

Why Did Ethnography Cross the Border?

Jaime A. Paredes Paez, University of Calgary, Canada

Abstract: Where is qualitative research headed? Why is ethnography so fundamental? This paper presents an examination of literature, primarily inspired by the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2018), by developing a narrative of the contemporary. The interweaving of multiple research paradigms, the advancement of the bricolage, and the coalition of dynamic worldviews create a trans-, inter-, cross-, multi-, pluri-disciplinary landscape where re-imagined, re-purposed, and re-functioned ethnographic stances offer more complex and rich pathways for social research. The present-future possibilities across the blurring borders of the contemporary become an invitation for researchers to read and narrate human worlds and experiences as ever-changing, infinitely complex relational structures. Ultimately, these contemporary possibilities are ways to enact transformative and humanizing utopic aesthetics.

Keywords: Ethnography, Contemporary, Borders, Social research, Paradigms

Introduction: Towards Contemporary Ethnographies

How does qualitative research navigate the contemporary? Where are social researchers headed? One way to begin to think about these questions is by considering Westbrook's (2008) conception of an ethnography of present situations, a re-imagined ethnography critically situated to examine multi-voiced, relational human experiences at a junction with "globalized, late-capitalism neoliberalism" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 1591). Contemporary ethnography encompasses race, genre, culture, peoples, nations, the Self, the Other(s), togetherness, languages, historicity, places, and while gravitating around the worlds of human experience—the essence of social research—ethnographers envision a hopeful futurity and perhaps, dreams of utopia amid oppressive colonizing forces (Spry, 2011). Westbrook proposes a re-purposed ethnography that acknowledges the opportunities in the contemporary, where fluid, multilayered narratives overlap, interact, and nurture one another, creating a bricolage¹⁰ of ways of knowing and being (Denzin, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Lincoln, 2001; Steinberg 2011).

Since ethnography emerged in the early 20th century within the field of anthropology through the work of Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas (Madden, 2017), and within urban sociology through Robert Park and the Chicago School of Urban Studies (May & Fitzpatrick, 2019), among others, ethnography has been re-functioned and enlarged to account for philosophical assumptions at the intersection of visions of an ever-coming future (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Madden (2017) reminds us that ethnography thrives at paradigmatic intersections, initially developing in several contexts in Europe and the United States while a paradigm revolution (Kuhn, 1962) was taking place, characterized by a shift from a monolithic view of reality to cultural pluralism and relativism. Re-functioning the ethnographic lens is how social researchers move across modernist narratives towards critical readings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), thereby fostering venues to question the neoliberal ethos that commodifies human worlds and experiences (Giroux, 2005). Re-purposing ethnography is how researcher-centric perspectives shift towards relational views (Wilson, 2008) where the Self and the Other(s) question and engage in dialogue, co-create knowledge, and act upon and from multiple realities (Spry, 2011).

Contemporary ethnographies embrace trans-, inter-, cross-, multi-, and pluri-disciplinary perspectives, thereby questioning reductionistic understandings of reality while reaching towards new horizons that challenge researchers to problematize static and binary worldviews. These new horizons blur positivistic boundaries among ways of knowing and being through multidimensional realities in which the material and the virtual are entangled with each other, subsequently creating meta-verses (Mystakidis, 2022) that compel researchers to seek more complex research designs to navigate today's hybrid realities (Boellstorff, 2008; Markham, 2017). Such intricate landscapes do not escape ethnographic stances. Contemporary ethnographies test and re-test their own limits (Madden, 2017) through developing grounded analytical practices to explore "cultural patterns and formations brought into view as we ask particular questions about the intersection of technology and people in the post-internet age" (Markham, 2017, p.

¹⁰ According to Kincheloe et. al., (2018), bricolage is an emancipatory research construct. "The French word *bricoleur* describes a handyman or handywoman who makes use of the tools available to complete a task [...]. Bricolage implies the fictive and imaginative elements of the presentation of all formal research. The bricolage can be described as the process of getting down to the nuts and bolts of multidisciplinary research" (Kincheloe et. al., 2018, p. 431). Furthermore, in bricolage "[t]here is great potential for interweaving of viewpoints, for the incorporation of multiple perspectives, and for borrowing [...]" where borrowing seems useful, richness enhancing, or theoretically heuristic" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 219).

1135). These grounded practices are what some scholars refer to as cyber ethnography (Madden, 2017), nethnography (Lopez-Rocha, 2010), or digital ethnography (Dhiraj, 2008).

Even through virtual lenses, the inquiry of social phenomena remains at the heart of ethnography, and as human understanding grows, ethnographic stances are “re-imagined, re-purposed, re-functioned” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 1591). Therefore, this critical literature review intends to provide insight into the possibilities of contemporary ethnographies that explore the complexity of social phenomena by embracing multiple disciplines, philosophical traditions, research methodologies, and research methods. This paper suggests a trans-paradigmatic ethnographic approach that crosses traditional disciplinary borders to better understand the richness and depth of human worlds and experiences.

Crossing Paradigms’ Borders

Post-modern sensibilities and post-structural views (Borer & Fontana, 2012) have sparked controversies but also created vast opportunities to advance and innovate social research by bridging quantitative and qualitative worldviews (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Some scholars refer to these controversies as the crossing of borders and the blurring of lines between traditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), or as the advancement of the bricolage (Steinberg, 2011), where the interweaving of multiple perspectives enriches, broadens, and challenges researchers’ assumptions and vantage points. For example, some feminist theorists apply bioethics and biomedical social studies to develop more complex understandings of decolonizing projects (Marway & Widdows, 2015); post-humanist scholars are starting to question the underpinnings of a data-driven, digital economy (Yasmin, 2021); cyber-ethnographers are studying the intersections between human and machine in virtual realities (Ceuterick & Ingraham, 2021); and critical case studies are being carried out in engineering (Yasui, 2011). Although traditionalists may call for a return to a positivist ethnography (Clarke et al., 2015), there is a growing call for action in social research, resembling that of critical and participatory scholars, that may unite researchers under an axiological movement that resists neoliberal attempts to scientize qualitative inquiries (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011).

Across paradigms’ borders, there is a sense of wandering and wondering, a nomadic and un-settled *Self* (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011; Spry, 2011), a larger human project that lies at the core of the fluid relations with the *Others* mediated by multivocal realities. The study of such a human project, or, to echo Freire’s words (2000), human vocation, is mainly ethnographic. It resides at the heart of human relationality (Wilson, 2008), and it is a phenomenon that ethnography seeks to understand, moving beyond anthropological and sociological frameworks (Madden, 2017) into the trans-, inter-, cross-, multi-, pluri-paradigmatic dimensions of human experiences (Nelson et al., 1992).

In-between such borders that are no longer clear, contemporary ethnographies seem to call social researchers into a realm of possibilities. For instance, Oduaran and Oduaran (2020) grounded their research in an ethnographic, multimodal case study to look at youth violence in rural communities in Nigeria, and Schatz (2009) focused on political ethnography, arguing for the value of ethnographic case studies to build theories as alternative interpretations of empirical reality by considering the insiders’ accounts and complex contextualities. Additionally, Tacchi (2015) explains how ethnography and action research (EAR) build “upon notions of immersion [and] long-term engagement” (p. 220) within local contexts to holistically study communicative ecologies in media and information technologies. More examples of contemporary ethnographies include performance ethnographies (Conquergood, 2006) which study aesthetics as inseparable from human experience and as a cornerstone in the meaning-making process since aesthetics are loaded with historical and ideological nuances to be interrogated and resisted. Ethnodrama and ethnotheatre, and its many variations – ethnodramatherapy, ethnodramatics, ethnodramatology, ethnographic drama, ethnographic performance text, ethnographic theatre, ethnohistory, ethnomimesis, ethnopformance, ethnostorytelling, ethnotainment (Saldaña, 2005; 2011) – articulate artistic narratives from theatre and screenplays, supplemented by qualitative data from ethnographic methods, such as field notes, participant observations, diaries, and interviews to explore participants’ experiences through a performance medium.

Trans-disciplinary research often bridges quantitative and qualitative worldviews as well by creating complex systems that problematize and delve into human worlds and experiences. Cognitive ethnography in bioengineering sciences uses ethnographic methods to collect and analyze data to focus on problem-solving, learning, creativity, reasoning, and cognitive/conceptual change (Nersessian, 2019). Design ethnography addresses complex global health challenges, pairing engineering design methodologies with social sciences to study tacit information sourced from stakeholders’ behaviours, language, and perceptions that may be critical to determine how, when, and why medical

services should be provided (Sarvestani & Sienko, 2014). Hybrid ethnography (Przybylski, 2020) reminds us once again of the imminent fusion of online-offline realities and the birth of a human-machine ethos. Nevertheless, crossing paradigms' borders requires researchers to embrace the rigorous task of understanding and questioning the historical development of the philosophical traditions from which paradigms have emerged. In other words, to carefully examine the complex worlds where systems of knowledge are being produced and legitimated (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004).

Blurring Worlds

Research paradigms are embedded in philosophical traditions and despite the possible tensions among these worldviews or figured worlds, as Kamberelis et al. (2018) explain, these are not necessarily exclusive nor static. Figured worlds are culturally constructed and socially produced horizons where “people figure out who they are in relation to others through habituated practices” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). For researchers, figured worlds inform their positionality, theoretical assumptions, methodological choices, and data collection methods. According to Kamberelis et al. (2018), there are five figured worlds:

1. Affirming Objectivism and Representation (Positivism)
2. Practicing Modernism (Interpretative)
3. Enacting Skepticism & Praxis (Critical)
4. Troubling Discourse & Deconstructing Power/Knowledge (Post-structural)
5. Working Ontologically to Remap the Real (Post-qualitative) (p. 1203).

However, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) highlight that these figured worlds are not self-contained nor perfectly delimited. Instead, they constantly borrow from each other, creating new possibilities to enact a more complex and rich ethnography of present situations, or, as mentioned earlier, the aesthetics of a bricolage.

The blurring of figured worlds challenges the hegemonic discourse inherited from the monolithic science model and the paradigm wars of the 1980s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Binary thought and dichotomies, such as art vs science, nature vs culture, materiality vs incorporeality, objectivity vs subjectivity, are to be re-imagined not as fragmented pieces in confrontation with one another, but rather as fractal structures that constitute the human experience (Steinberg, 2011). According to Kincheloe et al. (2018), the complexities of being in the world go beyond the scopes of reductionistic, exclusionary, and deterministic perspectives since social dynamics are not uniform, fixed, or stable. Instead, what constitutes human experiences resembles the structures of fractals in that these “possess sufficient order to affect other systems and entities within their environment” (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 264). Fractals manifest as never-ending, non-linear, dynamic, and diverse systems of relationships where borders are no longer impermeable (Kincheloe, 2011), and where “all things are related therefore relevant” (Wilson, 2008, p. 58).

Although there are tensions among figured worlds, all of them gravitate around the infinitely complex relationships (fractal-like) among researchers, participants, contexts, and phenomena (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Such complex relationships alert social researchers of the axiological implications of their research where trustworthiness (validity) becomes a matter of dialogic intersubjective judgment (Cohen et al., 2018). Critical, socio-constructivist, feminist, and indigenous scholars continually raise questions about agency, ownership, representation, and positionality, shaped—as critical theorists would argue—by narratives of power embedded in the ongoing, historical process of understanding ever-changing, dialogic human experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Furthermore, dialogic nuances in qualitative inquiries, where frontiers are permeable and horizons align, invite researchers to imagine and embrace complex ways to be with one another and co-create multivocal, relational narratives that are ethically grounded.

Contemporary Ethnographies: A Relational Pathway

The significance of relationships in qualitative research is paramount. Ultimately, researchers will present an account of their relationships with their participants and the phenomena of interest, informed by degrees of interaction within specific contexts. Indigenous communities and scholars capture these relational dynamics, including meta-physical (spiritual) dimensions, through the experience of relationality and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). Axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological concerns are seen as inseparable, non-hierarchical, and non-linear, which Kovach (2009) refers to as holism in indigenous knowledges, where respect ties and sustains

relationships among peoples and the environment in a sacred space that is as material as it is spiritual, and thus, makes research a ceremony (Wilson 2008).

Despite ethnography's extractive and exploitative history (Madden, 2017), the ethnographic lens can be re-imagined, re-purposed, and re-signified. Spry (2011) argues that ethnographic research, particularly post-modern autoethnography, intentionally seeks to decenter the narrative of the *Self* (the researcher) and the *Other* (participants) to embody the aesthetics of a relational *We* as a dialogical performance. Spry (2018) suggests that relational reflexivity and the embodiment of the *We* are both a rejection of hegemonic discourses in which the *Other* is commodified and the *Self* is elevated to a position of uncontested power, a recuperation of "who we want to be with *Others*, a hope-filled futurity built with sticks and stones, skin and bones" (p. 1112).

Therefore, contemporary ethnographic research crosses borders among philosophical traditions and blurs the lines between researchers and participants since "we are not simply subjects, but we are subjects in dialogue with others" (Madison, 2012, p. 10). Social researchers looking through the ethnographic lens search for multiple and fluid ways of constructing paradigms (Cohen et al., 2018), borrowing among qualitative and quantitative methods that, despite bearing vestiges of their own disciplinary trajectories, are not constrained by time and space; rather, these may become frameworks with "room for the inventive, the imaginative and the experimental" (Madden, 2017, p. 25). The scopes and aims of contemporary ethnography have yet to be tested (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), and while it is re-imagined, re-purposed, and re-signified, it is worth coming back to the question posed at the very beginning of this paper: where are social researchers headed?

There are no longer clear borders nor a single destination, but a call for social action in qualitative research. Social researchers and ethnographers are responsible for choosing what future lies beyond the contemporary narratives that are being written to coherently account for multidimensional, polyphonic, fractal ways of knowing and being. Contemporary ethnographers consolidate quantitative, qualitative, and post-qualitative discourses, while being profoundly aware of the axiological implications of dwelling in and examining human worlds and experiences without losing sight of a larger human project: becoming more fully human (Freire, 2000).

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) would argue that unless ethnographers act "fast and well," we may continue to witness the rise of a new colonialism, championed by a neoliberal agenda that is spreading its seeds over most of our social reality (p. 1590). Navigating these contemporary times is troubling, but how we choose to look at human worlds and experiences may prove to be decisive in perpetuating binary, monolithic narratives or alternatively, creating transformative aesthetics. Through the lenses of relationality, there is a hopeful invitation to embrace dialogic relationships with one another and the environment, in order to explore the possibilities of contemporary ethnographic holisms in social research as we learn to see and narrate human worlds and experiences as ever-changing fractal structures. Perhaps, Spry's (2018) words may illustrate where we are headed, thereby reminding us of hopeful, utopic present-future possibilities across the blurring borders of the contemporary:

"It is in that co-presence with others, holding the note with several voices where yours alone is lost, not in euphoria, not in infatuation, but in a utopian performative where hope and pain and bleeding borders between selves and others and lands and bodies become traversable" (p. 1118).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jaime A. Paredes Paez is a Ph.D. student at the University of Calgary (Werklund School of Education) where he pursues studies in Curriculum and Learning. His research interests gravitate around critical pedagogy and teachers' education.