

Focused Ethnography: A Methodological Adaptation for Social Research in Emerging Contexts

Sarah Wall

Key words:
focused
ethnography;
ethnography;
methodology;
participant
observation; social
research

Abstract: Ethnography is one of the oldest qualitative methods, yet increasingly, researchers from various disciplines are using and adapting ethnography beyond its original intents. In particular, a form of ethnography known as "focused ethnography" has emerged. However, focused ethnography remains underspecified methodologically, which has contributed to controversy about its essential nature and value. Nevertheless, an ever-evolving range of research settings, purposes, and questions require appropriate methodological innovation. Using the example of a focused ethnography conducted to study nurses' work experiences, this article will demonstrate how particular research questions, the attributes of certain cultural groups, and the unique characteristics of specific researchers compel adaptations in ethnography that address the need for methodological evolution while still preserving the essential nature of the method.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. An Evolving Method](#)
- [3. An Example of Focused Ethnography](#)
- [4. Culture Revealed](#)
 - [4.1 Ideas, beliefs, and values](#)
 - [4.2 Knowledge, skills, and activities](#)
 - [4.3 Power and control](#)
- [5. Discussion](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Introduction

Ethnography is one of the oldest qualitative research methods, originating in nineteenth century anthropology. Yet, researchers from various disciplines are now using and adapting ethnography beyond its origins as a result of philosophical reflections on the processes and purposes of the method. New fields of study, new kinds of questions, and new reasons for undertaking ethnographic studies have emerged, and with these, a form of ethnography known as "focused ethnography" has developed. While this type of ethnography is mentioned briefly in some qualitative methods texts and a small set of methodological articles, it remains methodologically underspecified, which has contributed to controversy about its character and value. In order to apply ethnography effectively to an ever-evolving range of settings and purposes, it is helpful to consider specific examples of ethnographic research that push the boundaries of convention. My intent in this article is to describe my experiences with focused ethnography and demonstrate how particular research questions,

the attributes of certain cultural groups, and the unique characteristics of specific researchers compel adaptations in ethnography that nevertheless preserve the essential nature of the method. First, I will outline the origins of ethnography and explain some of the adaptations that have occurred with this method over time, including focused ethnography. Then, using the example of a focused ethnographic study I recently conducted, I will demonstrate how various aspects of culture such as beliefs, values, knowledge and skills, as well as power and control can be richly revealed using focused ethnography, despite its differences from traditional ethnography, making it an important part of the ethnographic toolkit for social research. [1]

2. An Evolving Method

Most simply, ethnography is "the art and science of describing a group or culture" (FETTERMAN, 1998, p.1). It is characterized by

"a written description of a people that focuses on selected aspects of how they lead their routine, remarkable, and ritual lives with each other in their environment and of the beliefs and customs that comprise their common sense about their world" (MUECKE, 1994, pp.189-190). [2]

Ethnography has its origins in anthropology and the traditional ethnographic method has shaped our subsequent understandings and expectations about this method. Classical anthropological ethnography is characterized by the long term, holistic participation of a researcher amongst a foreign and/or "exotic," relatively bounded people group (MAYAN, 2009; MUECKE, 1994). In traditional or classical ethnography, the researcher is typically unfamiliar with the cultural setting under study and enters the setting with a broad, undefined purpose (MORSE & RICHARDS, 2002). [3]

Over the years, ethnography has evolved from its origins to take on different characteristics based on ideological currents of a given time. Systematic ethnography, which emphasizes the structure of a culture more than descriptions of it, emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, in response to critiques that classical ethnography was too broad and unsystematic (MUECKE, 1994). This form of ethnographic research was typified by step-by-step methodological approaches, schematic representations of cultural knowledge, ethnographic algorithms, and folk taxonomies (ibid.). Eventually, ethnography took an interpretive turn to emphasize "the power of the scientific *imagination* to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers" (GEERTZ, 1973, p.16, emphasis added). This stream of ethnographic methodology focused on "best guesses" about cultural meanings, presented through "thick descriptions" of cultural contexts (MUECKE, 1994). [4]

In response to concerns that existing forms of ethnography were essentialist and objectifying, critical ethnography emerged in recognition of the subjective, co-constructed and value-laden nature of research among cultural groups. This form of ethnography is founded on a view of culture as relational, partial, unbounded, dynamic, and plural, which is contrary to earlier conceptions of culture as closed,

isolated, uniform, and enduring (AGAR, 2006). In traditional ethnography, the goal was description; the intent was not to critique cultural circumstances or design strategies for change (MAYAN, 2009). Conversely, with critical ethnography, the intent was and is to include marginalized and contrary voices and reveal hidden agendas and power centers for emancipatory purposes (MAYAN, 2009; MUECKE, 1994). [5]

These methodological adaptations correspond to the moments of paradigmatic change described by DENZIN and LINCOLN (2000), including traditional, modernist, blurred, crisis of representation, and postmodern. These moments describe methodological creativity, interdisciplinary perspectives, reflexivity in representation, and shifts from positivist to postmodern thinking. The later moments describe the opening of a space for experimental, values-based, and critical forms of ethnography and have brought with them corresponding adaptations in methodological strategies and forms of writing. Although the moments described by DENZIN and LINCOLN have been criticized for being progress-oriented and normative in some ways (ALASUUTARI, 2004), they do show that there are many different ways of thinking about qualitative research and many ways to adapt it to changing times and purposes. In this time, we now see many new forms of ethnographic research such as visual ethnography, autoethnography, and institutional ethnography. [6]

It is important to avoid the assumption that methodological adaptations in ethnography have been chronologically tidy, that past ethnographies were all positivistic and totalizing, or that all ethnographers are postmodern now (ATKINSON, COFFEY & DELAMONT, 1999). Nevertheless, ideologies fluctuate and "scholars around the world have been busy inventing and reinventing ... ethnography" and creating "new ethnographies" since the inception of the method (WOLCOTT, 1999, p.12). The work of early ethnographers set in motion "successive waves of ethnographers in what has become an ever-widening circle of applications and adaptations" (p.169). MARCUS (1998) acknowledged the tremendous variety in the nature and presentation of ethnographic research, although HAMMAR (1998 in WOLCOTT, 1999, p.169) described some methodological adaptations as "weird." The evolution of ethnography provokes ongoing methodological discussion and debate (WOLCOTT, 1999). [7]

One ethnographic adaptation that has sparked discussion is *focused ethnography*. Focused ethnography is based on the premise that "we no longer need to travel to far-away places to study culture; nor is culture defined only along ethnic or geographical lines" (MAYAN, 2009, p.37). Rather, cultures and subcultures are everywhere and may be relatively unbounded (MAYAN, 2009). A focused ethnography usually deals with a distinct problem in a specific context and is conducted within a sub-cultural group rather than with a cultural group that differs completely from that of the researcher (KNOBLAUCH, 2005; MAYAN, 2009; MORSE & RICHARDS, 2002; ROPER & SHAPIRA, 2000). Focused ethnography is especially relevant when conducting applied social research in highly fragmented and specialized fields of study (KNOBLAUCH, 2005). Participants may not even know each other but the researcher focuses on their common

behaviors and shared experiences and works from the assumption that the participants share a cultural perspective (CRUZ & HIGGINBOTTOM, 2013; MAYAN, 2009; MORSE & RICHARDS, 2002). [8]

Sociological focused ethnography was introduced and first described by Hubert KNOBLAUCH (published in English in 2005) yet today it remains somewhat underspecified as a social science research method. It has been used primarily in practice-based disciplines (e.g. nursing, engineering, computer design) as a pragmatic and efficient way to capture specific cultural perspectives and to make practical use of that understanding (CRUZ & HIGGINBOTTOM, 2013; HIGGINBOTTOM, 2013; MILLEN, 2000; MUECKE, 1994). Research that resembles focused ethnography may also be referred to as mini-ethnographies, micro-ethnographies, rapid ethnographic appraisals, and "quick and dirty" ethnographies (MILLEN, 2000; MUECKE, 1994). KIEN (2008) labels these types of ethnographic projects as "technographies," which are "truncated and shaped by the pragmatics of producing 'deliverables' within a tight schedule" in industry settings (p.1102). [9]

Examples of focused ethnographies in the social sciences are few. Further, KNOBLAUCH (2005) stresses that many studies that might be labeled as focused ethnographies do not necessarily consider themselves to be part of this methodological movement and/or do not cite common methodological foundations. To the extent that focused ethnography is described in the methodological literature, it appears to differ from traditional ethnography in some key ways. Interviews, long-term participant observation, field notes, and document analysis are regarded as classic features of ethnography. Researchers are traditionally thought of as neutral, distant, reflective observers and it is assumed that ethnography is best conducted by researchers that are not part of the cultural group to make it easier for the researcher to see what is happening in the setting (GRBICH, 2007; HIGGINBOTTOM, 2013; KNOBLAUCH, 2005; MORSE & RICHARDS, 2002). In traditional ethnography, researchers typically do not enter the field with a formally specified research question (ROPER & SHAPIRA, 2000). Focused ethnography, on the other hand, is typified by short-term or absent field visits, an interest in a specific research question, a researcher with insider or background knowledge of the cultural group, and intensive methods of data collection and recording, such as video or audio-taping (HIGGINBOTTOM, 2013; KNOBLAUCH, 2005; MILLEN, 2000; MORSE & RICHARDS, 2002). [10]

Concerns have been raised by the lack of methodological foundation and the limited opportunity to adapt to the social worlds of others in focused ethnography (BREIDENSTEIN & HIRSCHAUER, 2002). As well, questions emerge about the trustworthiness of the knowledge gained through focused ethnographies because they are relatively brief and limited in scope (MUECKE, 1994). The image of ethnography continues to be shaped by classic anthropological ethnography. Thus, as KNOBLAUCH (2005) laments, "only long-term field studies, it seems, epitomize what may rightly be called ethnography" and ethnographic studies that vary from this "appear to fall short or to be 'deficient'" (§4). However, I concur with

KNOBLAUCH's sociological description of the method and would reiterate that it is the focus on cultural understandings and descriptions that define ethnography, rather than the form and amount of data collection that occurs. [11]

I now turn to an example of a sociological focused ethnography to demonstrate that cultural characteristics can be richly discovered through the strategies associated with focused ethnography. As methodological adaptations emerge, it is useful to present and discuss examples of research using that method in order to glean and share insights and ensure that the method accomplishes its intended purpose. I propose that focused ethnography is a legitimate and necessary option in our overall ethnographic toolkit because of its flexibility in exploring culture in emerging settings of interest. Rather than being a threat to the ethnographic endeavor, focused ethnography preserves the essential nature of ethnography and allows researchers to explore cultural contexts that can not be studied using conventional ethnographic methods. This moves our understanding of focused ethnography away from the popularized pragmatic goals of "quick and dirty" ethnographies that use research methods for industry problem solving and returns it to KNOBLAUCH's original conception of it as a social research method suitable for examining emerging cultural contexts. [12]

3. An Example of Focused Ethnography

From 2008 to 2010, I conducted an ethnographic study among self-employed nurses in Canada to investigate their work experiences and professional perspectives, within a changing sociopolitical and economic context (WALL, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b). Ethnography was the appropriate method for pursuing this topic because it allowed for an examination of the collective work culture of self-employed nurses. Culture consists of the patterns of behavior of a particular group of people and their customs, ideas, beliefs, and knowledge; studying culture allows ethnographers to determine what people know, believe, and do (ROPER & SHAPIRA, 2000). Ethnography can also uncover the tacit skills, complexities, and discretion in jobs that may be routine or marginal and reveal how power, control, and inequality are sustained in many work environments (SMITH, 2001). [13]

In my study, I found that traditional assumptions about ethnography did not hold. My research questions, the unique study population, and my unique positioning as a researcher among them necessitated a number of methodological adaptations. This study, then, provides an example of a contemporary application for the ethnographic method that demonstrates the need for innovative methodological strategies such as focused ethnography which make ethnography effective for new purposes. [14]

As mentioned above, in traditional ethnography researchers typically do not enter the field with a formally specified research question (ROPER & SHAPIRA, 2000), tending to begin the project with no prior conceptions of the field and letting the setting "tell [them] what's going on" (ERICKSON, 1977, p.62). However, I began with specific research questions about nursing knowledge and practice,

professional values, and work experiences rather than with an open-ended intent to live in and learn about a new culture. Specifically, I wanted to understand what motivated these nurses to pursue self-employment, what facilitators and barriers they faced as they established their practices, what type of work they did and what knowledge, skills, and experience they drew upon to do their work, what kinds of reactions they received from their clients, other nurses and health professionals, and the public about their very non-traditional nursing roles, and the ways in which nursing self-employment impacted their sense of identity and professional values as nurses. [15]

While early ethnographers were regarded as objective outsiders, my starting point required that I have both insider and background knowledge of and previous experience with my field of study. I had many years of hospital-based nursing experience but had never been self-employed. I had knowledge of and comfort with the general culture of nursing and experience with professional nursing regulation and issues management. I shared a background in clinical nursing with all of my participants and in health services administration with some. At the time, I was not actively licensed as a nurse and considered myself to be a sociologist with a healthcare background. Within this study, I filled both insider and outsider roles and found myself at different points along the continuum at different times. [16]

One of the most unique aspects of this study was the nature of the study population, which was almost entirely unlike the people groups studied by traditional anthropological ethnographers. Self-employment in nursing is relatively rare. Globally, self-employed nurses make up about 1% of all registered nurses, although their numbers are rising rapidly (CANADIAN NURSES ASSOCIATION, 1996; INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF NURSES, 2004). For now, these nurses represent the few who have opted for a dramatic departure from nurses' traditional organizational circumstances in an effort to enhance their professional potential. Self-employed nurses work in a wide range of practice settings and specialties. They are mainly solo practitioners who are geographically dispersed and usually work in isolation. Some have no specific physical workplace. Many do not know each other, although some are loosely connected to each other through a self-employed nurses' association. [17]

These unconventional features of my study affected my data collection strategies and options. I relied mainly on interview data to reveal the cultural elements of interest. I spoke at length (1-2 hours) with each of 20 self-employed nurses who were recruited via an e-mail from the self-employed nurses' association and also through snowball sampling. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed to identify persistent words, phrases, and ideas that were ultimately grouped into themes (MAYAN, 2009). I also analyzed relevant documents such as legislation, application forms, nursing practice standards, guidelines for entrepreneurial practice, position statements, and participants' websites. [18]

Observation and participation are regarded as the characteristic features of the ethnographic approach (ATKINSON, COFFEY, DELAMONT, LOFLAND &

LOFLAND, 2001). I took every available opportunity to spend time in the field with the nurses. I interviewed some of them in their home offices or clinics and so I was able to view their workspaces. I attended six meetings of the self-employed nurses' association, including their annual meetings in 2008 and 2010. This allowed me to speak to self-employed nurses other than those I had interviewed and hear more about pertinent issues and experiences. Yet time in the field was limited in this study for several reasons. The geographic dispersion and isolation of my participants meant that there was no shared physical setting in which I could observe or participate. This presents an immediate barrier to conducting participant observation in the traditional manner. Further, observation of some of my participants in their work settings was not possible due to the fact that my ethics approval was based, in part, on the expectation that I avoid situations where private medical information would be divulged (i.e. clinical, nurse-patient interactions). Seven of the twenty nurses I interviewed worked in practices involving direct patient care. As well, some of the nurses worked in highly sensitive and confidential fields, such as professional conduct or patient care complaint investigations, making participant observation inappropriate in these cases. A few of the nurses were in between active contracts and some were concerned that their clients (non-clinical) would be uncomfortable with the presence of a researcher during their discussions. Two nurses, both in administrative roles, consented to being observed at work but only one of these opportunities came to pass. [19]

With the application of ethnographic methods in new and unique settings, researchers have become interested in particular questions among groups that may already be familiar to them and that may differ from the bounded, foreign cultural groups of interest to traditional ethnographers. My study illustrates this clearly. Yet, despite the need for methodological adaptations that make it possible to use ethnography in new ways, the fundamental purpose of ethnography—to understand and describe culture—has not changed. Methodologically creative and flexible ethnographic studies can still reveal the richness of culture among the group of interest. [20]

4. Culture Revealed

Broadly speaking, the fundamental question in the study of culture through ethnography is, "What is going on here?" (WOLCOTT, 1999, p.69). More specific cultural elements of interest include ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge, social arrangements, and the workings of power (FETTERMAN, 1998; MORSE & RICHARDS, 2002; SMITH, 2001; WOLCOTT, 1999). In spite of the unconventional circumstances of my study, as outlined above, my study findings contained nurses' richly described experiences and impressions of their work and professional culture. Interestingly, although most of these nurses did not know each other, were geographically dispersed, and worked in diverse types of practices, their responses were quite unified, suggesting that they share a culture and have similar perspectives on it, despite their uniqueness as a study population. As this is a methodological article, my intent in this section is not to present a substantive discussion of my findings but to use data excerpts to

illustrate how cultural elements were revealed through this non-traditional ethnography. [21]

4.1 Ideas, beliefs, and values

Values and beliefs are the underlying forces that make a cultural system "tick" (FETTERMAN, 1998, p.18). The nurses in this study offered many comments about the values and beliefs that underpin the culture of their work. Several of them discussed their professional identity as nurses and conveyed its significance to their work. Although they were moving into a very non-traditional realm of practice, they took with them their nursing identities and built their nursing businesses on the values of nursing, thereby preserving their understandings of nursing professional culture. For example, Diana¹, a management consultant, explained that, although she did not have to be officially registered as a nurse to do her work, she had a "strong value in registered nursing" and saw herself as "always, first, and foremost a nurse." Kelly, who had a large, successful home care business, explained that although she always knew she wanted to own a business, she knew she "didn't want to abandon nursing." Lindsay, who had an alternative therapies practice, had "a very strong affiliation and loyalty to nursing," and wanted to maintain that identity and connection as she moved from hospital nursing to self-employment. [22]

This identity was closely linked to what these nurses saw as fundamental nursing values. Sylvia, who investigated patient care complaints, described the nursing perspective as based on "compassion, caring, empathy." Denise was certain that the success of her corporate wellness consulting practice was because "nursing is so respected. It's so well known. It's not threatening. It's always about helping, not taking." Nancy, also in an alternative healing practice, explained that she went into private practice because of a "belief in prevention and holism." Paula, whose practice involved counseling and complaint investigations, described holism as nurses' "capacity to see the whole picture and to understand what others are doing in this whole picture." She also portrayed nurses as "so patient-focused and so family-focused." [23]

The nurses in this study believed, as Paula articulated, that, as self-employed nurses, they were "in a unique position to make a difference." Lindsay explained that "nursing is very much about getting people off on their own and being well." Carla saw self-employed nurses as moving away from "caring through the chemicals and the procedures," making what Nancy saw as an "important shift from the traditional perspective" toward holistic healing and a view of patients as partners in their own care. This ideological shift was evident in my observations of Lindsay's clinic. Her clinic, unlike a traditional clinic, smelled of incense, had a bubbling fountain in the corner, and was decorated with earthy colors and exotic hanging tapestries. The purpose of her work was to promote physical healing and emotional well-being by balancing the body's physical energy centers. The values inherent in her non-traditional work were reflected in her workspace. [24]

1 Participant names used herein are pseudonyms.

These data excerpts illustrate some of the richness of the descriptions presented by these nurses in terms of their identity and the values and beliefs associated with their work, demonstrating that cultural elements were strongly expressed by these research participants despite the unconventional nature of this ethnography. [25]

4.2 Knowledge, skills, and activities

An ethnographer asks: "What do people in this setting have to know in order to do what they are doing?" (WOLCOTT, 1999, p.69). This is particularly relevant to an ethnography of work. In this study, I was specifically interested in how the nurses described their knowledge because their work was so different from traditional nursing practice. Notably, these nurses seldom described their knowledge and skills in terms of tasks. Rather, they spoke about the conceptual knowledge upon which they based their work, the broad areas in which they worked with clients, and the guidelines against which they evaluated their work. This reveals an important, collective cultural shift from traditional conceptions of what nurses know and do. Although their practices were diverse, there were threads of knowledge that drew all their practices together as nursing practices. For example, some of them talked about nurses' broad knowledge of the health care system and the various roles and functions within it. Sophie explained that "I do know how the system works and I do think I bring a patient-centered approach." Georgette had found in her project management work that "the face that meets with the medical team needs to have a medical background" in order to be effective in health-related program planning. As noted earlier, Paula, whose practice involved both counseling and complaint investigations, discussed nurses' capacity to see "the whole picture." In observing Grace in her work as a project manager during a day-long meeting of a large project team, it was evident that her role was to coordinate the various roles and professional responsibilities based on her big picture perspective and her knowledge of the way the elements of the project fit together. [26]

These self-employed nurses used transferable communication, planning, and observational skills to accomplish their work. Sheila, a human resources consultant, said that she used "the skills that I learned in nursing [school and practice] on how to be compassionate, how to talk to them, how to draw them out and understand where they're coming from." Allison, the owner of a laser hair removal clinic, also felt strongly that nurses were able to bring a "certain professionalism and nurturing" to their work that others doing similar work (such as estheticians in her case) might not have. Diana (management consultant) pointed out that "you always have that nursing lens on things." She described the transferability of the nursing process, a pervasive concept in nursing aimed at systematizing nursing practice, which involves "assessing the problem, diagnosing what the problem is, deciding on some actions that you want to take and evaluating it." She has found that it "works in project management." Nancy, an alternative health practitioner, also explained how she uses the nursing process in her work as she performs a holistic assessment and creates a care plan using holistic health interventions such as Reiki or therapeutic touch.

Likewise, Carla used the nursing process in her administrative consulting work, along with the observational skills she honed as a hospital nurse. They evaluated their own work according to established professional standards and guidelines, such as, as Gabby, a foot care nurse explained, "our code of ethics, according to the nursing practice standards, according to infection prevention and control standards." [27]

These nurses worked in a diverse range of clinical and non-clinical practices. Clinical practices included wound and foot care, health education, counseling, alternative and complementary therapy, and laser hair removal. Non-clinical practices involved management consulting, project management, and complaint investigations. What tied them all together in the same professional cultural was their connection to the overarching goals of nursing. Carla explained that the fundamental question to ask about self-employed nursing practice is: "So are we supporting health, are we educating, are we coaching, are we counseling, are we restoring, are we health teaching?" She summed up what it is that self-employed nurses do by saying, "[i]t's not the tasks we do. It's how we inform the experience of health. That's what we do. We innovate health." [28]

These findings demonstrate clearly how these nurses viewed their knowledge and skills and how they saw their activities as being connected to an overarching professional culture and purpose. Notably, in spite of the non-traditional ethnographic approach employed in this research, knowledge as an aspect of culture was still very richly revealed in this study. [29]

4.3 Power and control

The dynamic interplay of cultures and subcultures and the players within them can produce power differentials and controversy. Nurses have a traditional image as selfless and subservient and they most commonly work as organizational employees. As Denise remarked, "[i]t's a very funny concept that society has of nursing. It's perhaps not as empowering as I would like." These self-employed nurses challenged this conception by becoming independent business people working outside of hospitals and for this they faced consequences. Mary-Jane observed that, "[n]obody likes change. Change is hard. To be the first is hard." [30]

At times, the nurses faced negative responses from members of the public and from other healthcare professionals who did not understand what the role of nurses could be outside of hospitals and, in the case of other healthcare professionals, were concerned about infringement on their professional territory. However, the most significant consequence of the cultural challenge these nurses presented was trouble with the regulatory association² as they sought to have their practices approved as nursing practices. Almost all of them told emotional stories about their experiences with the regulatory association. Denise expressed a common sentiment when she said she has "cried more in my career as a

2 The regulatory association is the organization responsible, under legislative authority, for licensing registered nurses and monitoring ongoing competence to practice.

private nurse about [regulatory issues] and being afraid of being kicked out [of nursing] and being afraid of not doing something." [31]

The specific concerns with professional regulation related to significant time delays in obtaining approval, excessive surveillance beyond what employed nurses experienced, and inconsistent decisions about what constitutes nursing practice. Mary-Jane waited over a year for regulatory approval for her diabetes outreach practice, which would have allowed her to count her practice hours toward her annual registration renewal. While waiting, however, her license lapsed because she could not count unapproved hours. Several others, who waited months, became "paranoid" about the meaning of the delay and the scrutiny to which they were subjected. Kelly (home care agency) wondered, "[w]hy do I have to justify myself when no other nurse does? I know a lot of nurses [in traditional practices] and their practice isn't necessarily scrutinized like this is." The process of applying for regulatory approval for a nursing business, which was over and above the general process for all registered nurses, was described as grueling and onerous. The application form, which was one of the documents analyzed in this study, was very long and the questions were geared toward the work that nurses would do in traditional clinical practice. While Carla acknowledged that "they're [the regulatory association] trying to make an assessment, they feel they have the safety of the public at heart," she also believed that "they lack understanding ... they try to cover so much, asking inane questions, questions that aren't even related to the practice or comparisons that don't even fit." As Paula explained, the application process did not allow her to "convey through the process how I viewed myself as a nurse and what my nursing practice was about." [32]

These nurses also felt disheartened by the narrow conception of nursing under which the regulatory association functioned. Many struggled to have their practices recognized as nursing practices. For example, Steve, an occupational health nurse, had been unable to secure approval for his practice. The provincial regulatory association had deemed "that occupational health nursing was not in the scope of practice of a nurse," despite the fact that occupational health nursing is a recognized specialty of the Canadian Nurses' Association. He said:

"I can't call myself a nurse because my association doesn't understand what I do. We're trying to expand our role and educate people about registered nurses and here's a prime opportunity to show what a nurse can do and yet we don't get support from our own organization." [33]

As well, regulatory issues were a constant topic of discussion at meetings of the private practice nurses' association. [34]

These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of focused ethnography in revealing the tensions that exist in dynamic cultural contexts and show what these nurses faced, both as individuals and a collective, as they pushed the boundaries of nursing's conventional professional culture. [35]

5. Discussion

Ethnography is increasingly used across disciplines, for applied purposes, with pre-formulated questions, and among new kinds of cultural groups (MAYAN, 2009; ROPER & SHAPIRA, 2000). As WOLCOTT (1999, p.42) acknowledges, "ethnography has long since slipped out from under the anthropological tent" and it can no longer be said that it means what it meant in the past or what particular ethnographers would like it to mean. In the end, it is not the data collection techniques that make a study ethnographic; it is the *intent* of the research that legitimates the use of the label (WOLCOTT, 1999). In this article, I have illustrated that data collection strategies can be adapted in focused ethnography and yet still produce rich data that preserves the ethnographic intent to reveal the common elements of culture such as values, beliefs, knowledge, skills, actions, and power dynamics. As WOLCOTT points out, standard procedures can underwrite ethnographic work but there is ample opportunity to consider alternative approaches and make changes. [36]

The relationship between ethnography and sociopolitical policy has been a topic of discussion. Most ethnography has been directed toward building disciplinary knowledge rather than solving practical problems (ATKINSON & HAMMERSLEY, 1994). Interest in focused ethnography has been generated mainly within the practice disciplines and industry. There is a drive for research evidence that can be produced in a timely fashion in order to inform policy- and practice-relevant decision-making. This can lead to a view of focused ethnography as "quick and dirty" research (MILLEN, 2000). If ethnographic research is conducted mainly in response to corporate or organizational information demands, the risk is that it will fail to capture the richness of a cultural context and the theoretical significance of the findings. While focused ethnographic projects might be brief in comparison to traditional anthropological ethnographies, ethnography is not "something to be done by anyone in a hurry" (WOLCOTT, 1999, p.17). Perhaps it is appropriate now to re-direct our understandings of focused ethnography away from its brevity and practicality and consider the ways in which this methodological adaptation makes it possible to use ethnography in situations where it may not have worked if conducted traditionally, such as in the example presented herein. Significantly, this conception of focused ethnography bridges a gap between traditional ethnography that develops knowledge and adapted forms of ethnography that are conducted to address practical problems. [37]

This study example highlights how new settings and purposes for ethnography may mean that research questions, researcher status, and data collection strategies are not conventional. As with this research, some ethnographic studies may require a distinct focus and may begin with specified research questions. They may be characterized by absent or short-term field visits. Increasingly, ethnographers will be entering their study settings with much more of a prior connection than ethnographers of old who traveled to distant and unfamiliar lands. These features of contemporary ethnography necessitate a re-evaluation of the methodological structure of ethnography and the ways that this can change without threatening its fundamental intent. [38]

There is some support in the literature for focused ethnography, although in my experience, the method has met with skepticism. Yet, the often applied nature of focused ethnography can appropriately lead to the formulation of research questions prior to entering the field (ROPER & SHAPIRA, 2000). Further, as KNOBLAUCH (2005, §6-8) argues, it can be possible for focused ethnographers to work against "a backdrop of common, shared knowledge" with participants and still be able to discover "alterity" or otherness, given a regard for reflexivity. This allows for a nuanced perspective on a researcher's insider/outsider status. Regarding data collection, threats to "ethnography's signature," participant observation, are lamented (BRINK & EDGECOMBE, 2003) as ethnography is adapted for new purposes. WOLCOTT (1999) suggests that, without the classic data collection strategies of participant observation, interviewing, and archival analysis, a study might not be ethnographic. Indeed, some degree of participant observation is important as a source of cultural data because it allows the researcher to experience the lives of the people under study (FETTERMAN, 1998; WOLCOTT, 1999). However, ROPER and SHAPIRA (2000) point out that there is no general rule about the "right" amount of time to spend in the field, so researchers have latitude to determine what works best for their studies. As well, time spent in observation does not guarantee that all data collected will be useful or pertinent; other data collection strategies might yield richer data with less investment of time (MILLEN, 2000). In fact, limited time in the field can be substituted for by a higher intensity and volume of data, such as the type of data that arises from in-depth, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews (HEYL, 2001; KNOBLAUCH, 2005; MORSE & RICHARDS, 2002). [39]

Fundamentally, ethnography is intended to "describe individuals and groups within a holistic perspective and aim to uncover cultural beliefs and practices that generate observed behavior" (ROPER & SHAPIRA, 2000, p.9). My research with self-employed nurses revealed rich themes about patterns of behavior and activities, ideas, beliefs, knowledge, relationships, and the sociopolitical organization of nursing self-employment, which reveal the very building blocks of culture (ROPER & SHAPIRA, 2000). Thus, despite the ways in which this study deviated methodologically from traditional ethnography, it maintained the essential character and purpose of ethnography, thus legitimizing focused ethnography as an appropriate approach to studying culture. [40]

References

- Agar, Michael (2006). Culture: Can you take it anywhere? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), Art. 11, http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/PDF/agar.pdf [Accessed: May 13, 2013].
- Alasuutari, Pertti (2004). The globalization of qualitative research. In Clive Seale, [Giampietro Gobo](#), Jaber F. Gubrium & David Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp.507-521). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Atkinson, Paul & Hammersley, Martyn (1994). Ethnography and participant observation. In [Norman K. Denzin](#) & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp.248-261). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Atkinson, Paul; Coffey, Amanda & Delamont, Sara (1999). Ethnography: Post, past, and present. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28(5), 460-471.

Atkinson, Paul; Coffey, Amanda; Delamont, Sara; Lofland, John & Lofland, Lyn (2001). *Handbook of ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Breidenstein, Georg & Hirschauer, Stefan (2002). Finally focused? Neither "ethno" nor "graphy." Annotations to [Hubert Knoblauch's](#) article "focused ethnography." *sozialer sinn: Zeitschrift für hermeneutische Sozialforschung*, 1, 125-128.

Brink, Pamela J. & Edgecombe, Nancy (2003). What is becoming of ethnography? *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(7), 1028-1030.

Canadian Nurses' Association (1996). On your own—The nurse entrepreneur. *Nursing Now: Issues and Trends in Canadian Nursing*, 1, 1-4.

Cruz, Edward V. & Higginbottom, Gina (2013). The use of focused ethnography in nursing research. *Nurse Researcher*, 20(4), 36-43.

Denzin, Norman K. & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (2000). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp.1-28). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Erickson, Frederick (1977). Some approaches to inquiry in school-community ethnography. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 8(2), 58-69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3216407> [Accessed: May 13, 2013].

Fetterman, David M. (1998). *Ethnography step by step*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Grbich, Carol (2007). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Heyl, Barbara S. (2001). Ethnographic interviewing. In Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland & Lyn Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp.369-383). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Higginbottom, Gina (2013). Guidance on performing focused ethnographies with an emphasis on healthcare research. *The Qualitative Report*, 18, Art. 17, 1-16, <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/higginbottom17.pdf> [Accessed: June 30, 2013].

International Council of Nurses (2004). *Guidelines on the nurse entre/intrapreneur providing nursing service*. Geneva: Author.

Kien, Grant (2008). Technography = technology + ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(7), 1101-1109.

Knoblauch, Hubert (2005). Focused ethnography. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(3), Art. 44, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0503440> [Accessed: May 1, 2014].

Marcus, George (1998). Sticking with ethnography through thick and thin. In George Marcus (Ed.), *Ethnography through thick and thin* (pp.231-253). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mayan, Maria (2009). *Essentials of qualitative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Millen, David R. (2000). Rapid ethnography: Time deepening strategies for HCI field research. *Proceedings from DIS '00: Conference on Designing Interactive Systems: Processes, Practices, Methods, and Techniques*. New York, NY: ACM Press.

Morse, Janice M. & Richards, Lyn (2002). *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Muecke, Marjorie A. (1994). On the evaluation of ethnographies. In Janice M. Morse (Ed.), *Critical issues in qualitative research methods* (pp.187-209). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Roper, Janice M. & Shapira, Jill (2000). *Ethnography in nursing research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Smith, Vicki (2001). Ethnographies of work and the work of ethnographers. In Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland & Lyn Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp.220-233). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wall, Sarah (2013a). "We inform the experience of health": Perspectives on professionalism in nursing self-employment. *Qualitative Health Research*, 23(7), 976-988.

Wall, Sarah (2013b). Nursing entrepreneurship: Motivators, strategies and possibilities for professional advancement and health system change. *Nursing Leadership*, 26(2), 29-40.

Wall, Sarah (2014a). Dilemmas of responsibility for nurses in independent practice: Knowledge, learning and innovation. In Tara Fenwick & Monika Nerland (Eds.), *Reconceptualising professional learning in turbulent times: Changing knowledges, practices, and responsibilities* (pp.184-197). London: Routledge.

Wall, Sarah (2014a). Self-employed nurses as change agents in healthcare: Strategies, consequences, and possibilities. *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 28(4), 511-531.

Wolcott, Harry F. (1999). *Ethnography: A way of seeing*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Author

Sarah WALL, PhD, is a sociologist and an assistant professor in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta. She is a qualitative methodologist who has conducted and published the findings of ethnographic and autoethnographic projects. She teaches, among other courses, research methods and is co-editor of the [International Journal of Qualitative Methods](#). Her substantive research interests pertain to nurses' work and work environments, emerging nursing roles, professions and organizations, and organizational ethics.

Contact:

Sarah Wall

Faculty of Nursing
University of Alberta
5-278 Edmonton Clinic Health Academy
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
T6G 1C9

E-mail: swall@ualberta.ca

Citation

Wall, Sarah (2015). Focused Ethnography: A Methodological Adaptation for Social Research in Emerging Contexts [40 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 16(1), Art. 1, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs150111>.

Revised: 2/2015