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EVOLVING NARRATIVES: THE CHANGING STYLES AND GENRES OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Abhradip Banerjee

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Author Details:
Assistant Professor (W.B.E.S.),
Government General Degree College,
Gopiballavpur II, Jhargram,
West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:
Abhradip Banerjee

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Abstract

Ethnographic fieldwork has always been considered as one of the most unique methods adopted by social-cultural anthropologists for finding answers to their wide array of research questions. However, owing to changing geopolitical scenarios and theoretical shifts, practices of doing ethnographic fieldwork and especially the writing style or the manner of descriptions have gone through a gradual transformation. The norms of writing, especially, have shifted from passive, impersonal realist depictions to dialogic and reflexive accounts to more critical issue-driven assessments to somewhat personal and blurred genres of autoethnography and autobiographies. Needless to say, this shift coincides with the growth, development and diversification of the discipline of anthropology. Through this article, I look to explore this journey and how changing intellectual, cultural and political landscapes have triggered the evolution of writing style from antiquity to the present day. By so doing, I also assess the prospects and possibilities of some of the new and emerging ethnographic writing styles, which many consider to be a danger to objective social science.

Keywords: *ethnographic fieldwork, style of writing, crisis of representation, reflexive turn, auto-ethnography*

Introduction

The term ‘ethnography’ is often used to refer to both ‘actual methods of fieldwork’ through which anthropologists collect materials, as well as the written text they produce from it. But, from a general sense, the term ‘ethnography’ refers to the descriptive study of human society or cultural portrayal of a particular group or community. Simpson and Coleman (2017), however, provide a more systematic definition of the term, which involves ‘the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution’. My concern in this article revolves around the later usage of the term ethnography concerning the objective, rationale and know-how of written ethnographic texts. Because ethnography, as a research method and genre, has undergone significant evolution since its inception during the late-19th and early 20th-century anthropological endeavours.

Having its legacies rooted in mid-19th-century ethnological endeavours, ethnography originally emerged as a tool for Western anthropologists to document and interpret the cultural practices of non-Western societies. Over time, however, the field has witnessed profound transformations, influenced by shifts in academic paradigms, ethical considerations, and the broader sociopolitical landscape. The norms of carrying ethnographic fieldwork along with the process of writing ethnographies started transforming as anthropologists came across complex, heterogeneous and transitional societies, especially since the post-Second World War period. Issues like diasporas and the notion of a “global village” made their task much more complicated. The effect is so profound and all-encompassing that anthropologists during the late 1950s and 1960s had to introduce concepts such as ‘networks’ to study more complex societies, as it was realized that the local cannot be understood without reference to what is happening outside. This has led to multi-sited ethnography becoming a necessary tool to study complex social phenomena. Today, dwelling upon a static ethnographic approach is almost ‘unthinkable’ as it is almost impossible to find societies devoid of cultural complexities and immune to the impacts of globalization. Most of the societies today are in a state of transition, and it has been realized that some of the local phenomena cannot be understood without reference to what is happening outside (Gudeman, 2001). Moreover, along with people’s growing inclination to use digital media, anthropologists in recent years have begun to move away from face-to-face participant observation to studying alternative constructions of cultural life, such as emergent online virtual worlds (e.g. Boellstorff, 2012).

These changes have given rise to diverse styles of ethnography, each characterized by its unique theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and narrative forms. From the detached and authoritative tone of early realist ethnography (e.g. Boas, 1888; Haddon, 1898) to the introspective and participatory frameworks of reflexive, critical, and collaborative ethnographies, the genre has embraced a multiplicity of voices and perspectives (e.g. Dumont, 1978; Evans-Pritchard, 1973; Favret-Saada, 1980; Hobbs & May, 1993; Jackson & Ives, 1996; Perry, 1989; Rabinow, 1977). Moreover, autoethnography (e.g. Reed-Danahay, 1997; van Manen, 1988), which centres the researcher's personal experiences as a lens to explore broader cultural phenomena, has further challenged traditional boundaries of the field, blurring the lines between ethnography and memoir.

Through this research, I seek to explore the historical development of ethnographic styles, examining how they have adapted to changing intellectual and cultural landscapes. By analyzing the strengths, limitations, and ethical implications of these approaches, I aim to provide insights into how ongoing negotiation with colonial legacies, ethical dilemmas, and the complexities of representing others' lived experiences that led to the emergence and diversification of ethnographic genres. For that matter, how have these different styles and genres been able to address the challenges of capturing cultural realities in diverse contexts? Moreover, in what ways do these stylistic shifts have either enhanced or limited the scope of ethnographic inquiry? Therefore, this investigation, by illuminating how ethnography continues to evolve in response to the complexities of an interconnected, ever-changing world, may shed light on the future of ethnography as both a methodological tool and a literary genre as well.

Method

To meet some of the aforementioned objectives, I had to rely on relevant secondary sources, which I have been able to identify through a comprehensive review of books, journal articles, and seminal ethnographic works spanning between classical, modern, and contemporary periods. For this purpose, I have used databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and AnthroSource and gathered peer-reviewed articles and ethnographic case studies. Selection criteria included works that discuss the 'stylistic and methodological evolution of ethnography', and 'introduce innovative and experimental narrative techniques or theoretical frameworks. To analyse the evolving styles and genres of ethnography I have employed a qualitative and interpretive approach where I have drawn upon key ethnographic texts, methodological treatises, and interdisciplinary critiques to trace historical and contemporary transformations in ethnographic writing. Then I have analysed the collected information based on the dominant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Braun et al., 2016) such as 'shifts in ethnographic style', genre of expansions, theoretical influence and ethical considerations.

The organization of the article is as follows. In the first subsection, I explore the characteristics of realist ethnography. Here, I also explain the rationale and academic background, based upon which realist ethnographies came into existence and faded away. In the second and third subsections, I respectively explore the characteristics of reflexive and critical ethnographies. Moreover, I explain the factors based upon which these two separate genres of ethnographies were able to serve the changing norms and growing academic requirements. In the fourth subsection, other than explaining the characteristics of autoethnography, I try to assess why autoethnographies have always been considered at the margin of academic writing. Finally, in the concluding section, by reassessing the turn of events, I try to assess the road ahead in terms of direction, relevance and immediate disciplinary requirement.

Realist Ethnography and its Focus on 'Objectivity'

The hallmark of realist ethnography lies in its detailed, rich description of cultural practices, rituals, and everyday life. The realist ethnographers often aimed to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the studied context. However, understanding the true nature and core characteristics of realist ethnographies requires a deeper analysis of the time during which this particular style of ethnographic writing emerged and became a norm within the discipline of anthropology. Realist ethnographies are one of the earliest and most traditional forms of ethnographic writing, which late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century anthropologists have often dwelled upon. Early ethnographic endeavours like (e.g., Boas, 1888; Haddon, 1898; Malinowski, 1922; Morgan, 1851; Rivers, 1906) can be cited as some of the prime examples of realist ethnographies of the earliest generation.

This particular style of ethnography started emerging within the discipline of anthropology when early evolutionary and diffusionist assertions were facing severe criticism because of their ethnological methods of cross-cultural comparison, and particularly for their lack of empiricism. Invariably, in an effort to bring change, most anthropologists of that period started emphasizing empiricism, objectivity, scientific rigour, fieldwork and the detailed first-hand documentation of cultural practices as the entire academia during this particular period was riding high on the waves of positivism. The core positivistic belief that scientific laws and theories can be discovered regarding the functioning of human societies pushed ethnographers to incline towards the use of scientific methods like systematic observation, documentation, and analysis while studying human society and culture. The realist ethnographers started using participant observation and structured interviews to provide a more objective and factual account of the studied culture or community.

The realist ethnographers have held on to the disciplinary norms of "studying the exotics", and the "other cultures" set by their ethnological forerunner. But their positionality within their own research changed entirely and that resulted in complete authoritarian detachment from ethnographic texts. Positivist assertion of doing scientific and bias-free research led ethnographers of this particular period to take a more neutral stance and write in the third person, avoiding references to themselves to minimize

personal bias and maintain a sense of impartiality. Due to this reason, realist ethnographers often excluded or at best downplayed their personal reflections, interpretations, or emotional responses, which they have accumulated during the course of fieldwork.

While realist ethnography has been foundational to the development of the discipline of social-cultural anthropology, it has its own set of limitations. One of the foremost issues is the issues surrounding their mono-vocality and ethnocentric representation. Realist ethnographers have often been criticized for perpetuating a colonial gaze, presenting a singular authoritative interpretation and downplaying the role of the voices of the studied communities for a complete understanding of the complex cultural realities. Instead of viewing culture as a dynamic, fluid, and interconnected entity, the realist representation of culture and society as a static, bounded and coherent system has drawn severe criticism. The realist ethnographers have also been criticised on the grounds of their timeless descriptions and lack of historical context to the communities and cultures they studied, which resulted in more exoticization of the studied groups.

Reflexive Ethnographies and an Emphasis on the Researcher's Positionality

Some of the core characteristics of reflexive ethnography lie in its fluidity, methodological openness, and use of a multiplicity of voices through which it moves beyond detached observation to embrace the subjective, relational, and ethical dimensions of research. The following (e.g. Dumont, 1978; Evans-Pritchard, 1973; Favret-Saada, 1980; Hobbs & May, 1993; Jackson & Ives, 1996; Perry, 1989; Rabinow, 1977) are a few prominent examples of reflexive ethnography. Reflexive ethnographies, unlike realist ones, urged researchers to be aware of their role and positionality within the research process. By incorporating personal experiences and participant voices, it started providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of cultural phenomena while addressing power imbalances and the inherent challenges of representation.

Needless to say, reflexive ethnographies, much like the preceding realist ones, were also a product of their time and emerging academic requirements. Reflexive ethnographies were developed in an effort to resolve criticism received by the preceding realist ones. Following a sudden change in the geopolitical scenario and rapid growth in the number of professional anthropologists and institutions devoted to teaching and research during the post-Second World War period, anthropologists had to give up many of their realist norms like studying the so-called 'primitive' and the 'exotic' as most of the societies during this particular period hardly lived in isolation (Eriksen, 1995). With the felt need for ethical and authentic representation of their participants, the value of having an insider's perspective was realized as some of the subjects of anthropological inquiry (people of developing countries) gradually became aware of the discipline of anthropology itself. Therefore, to avoid exploitation or misrepresentation, the reflexive ethnographers from this particular period onwards started shrugging off their preceding ethnocentric bias. With this change in perspective, unlike in realist ethnographies, a great value is being given to 'silences' and 'avoidances', as these gaps illustrate important aspects of a culture (Grbich, 1998; O'Byrne, 2007).

With the growing awareness of becoming more sensitive to the power dynamics between researchers and participants, reflexive ethnographers choose to pursue their research with a methodological standpoint that is subjective and more transparent in nature as it often provided a critical reflection of how the researcher's background (e.g., gender, ethnicity, social class) shaped social interaction during the field and eventually the interpretation of the respondents. Due to this reason, moving away from the positivist rigour of depicting impartial and objective truth, reflexive ethnographers started imbibing upon their own 'reflexive self' to demystify the ethnographic process for their readers. Thus, providing explicit details regarding every step of the research process, including the researcher's own challenges, mistakes, and evolving perspectives, became a new norm. This movement towards 'personalized research reflections' firstly came as an outcome of a greater emphasis on the process of 'immersion', which involves an ethnographer's own interactions with the culture being researched and secondly as part of a recognition of the relational nature of anthropological fieldwork and possibilities of dialogic knowledge co-construction (Holt 2003).

Critical Ethnographies, Social Inequalities and Power Dynamics

The uniqueness of critical ethnographies lies in the fact that the ethnographers of this particular genre, by critically reflecting upon their own positionality and openly acknowledging how their identity and privilege influence the research, have tried to retain the traits of reflexivity on one hand. Again, on the other hand, these ethnographers have also tried to combine ethnographic methods with critical theory to question and challenge societal norms and often advocated for marginalized or oppressed groups. Nonetheless, achieving the transformative goal has been the hallmark of critical ethnography as their main aim revolved around moving beyond mere observation, empowering the participants and advocating for their rights by engaging with the issue of equality and justice. Due to this reason, while examining the influences of historical, political, and economic forces on marginalized communities, the ethnographers of this particular genre have often adopted an explicitly ethical and political stance, which has helped them in addressing injustices observed during fieldwork rather than explaining how power, privilege, and systemic inequality shape cultural practices and social structures.

Critical ethnographies emerged during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s when several anthropologists decided to become politically more active and began experimenting in various ways to incorporate emancipatory political projects into their research (Noblit et al., 2004). One of the earliest examples of critical ethnography with direct participation and benefits to the community is Sol Tax's (1963) "action" ethnography on the Mesquakie settlement in Iowa. However, ethnographies of this particular genre began to gain prominence during the 1980s and 1990s when the discipline of anthropology, along with other social sciences, was passing through a theoretical reorientation. Due to this, the critical ethnographers, with their objectives of bringing political change, chose to conduct fieldwork in unconventional environments such as modern workplaces that were not

necessarily considered exotic, going by the disciplinary idioms of previous anthropologists. And others consciously attempted to conduct research on so-called deviant or suppressed groups that have long remained outside the prevailing paradigm of hegemonic cultural positionings to provide new avenues for dissent and dialogue on societal transformation. Needless to say, the growth and influences of Marxist, critical, postmodernist, poststructuralist and feminist theories that started challenging existing hegemonic social structures played an important role in it. Invariably, critical ethnographers had to adopt a multidisciplinary approach and new methods of analysis for shedding light upon and making a critique of the social system. The following are examples of critical ethnography (e.g. Bourgois, 1995; Farmer, 2004; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Smith, 2005; Stack, 1974).

The critical ethnographies tried to move beyond the mere descriptive nature of traditional realist and reflexive ethnographies to focus on power dynamics, social justice, and the transformation of inequitable social structures. Critical ethnographers often transformed the ethnographic process into a tool for advocacy and critique. By foregrounding power dynamics and engaging with issues of inequality, critical ethnographers not only tried to document cultural realities but also challenged oppressive systems, striving to create a more just world.

The Autoethnography

Autoethnography is one of the recently emergent genres of writing within the qualitative research method. It combines elements of both autobiography and ethnography, the central narrative of which often revolves around a researcher's personal experiences. It focuses on those personal experiences as a lens to explore and analyse broader cultural, social, and political phenomena. The aim is to connect individual experiences to larger cultural or societal contexts. The following are a few prominent examples of autoethnography (e.g. Banerjee, 2022; Banerjee et al., 2011; Banerjee et al., 2017; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 1995, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

The unique characteristic of autoethnography lies in the fact that it bridges the personal and the cultural, offering a unique perspective on social phenomena through deeply introspective and evocative narratives. Moreover, the uniqueness of this genre can also be associated with its complete embracing of subjectivity, reflexivity, self-emancipation and vulnerability. With its entirely unique approach, it challenges traditional research paradigms and provides powerful insights into the interplay between individual and collective experiences.

The genesis of autoethnography can invariably be linked to the period when anthropologists began to engage in dialogue regarding anthropology's objective foundation, especially concerning the relational dynamics between authors, audiences, texts and the process of anthropological knowledge construction (Barthes, 1977; Derrida, 1978; Radway, 1984). Obviously, the seed of the autoethnographic genre of writing was first sown during the 1980s when scholars started giving up the desire for grand or universal narratives (De Certeau, 1984; Lyotard, 1984) realizing social science's ontological, epistemological, and axiological limitations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). However, autoethnography as a genre of writing started gaining prominence since the early 2000s when postmodernists and poststructuralist scholars became sceptical about the possibilities of attaining universal objective truth as they began to realize that all human investigators are grounded in human society and can produce only partial, locally and historically specific insights (Delamont et al., 2000, p.5).

The Post-modern and post-structural scholars became critical of the fact that most of the realist ethnographies often overlooked the researcher's subjective influence on their findings and interpretations and assumed that researchers possess an omnipotent and entirely or nearly objective viewpoint (Grbich, 1998). Due to this, most of the works carried out in the positivist rigour often concealed more facts in the name of objectivity than they actually revealed. Autoethnographies, on the contrary, compared to their preceding realist, reflexive and critical genres of writing, adopted a completely different stance towards subjectivity and self-emancipation. Based on their belief that stories are complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that teach morals and ethics, introduce unique ways of thinking and feeling, and help people make sense of themselves and others (Adams, 2008; Bochner, 2001, 2002; Fisher, 1984), the auto-ethnographers often use of literary techniques such as storytelling, poetry, or memoir and highly evocative style that emotionally engages readers. And because of this blurred boundary between academic and creative writing, autoethnography as a genre of writing, at times, has been placed at the margins of academic practices.

Conclusion: Revisiting the Core Aim of Doing and Writing Ethnographies and Finding the Road Ahead

Despite many changes in norms and practices of doing fieldwork and writing, ethnographic descriptions, because of their unique utilitarian purposes of gathering and working upon firsthand information regarding any particular culture, shared norms, values, ways and customs of a given society or a group, continue to be at the heart of anthropological research to date. However, no one can deny the fact that practices of doing and writing ethnographies are passing through a period which many consider to be an "experimental moment". Many anthropologists now openly acknowledge the fact that social anthropology can no longer fulfil its traditional aim of providing holistic, objective representations of the lives of members of 'exotic', other cultures (see James et al., 1997). Under these circumstances, as a student of anthropology, one of the most important questions to ask is, are we on the brink of risking our existence as a separate field of knowledge?

Many consider that the most notable changes in the way ethnographic research has been carried out and represented came between the periods of the mid-70s to late 80s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mendez, 2013). During which, the postmodernists and post-structuralists started explaining why no two conceptualizations or understandings of any phenomenon, because of being constructed within differing contexts involving different actors, will not be identical (Sim, 2002). By explaining why

ethnographers need to emphasize on the alternative forms of reality, and why each answer is valid, correct and true for the respondents, the researcher(s) and the cultures within which the project was constructed and executed (Butler, 2002), the post-modernist and post-structural perspective started posing a challenge to the traditional form of ethnographies and has brought up issues regarding the 'credibility' and 'validity' of most of the early realist ethnographic representations. Even, it would not be wrong to claim that such post-modernist and poststructuralist attacks certainly have loosened anthropology's objective foundation. Due to this, the realist norm of writing passive, etic descriptions of culture, practices and norms of particular communities living in exotic locations has been abandoned in anthropology.

Again, during the same point in time, in order to provide a true picture of the context under which the research is being carried out, many ethnographic works started turning towards reflexivity, falling back upon a researcher's own self-reflection and (partial) self-emancipation (Scholte, 1972). This period was marked by the production of a whole new range of ethnographies of 'blurred genres' characterized by the use of diverse research strategies and formats. The political activism of many anthropologists during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s also provided impetus to the rise and growth of critical ethnographies. Finally, the 'crisis of representation', which according to Holt (2003, p.18) "calls to place greater emphasis on how the ethnographers interact with the culture being researched" ultimately gave rise to the auto-ethnographic/autobiographic genre of writings.

However, the autoethnographic and autobiographical ethnographic writing traditions also have their own set of scope and limitations (Sparkes, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Coffey, 1999; Mendez, 2013). First of all, doing autoethnographic research is relatively easier as the researcher mostly calls on his or her own experiences as the source from which to investigate a particular phenomenon. Secondly, autoethnographic and autobiographical styles of writing help 'colonized selves' to be visible. Further, the personal narratives in an autoethnographic or autobiographical style of writing, which gives us access to learners' private worlds and provides rich data, is one of the main advantages (Mendez, 2013; Pavlenko, 2002, 2007). However, the same advantage of being based on a rich source of personal experience does not provide autoethnographic studies with the chance to validate their findings by comparing them with similar research carried out elsewhere in the world. It is in this context that many have severely criticized autoethnography for its 'gross self-indulgence' (Coffey, 1999, p.132) and regarded it as a genre situated at the margins of academic practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 2000, p.21).

Needless to say, the rift of opinion regarding the use of self within anthropological research has persisted and perhaps will be there so long as there is a road forward to be imagined (Hughes-Freeland, 1995) because the matter of fact is, ethnographers at any point of time, be it at the time of classical(realist), reflexive critical or postmodern period, didn't had the luxury of a 'dispassionate mediator' or 'instrument' between them and the phenomena they observed. It's the paradigmatic philosophy popular at a given point in time, which has rendered certain works to be either objective, critical, reflexive, subjective/inter-subjective at certain parts. Therefore, there is no reason to panic as we are indeed living within what many think to be an "experimental moment" and O'Byrne (2007, p.1389) rightfully puts it that we need to be 'sensitive' and 'respectfully open-minded towards each perspective'.

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