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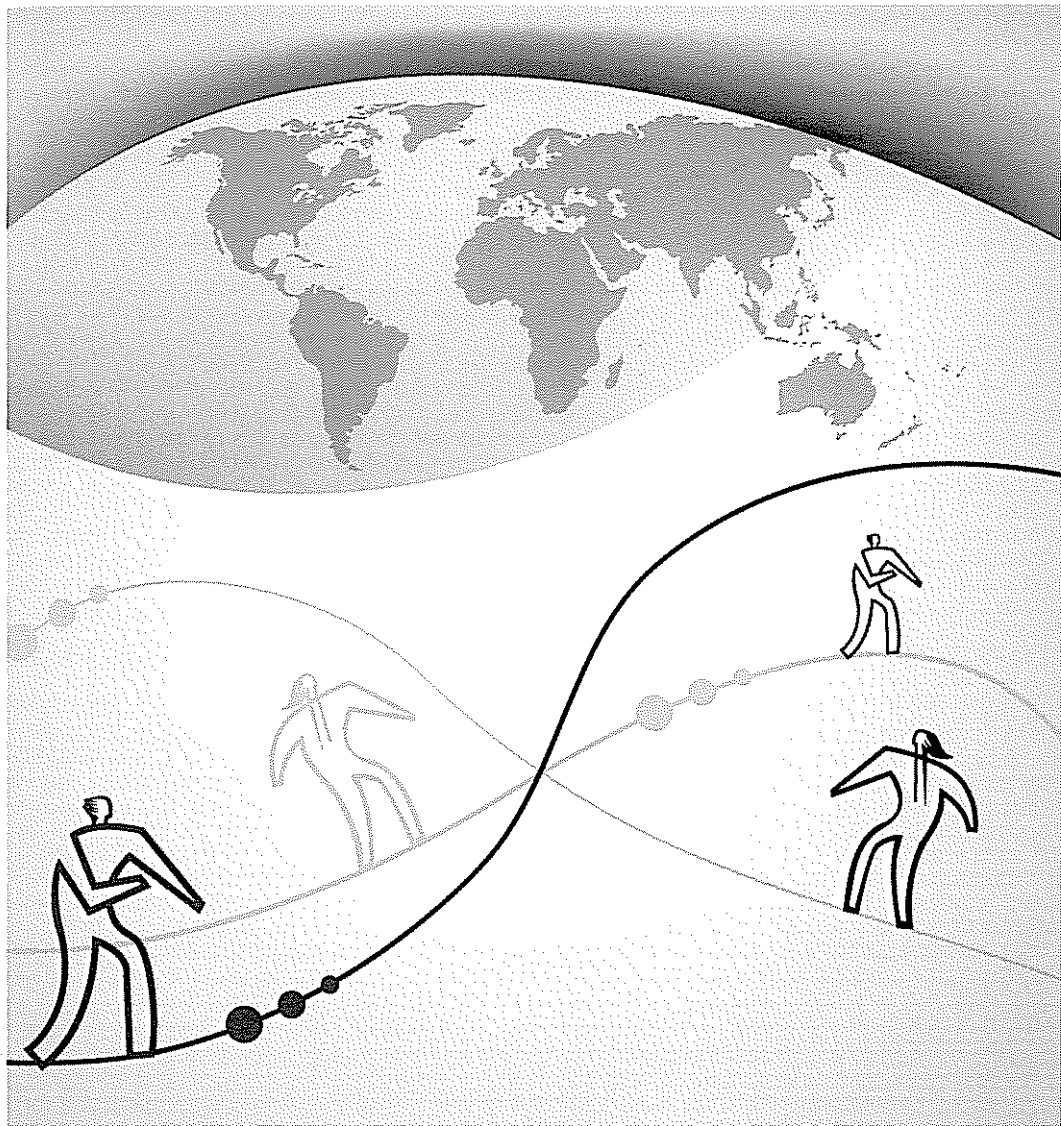
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MIGRATION AND HEALTH

A RESEARCH METHODS HANDBOOK

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Ethnographic Research in Migration and Health

Seth M. Holmes
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INTRODUCTION AND LAYOUT

This chapter explores the methodological approach of ethnographic research and its importance in migration and health studies. It serves as an introduction to the methodology of ethnography for those new to this approach, helping such readers become familiar with the ways in which their understanding of migration and health could be expanded by reading ethnographic studies, collaborating with ethnographic researchers, or embarking on the path of conducting ethnographic research themselves.

Ethnography is the long-term study of a group of people, their interactions and experiences, and the meanings through which they understand their lives. However, ethnographers should not assume unchanging, static cultures or groups of people. Rather, contemporary ethnography focuses on the effects of history, politics, economics, social inequalities, and interaction (Clifford 1998; Pratt 1992). It is an overarching, multifaceted, and holistic qualitative research based on participant observation (see chapter 14, by Aguilera and Amuchástegui, in this volume) and often supplemented by complementary methods such as interviews, life histories, and the review of media, archival, and clinical records. Ethnography requires the long-term, in-depth immersion of the researcher in a particular social, economic, political, and historical context. This methodology is especially helpful in understanding complex and power-imbued social and cultural interactions in context, without simplifying reality into easily analyzable questions, dichotomies, or scales.

Due to its contextual nature, ethnography is a useful strategy in answering questions associated with health issues in the setting of migration. Because of its strong emphasis on exploring the complex nature of social phenomena, ethnography is

especially useful for analyzing the systems of concepts, beliefs, and perceptions of risk and vulnerability related to practices or behaviors (Holmes 2011; Quesada, Hart, Bourgois 2011). At the same time, ethnographers must keep in mind that patterns and issues associated with migration and health exist within specific social, economic, political, and historical conditions. Ethnography is especially helpful in answering research questions focused on the interrelationships between the micro illness experiences and health-related practices or behaviors of individuals and the macro social, political, economic, and cultural conditions influencing those experiences and behaviors. For instance, ethnographic research can illuminate the effects of specific health and social policies, which is important because even efforts that are intended to be beneficial may contribute to marginalization and exacerbate inequalities. Embedded within a particular context, ethnography helps to link local specificities with transnational perspectives.

This chapter will consider the ways in which ethnography differs from other research methodologies, the specifics of ethnographic data collection and analysis, the advantages and limitations of this method, as well as brief case study examples to illustrate the value of this approach. The main points include the following:

- Ethnography provides in-depth investigation of multiple levels related to health and inequality, from individual experiences and practices to sociocultural structures influencing those individuals, their experiences, and their practices.
- Ethnography is especially useful in research with “hidden” and stigmatized populations, such as many immigrant groups.
- Ethnographic research does not provide for the calculation of incidence and prevalence of specific health problems, but rather seeks to understand their production and expression in the larger context of daily life.

THE UNIQUE CONTEXTUAL NATURE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography helps us understand social and cultural phenomena from the perspective of participants in the social setting under study. Ethnography explicitly acknowledges the context in which research is performed. In order to avoid ethnocentrism—that is, perceiving and judging the social world one observes according to the meanings from one’s own cultural milieu—ethnographers actively seek to understand and set aside their own assumptions as much as possible. This allows ethnographic researchers to be open to understanding new meanings and realities that they might not have conceptualized before entering the field. In this way, ethnographic research is more inductive—coming from the context being investigated—than most forms of research. As a result, ethnographers should not formu-

late the answers to their questions before entering the field, as this would involve bringing too many assumptions from a potentially different social and cultural context. In addition, as with all research, ethnographic projects are undertaken only after the researchers and the research subjects engage together in the process of informed consent, which entails outlining the goals of the study.

One related key difference between ethnographic research and quantitative research, in particular, is its flexibility. Ethnography is an iterative process, occurring through successive and overlapping research segments. Thus, ethnographers can change or further refine their questions during the long-term immersion of participant observation or as the data they collect compel them to do so. Most other research methods require that research questions be enumerated and codified before the beginning of formal data collection. This relates to the relative dearth of information about some migrant populations in the health disparities literature, a field that often relies heavily on quantitative information. Because there may be no reliable epidemiological data for some populations, they may be excluded entirely. Ethnographic studies are helpful partially because they aid in the understanding of particular experiences of disparities from the perspectives of particular groups about whom it may be difficult to collect reliable quantitative data.

Whereas many other research methods seek to “generalize from” one group to all similar groups of people (to be able to say, for example, “Latino immigrants have higher rates of [a specific health problem] than does the general U.S. population”), ethnography seeks to “generalize within.” This phrase, used by Clifford Geertz (1973), one of the founders of the field of cultural anthropology, implies not a generalization to all people of a given category, but rather a generalization of theories, analyses, concepts, or phenomena. As a result, an ethnographer might be more focused on understanding the manner in which power, hierarchy, stigma, or the dismantling of the social safety net functions in the world rather than on making generalizations about specific populations. For example, rather than focusing on alleged cultural characteristics such as “machismo” or “familism” among Mexican migrants and their effects on health prevention efforts, the ethnographer might instead focus on how these concepts emerged within historical power relations in Mexican society and became reinforced or changed through migration processes, as well as how and why their expressions have been so readily taken up by medical and public health practitioners in the US. In this way, ethnography is often understood to be “interpretive” in that it tends to focus on interpreting the meaning of symbols and the functions of power. Rather than positing that reality is stable and can be observed in one objective way, an interpretive approach recognizes that there are many subjective understandings of reality, processes, or events, and that these are vital components of the phenomena under study. Ethnographic methods can be critical to investigating disparities in migrant health without simplifying the complex reality in which those disparities are embedded (sidebar 13.1).

SIDEBAR 13.1 ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH: EXAMPLE OF US-MEXICO MIGRATION AND OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

The following field example from our own work yields fruitful and relevant insights to research questions that would not have been as deeply understood through less in-depth and experiential methods.

The first example relates to ethnic hierarchies and health among indigenous Mexican farmworkers in the United States (Holmes 2007; Holmes 2013). This ethnographic research took place over the course of one cycle of migration from a mountain village in Oaxaca, Mexico, through central California, to northwestern Washington State. This multisited project provided a full analysis of the multiple occupational conditions and living conditions in Mexico and the US that play into the health problems of this group of people. The long-term immersion in the sociocultural context of one particular farm in Washington State allowed for an understanding of multiple perspectives simultaneously, including subtle meanings of race and power that differ depending on one's social position. For example, the hidden yet robust hierarchy of workers on this farm relates not only to the quality of work and housing one has access to but also directly to one's ethnicity, citizenship status, and gender. This subtle yet deeply important reality that partially determines health and disease was uncovered only by living in labor camps, picking fruit, observing interactions, celebrating birthdays and baptisms, and interviewing various people on the farm for several months. The particularly subtle hierarchical meanings attached to different ethnic groups, including different indigenous groups, would have been extremely difficult to apprehend through a less immersive and in-depth method.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA COLLECTION

Ethnographic research involves building conceptual models through participant observation supplemented by other specific methods and then validating them qualitatively and sometimes quantitatively. The ways in which ethnographic data are collected are distinct from other research techniques. Not only is ethnography most often a longer-term observation of the social world of the study subjects, but it is also a more holistic immersion into that world via participant observation. Whereas most research methodologies involve an inanimate research tool (for example, a survey instrument or a pipette), the instruments utilized in ethnographic research are the ethnographers themselves. This means that the researchers collect not only cognitive but also bodily and sensory observations about the

social world they are studying. Ethnographers analyze what they see and hear, along with what they experience, in a more bodily fashion, such as spatial relationships, daily rhythms, seasonal shifts, even odors and tastes. This allows for a more complex, nuanced, and "thick" description of the data (Geertz 1973).

Participant observation takes place in community settings that have direct relevance to the research questions. While this methodology may include data collection from interviews and surveys, it differs significantly from other methods of research in that it is performed and analyzed within the situational knowledge provided by long-term participation, observation, and relationship-building. The researcher approaches and builds rapport with participants in their own environment; in the case of migration and health, these environments might include migrant camps, clinics, day laborer centers, churches, or community organizations. For example, one of the authors (SMH) spent approximately eighteen months full-time migrating with a group of indigenous Mexican farmworkers, living in a migrant camp in Washington State and picking berries alongside participants, migrating to California and visiting migrant clinics, migrating to the hometown of participants in rural Mexico, and then crossing the border desert into Arizona with participants (Holmes 2007; Holmes 2013).

Researchers write detailed accounts of what they see and hear, recording all observations as field notes. Field notes are written either discreetly during or following the activity, depending on how much the researcher is participating, and expanded upon as soon as possible before memory of the details fades. Ethnographers quickly learn that they must take field notes on everything they notice in the early part of their fieldwork, especially the first few weeks or months, because, soon, many details will no longer stand out or even be noticed at all. For example, in one study, gaining the trust of migrant backstretch workers (i.e., people who labor in the stable areas behind racetracks, feeding and grooming horses and mucking stalls) required becoming accustomed to the rhythm of the horseracing world through regular visits. This included unique experiences of time (workers are "on the clock" 24/7, and all activities are dictated by racing schedules), space (living, cooking, and socializing only feet from the animals), and social hierarchies based on specific occupational roles (Castañeda et al. 2010). Once the ethnographer becomes accustomed to the new social world, aspects of this reality that seemed interesting initially may be perceived as normal to the point that they are no longer consciously perceived. Thus, writing field notes is not only a vital source of material for later analysis, but also a means for ethnographers to reflect upon their experiences as part of the iterative process that allows for the refinement of research questions (Rosaldo 1993).

Along with the explicit acknowledgment of context, ethnography requires researchers to be reflexively aware of their own social position. Researchers must be cognizant of and document power hierarchies not only in the field they study,

but also in their interactions with research subjects. This includes recording the ways in which people respond to them given their particular social position, including gender, race, nationality, and social class. In this way, the particularity of the context of research and of the researchers themselves becomes an opportunity for further data collection.

Within ethnographic work, formal and informal interviews are often used to supplement participant observation field notes. Interviews tend to be utilized once rapport with a research subject has been built in order to further address sensitive topics. Interviews are appropriate for eliciting individual experiences, opinions, and feelings, and they provide the opportunity to collect in-depth responses, with all of the nuances and contradictions, connections and relationships, that a person sees among particular events, phenomena, and beliefs. Face-to-face interviews (often called “direct administration”) are preferred, since they create more rapport between the interviewer and the respondent and avoid problems stemming from illiteracy, poor comprehension, and mixed language ability. The context of the interview, including any potential distraction or involvement of others, should be noted. As in any interview, the ethnographer should avoid preconceptions or leading questions that are worded in such a way as to influence participants’ responses. Asking open-ended questions can also encourage more in-depth responses. Interviews—as well as natural conversations within participant observation more generally—are often audio-recorded and transcribed later for analysis.

In the context of migration and health, ethnographic research can be especially helpful in exploring social interactions and categories, symbolic meanings of health and health-related activities, power hierarchies, and the social and cultural workings of prejudice and exclusion. For example, the research of one of the authors (SMH) reveals social hierarchies and health disparities organized around immigration status, ethnicity, and labor position as well as the ways in which these hierarchies and disparities come to be understood as normal and natural in society. These unofficial social dynamics and subtle meanings would have been complicated and difficult to explore using less in-depth, long-term, and contextual research methods.

In the last decade, more ethnographers have been calling for the practice of “multisited ethnography” (Stoller 1997; Tsing 2008; Falzon 2009). This practice involves research in multiple, usually geographically dispersed, sites and is understood to allow for deeper understandings as well as comparative analyses of a particular problem. In the study of migration and transnationalism, multisited ethnography can be especially helpful because events and experiences often span multiple locations. For example, this could mean engaging in research on the US farms where Mexican migrants live as well as in their hometowns in Mexico, which could allow for further conceptualization of the reality of transnational immigration (Holmes 2007; Holmes 2013) (sidebar 13.2).

SIDEBAR 13.2 ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD STUDY: EXAMPLE OF AFRICAN IMMIGRATION TO GERMANY AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Ethnography encourages long-term involvement with individuals over time in order to understand the particular trajectories of their experience. For instance, in one study (Castañeda 2008), it was useful to follow firsthand the case of “Sarah,” a thirty-three-year-old undocumented woman from Ghana living in Berlin, Germany. The original research questions focused on access to medical care for undocumented migrants; however, during the course of participant observation of experiences with patients of a migrant clinic, the unique analytical potential of studying reproduction became evident and thus influenced the course of the rest of the project. Because the ethnographer gained rapport with Sarah, she was invited to accompany her during visits to clinics for prenatal care, to the hospital when she gave birth, and to various government offices in failed attempts to secure a birth certificate for her (undocumented) child. She was also introduced to a large West African expatriate community, which supported Sarah and related similar experiences of social marginalization and exclusion from health care services. The various elements of Sarah’s experience, like those of many other pregnant undocumented women encountered in the larger study, came together only over the course of over a year and a half of formal and informal conversations, visits to clinics, shared meals, and so forth. This underscores the value of longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork in following individuals over time to draw out their complex and often contradictory experiences.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH STAGES OF ANALYSIS

As described above, ethnographic methods involve long-term immersion in a particular social and cultural context. Through participant observation, the researcher participates in everyday life during an extended period of time, while observing interactions and listening to conversations in order to identify significant practices, ideological and political economic forces, and cultural concepts. Ethnography involves data from observations, conversations, and interviews, as well as from the social interactions and bodily experiences of the ethnographer. Data collection involves the taking of field notes, often supplemented by audio-recorded conversations and interviews and sometimes by other methods, such as clinical chart reviews. In general, these different methodologies and their analysis within the ethnographic research project take place in two overlapping stages.

The first stage focuses on the in-depth, thick description of background, context, and important social actors and institutions related to the research question. This stage involves a broad review of detailed field notes with descriptions of everything possibly related to the topic. In this stage, the researcher may ask many "naive" questions of all the participants in order not only to understand the general layout of the social world, but also to gain perspective about his or her particular vantage point.

The second stage of ethnographic field research, which often begins as the first stage is still under way, involves what might be described as a process of iterative hypothesis testing, which should lead to more and more precise and inductive, reality-based questions and observations. This stage focuses more directly on the research question; hypotheses are developed based on the background contextual research of the first stage and extant findings and social theory already understood from previous literature. The researcher develops a hypothesis, asks questions, and continues to conduct participant observation related to the research question. Next, the researcher analyzes the data, refines or completely transforms the hypothesis, and undergoes another round of data collection aimed at further exploration and refinement. This continues until the researcher (or research team) is confident in the ongoing reproduction of findings. For example, mainstream media portrayals of Mexican migration imply a voluntary, economic decision-making process. However, ethnographic research led one of the authors (SMH) to question this assumption based on repeated conversations and interviews with Mexican migrants indicating that Mexican migrants experience the migration process as involuntary and brought about by political as well as economic forces (Holmes 2011).

The analysis of ethnographic data is multifaceted and depends on the individual methods utilized. Because the goal is to examine complex social processes and meanings, data interpretation often involves reading and rereading notes and transcripts, reflecting, asking additional questions of participants to clarify issues that may be confusing, and comparing issues both within the study's data and between the current project and other related literature. As an example of one common method of analysis, qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and field notes can be coded into domains or variables. As a next step in analysis, the researcher (or research team) may conduct a componential analysis of themes, along with the selection of illustrative quotes related to those themes. The researcher can analyze the qualitative data with a data management program such as ATLAS.ti or MAXQDA or simply by hand, marking different sections according to the related code. Data within a single code are then compiled and analyzed for their characteristics and meanings, and may also be coded axially, which means focusing on connections among different categories. The technique known as "triangulation" allows for the verification of results and the integration of qualitative

and quantitative data. This involves reviewing the results of several kinds of data from the same sources over time as well as from independent sources in order to increase the validity (sometimes called "internal validity") of the findings.

The model of grounded theory can be particularly useful in ethnographic studies (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Despite the term, grounded theory is a technique for analysis rather than a theoretical orientation. It focuses on inductively allowing the codes and related analysis to emerge from the data, instead of imposing preformulated possibilities. In ethnography, analysis often begins during fieldwork, as investigators systematically analyze and code field notes and interviews in order to test the primary hypotheses of the study and develop more precise questions for the next rounds of interviews and participant observation. In some cases, the researcher will leave the field site and then reenter after some period of reflection and refinement of the research questions. This method allows for ongoing contextual development of more and more precise understandings.

Many ethnographic researchers invite study participants themselves to look over and comment on the analysis and conclusions of a project. This can work to increase the validity of findings by minimizing the a priori bias of the outsider and can sometimes bring complicated negotiations. This process of consultation with study participants may sometimes lead to further awareness of power hierarchies and different social positions and perspectives in the midst of potential complications and negotiations.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

Ethnography has many advantages as a research technique. First, it provides for in-depth, long-term understanding of specific case studies. The specific length of an ethnographic study will depend on the researcher's familiarity with the community and specific research questions. Another strength of this type of research is extremely strong internal validity, or the degree and depth of understanding and verification of the data and analysis being presented. Triangulation with different social actors as well as with the same person over time allows for further understanding from multiple vantage points and through processes of change. In addition, ethnography allows for understanding of complex, subtle, and power-imbued social, cultural, and symbolic interactions *in vivo*, in context, and without the requisite simplification that is necessary in the formulation of easily analyzable questions, dichotomies, or scales.

Ethnography is especially helpful for research among stigmatized and hidden populations, with whom rapport takes significant time and comprehension improves with rapport. For example, undocumented migrants are often hidden populations, limiting the feasibility of many other methods. Among this particular population, no sampling frame exists since the size of the population is often

unknown, and membership involves stigmatized behavior that may lead to mistrust and low response rates with other methods of inquiry. For this reason, ethnographic methods built around participant observation are ideal; they offer more depth than the surface examination provided by more short-term methods (Walter et al. 2002).

Another primary benefit of ethnographic field research in the study of hidden populations is "the potential of limiting the artificiality of group definitions by grounding research parameters within the context of actually observed behaviors; insider understandings . . . [and] self-reported identities of the target group" (Singer 1999: 172). Other research methods may lend themselves, unfortunately, to the reproduction of preconceived understandings and questions regarding the hidden or stigmatized group. This can occur through the use of juridical constructions such as "legal" and "illegal," "voluntary economic migrant" or "involuntary political refugee" or even through definitions of the community under study according to preconceived identities and boundaries (such as "Latino" instead of utilizing categories employed by the study participants, for example, indigenous Mexican groups).

In addition, ethnography allows the researcher to gain access to locations and activities that might otherwise be closed to surveys or one-time interviews, along with a long-term commitment to a field site to capture change over time. This allows the researcher to investigate subtle forms of prejudice, assumption, and meaning that are often difficult to assess with quantitative methods or interviews alone. In addition, ethnography emphasizes in-depth investigation of the various levels influencing health and inequality, what Nader (1969) has called a "vertical slice." For example, a health issue such as HIV/AIDS in a particular migrant population requires the investigation of power interactions at multiple levels, including interpersonal relationships, structural factors, stereotypes and prejudice, access to testing, access to care, economic and political factors influencing migration, and national and international policy.

At the same time that ethnography allows for these many possibilities, it does not allow for the incidence and prevalence calculation of specific health issues. In addition, due to the nature of in-depth, long-term participant observation, ethnography generally involves a relatively small number of research participants. While this allows for strong internal validity, it does not provide for as strong external validity, or the degree to which the data are representative of other populations in other places and times. This can be partially overcome through triangulation, or the cross-verification of multiple sources of data in order to facilitate comparative analysis and validation. However, given the focus of most ethnography on "generalizing within" as opposed to "generalizing from," this limitation is not of primary concern to most ethnographic research questions. In addition, ethnography, like any research method, requires perseverance and humility as it may take time and patience to build rapport.

PRESENTATION AND PUBLICATION

Ethnographic research is published both in traditional health sciences venues (such as public health, medical, and nursing journals) and in social science journals or books. Ethnographic articles are often longer than what is typical for the presentation of quantitative or survey-based data. An article based on ethnographic research will look very different depending on whether it is published in a journal focused on the health sciences or the social sciences. Health science journals require the author to separate the iterative and inductive process of ethnographic research into different predetermined sections (such as Methods, Analysis, Results, and Discussion). Ethnographic articles published in social science journals often take a different, more narrative format. This format allows the author to remain closer to the iterative process of data collection and analysis most common to ethnographic research, and allows the reader more narrative flow, providing reflexive description of the research methods alongside the description and analysis of the observations. Those in the health sciences may be unfamiliar with this format, but many ethnographers find it a helpful means for presentation. Ethnographers often briefly describe themselves, where they were, and what was going on as they relay their observations and analysis. This allows for a more full recognition of the interpretive nature of ethnography and, indeed, of all research.

Many ethnographers write books with multiple chapters about the same long-term research project in order to allow the reader the most in-depth understanding. The writing of such a book also allows for more detailed narrative development of the characters of the research subjects, their relationships with one another, and the power dynamics involved, as well as an in-depth analysis of different topics in each chapter. Such books, published with peer-reviewed academic presses, are highly respected (often more so than articles) by many ethnographers, anthropologists, and sociologists. These books may also reach different and sometimes broader audiences than academic articles alone.

Regardless of the format, the presentation or publication of ethnographic research allows for an impressive degree of human everyday life to be revealed. The presentation of in-depth descriptions of a small group of people along with related direct quotes and/or descriptions of events allows the reader to imagine the reality being described and analyzed. One might argue that this form of presentation invites the reader to feel more interest and compassion than with the presentation of statistics. For these reasons, ethnographic research should be considered seriously when one is interested in effecting policy, public opinion, and/or behavioral change. Finally, because of the long-term, in-depth involvement with a specific community that ethnography fosters, this approach allows for a better understanding of how research findings might be translated into efforts at improving health. For this reason, many health ethnographers argue that this research method is

truly and deeply “community based” As described above, the practice of discussing findings and interpretations with research participants can be helpful in increasing awareness of the ideas and goals of the research participants themselves

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided a basic understanding of ethnographic research, its advantages and limitations for research on migration and health, and its data collection, analysis, and presentation We anticipate that after reading this chapter, you will have strengthened interest, desire, and confidence to begin planning and conducting your own important research into the critical area of migration and health. If you plan to use primarily quantitative or other nonethnographic research methods, we hope you now have a stronger understanding of the ways in which reading ethnography or collaborating with ethnographers in mixed-methods team research will expand the possibilities of your investigations. Alternatively, if this chapter has sparked further interest in beginning on the path to becoming comfortable engaging in ethnographic research, we hope you will explore some of the resources below. Through ethnographic research, you can contribute meaningfully to the further understanding of the reality and experience of health and sickness among the many migrants around the world

RESOURCES

Qualitative Data Analysis Software/Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS):

- ATLAS ti (www.atlasti.com)
- NVivo (www.qsrinternational.com)
- MAXQDA (www.maxqda.com)
- Dedoose (www.dedoose.com)

Websites:

- Migrant Clinicians Network (<http://www.migrantclinician.org>)
- Indigenous Mexicans in California Agriculture (<http://www.indigenousfarmworkers.org>)
- National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc (<http://www.ncfh.org/>)
- Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) (www.picum.org)
- Migration Policy Institute (MPI) (www.migrationpolicy.org)
- Center of Expertise on Migration and Health (<http://ccis.ucsd.edu/programs/coemh>)

- AccessDenied: A Conversation on Unauthorized Im/migration and Health (<http://accessdeniedblog.wordpress.com>)

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