



What is ethnography? Can it survive? Should it?

Martyn Hammersley

To cite this article: Martyn Hammersley (2017): What is ethnography? Can it survive? Should it?, Ethnography and Education, DOI: [10.1080/17457823.2017.1298458](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2017.1298458)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2017.1298458>



Published online: 12 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 32



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



What is ethnography? Can it survive? Should it?

Martyn Hammersley

WELS, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper notes that, in the field of education and beyond, the term 'ethnography' has acquired a range of meanings, and comes in many different versions, these often reflecting sharply divergent orientations. I argue that this is a major problem that requires attention; particularly since today there are some serious threats to the practice of ethnographic work, on almost any definition. However, while we need to forge greater agreement about the meaning of the term, this is a challenging task. Indeed, if we take 'ethnography' to refer to a whole methodological approach little agreement will be possible. I argue that it *may* be feasible if we treat ethnography as one methodological strategy among others, each having varying advantages and disadvantages for the purposes of investigating particular topics. However, the fundamental disagreements among ethnographers today about ontological, epistemological, and axiological matters render even this by no means unproblematic.

KEYWORDS

Definitions of ethnography; types of ethnography; threats to ethnography; nature of ethnography; participant observation

At face value, at least, ethnography has thrived over the past 50 years, in the field of education and elsewhere. The term has come to be widely used, spreading out from anthropology across the social sciences. Indeed, there are now journals in various fields employing it in their titles, including this one. However, I want to suggest that the picture is not quite so rosy as this implies. One reason is that there has been increasing variation in what the term is taken to mean, and a growing number of labelled varieties of ethnography, these partly reflecting the influence of discrepant philosophical and methodological ideas. In my view this uncertainty and lack of agreement about what 'ethnography' means is not only unsatisfactory but is also dangerous at the present time, when there are some serious challenges to the kinds of work involved. These challenges raise questions about the justification for ethnography and its survival.

The seriousness of the problem may vary across fields: one response to an earlier version of this paper was a claim that there is greater agreement in education about what counts as ethnography than there is elsewhere. I am not sure that this is true, but the key issue concerns whether there is sufficient agreement about what we are aiming to produce, and how to achieve this, to allow for coherent teaching, consistent assessment of student dissertations that claim to adopt an ethnographic approach, and fair judgment

of articles submitted to this and other journals. I suggest that examination of the contents of this journal over the past 10 years would at least raise questions about the level of agreement that exists. But, in any case, there are benefits from viewing ethnography in broad perspective rather than confining our attention to the field of education alone: it may help us to understand ourselves better.

Current threats

Several threats are widely recognised:

- (1) A growing demand for social research to be ‘accountable’ in quite narrow terms: as regards ‘demonstrable impact’, ‘engagement’, ‘knowledge transfer’, etc. This is part of a long-term shift away from a state-patronage system and towards an investment model in funding research, which demands that the returns on specific projects be identifiable (Hammersley 2011: Intro). I suggest that ethnography, in most of its forms, is especially challenged by such demands for narrow accountability. Closely associated with this is the increased pressure to bring in funding from outside universities: from commercial organisations, charities, etc. Persuading these bodies of the value of ethnography can be difficult, not least because of the short time-scales to which they frequently work. Against this background, ethnography may be seen as an inefficient way of producing relevant findings. To compete in this environment, there are tendencies in some areas to ‘streamline’ ethnography. But we must recognise the potential costs of this: what is done under this pressure may be a long way from what most of us would call ethnography.¹
- (2) The current emphasis on ‘big data’, and on quantitative and ‘mixed methods’ research more generally. In the UK, considerable ideological and financial support is being devoted to pushing back the dominance of qualitative methods in much of social science. One example is the renewed stress in government circles on randomised controlled trials as the gold standard. Another is the Q-step programme in which large amounts of money are being devoted to quantitative methods training.² This shift back towards quantitative methods is happening, and will have consequences for those wishing to do ethnography.
- (3) Equally important are the changed conditions of work in universities, and in the employment market for academics. There is great pressure on postgraduate students to complete in a fixed period of time, and to display their acquisition of ‘employable skills’ along the way. They are expected to be doing training courses in this that and the other, they must do some undergraduate teaching, they should set up or participate in committees, they must network, they ought to present at work-in-progress seminars, and indeed give papers at external conferences, perhaps even organise such conferences, and ideally they must get articles published in journals. It is not that any of these activities is undesirable in itself, but taken together these demands make it much more difficult to devote the time required to do research well. To some degree, what is involved here is a demand for ‘busyness’, not unlike that identified as central to progressive primary school teaching by Sharp and Green (1975) many years ago. This is at odds with at least one definition of ‘ethnography’ as ‘hanging around’, and certainly artificial ‘busyness’ is the enemy of intensive, long-

term fieldwork, as well as of the kind of exploration of previous work in a discipline, and reflection on it, that is essential. Of course, it is not just students who have been rendered 'busy' in this sense, so too have academics themselves: they too barely have the time to do research properly. Even if a permanent post can be obtained, and such posts are difficult to get these days in the UK, high levels of teaching and administration, the pressure to attract external funds, to produce research outputs and to get them into 'high impact' journals, and so on, make devoting significant amounts of time to doing research increasingly difficult. And this has particular impact on ethnography.

- (4) There are also obstacles in gaining access to settings in order to carry out ethnographic work. This was a problem that Troman (1996) pointed to many years ago in relation to UK schools, and it has probably got worse since then, both in these institutions and elsewhere. A key factor here is fear of bad publicity; and even when initial access is eased by a desire for good publicity on the part of organisations the problem of access may be exchanged for other problems down the line: efforts to shape the research to meet the needs of the organisation, or disputes about the publication of findings.³
- (5) Finally, there is the question of ethical regulation, which has now spread across all of social science (Hammersley 2009). Ethics committees often regard ethnographic work as particularly problematic, both because within it the usual means of gaining 'informed consent' are difficult, if not impossible, to deploy, and because by its very nature ethnographic fieldwork changes over its course, rather than simply involving the 'implementation' of an agreed research design.

I am not suggesting that ethnography is made impossible by these developments, but it is clear that they make certain kinds of ethnographic work much more difficult. Given that one of the effects of these changes is to encourage 'more efficient' means of generating data, it is especially important to have a clear sense of what we mean when we use the term 'ethnography', what status we give to the enterprise, and why it is of value. However, there seems to be considerable disagreement about these matters among those who call themselves ethnographers, in education and elsewhere.

What is ethnography, and why is it of value?

Looking at the methodological literature, we find that the term 'ethnography' is defined in a variety of ways, some of which bear little relation to previous usage.⁴ But even back in the 1970s the anthropologist Hymes (1977) suggested that 'A definition of ethnography is [...] an elusive and complicated question'. Of course, there is no shortage of definitions today. The problem is that they vary considerably in character, and behind them lie some fundamental divisions.

There are amusing definitions that are not very informative, such as that of Harry Wolcott, an anthropologist in the field of education:

[Ethnography] is the business of inquiring into other people's business. (Wolcott 1999)

Or that of John van Maanen, a sociologist:

Ethnography is ‘a wonderful excuse for having an adventurous good time while operating under the pretext of doing serious intellectual work.’ (van Maanen 1995)

Neither of these is likely to enhance the public image of ethnography, or to help us much in characterising the nature of the enterprise.

Other definitions provide a clearer indication of the features of an ethnographic approach:

‘Ethnography’ [...] has effectively become a catch-all term to describe any form of long-term qualitative research based on a triangulation of methods. [...] [It] means, literally, ‘writing culture’. (Mitchell 2007)

Ethnography is ‘a research method located in the practice of both sociologists and anthropologists, and which should be regarded as the product of a cocktail of methodologies that share the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular culture or social setting.’ (Hobbs 2006)

Ethnography can be defined as the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting (if not always the activities) in order to collect data in a systematic manner, but without meaning being imposed on them externally. (Brewer 2003)

Ethnography is a holistic, thick description of the interactive processes involving the discovery of important recurring variables in the society as they relate to one another, under specified conditions, and as they affect or produce certain results and outcomes in the society. It is not a case study, which narrowly focuses on a single issue, or a field survey that seeks previously specified data, or a brief encounter (for a few hours each day for a year, or 12 hours a day for a few months) with some group. Those types of research are ethnographic but *not ethnography!* (Lutz 1981, emphasis in the original)⁵

Each of these definitions picks out somewhat different features, but if we put them together we get a list along the following lines:

- relatively long-term data collection process,
- taking place in naturally occurring settings,
- relying on participant observation, or personal engagement more generally,
- employing a range of types of data,
- aimed at documenting what actually goes on,
- emphasises the significance of the meanings people give to objects, including themselves, in the course of their activities, in other words culture, and
- holistic in focus.

And this is a reasonably comprehensive list of the features that are often ascribed to ‘ethnography’.⁶ I suspect that most of those who regard themselves as ethnographers would accept many of them; though probably not all, and they may want to include others. However, few would want to insist that ethnographic work must always display *all* of the features in any such list.

Furthermore, there is uncertainty and dispute about what each of these features implies. For example:

- What does ‘long-term’ mean? Days, weeks, months, or years?
- What are ‘naturally occurring’ settings, what is excluded here? Are virtual settings ‘naturally occurring’? What about ethnographic work where the researcher plays a central participant role in the setting? Most notoriously, ‘gang leader for a day’ (Venkatesh 2008).
- Which sources of data are to be combined and how? Could an ethnographic study rely entirely on interviews and documents? What about the notion of ‘historical ethnography’ (see Vaughan 1996)?
- Is it ever possible to document ‘what actually goes on’, even through participant observation?
- Can we fully understand the meanings other people give to their world? What would count as such understanding, and how would we know we had achieved it?
- What exactly is the ‘whole’ that must be encompassed in ethnographic investigation, and how is this compatible with micro-focused collection and analysis of data, or for that matter with the effects of globalisation?

Highlighting the divergences in view about these and other matters are the large number of qualifying adjectives that have come to be applied to the term ‘ethnography’, including:

autoethnography, casual ethnography, citizen ethnography, cognitive ethnography, collaborative ethnography, constitutive ethnography, critical ethnography, digital ethnography, duoethnography, educational ethnography, ethnomethodological ethnography, feminist ethnography, focused ethnography, functionalist ethnography, global ethnography, hypermedia ethnography, insider ethnography, institutional ethnography, interactionist ethnography, interpretive ethnography, linguistic ethnography, literary ethnography, longitudinal ethnography, Marxist ethnography, micro-ethnography, militant ethnography, multi-scale ethnography, multi-sited ethnography, narrative ethnography, performance ethnography, postmodern ethnography, practical ethnography, public ethnography, race ethnography, rapid ethnography, rural ethnography, slow ethnography, team ethnography, urban ethnography, virtual ethnography, visual ethnography.⁷

The adjectives deployed here vary considerably in character. Some indicate the use of a particular sort of data or method (sometimes raising questions about whether ethnography involves combining different sorts of data). Others signal a particular commitment: whether this is to a field of investigation, to a theoretical or methodological position, or to some set of practical or political values. Moreover, it should be clear that several of these commitments are in conflict with one another. This is illustrated by the fact that there have been pugnacious disputes, relating, for example, to Delamont’s (2000) critique of the work of Hargreaves (1967), Willis (1977), and others (see also Rosvall 2015), Wacquant’s (2002) attack on urban ethnographies informed by Chicago interactionism (see Hammersley 2013: Chap. 4), and ethnomethodologists’ critique of conventional ethnography in the field of Human Computer Interaction (Button et al. 2015).

Differences in underlying assumption on the part of ethnographers are by no means entirely new of course. The history of ethnography reveals that it has been associated with diverse theoretical and methodological commitments. Even if we start with Boas and Malinowski near the beginning of the twentieth century and follow this history through to the end of the twentieth century, we would have to recognise the influence

of German folk psychology and culture theory, positivism, functionalism, the pragmatism and symbolic interactionism of the Chicago School, Marxism, feminism, post-modernism, critical realism, and no doubt other sets of ideas too. And if one traces the history of ethnography in the field of education one can find examples of work representing most of these approaches.⁸

Moreover, in the twenty-first century, it is not hard to find a very wide span of commitments with which the meaning of the term ‘ethnography’ can be infused. For illustrative purposes I will use just two sharply contrasting examples here. The first is ‘Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics’ (Scharen and Vigen 2011: Introduction):

[...] theologians and ethicists involved in ethnographic research draw on the particular to seek out answers to core questions of their discipline: who God is and how we become the people we are, how to conceptualize moral agency in relation to God and the world, and how to flesh out the content of conceptual categories such as justice that help direct us in our daily decisions and guiding institutions.

Ethnography is a way to take particularity seriously [...], our conviction that each particular life, situation, or community is potentially, albeit only partially, revelatory of transcendent or divine truth.

Here, perhaps, we have an extreme instance of the kind of ‘sacred epistemology’ to which Denzin and Lincoln (2005, 36–37) have appealed.

A very different example, much less to the taste of Denzin and Lincoln I suspect, is what has been referred to as *corporate* ethnography. In a piece in the *Harvard Business Review*, Anderson (2009) writes:

Corporate ethnography [is] central to gaining a full understanding of your customers and the business itself. The ethnographic work at my company, Intel, and other firms, now informs functions such as strategy and long-range planning. [...] By understanding how people live, researchers discover otherwise elusive trends that inform the company’s future strategies. [...] Our job as anthropologists is to understand the perspective of one tribe, consumers, and communicate it to another, the people at Intel.⁹ Our experiences in both worlds make this translation possible. [...] Ethnography has proved so valuable at Intel that the company now employs two dozen anthropologists and other trained ethnographers, probably the biggest such corporate staff in the world. [...] I believe that ethnography is so beneficial that it will spread widely, helping firms in every industry truly understand customers and adapt to fast-changing markets.

Along the same lines, here is part of the blurb from a paper given at a conference in 2013: ‘with the new reality of pharmaceutical research and development, companies are urged to look into new ways of delivering impact and value to payers, prescribers, and users. This paper explores how ethnographic research can fill that role [...]’ (Gargeya and Holme 2013).

These examples underline the fact that what is at issue in different definitions of ‘ethnography’ is frequently not limited to methods of research design, data collection, and analysis, but extends to methodological, ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political ideas.¹⁰ And, indeed, some see ethnography as a ‘paradigm’, incommensurable with others, or even as a way of life (Rose 1990), that we choose to adopt as a matter of faith, politics, ethics, aesthetics, or personal style. In these terms, each specific version of ethnography tends not only selectively to emphasise some of the standard components

rather than others, but also to introject its own values and preoccupations into the very meaning of the term 'ethnography'. Thus, it comes to be taken for granted that, for example, ethnography is inherently interactionist, or necessarily devoted to challenging inequality, or committed to a micro- or to a holistic perspective, etc.

At the other extreme, ethnography may be viewed as just one set of methods among others, between which we make a choice for each investigation, on the basis of which is most appropriate for answering the particular research questions we are addressing. Here a much more instrumental attitude is adopted towards the various assumptions built into ethnography.

In my view, neither of these positions is entirely satisfactory, but I will adopt the second here, for reasons to be explained.

How to deal with the definitional problem?

We can think of the two contrasting views of ethnography I have just outlined as providing thick and thin approaches to defining the term, respectively.

The first approach, the 'thick', would require us to lay down what are appropriate theoretical and value commitments for ethnographic work, *and specifically to rule out others*. We could, for example, insist that ethnography is a secular, scientific enterprise, not a theological one; and that it is concerned with understanding people's behaviour for its own sake, rather than in order to serve some practical goal. In this way we would exclude both Christian and corporate ethnography, and quite a few of the other types of ethnography picked out by the list of adjectives I cited earlier as well.

But it should be clear that, if we choose this first option, we will face some very difficult issues, and generate a lot of disagreement among those who call themselves ethnographers, with little or no chance of reaching a consensus. Furthermore, we must be prepared to provide grounds for the demarcation lines we draw, ones that others *should* accept even if they refuse to do so. And these may be hard to find. Can we appeal to some *essential* character of ethnography as a practice that indicates what does and does not belong under this heading in these 'thick' terms? It is unclear to me how this could be done. Can we use a looser or fuzzier definition and still be confident in determining what is and is not ethnography? Perhaps, but I believe it is unlikely that we could even fudge agreement in this way.

The alternative 'thin' option would be to treat ethnography simply as a research strategy that can be employed by researchers adopting a wide variety of potentially conflicting commitments: theological or commercial, 'critical' or interpretive, interactionist or ethno-methodological, and so on. This option could allow agreement to be reached more easily, though we may feel that it involves giving up too much of what is built into our own personal commitment to ethnography; and it will leave us with a range of types of ethnographic work that may take very different forms, despite sharing a basic set of methods and their associated ideas in common.

Furthermore, we will find that adopting a thin definition does not allow us to avoid dealing with *all* of the conflicting commitments I have alluded to, since some of the latter reach right down into the reasons for using particular methods. To illustrate, let me take the case of participant observation, which is often seen as a core element, if

not *the* core, of ethnography.¹¹ It seems to me that in deciding to use this method we are necessarily committing ourselves to most if not all of the following assumptions:

- (1) That direct observation by a researcher is more likely to produce data that will enable accurate documentation of what people do, how they do it, and/or why, as against relying solely on people's own accounts about this. This is not just because people may lie or be 'economical with the truth', but also because there will be much about their behaviour and its environment of which they are unaware.
- (2) That observation in naturally occurring settings will be more informative than elicitation of data in situations that are strongly structured by the researcher, whether via interviews, questionnaires, or experiments. Also involved here may be the assumption that participant observation is less reactive than non-participant observation.
- (3) That the accounts of participants collected in the course of participant observation are more likely to be valid, and correctly interpreted, than accounts elicited in formal interviews. This is because accounts are context-sensitive, and tend to be related to features of the lives of participants of which the researcher would be unaware without participant observation.¹²

Yet, in the context of the 'paradigm wars' of the past 40 years, there are grounds on which even those who call themselves ethnographers may challenge these assumptions.¹³ The first, the idea that the ethnographer is more likely to be able to provide a sound understanding of social processes than other participants, would be questioned by some who stress insider knowledge or the 'voice' of participants. This assumption also relies on the idea that it is possible to know the truth about empirical matters. Not everyone would be prepared to sign up to this today. Many of us avoid the word 'truth' or clothe it in 'scare' quotation marks when we use it. One reason for this is that truth or reality is sometimes seen as multiple, and from this perspective what we gain through participant observation would be simply the ethnographer's own perspective, which (it may be argued) must not be treated as superior to those of participants. Or, alternatively, it might be argued that ethnographic research should be devoted to documenting participants' perspectives or 'worlds', rather than comparing these with an objective account of 'what actually happens'. 'Objectivity' is another term that we handle warily today, or do not use at all.

The second assumption relies upon a distinction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' or 'artificial' settings, and treats a researcher's participation in a situation as involving minimal reactivity by comparison with interviews. However, a very different view is taken by conversation analysts, most of whom would probably not regard a situation in which the researcher was a participant as 'naturally occurring', as well as ruling out the use of interviews. The argument would be that under such conditions the researcher's social science agenda or identity is likely to shape what is done.¹⁴ From a different angle, many years ago Atkinson and I ([1983] 2007) raised questions about the distinction between 'natural' and researcher-instigated situations, on the grounds that it implies that researchers do not belong to the social world. We also pointed out that the problem of reactivity is concerned with identifying what are typical or habitual responses on the part of people, so it is important to remember that behaviour observed in a 'natural' setting with no reactivity may still not be typical of what is done by the same people at other times or in different places.

The third assumption involves ontological claims about the nature of the world independent of any constructions of it, those of informants as well as that of the researcher. This is an assumption that some seem to reject. For example, Atkinson (2015: Chap. 6) denies that ethnographers should concern themselves with the accuracy of informants' accounts, insisting that the focus must instead be on how those accounts are constructed, what discursive resources are employed in them, what implications they carry, and so on. So, from his point of view, we can investigate how informants construct plausible accounts, but not judge the truth of those accounts for ourselves, or use observational data for this purpose. This reflects the influence of what we can broadly refer to as constructionism, according to which the focus of social inquiry must be on how social phenomena are constituted by practices rather than on how they relate to one another in causal terms.¹⁵

So, there are arguments now current among ethnographers that seem to undercut, or at least erode, the rationale for participant observation, as well as that for interviews. This illustrates the fact that, even if we try to resolve the problem of what ethnography is by providing a thin definition, we may not entirely escape difficult and contentious issues.

A further problem concerning the definition of ethnography

Up to now I have discussed the definition of ethnography as if this were merely a matter of identifying its essential, or common, features. But the sense given to any term relies on what contrasts it is taken to have with the meaning of others, in this case with those relating to other approaches to social research. While many writers providing definitions of 'ethnography' do not locate it explicitly within any such typology, others have attempted to provide comprehensive typologies. Cresswell has offered a useful overview of some of these (see Table 1).

It is all too clear from these lists that there is no standard set of other approaches that are taken to contrast with ethnography. Furthermore, most if not all of these typologies are *unsystematic*: they list a *collection* or *range* of named approaches rather than identifying

Table 1. Typologies of qualitative approaches offered in the literature.

Authors	Qualitative approaches	Disciplines/ fields
Jacob (1987)	Ecological Psychology, Holistic Ethnography, Cognitive Anthropology, Ethnography of Communication, Symbolic Interactionism	Education
Strauss and Corbin (1990)	Grounded Theory, Ethnography, Phenomenology, Life Histories, Conversational Analysis	Sociology, Nursing
Denzin and Lincoln (1994)	Case Study, Ethnography, Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology, Grounded Theory, Biographical Method, Historical Research, Applied and Action Research, Clinical Models	Social Sciences
Denzin and Lincoln (2005)	Performance Ethnography, Case Study, Public Ethnography, Analyzing Interpretive Practice, Grounded Theory, Critical Ethnography, Life History, Participatory Action Research, Clinical Models	Social Sciences
Marshall and Rossman (2010)	Ethnographic Approaches, Phenomenological Approaches, Sociolinguistic Approaches, Narrative Analysis, Action Research, Cultural Studies, Internet/Virtual Ethnography, Critical Ethnography, Feminist Theory and Methodologies, Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory and Analysis	Education
Howell (2013)	Positivism and Post-positivism, Phenomenology, Critical Theory, Constructivism and Participatory Paradigms, Post-Modernism and Post-Structuralism, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Hermeneutics, Foucault and Discourse Analysis	Social Sciences

(Modified version of Cresswell 2013: Table 1.1, 8–10).

underlying dimensions that allow us to relate the different approaches to one another in terms of similarities and differences. Borges (1999, 221) provides a parody of this sort of typology in his reference to an ancient Chinese Encyclopaedia which divided animals into:

(a) those belonging to the Emperor, (b) those that are embalmed, (c) those that are tame, (d) pigs, (e) sirens, (f) imaginary animals, (g) wild dogs, (h) those included in this classification, (i) those that are crazy-acting (j), those that are uncountable, (k) those painted with the finest brush made of camel hair, (l) miscellaneous, (m) those which have just broken a vase, and (n) those which, from a distance, look like flies.¹⁶

You will also note that most of the typologies listed in the table adopt a ‘thick’ strategy, in that what ethnography is compared with, very often, are approaches involving substantial, distinctive theoretical, and philosophical commitments, not just methods and the specific assumptions associated with these.

So, I believe that if we are to reach a satisfactory conception of ethnography, we must not only adopt a ‘thin’ approach but also locate it within a systematic typology showing its similarities to, and differences from, other approaches to social inquiry. In order to do this we must identify the main aspects of social inquiry, spell out alternative strategies in relation to each of them, and then identify overall styles of research that combine particular options relating to these different aspects. Table 2 is intended to give a sense of what this would involve.

Within Table 2, it should be relatively easy to identify ethnography as one style or strategy of social research, this combining a particular set of options (marked E in the Table) in relation to the various aspects of the research process.¹⁷ Similarly, other well-known strategies, such as experimental and survey research, can be identified that involve other combinations. There is also scope for less usual combinations of these options, indicating that there is a broader range of strategies available than these three conventional ones.

Clearly, this approach requires us to treat the features we ascribe as distinctive to ethnography, as against other methods, not as absolute commitments but as advantages to be balanced against disadvantages, in comparison with other approaches. In other words, the choice among the options relating to each aspect of the research process outlined above involves trading off benefits against costs in light of the requirements of a particular study. This is incompatible with the view that ethnography is the only legitimate approach to social research or that it is the gold standard.¹⁸ Instead, we must recognise the weaknesses of ethnography as well as its strengths: it is usually weak if we want to generalise to large populations, or if we want to test causal claims strongly; but it is more effective in terms of providing descriptive detail and ensuring accuracy, in minimising reactivity, and in allowing the tracing of causal processes.¹⁹

The approach I am suggesting also requires that we treat some of the ontological and epistemological arguments that underpin ethnography in instrumental terms, rather than as existential commitments. In short, they are to be judged by their fruits: the issue is not, primarily, whether they are true but how consistently they can be applied, and how productive they are in generating worthwhile and reliable knowledge. For example, some forms of constructionism, if applied consistently, would lead to a debilitating scepticism or relativism, but treated in an instrumental fashion may nevertheless be illuminating.

By contrast, axiological issues – for instance about whether or not the task of ethnography should include evaluating the phenomena studied (in practical or political terms),

Table 2. Options relating to each aspect of the research process.

Aspects of the social research process	Options				
<i>Formulation of research questions (Dimension = fixed at the start versus developed, or even changed, over the course of inquiry)</i>	Take specific research questions from an external source, whether the literature or a research funder	Move from an initial sense of a research problem to specific operationalised research questions as soon as possible	Treat the formulation of the research questions and their refinement as taking place over the whole course of the research process [E]		
<i>Research design (Dimension = fixed versus flexible)</i>	An implementation plan for the research is worked out at the beginning before data collection begins	Initial planning takes place, but a flexible approach to research planning is adopted, not just to deal with obstacles but also to take opportunities [E]			
<i>Case selection (Dimensions = number of cases, and natural versus 'created' cases)</i>	Experimental creation of cases	Investigation of a small number of features of a relatively large number of naturally occurring cases	In-depth investigation of a small number of naturally occurring cases [E]		
<i>Sources of data^a</i>	Archived research data	Already available documents	Non-participant observation	Participant observation	Questionnaire Interview
<i>Data analysis^b</i>	Mainly quantitative	Mainly qualitative [E]			
<i>Writing up (Dimension = fixed versus flexible)</i>	Following a standard pattern	Adopting a flexible approach adapted to the research findings and the intended audience [E]			

^a The dimensions relating to data collection are too complex to be included in this table. A sense of what is involved is provided in the diagram included as an [appendix](#).

^b I have not even attempted to map the dimensions involved here.

making recommendations, or even working to bring about change – cannot be treated in an instrumental fashion. However, by adopting a thin strategy one avoids conflating these with the question of what is to count as ethnography. These issues are certainly no less important than those I have been discussing here, but any attempt to resolve them could carry serious implications for some kinds of ethnography. From my perspective, for example, not just Christian, or any other theological form of, ethnography, but also corporate ethnography, where the aim is to serve the goals of the firm, ‘critical’ ethnography (Carspecken 1996), ‘militant ethnography’ (Juris, 2007) and ‘feminist ethnography’ (Junqueira 2009), and for that matter ‘nationalist ethnography’ (see, for instance, Gellner 1998), would be ruled out because they place other goals alongside or above the production of knowledge (Hammersley 2002: Chap. 6, 2004, 2014). Fortunately, there is no need to treat such contentious axiological matters as involved in defining ethnography, and there are good reasons to avoid doing so, since it would effectively rule out any chance of wide agreement.

Conclusion

I have argued that the current situation, and the foreseeable future, represent a very challenging context for ethnographic work, and I proposed that, in order to survive the challenges, we need to be clearer about our ethnographic commitments and the grounds for them. I suggested that this has become much more difficult since the early 1970s. At that time, despite other problems, there was more agreement among ethnographers about the nature of the enterprise in which they were engaged, and little proliferation of alternative methodological approaches. The debates were largely with those outside of ethnography, whether psychologists engaged in experimental and quasi-experimental studies, sociologists relying upon survey research, or social theorists.

The situation is very different today, with only very limited agreement about what ethnography involves. Even if we seek to define ‘ethnography’ at the level of methods employed, in other words to pursue a relatively ‘thin’ definition, there will still be some disagreements that need to be addressed. There is also the question of how we conceptualise the relationship between ethnography and other approaches within social science. In my view, treating it as the gold standard, or as the only legitimate method, is not only a methodological error, but is also politically unwise in the current climate (Hammersley 2015). In this article I have outlined one way of trying to define ‘ethnography’ thinly, and in a manner that indicates its systematic relations with other styles of social inquiry.

Whether this helps in trying to ensure that ethnography survives remains to be seen. There is also the question of whether it *should* survive, which was also raised in my title. But the answer to this depends upon how ‘ethnography’ is defined. In my view there are some forms that do not deserve to survive, but there is much that does. Indeed, there are kinds of ethnographic work whose contribution to our knowledge of the social world is essential.

Notes

1. Bellotti (2010) writes: ‘Ethnographers’ data collection and analysis methods have therefore been condensed, recombined, adapted – both systematically and as-needed – to meet

these business demands'. See also Westney and van Maanen (2011). For a thoughtful discussion of short-term ethnography, and strategies to compensate for the problems involved, see Brockmann (2011). The terms 'condensed ethnography' (or 'condensed fieldwork') and 'focused ethnography' have been used to refer to this kind of work. See Walker (1978); Knoblauch (2005); and Wall (2015).

2. There does not seem to have been much sustained resistance to this, but see: Dingwall (2014).
3. On the issue of access generally, see Cipollone and Stich (2012).
4. In defending what he calls 'traditional ethnography', Walford (2009) insists that 'for an activity or product to be regarded as ethnographic, there is a need for some recognisable continuity' with what was regarded as ethnography in the past. Even if this criterion is accepted, there is clearly room for disagreement about the level of continuity required.
5. I will not pursue the issue here of how research can be ethnographic but not constitute an ethnography, but it does illustrate the fuzzy boundary around the concept.
6. If we compare this list with that provided by the editors of *Ethnography and Education* when this journal was first established we find many common elements, but also some new ones:

- the focus on the study of cultural formation and maintenance;
- the use of multiple methods and thus the generation of rich and diverse forms of data;
- the direct involvement and long-term engagement of the researcher(s);
- the recognition that the researcher is the main research instrument;
- the high status given to the accounts of participants' perspectives and understandings;
- the engagement in a spiral of data collection, hypothesis building, and theory testing – leading to further data collection; and
- the focus on a particular case in depth, but providing the basis for theoretical generalisation. (Troman, Jeffrey, and Walford 2006, 1).

7. In addition, we have at least one *numerical* adjective applied to 'ethnography': White's (2009) 'ethnography 2.0'. One or two labels carry multiple meanings. For example, Dourish 2006 (cited in Button et al. 2015, 62) contrasts 'analytic ethnography', concerned with providing interpretive understanding of cultures, with 'factual ethnography', focused on the description of situated action, whereas Button et al. (2015, 48) distinguish 'between "scenic ethnography", which involves the superficial registration of details, and "analytic ethnography" which is about elaborating the socially organised ways in which action is brought about and recognisably accomplished in its performance', in other words ethnomethodological ethnography. For a third meaning, see Vaughan (2009).
8. These influences have sometimes been combined, for example 'feminist post-structural ethnography' (Cairns 2013) and 'black emancipatory action research', the latter being held to incorporate ethnography (Akom 2011). See also the contributions to *Ethnography and Education* vol. 4, no. 3, 2009.
9. There is a distorted echo here, no doubt unwitting, of Martin Nicolaus's famous critique of sociology in 1968, in which ethnographers were described as those who

don the disguise of the people and go out to mix with the peasants in the "field", returning with books and articles that break the protective secrecy in which a subjugated population wraps itself, and make it more accessible to manipulation and control.

Available at: <http://www.colorado.edu/Sociology/gimenez/fatcat.html>.

10. Indeed, Ingold (2014) argues that the term has become almost meaningless: 'Ethnography has become a term so overused, both in anthropology and in contingent disciplines, that it has lost much of its meaning' (Abstract).

I am concerned to narrow ethnography down so that to those who ask us, in good faith, what it means, we can respond with precision and conviction. Only by doing so, I

contend, can we protect it from the inflation that is otherwise threatening to devalue its currency to the extent of rendering the entire enterprise worthless. (384)

11. However, Forsey (2010a, 2010b) has argued that the relationship between ethnography and participant observation should be decoupled. See also Hockey and Forsey (2012).
12. Of course, there are other assumptions that are associated with the use of participant observation, for example that human social life is not structured in terms of fixed, law-like patterns, but displays emergent processes of various kinds that involve a high degree of contingency, requiring observation *in situ* over a considerable period of time. But we could find participant observation useful even if we did not believe this, whereas the assumptions I have listed are so central to the use of participant observation that if we did not hold one or more of them there would be little reason for using this method.
13. For an account of some of the ways in which there have been changes in methodological ideas that are at odds with the initial commitments of ethnography when it first started to become popular across the social sciences in the 1970s; see Hammersley (2008: Chap. 1).
14. See Potter and Hepburn (2005) and Hammersley (2013). For an interesting discussion of some of the issues here see Speer (2002, 2008).
15. For an extended discussion of this and other aspects of Atkinson's book, see Hammersley (2015). It should be said that he greatly values participant observation as a method.
16. I have used the translation by Will Fitzgerald, available at: <http://entish.org/essays/Wilkins.html>.
17. I have left open the choice of data collection strategies because an ethnographer could use several combinations of those listed. Also, the options identified here are relatively crude, they could be refined, generating sub-categories. This is most obvious in the case of the contrast between quantitative and qualitative analysis.
18. It is not uncommon for ethnography to be treated in this way: see for example Atkinson (2015, 3). For a commentary, see Hammersley (2015).
19. I have argued elsewhere that, despite claims to the contrary, most qualitative research is concerned with causal analysis, see for instance Cooper et al. (2012, 72–73). For elaboration of the notion of process tracing, see Bennett (2014).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Akom, A. 2011. "Black Emancipatory Action Research: Integrating a Theory of Structural Racialisation into Ethnographic and Participatory Action Research Methods." *Ethnography and Education* 6 (1): 113–131.
- Anderson, K. 2009. "Ethnographic Research: A Key to Strategy." *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2009/03/ethnographic-research-a-key-to-strategy>
- Atkinson, P. 2015. *For Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Bellotti, V. 2010. "Ethnography in industry: Objectives?" *UX Magazine*. Article No: 532. <https://uxmag.com/articles/ethnography-in-industry-objectives>
- Bennett, A., ed. 2014. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Borges, J. 1999. "John Wilkins' Analytical Language (1942)." In *Selected Non-fictions*, edited by E. Weinberger. New York: Viking.
- Brewer, J. 2003. "Ethnography," In *The A–Z of Social Research*, edited by R. Miller and J. Brewer, 99. London: Sage.
- Brockmann, M. 2011. "Problematising Short-term Participant Observation and Multi-method Ethnographic Studies." *Ethnography and Education* 6 (2): 229–243.

- Button, G., A. Crabtree, A. Rouncefield, and P. Tolmie. 2015. *Deconstructing Ethnography Toward a Methodology for Ubiquitous Computing and Interactive System Design*. Cham: Springer.
- Cairns, K. 2013. "Ethnographic Locations: The Geographies of Feminist Post-structural Ethnography." *Ethnography and Education* 8 (3): 323–337.
- Carspecken, P. 1996. *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*. New York: Routledge.
- Cipollone, K., and A. Stich. 2012. "Attending to Issues of Access in Contemporary Times: Centring a Significant Side Issue." *Ethnography and Education* 7 (1): 21–38.
- Cooper, B., J. Glaesser, R. Gomm, and M. Hammersley. 2012. *Challenging the Qualitative-Quantitative Divide*. London: Continuum and Bloomsbury.
- Cresswell, J. 2013. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Delamont, S. 2000. "The Anomalous Beasts: Hooligans and the Sociology of Education." *Society and Sociology* 34 (1): 95–111.
- Denzin, N., and Y. Lincoln. (Eds.) 1994. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 1st ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N., and Y. Lincoln. 2005. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dingwall, R. 2014. *Quantophrenia is Back in Town*. <http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2014/05/quantophrenia-is-back-in-town/>
- Dourish, P. 2006. "Implications for Design." In *CHI2006: SIGCHI Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, April 22–26, New York*, edited by R. Grinter, T. Rodden, P. Aoki, E. Cutrell, R. Jeffries, and G. Olson, 541–550. Montréal: ACM Press.
- Forsey, M. 2010a. "Ethnography and the Myth of Participant Observation." In *New Frontiers in Ethnography (Studies in Qualitative Methodology, Volume 11)*, edited by S. Hillyard, 65–79. Bingley: Emerald.
- Forsey, M. 2010b. "Ethnography as Participant Listening." *Ethnography* 11 (4): 558–572.
- Gellner, E. 1998. "Whither Anthropology? Or: Whither Bronislaw." In *Language and Solitude: Malinowski, Wittgenstein and the Habsburg Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gargeya, Y., and M. Holme (ReD Associates). 2013. 'Out of the Labs': *The Role for Ethnography in Guiding Clinical Trials*. <http://epiconference.com/2013/program/sessions/%E2%80%99Cout-labs%E2%80%9D-role-ethnography-guiding-clinical-trials>
- Hammersley, M. 2002. *Educational Research, Policymaking and Practice*. London: Paul Chapman/Sage.
- Hammersley, M. 2004. "Should Ethnographers Be Against Inequality? On Becker, Value Neutrality, and Researcher Partisanship." In *Ethnographies of Educational and Cultural Conflicts: Strategies and Resolutions*, edited by B. Jeffrey and G. Walford. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Hammersley, M. 2008. *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry: Critical Essays*. London: Sage.
- Hammersley, M. 2009. "Against the Ethicists: On the Evils of Ethical Regulation." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 12 (3): 211–225.
- Hammersley, M. 2011. *Methodology Who Needs It?* London: Sage.
- Hammersley, M. 2013. *What Is Qualitative Research?* London: Bloomsbury.
- Hammersley, M. 2014. *The Limits of Social Science*. London: Sage.
- Hammersley, M. 2015. "Reflections on Paul Atkinson's for Ethnography." Unpublished paper. <https://martynhammersley.wordpress.com/documents/>
- Hammersley, M., and P. Atkinson. (1983) 2007. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Hargreaves, D. H. 1967. *Social Relations in a Secondary School*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hobbs, D. 2006. "Ethnography," In *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods*, edited by V. Jupp. London: Sage.
- Hockey, J., and M. Forsey. 2012. "Ethnography Is Not Participant Observation: Reflections on the Interview as a Form of Participatory Qualitative Inquiry." In *The Interview: An Ethnographic Approach*, edited by J. Skinner. London: Bloomsbury.
- Howell, K. 2013. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Methodology*. London: Sage.

- Hymes, D. 1977. "What is Ethnography?" <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED159234>
- Ingold, T. 2014. "That's Enough about Ethnography!" *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4: 1. <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau4.1.021>
- Jacob, E. 1987. "Clarifying Qualitative Research: A Focus on Traditions." *Educational Researcher* 17 (1) (Jan-Feb): 16–19, 22,24.
- Junqueira, E. 2009. "Commentary: Feminist Ethnography in Education and the Challenges of Conducting Fieldwork: Critically Examining Reciprocity and Relationships Between Academic and Public Interests." *Perspectives on Urban Education* 6 (1): 73–79.
- Juris, J. 2007. "Practicing Militant Ethnography with the Movement for Global Resistance in Barcelona." In *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations. Collective Theorization*, edited by S. Shukaitis, D. Graeber, and E. Biddle, 164–178. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Knoblauch, H. 2005. "Focused Ethnography." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 6: 3. Art. 44. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/20/43>
- Lutz, F. 1981. "Ethnography: The Holistic Approach to Understanding Schooling." In *Ethnography and Language in Educational Settings*, edited by J. Green and C. Wallat. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Marshall, C., and G. Rossman. 2010. *Designing Qualitative Research*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mitchell, J. 2007. "Ethnography," In *The Sage Handbook of Social Science Methodology*, edited by W. Outhwaite and S. Turner, 55. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Potter, J., and A. Hepburn. 2005. "Qualitative Interviews in Psychology: Problems and Possibilities." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2 (4): 281–307.
- Rose, D. 1990. *Living the Ethnographic Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rosvall, P.-Å. 2015. "'Lad' Research, the Reproduction of Stereotypes? Ethnographic Dilemmas When Researching Boys from Working-class Backgrounds." *Ethnography and Education* 10 (2): 215–229.
- Sharen, C., and A. M. Vigen. 2011. *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. London: Continuum.
- Sharp, R., and A. Green. 1975. *Education and Social Control: A Study in Progressive Primary Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Speer, S. A. 2002. "Natural and Contrived Data: A Sustainable Distinction?" *Discourse Studies* 4 (4): 511–525.
- Speer, S. 2008. "Natural and Contrived Data." In *The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods*, edited by P. Alasuutari, L. Bickman, and J. Brannen. London: Sage.
- Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Troman, G. 1996. "No Entry Sign: Educational Change and Some Problems Encountered in Negotiating Entry to Educational Settings." *British Educational Research Journal* 22 (1): 71–88.
- Troman, G., T. Gordon, B. Jeffrey, and G. Walford. 2006. "Editorial." *Ethnography and Education* 1 (1): 1–2.
- van Maanen, J. 1995. *Representation in Ethnography*, 2. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vaughan, D. 1996. *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vaughan, D. 2009. "Analytic Ethnography." In *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, edited by Peter Hedstrom and Peter Bearman, 688–711. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Venkatesh, S. 2008. *Gang Leader for a Day*. London: Allen Lane.
- Wacquant, L. 2002. "Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography." *American Journal of Sociology* 107 (6): 1468–1532.
- Walford, G. 2009. "For Ethnography." *Ethnography and Education* 4 (3): 271–282.
- Walker, R. 1978. "The Conduct of Educational Case Studies: Ethics, Theory and Procedures." In *Rethinking Educational Research*, edited by B. Dockrell and D. Hamilton. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Wall, S. 2015. "Focused Ethnography: A Methodological Adaptation for Social Research in Emerging Contexts." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 16: 1. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2182>

Westney, D. E., and J. van Maanen. 2011. "The Casual Ethnography of the Executive Suite." *Journal of International Business Studies* 42: 602–607.

White, M. L. 2009. "'Ethnography 2.0: Writing with Digital Video'." *Ethnography and Education* 4 (3): 389–414.

Willis, P. 1977. *Learning to Labour*. Farnborough: Saxon House.

Wolcott, H. F. 1999. *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, 284. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

Appendix: Typology of data collection strategies

