



Evidence Summary

Ethnographic Methods are Becoming More Popular in LIS Research

A Review of:

Khoo, M., Rozaklis, L., & Hall, C. (2012). A survey of the use of ethnographic methods in the study of libraries and library users. *Library & Information Science Research*, 34(2), 82-91. doi: 10.1016/j.lisr.2011.07.010

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Abstract

Objective – To determine the number of ethnographic studies of libraries and library users, where these studies are published, how researchers define ethnography, and which methods are used by the researchers.

Design – Literature survey.

Setting – The researchers are located at Drexel University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States of America.

Subjects – 81 ethnographic studies of libraries and library users.

Methods – The researchers conducted a literature survey, starting with a pilot study of

selected library and information science (LIS) journals, to find ethnographic studies and to determine key terms in research using ethnographic methods. The researchers used these terms in the main study to identify more LIS research using ethnographic methods. The same journals used in the pilot study were then searched online as part of the main study, along with three LIS databases (LISA, LISTA, LLIS). The researchers also searched the open web in order to capture grey literature in the LIS field. All literature found, including those sources found through secondary citations, was screened for inclusion in coding. Studies with non-LIS settings were excluded as were studies that utilized non-ethnographic methods. The screened studies were coded to determine categories of methods used.

Main Results – The researchers found 81 articles, reports, and conference presentations that used ethnographic methods, which they compiled into a bibliography. This is an order of magnitude larger than that found by previous literature surveys. Of these studies, 51.9% were published after 2005. The majority (64.2%) of the studies were published in journals. Many studies did not provide clear or detailed definitions of ethnography and the definitions that were provided varied widely. The researchers identified themes which had been used to support ethnographic methods as a research methodology. These included using ethnographic methods to gain richer insight into the subjects' experiences, to collect authentic data on the subjects' experiences, and to allow flexibility in the methods chosen. They also included the use of multiple data collection methods to enable data triangulation. The five main method categories found in the literature were: observation, interviews, fieldwork, focus groups, and cultural probes.

Conclusion – Based on the relatively large number of ethnographic studies identified when compared to previous literature surveys and on the upward trend of publication of ethnographic research over the past five years, the authors noted that their overview study (and resultant compilation of literature from disparate sources) was important and time-saving for researchers who use or are beginning to use ethnography as a research methodology.

Commentary

This study provides an overview of research in the LIS field using ethnographic methods, which is published in many disparate sources. As such, it is situated to extend LIS research literature and align it with other social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology, which often use ethnographic methods. The researchers position their study as novel, given that no other researcher or research team has yet completed a comprehensive survey and bibliography of research using ethnographic methods in the LIS field. As the researchers

were able to identify 81 studies that used ethnographic methods, there is obvious interest in the LIS field in researching multiple aspects of libraries and library users using these methods. As a starting point for background research on previous studies using ethnographic methods, it is a useful article for librarian practitioners.

The study is well-written and the researchers clearly define their research questions and link their results back to these questions. They also acknowledge the limitations of the study and how the study will need to be updated to keep current with the expanding literature using ethnographic methods. The study is valid using the critical appraisal tool by Glynn (2006) for calculating study validity, if it is assumed that the researchers analyzed studies for use of ethnographic methods and not studies that were themselves ethnographies. There is the possible issue of conflating ethnographic studies with studies using ethnographic methods throughout the study. Ethnographic methods, such as interviews and observation, are used by many types of qualitative methodologies (Berg, 2007) that would not be considered ethnographies. The researchers appeared to use the phrases "ethnographic studies" and "ethnographic methods" interchangeably throughout the study, although these are two different concepts.

A question raised by the lack of precision in using the phrases "ethnographic studies" and "ethnographic methods" is the categorization of studies as ethnographies when the researchers never identified their studies as ethnographies or their methods as ethnographic (Briden & Marshall, 2010; Cmor, Chan, & Kong, 2010). More information about the definitions of ethnography found in the literature would have been useful, especially those definitions that were "induced indirectly" from the literature studies (p. 84). These issues could have resulted in the researchers' overestimation in the number of ethnographic studies in the LIS literature, while at the same time accurately recording the number of studies that used ethnographic methods.

These issues aside, this study's extensive bibliography will be useful to those who want an overview of some of the most popular qualitative methods used in LIS research and to those contemplating using ethnographic methods. The compiled bibliography of research studies is a valuable reference and starting point for those interested in learning more about the application of qualitative methods in LIS research settings, especially in the area of observation and interviews. Through reading the cited literature, librarians will gain a better understanding of various qualitative methodologies used in LIS research and thereby be better able to select an appropriate methodology for their next research project.

References

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