Teaching family medicine residents how to conduct research is increasingly being seen as a crucial component of their training, in part as a means of strengthening the discipline and in part to improve their practices. Whereas quantitative methods once dominated approaches to medical research, the application of qualitative methods is seen as an effective way to study issues in primary care. Ethnography is one such qualitative approach that offers residents a useful tool for conducting research. This article presents an overview of ethnography as a research method that is used to gain a deeper understanding of human behaviour, motivation, and social interaction within specific and complex cultural contexts.

Ethnographic research has long played an important role in medicine. Becker and colleagues’ landmark ethnographic study, *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School,* used qualitative interviews and participant observation to learn how medical students are acculturated into the medical profession; how they learn to negotiate the social complexities within the hospital; and their anxieties, doubts, and idealism as they go through medical training. The study also provides useful insight into students’ evolving and shifting conceptions of the medical profession. Ethnographies such as this one provide an in-depth perspective on a range of health-related issues, such as the professional and corporate culture, social determinants, the illness experiences of patients, moral problems in health care, the family’s role in patient care, patient attitudes toward delivery of care, and other factors that influence health care and health outcomes. In essence, ethnographies provide a deeper insight into a culture. In this sense culture is defined as the collective assumptions and beliefs that influence the practices of a particular group of people who share a social space.

The term *ethnography* is thought to have first been introduced in 1922 by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). It has its roots in the descriptive science of social anthropology, central to which is the study of culture and cultural behaviour. Ethnographies, however, are not limited to studies of ethnic rituals and practices. They include studies that describe and explain a range of social phenomena within various culture-sharing groups. These ethnographies provide an in-depth description and analysis, and paint a portrait of the ways in which culture-sharing groups interpret their experiences and create meaning from their interactions. Surgeons, for example, have a particular professional culture influenced by attitudes and behaviour that are characteristic of that group and transmitted across generations through learning.

**Divergent approaches**

Traditional approaches to ethnographic research endeavoured to collect facts and evidence through detached observations about the culture being studied, with the researcher attempting to operate in the background as an objective bystander in order to develop an impartial understanding of observable phenomena. This positivist* aim of impartiality, criticalists† will argue, is not tenable, as it depends upon the unlikely ability of the researcher to be once-removed from the culture under observation. Criticalists maintain that researchers are mistaken if they believe they are able to provide a neutral account of others’ experiences. Unlike Malinowski, the next generation of researchers finds that ethnographers are influenced by a “culturally mediated world, caught up in ‘webs of significance’ they themselves have spun [where] there is no privileged position, no absolute perspective, and no valid way to eliminate consciousness from our activities or those of others.”

Positivists defer to the transcribed interview over the lived experience of a face-to-face conversation. As a result, knowledge becomes a derivative of the captured, transcribed voice; the known, originally of flesh and blood, is transformed into an amorphous entity, only to be reincarnated and solidified in text. Both the captured voice and the fixed subject can now be manipulated without fear of losing data to the continuity of life and time. A transcribed text can be seen as containing a set of meanings that remain frozen for all time, and is thus more reliable. Yet criticalists would argue that such texts are read and reread, interpreted and reinterpreted with every new reading, through which the reader as researcher creates newer meanings and reifications. What goes unrealized is that each encounter

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*Positivists subscribe to the theory that empirical experience is the most legitimate source of knowledge, and that knowledge begins and ends with a sensory experience free of subjective interpretation.*

†Criticalism presupposes that knowledge is conjectural, socially constructed, and ephemeral—always open to critical analysis and re-analysis.
with the text is a new experience. To believe that each reading is still an encounter with the original experience ignores the contextual, historical moments that produced it. The text is given a life of its own with a corresponding belief that it presents the “truth” about the situation being studied.

Criticalists believe, therefore, that the new ethnographer must be careful not to be entrapped by a particular form and version of truth. The social world is governed by multiple truths, which are contextually situated. The researcher’s credibility and legitimacy are gained by acknowledging the representation of multiple versions of truth, showing how each version can impinge on and shape the phenomenon being studied. No single version is given authoritative privilege, for each has its own strengths and limitations—for example, at the scene of an accident, a range of perspectives is obtained to help illuminate the situation in order to arrive at the best possible explanation of what happened. Meanings are not inherent in observation alone, but rather must be elucidated through the interpretation of the range of perspectives offered to illuminate the phenomenon under study.

Constructing realism

Although it might seem as if this movement toward “multiple truths” means that it is impossible to ever know anything, the opposite might in fact be the case. Instead of looking for a single truth when using an ethnographic approach, researchers are encouraged to try to understand the cultural environment from multiple points of view. Hence, in qualitative research, the term experience is more commonly used than truth. Researchers will need to broaden their perspectives while taking into account diverse perceptions of what is occurring in the social environment. Rather than developing single-person interpretations and generalizations, the aim is to collect thick, extensive, and detailed descriptions and interpretations of the area being studied. We can speculate that if a study like Boys in White, for example, were being conducted today it would be a much richer work, as it would not only be looking at the socialization of medical students from the “detached” perspective of the researchers but also examining in more detail the views of patients and other professionals, as well as the diversity within the student group. The experiences embedded in each of these perspectives would help us develop a much richer understanding of medical students within their social context.

Qualitative research is not a monolithic concept like statistics. It draws upon a rich variety of strategies and theoretical frameworks from different disciplines and traditions. Ethnography is but one qualitative research method for studying social phenomena.

Hypothesis

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Competing interests

None declared.

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