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Ethnographies of pain: culture, context and complexity

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Abstract

This article briefly introduces and discusses the value of ethnographic research, particularly research hailing from the discipline of social and cultural anthropology. After an introduction to ethnography in general, key ethnographic studies of pain are described. These show that ethnography provides a set of techniques for data collection and analysis, as well as a way of thinking about pain as socially and culturally embedded. Modern ethnographic writing is far removed from the literature of the past that sometimes described stereotypes rather than process and complexity. Ethnography provides the chance to describe the complexity and nuance of culture, which serves to counter stereotypes. The article concludes with an example from pain research conducted in a clinical setting. Through the use of ethnographic techniques, the research study provided greater insight than other methods alone might have achieved. The article includes references for further reading should readers be interested in developing their engagement with ethnographic method and interpretation.

Keywords

Ethnography, qualitative, anthropology, pain, research methods, culture

It is widely accepted that a person's experience of pain is multi-dimensional, relating to culture, emotion, mind and body.¹ There is no single 'correct' way to explore this multi-dimensionality, and researchers have taken a variety of approaches, which may emphasise some elements of the experience over others. Ethnography is one approach to in-depth research; although widely applied in social sciences and underpinning some key texts on pain, there is potential to expand its use in clinically relevant research. Here, I will briefly introduce readers to ethnography and its potential.

What is ethnography?

Ethnography is both a method and written (or visual) account practised and produced by social scientists. Its origins can be traced to early social anthropology,² with anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski often described as the founder of 'participant observation': an observational method used in many ethnographic studies.³ In the early 20th century, Malinowski spent several years as

a participant observer, taking part observing and recording daily life in the Trobriand Islands (now in Papua New Guinea). Based on his ethnographic research, he produced detailed accounts of social life.⁴ Today, ethnographic research and writing continue to explore and describe society and culture, with ethnographic techniques used to understand numerous contexts and topics around the world.

Current ethnographic research usually comprises multiple methods of data collection methods and recording. These include participant observation and writing field notes, interviews and audio- or video-recording, collection of documentary and visual materials, and surveys.^{5,6} Participant observation is often

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seen as the hallmark of ethnography; in conducting participant observation, a researcher spends time taking part in activities within the research setting in order to understand people's actions and knowledge. Data, therefore, comprise non-verbal as well as verbal behaviours. If participation is not possible, then observation without participation is an acceptable alternative. Ethnographic research is usually overt, with covert research the exception rather than the norm. Ethnographers seek to respect participants and ensure that research does not bring about any harm, in keeping with current guidance on ethics and good practice.⁷ Although observation is a key element of many ethnographic studies, ethnography can be conducted without inclusion of observational data collection. Some ethnographers would contend that analysis and interpretation are critical elements of ethnography rather than method used to gather data. Ethnographers analyse and interpret material in light of existing knowledge to produce ethnographic accounts, which often include fine-grained detail contextualised in wider concerns such as history or social structure.⁸

Ethnography is many things

Ethnographers have gone about their research in a number of ways. Classically, ethnographers have spent time living in communities to produce accounts of everyday life, but they have also studied institutions, with health-related research conducted in hospitals and other healthcare settings.⁹⁻¹² Recently, ethnographers have engaged with new technologies, including the internet, as means of eliciting and collecting information,¹³ and have conducted multi-site ethnography involving real or virtual travel between settings to trace people or topics across locations.^{14,15} Ethnographers have also focused on individual life stories, with 'autoethnography' combining elements of autobiography with ethnography.¹⁶

Ethnographic studies are conducted by exponents of a number of disciplines, including but not exclusively, anthropology, sociology, geography and nursing. Although hailing from diverse disciplines, ethnographers all attempt to understand people's actions, behaviours and knowledge in context and with attention to process. The aim may be to achieve some general conclusions and relate empirical findings to theoretical considerations, but ethnographers would not normally use the language of generalisability. Instead, many would try to produce accounts that have resonance with other contexts, speak to broader issues and achieve depth and detail.

Ethnographies of pain

Pain is part of the fabric of human experience, and because of their interest in everyday life, ethnographers

have long since included accounts of pain in their studies. Tracing the history of anthropological engagement with pain, Kleinman et al.¹⁷ remind us that late 19th- and early 20th-century anthropologists explored pain. A look through my own book collection quickly identified an ethnography of the South Eastern Solomon Islands dated 1927, in which W.G. Ivens¹⁸ writes of people's 'recuperative powers' in the face of pain.

Some ethnographers have made pain a primary focus, providing insight into the complexity of pain and pain management. In a seminal collection edited by DelVecchio Good et al.,¹⁹ anthropologists showcase research conducted in North America and draw readers into the worlds of people living with pain. A chapter by Jackson²⁰ is based on her 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a 'chronic pain treatment center', elaborated in a monograph. Jackson describes a distinction between 'real' and 'unreal' pain in the treatment centre and highlights the challenge of communication between patients and professionals. Jackson's message is ultimately positive and points towards the great need to understand how pain is confusing and interpretations are multiple.

Another noteworthy ethnographic study is C. Jason Throop's²¹ moving account of pain and suffering in Yap, Micronesia. Throop lived in Yap for extended periods over several years, during which he conducted participant observation, interviews and audio-recording. One of several cases that he describes is a girl he calls 'Tinag' who breaks her arm after falling from a tree, then underwent treatment from biomedical and traditional practitioners. The healer massages and resets Tinag's broken arm in a painful process. Readers cannot fail to be moved by the transcript and account of the treatment, which includes her cries and her parents' protestations about the need for her to 'endure' the intense pain of treatment. Through this and other cases, Throop highlights the link between pain and moral qualities and shows how expressions and interpretations of pain echo broader cultural values in Yap: enduring pain is virtuous, reflecting the value placed on hard work and persistence.

These ethnographies of pain sensitise readers to the complexity of pain, pain expression and pain management in the context of broader processes, values and norms. By showing how individual experience and context interact, these studies also provide a useful counterargument to dated work that had attempted to link culture, or ethnicity, and pain. For instance, Zbrowski's²² study of North Americans of diverse origins described differences in pain expression and cultural background, perhaps echoing older ethnographic accounts.¹⁸ Such work had simplified the link between culture and pain, verging on the production of stereotypes and bearing little resemblance to the portrayals of complexity within current ethnographic studies.

This is an important point: modern ethnographies have managed to convey the complex links between culture (and ethnicity) and pain, rather than resorting to stereotypes. Through this, modern ethnography avoids suggesting that there are straightforward causal associations between culture and pain experience, communication or behaviour.

Using ethnography in clinical research

The risk of over-simplification of ethnographic material into stereotypes about ethnic groups has, in my view, meant that ethnographers have often preferred to communicate their research in long-hand texts rather than accessible summaries. These ethnographic texts make for fascinating reading as they contain considerable detail of life with pain. Furthermore, results and reflections conveyed within them may resonate strongly with experiences of pain clinicians or researchers working on pain. Additionally, although the studies described above have involved long-term ethnographic research and led to books or edited collections, it is perfectly possible to use elements of ethnographic data collection and interpretation in a shorter timeframe, for instance, within clinical or multi-disciplinary settings. Such research provides the chance to observe behaviour in context and to use observation to make sense of verbal data.

For example, I will describe a study in which I was recently involved. This was a study that aimed to understand decision-making about surgery for people with painful osteoarthritis. Although joint replacement surgery is widely provided at relatively high cost to healthcare providers, we lack knowledge about how decisions are made to offer surgery and the role of pain or other issues in that decision. Using an approach inspired by ethnography, the study researcher attended consultations between patients and healthcare professionals. The researcher observed and audio-recorded consultations and then interviewed clinicians and patients individually about the decisions made in those consultations. Interpreting the information collected and comparing observational with interview data, for instance, the body language in consultations and use of 'props' such as X-rays, the study concluded that patients modified their communicative behaviour to echo that of clinicians. In addition, the study found that although pain reports were central to decision-making, clinicians and patients sometimes had different views about the 'need' for treatment depending on a host of contextual factors including social issues. These influenced satisfaction with decisions made.^{23,24} This study was conducted with more rapidity than conventional anthropological ethnographic work, but we found that using observation and interviews alongside each other provided information that would have

been hard to achieve solely from interviews or survey alone. We also took care to write-up the study to reach clinical audiences in an accessible fashion and hope that the results will influence future policy about prioritisation for surgery.

My own study is just one example of how it may be useful to select and apply elements of ethnography in clinically relevant pain research. There is scope to conduct more such research into pain, a field in which we know that non-verbal behaviour and contextual factors have important roles. Importantly, modern ethnographic literature provides insight into the complexity of pain experience and the connection between individuals' experiences and context in which experience occurs. This literature also enables us to transcend the idea that culture is simply a risk factor for elements of pain experience or communication. Instead, ethnography can show the complex dynamics between society, culture, help seeking and the experience of pain, and this is particularly evident in work by DelVecchio Good et al.,¹⁹ Jackson²⁰ and Throop.²¹

I would suggest that the complexity shown in ethnography is familiar to pain clinicians and researchers, and that ethnographic accounts give voice to nuance and individual experiences. Ethnography also provides methods that can be used and adapted to suit the needs of more rapid research studies. Ethnography has much to offer, and applying it in clinically relevant pain research should resonate with clinical experience and provide the opportunity to look beyond verbal or numerical reports of pain.

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