice should be a geographically bounded site.

**Aim** To present a critical methodological review of multi-sited ethnography.

**Discussion** Understanding that it can no longer be taken with any certainty that location alone determines culture, multi-sited ethnography provides a method of contextualising multi-sited social phenomena. The method enables researchers to examine social phenomena that are simultaneously produced in different locations. It has been used to undertake cultural analysis of diverse areas such as organ trafficking, global organisations, technologies and anorexia.

**Conclusion** The authors contend that multi-sited ethnography is particularly suited to nursing research as it provides researchers with an ethnographic method that is more relevant to the interconnected world of health and healthcare services.

**Implications for practice** Multi-sited ethnography provides nurse researchers with an approach to cultural analysis in areas such as the social determinants of health, healthcare services and the effects of health policies across multiple locations.

**Disciplines**
Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

**Publication Details**

This journal article is available at Research Online: [http://ro.uow.edu.au/smhpapers/4611](http://ro.uow.edu.au/smhpapers/4611)
Shared worlds: Multi-sited ethnography and nursing research.

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Abstract.

Aim: To present a critical methodological review of multi-sited ethnography.

Background: Ethnography, originally developed for the study of supposedly small-scale societies, is now faced with an increasingly mobile, changing, and globalising world. Cultural identities are able to exist without reference to a specific location and extend beyond regional and national boundaries. It is no longer seen to be an imperative that a geographically bounded site should be the sole object of the ethnographer’s practice.

Data sources: Relevant literature published in the area of ethnography, culture and healthcare.

Review methods: Literature review.

Discussion: Understanding that it can no longer be taken with any certainty that location alone determines culture, multi-sited ethnography provides a method of contextualising multi-sited social phenomena. The method enables researchers to examine social phenomena that are produced in different geographic locations simultaneously. It has been used to undertake cultural analysis of diverse areas such as organ trafficking, global organisations, technologies and the experience of anorexia.

Conclusion: The authors contend that multi-sited ethnography is particularly suited to nursing research as it provides researchers with an ethnographic method that is more relevant to the inter-connected world of health and health services.
Implications for research/practice: Multi-sited ethnography provides nurse researchers with a approach to cultural analysis in areas such as the social determinants of health, healthcare services and the impact of health policies across multiple locations.

Keywords: ethnography, qualitative research, field research methods, research design, culture
Introduction

The modern practice of ethnography developed within the discipline of anthropology during late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It has now been adopted by many other disciplines in their attempts to understand social phenomena. In its traditional form, we understand ethnography to involve the researcher participating within a community for an extended period of time, observing what is happening, listening to what is being said and asking questions of those under the ethnographer’s gaze (Crowley-Henry 2009). In this approach, ethnographic research becomes “the work of describing a culture . . . to understand another way of life from the native’s [sic] point of view” (Spradley 1980, p. 3). The ethnographer’s understandings are mapped to specific areas, thus naturalising their “discoveries of culture” (Coleman and Collins 2006, p. 5). The ethnographer then represents this group in an ethnography as being bounded (by certain cultural rules/rights and ways of being), homogenous (which is to say that within the cultural grouping, difference between and among individuals is less important than the similarities which define them as a collective) and unchanging over time, place and cultural space (Salazar 2013).

Since the mid-1980s, ethnography has undergone a period of radical critique of its traditional form as presented above. This has been characterised and brought to expression by critical reflection on the processes of producing “ethnographic knowledge”. Ethnography, originally developed for the study of supposedly small-scale societies, is now faced with an increasingly mobile, changing, and globalising world (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). It is no longer seen to be an imperative that a geographically bounded site should be the sole object of the ethnographer’s practice (Amit, 2000). This place-focused concept of culture has been deconstructed by many theorists (Burrell 2009; Amit 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Hastrup and Olwig 1997). These critiques have brought insights about how the ethnographic research
site is in many ways constructed by the researcher, rather than discovered by them (Burrell 2009).

Constructing the field.

The concept of “the field” has come to encapsulate cultural difference in the traditional conception of ethnography and the notion of a geographically defined research area has become problematic in contemporary ethnography (Wittel 2000). In many locations throughout the globe, we now see fewer people sharing their life’s experience in the one location. Cultural identities are able to exist without reference to a specific location and extend beyond regional and national boundaries. Communication through internet connected devices, the growth of digital social networks, and the ubiquitous presence of inexpensive communication technologies has led to the capacity for people to contribute to and identify with cultures whose members a geographically dispersed. The previously assumed and purportedly unproblematic relationship between culture and a specific location has become increasingly ambiguous.

Fieldwork methods encompassing long term contact with the same location and people has been a core feature of ethnographic practice as it developed during the 20th century. The works of anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) and Franz Boas (1858-1942) led the way in their attempts to understand culture through this form of long-term immersive fieldwork. This ideal has shaped the view that fieldwork is a vital component of any ethnographic study. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have critiqued the hidden understandings of this tradition and suggest that the notion of fieldwork has become fetishized by ethnographers. These understandings privilege the idea of fieldwork, in its ‘purest and most essential’ form, as being conducted as a lone activity by a researcher who lives for at least a year among a group people in a distant site (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, p. 11). This archetype
of ethnographic fieldwork creates such binary oppositions as “home and away”, “insider and outsider”, and reinforces the essentialist “othering” of the people the ethnographer researches (Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

One consequence of the critique of ethnography and the fieldwork method has been the development of new approaches to conducting fieldwork. Fieldwork is no longer limiting itself to standard procedures such as participant observation or interviews within a given locality. The idea of the bounded field has been discarded by many ethnographers and been replaced with an idea of “field” that is spatially and temporally fluid. Increasingly, the site that ethnographic studies focus on is not necessarily a geographical “field” but a site seen in terms of connections, a series of “shifting locations” relevant to the social phenomenon of interest (Clifford 1997). This is shaped by the understanding that it can no longer be taken with any certainty that location determines culture.

A multi-sited approach to ethnography.

Emerging from the “Writing Culture” critique of ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986), the paradigm of multi-sited ethnography has been developed and elaborated by the anthropologist George E. Marcus since the mid-1990s. This method of ethnography moves from the localised situations of conventional ethnographic research to examine “the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities” (Marcus 1995, p. 96) and provides a means for studying social phenomena that cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single site. The method therefore reorients the idea of the social in ethnography, allowing studies to undertake cultural analysis on phenomena such as social relations, institutions, systems, processes and structures (Marcus 1999, p. 7).
Marcus (1999) emphasises that multi-sited ethnography is more a matter of contextualising multi-sited social phenomena rather than an ethnography that covers many sites. For example, the research domains that have been studied using the method have included studies focused on global organisations, bureaucracies, on markets, technologies, and on policy processes and their impact on communities (Marcus 2006). In his much cited description, Marcus (1995, p. 105) styles multi-site research as being “designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact define the argument of the ethnography”. In this *modus operandus*, the ethnographer could follow people, objects, biographies, metaphors, stories or even conflicts in their social analysis, following and recording them in time, place and space (Marcus 1995). The choice of the phenomenon of interest will therefore influence the sites selected within the research. Marcus highlights how the links between the multiple sites might be conceived at an initial site through fieldwork “oriented primarily to explicating a shared world of a set of subjects” (Marcus 1999, p. 7).

Collaboration is at the methodological core of multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 2007). Within this collaboration, the researcher and subject become “epistemic partners” and “para-ethnographers” in the study (Marcus 2007, p.7; Marcus 2005, p.7). Fieldwork can take the form of collaborative dialogues with inquiries built around them (Marcus 2005). The ethnographic project advances by deferring to and being altered by the collaboration with subjects (Holmes and Marcus 2008). The final written account of collaboration between the ethnographer and the subjects also provides a means of ethnographically justifying the sites to which the researcher commits in their multi-sited study (Marcus 2005). Theory emerges through the ethnographer’s analysis of the relationship between the sites where and through which the ethnography is conducted (Marcus 1998).
Immersive fieldwork remains as the primary method in the ethnographic tool kit of multi-sited studies (Marcus 2012). However, the approach may not deliver the expected elements of ethnography, such as long-term fieldwork (Marcus 2005). Indeed, multi-sited ethnography does not represent a specific strategy for designing studies but involves the use of multiple sources of information from multiple approaches within the frame of “fieldwork” to gain new insights into the social world (Marcus 1999, p. 9-10).

Cook, Laidlaw and Mair (2009) observe that the ideology underpinning multi-sited ethnography rests on a number of suppositions: that there is a hidden truth, discoverable only by those who achieve a global view; that this truth will bring together and explain all the partial perspectives of those who only know one point of view; and that what is seen from those different perspectives, though perhaps diverse, is all really part of an integrated and coherent phenomenon. Hage (2005) warns that many researchers use the method in a mechanical way to structure research without highlighting the significance and the ramifications of studying a phenomenon across multiple sites.

Multi-sited ethnography tests the limits of a method that had previously been reliant on knowledge developed through spending an extended period of time in a single site. The intensity of fieldwork expected in previous approaches has become unnecessary in the new method and because of this the “ethnographic quality” of the fieldwork has been questioned (Burawoy 2003). Against accusations that this method represents a fragmented approach to research however, Mitchell (2012) notes that the approach has not professed any ambitions for any idealised notion of holism, that one can indeed capture and re-present some mythical unity of expression or manifestation of culture. The multi-sited method does not aim at creating supposedly holistic descriptions related to interactions with small groups of people within one locality; it aims at studying social phenomena that are produced in different geographic locations simultaneously (Amelina 2010). This difference in ethnographic aims highlights that
single sited and multi-sited approaches to ethnography represent different frames for understanding complex cultural processes and social structures.

Multi-sited ethnography and health.

As multi-sited ethnography has established itself as a research method among anthropologists, other disciplines have embraced this approach to ethnography. This approach to research would seem to have clear relevance to health research that requires an in-depth analysis of social worlds. It has been used in such diverse research areas as the “culture-communication nexus” between Alaska Native peoples and health organisations (Balestrery 2014), organ trafficking (Scheper-Hughes, 2004) and the experiences of people with anorexia (Warin 2006). Exemplars of how the method has been applied can provide the reader with an understanding of the breadth of approach. They also demonstrate how complex health-related phenomena can be viewed effectively through the lens of multi-sited ethnography, producing rich new understandings.

For example, Adhikari (2013) undertook a multi-sited ethnography to explore the phenomenon of the increasing numbers of nurses who are leaving Nepal to participate in the global healthcare market. In Nepal, the researcher interacted with nursing students, visited nursing colleges and interviewed senior nurse managers, campus chiefs and nurse teachers studying the “socio-cultural” context for nurse migration with a particular focus on how women are trained to become nurses and how they prepared for their international move to gain employment. The researcher then followed Nepali migrant nurses to the UK, interviewing them and interacting with their husbands and other family members. It was observed that nurses entered into lower status jobs in the UK, but gained a higher social status back in Nepal through
their migration. The nurses who were followed experienced increased economic independence and earning potential, whilst their dependent husbands had to accept a compromised social position, which had the potential to impact on gender relations in the family.

Weine, Mahbat and Azamdjon (2008) used a multi-sited ethnographic method to explore ways of potentially addressing the global public health problem of HIV prevention amongst male migrant workers. The researchers focused on Tajik migrant workers in Moscow and visited bazaars and construction sites in search of participants. Interviews and focus groups were undertaken with the Tajik workers, focusing on their knowledge of HIV/AIDS, their attitudes, and their behaviours. Their findings identified that although the men had basic knowledge about HIV, their ability to protect themselves from acquiring it was compromised by their living and working conditions. These were as a consequence of them living undocumented in Russia, without legal rights or access to health care. The analysis highlighted the importance of religious and family support within their lives and their potential to be drawn upon in preventative interventions in the future.

Olson and Couchie (2013) have appropriated multi-sited ethnography to explore the role of midwives in implementing an elective birthing programme in a First Nation community in rural Canada, and to identify any barriers to the practice of midwifery in the setting. Their study combined participant observation and interviews in the hospitals, boarding homes, and governmental organisations. Interviews were undertaken with pregnant Aboriginal women, fathers, grandmothers, First Nations political leaders, nurses, policy makers, doctors and midwives, and representatives from their respective peak bodies. The analysis identified that there was a need within the community to move away from evacuating women for child birth and a requirement for increased access to midwifery services in First Nations Communities to enable this. For community-based birthing to be a success, it needed the removal of policy barriers that inhibited the ability of midwives to practice in the setting.
Towards a multi-sited imaginary of nursing culture.

In this section the authors discuss how they have used multi-sited ethnography in studying a social phenomenon that cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single site. In our study, the phenomenon of interest has been the profession of mental health nursing as it relates to the care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Indigenous peoples of Australia, have identified a lack of respect for their culture and the dominance of a Western-centric perspective on mental health as creating negative health care experiences in public mental health services (Walker, Schultz and Sonn 2014). Health professionals have been identified as failing to provide care that is culturally safe for Indigenous Australians (Walker, Schultz and Sonn 2014). Nurses represent the largest professional group practising within these services. Challenged by the critique, the authors are undertaking a social analysis of mental health nursing practice as it relates to this group of mental health service users.

Nursing has its own culture (Hoeve, Jansen and Roodbol, 2014), which is not geographically bounded. Historically, mental health nursing was bounded within total institutions (Goffman 1982). However, this is no longer the case in Australia following de-institutionalisation in the 1980s (Cleary 2003). This process of reform has seen the closure of the vast majority of stand-alone psychiatric hospital and the development of specialised in-patient services within acute general hospitals, as well as a shift in emphasis from hospital to community-based service delivery (Cleary 2005). The object of inquiry, the professional group
of mental health nursing, now works across many different clinical areas within multiple health services that constitute the public mental health system in Australia.

Using a traditional approach to ethnography would have required this study to be focused on a single site of clinical practice. Viewing the issue through the lens of multi-sited ethnography has allowed the authors to follow professional culture across Australia. This has involved conducting interviews with registered nurses who work in public mental health services throughout the country, and visiting mental health services and mental health nursing gatherings, such as conferences and seminars to research practice with mental health nurses. Our approach has involved extended periods of observation and interaction within a metropolitan and a regional mental health service over two thousand kilometres apart that serve Indigenous Australian service users in very different social environments. Across these services, mental nurses are connected by a common professional practice.

The multi-sited approach has provided the authors with a method to explore a broad criticism of public mental health services and the health professional who work within them by following the social realities of practice across multiple local sites. This has allowed us to describe and interpret the connections that bind practice across localities and the disconnections. Disjuncture in mental health nursing practice with Indigenous Australians have been observed between mental health services, as well as within the service’s clinical areas. For example, community-based team members in one service area described their practice as culturally safe, while inpatient nurses in the same service described their practice as custodial and dominated by a biomedical approach to mental health care.

A key challenge for the authors involved constructing a study of the sites of practice that could explicate the shared world of mental health nurses in public mental health services in Australia. Given the many thousands of mental health nurses and the complexity of the health system they work in, our study can make no claim of having an “ethnographic grasp” of this
professional world in its entirety (Hannerz 2003, p. 207). Collaboration with mental health nurses throughout the research process has guided the research design within the practical limitations of time, distance and resources.

This collaboration has guided the research design into unexpected areas, such as identifying the need to undertake an historical media analysis of the perceptions of mental health nursing as a practice. The process of engagement with mental health nurses has involved their active involvement in social analysis of profession within interviews rather than simply being sources of data (Islam 2014). Their analysis of the profession and its practice has shaped the research’s fieldwork in our attempts to understand the complex social structures of both mental health nursing and mental health services. Their insights into area such as the impact of bed management systems on care, service relationships with local Indigenous communities and the professional relationships within services, have provided direction to later observations within mental health services.

Conclusions

Multi-sited ethnography focuses research in ways that are more complex and intense than the traditional ethnographic paradigm (Marcus 1995). The method supports the nurse researcher in creating an account of how parts of the contemporary world interact and operate. This scope enables multi-sited ethnography to have relevance in our efforts to respond to social problems (Fortun 2012).

By moving from the hegemonic concept of an “ethnographic field”, multi-sited ethnography is more relevant to the interconnected world of health and healthcare. The breadth of the method allows the nurse researcher to undertake studies that go beyond the restrictive
ideology underpinning traditional ethnographic approaches to enable understandings on phenomena such as the social determinants of health, health services and the impact of health policies, amongst many other areas.

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