

Teaching Ethnographic Methods: The State of the Art

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Ethnography is a core methodology in anthropology and other disciplines. Yet, there is currently no scholarly consensus on how to teach ethnographic methods—or even what methods belong in the ethnographic toolkit. We report on a systematic analysis of syllabi to gauge how ethnographic methods are taught in the United States. We analyze 107 methods syllabi from a nationally elicited sample of university faculty who teach ethnography. Systematic coding shows that ethics, research design, participant observation, interviewing, and analysis are central to ethnographic instruction. But many key components of ethical, quality ethnographic *practice* (like preparing an IRB application, reflexivity, positionality, taking field notes, accurate transcription, theme identification, and coding) are only taught rarely. We suggest that, without inclusion of such elements in its basic training, the fields that prioritize this methodology are at risk of inadvertently perpetuating uneven, erratic, and extractive fieldwork practices.

Key words: ethnography, research methods, qualitative research, teaching, participant observation, fieldwork

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Introduction

This study examines what skills are currently taught as part of ethnographic research training at universities in the United States. Considered a cornerstone of qualitative research in anthropology and allied fields (Jones 2010), ethnography is treated as a set of field research methods and as the product of these methods (Fetterman 2019). Here, we attempt to construe ethnography explicitly as a methodology, that is, a way of thinking about and an approach toward research. There are many methodological approaches within the broader framework of ethnography. This, and the general conflation of “ethnography” with “qualitative research,” complicates decisions about what skills should be included when teaching ethnographic methods or whether to teach methods at all. While a pedagogic culture of teaching social science research methods is rapidly developing (e.g., Kilburn, Nind, and Wiles 2014; Wagner, Garner, and Kawulich 2011), a pedagogic subculture regarding ethnography is harder to define. Below, we present an analysis of 107 syllabi to assess what ethnographic methods techniques are taught and provide recommendations for teaching to the needs of today’s students.

A Brief History of Ethnography as Methodology

Ethnographic forms of research emerged in the late 19th century, initially influenced by positivism and adhering to the then-accepted tenets of the scientific method

(Jones 2010). At the turn of the 20th century, W.E.B. Du Bois pioneered ethnographic methods as well as quantitative data visualization to represent the social conditions of Black communities in Philadelphia and Georgia (Harrison 1992; Morris 2017). Methodological foundations were further defined by Malinowski's Trobriand fieldwork (1914-1918): learning the language, participating in daily life and events, recording different types of data, taking copious field notes, and so on. Malinowski's use of ethnographic research in support of British colonialism was ultimately criticized (Foks 2018; Pels and Saleminck 1994), but he nevertheless defined how ethnographers *do* ethnography (Jones 2010; Young 1979). Simultaneously, the Chicago School advanced ethnographic fieldwork to study urban and rural contexts up to and through World War II within the United States.

In the late 1960s, the post-structuralist movement brought focus to the power and subjectivity of the researcher and shifted the stance of many ethnographers from positivism to interpretivism (e.g., Geertz 1973); others continued to advance mixed methods approaches to ethnography (Pelto 2017). With a reflexive turn influenced by feminist scholars, scrutiny of ethics (including confidentiality and informed consent), reflexivity and positionality (looking at a researcher's gender, race, and class vis-à-vis research participants), and representation (who has the authority to write texts) emerged as part of the conversations about ethnographic research. More recently, this includes having a critical understanding of the history of the field and ethnographic comportment (i.e., self-realization and acknowledgment of researchers' positionality and behavior while undertaking fieldwork as well as their accountability to the people being researched) (Harrison 2018). As such, ethnographers are adopting decolonial research practices centered on community power, self-determination, and redressing historical harms (Rosenthal et al. 2009; Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger 2020). Reflecting on this complex history, ethnography as a scholarly practice today ranges from long-term participant observation fieldwork to short-term direct observation fieldwork, from field experimentation to participation in online forums and virtual worlds, and from adherence to the scientific method to outright rejection of it.

Hammersley (2018) argues that the confusion about what "ethnography" actually *is* started in the early 1970s when it was gaining popularity across the social sciences as a means to study cultural phenomena. He outlines key definitions for the approach: placing emphasis on ethnography as "writing culture" (Mitchell 2007), engaging personally in the social setting (Hobbs 2006), collecting systematic data through participation (Brewer 2003), and providing a holistic, thick description gained through sustained interaction (Geertz 1973; Lutz 1981). Other important shared practices and goals are that ethnography: (1) requires locally engaged data collection; (2) occurs in natural settings; (3) depends on participant observation and personal engagement; (4)

accumulates different types of data; (5) documents lived experiences; (6) focuses on the meanings that individuals assign to objects; and (7) is holistic in aim (Bernard 2017; Hammersley 2018).

Additionally, Jones (2010:4) summarizes the methodological commitments of ethnography as including cultural relativism, writing "thick descriptions," understanding through participant observations, providing the insiders' (or participants') viewpoint, placing importance on "ethics, representation, 'voice,' power, and inclusion," and the need for reflexivity and subjectivity. Hammersley (2018:6) points out that all these criteria raise many further unanswered questions, such as what are "natural settings," and concludes that "... 'ethnography' is frequently not limited to methods of research design, data collection, and analysis, but extends to methodological, ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political ideas."

Ethnographic Methods in the Classroom

Given ethnography's expansive scope, it is no surprise that ethnographers often note in retrospect that their *methodological* and methods training was limited and piecemeal—perhaps reflecting the ways that fieldwork has historically been associated with the concept of the lone ethnographer (Rabinow 2007; Ruth et al. 2022). The lone-ethnographer model of fieldwork typically includes learning methods through trial and error over the course of independent research (though often under faculty guidance) and self-teaching methods through informal consultations with other ethnographers, attending seminars, and deeply reading ethnographic books and research reports (Drisko 2016). That is, historically, ethnographic methods were rarely taught in the classroom. Thus, there remains, in our view, an unmet need to move beyond this history of hidden and informal methods training.

When we look to the literature about the methods being taught in formal settings, the majority of research on "teaching ethnography" and "teaching qualitative methods" focuses on pedagogy rather than topics/skills, such as the benefits of hands-on learning (Clarke and Braun 2013; Hale 2016; Howell and Chhay 2017; Hsiung 2008; Trnka 2017) or the importance of students conducting their own research projects (e.g., Takata and Leiting 1987; Winn 2006). There are also articles demonstrating innovation in teaching anthropological methods—such as via participatory research, service-learning, online virtual worlds, laboratories, and action anthropology (Copeland 2021; Copeland et al. 2016; Dengah et al. 2016; Knowles et al. 2015; Lane et al. 2011; Snodgrass 2016). When the literature allowed us to identify specific methods being taught, these included individual interviewing (Roulston, deMarrais, and Lewis 2003; Copeland et al. 2016), group interviewing and focus groups (DeLyser et al. 2013; George 2013; Lane et al. 2011), reflexivity (Bondi 2009; Hsiung 2008; Jenkins 1995), participant observation

(Levine et al. 1980; Snodgrass 2016), coding (Takata and Leiting 1987), thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2013), oral history (Pile 1992), collaborative fieldwork (Makagon 2013; Schmid 1992), Photovoice (Knowles et al. 2015), and epistemology (Corte and Irwin 2017).

Other subsets of the literature focus on ways to avoid reinforcing gender roles, teaching multiple viewpoints within a field, confronting common myths, developing social and communication skills (e.g., Bondi 2009; Corte and Irwin 2017; Hood 2006; Jenkins 1995), and the advantages of team-based fieldwork, research, and writing (Keen 1996; Makagon 2013; Nyden 1991; Schmid 1992; Trujillo 2016). Finally, some literature focuses on the benefits of teaching qualitative methods—including ethnography—to students in other disciplines (Kleinman, Copp, and Henderson 1997), such as computer science (Weinberg and Stephen 2002), business (Harlos et al. 2003), or social work and public health (Gioia 2014). Overall, as Earley (2014) points out, the literature on research methods for ethnography focuses on teaching strategies and has generally avoided engaging in course content and learning goals.

Three widely used ethnography textbooks give us an indication of key topics that perhaps are consistently taught. Bernard's (2017) *Research Methods in Anthropology (5th edition)* covers: preparing for research (including ethics), research design, sampling, unstructured and semi-structured interviewing, participant observation, direct and indirect observation, field notes, and qualitative data analysis. Additionally, Hammersley and Atkinson's (2019) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice (4th edition)* covers the following topics: research design, access, field relations, interviewing, documents/artifacts, recording/organizing data, analysis, writing ethnography, and ethics. Similarly, Fetterman's (2019) *Ethnography: Step-by-Step (4th edition)* includes: fieldwork, participant selection and sampling, entry, participant observation, interviewing, lists/forms, questionnaires, equipment, analysis (patterns, content analysis), writing, and ethics. More recently, a field projects book suggests teaching methods such as ethics, participant observation, interview techniques, spatial mapping, photo and video documentation, and auto-ethnography (Forrest 2022).

Methods

Data Collection

In Summer 2019, we emailed 21,344 United States-based members of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) (the largest professional organization for which ethnography is considered a *defining* method) as part of a larger study on the state of methodological teaching and training in the United States. There were 1,354 respondents, some of whom work in disciplines and departments outside of anthropology units but nonetheless use their anthropology training and ethnographic methods in some capacity in their teaching and research. We also

asked respondents to submit their methods syllabi, and 140 respondents obliged. While syllabi certainly do not contain complete pedagogical and instructional information, they do offer an unobtrusive assessment of instructional content (Willingham-McLain 2011). For this analysis, we focus on 107 syllabi for courses that were explicitly about ethnographic methods (determined by stating “ethnographic methods” in the title or course description/content), excluding 33 syllabi for courses that were mostly about statistical and GIS methods. The 107 syllabi were for advanced undergraduate and graduate-level courses in anthropology and allied disciplines (e.g., health, environmental studies, public affairs, and religion). Course titles included *Ethnographic Research Methods*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Research Methods*, *Qualitative Field Methods*, and *Social Science Research Methods*. Syllabi varied in length and content but consistently included sections covering course description, required readings, student learning outcomes, required assignments and assignment descriptions, and a course calendar or schedule.

All syllabi were de-identified prior to analysis. All survey protocols and contact materials were approved by Arizona State University IRB STUDY00010117.

Text Coding and Analysis

The analytic approach was influenced by prior studies using syllabi as a means to assess the structure and culture of instruction (Glesne and Webb 1993; Stanny, Gonzalez, and McGowan 2015). To begin, we (Alissa Ruth and Amber Wutich) created a codebook consisting of thirty-five key terms covering ethnographic methods and their application that can be arranged into six categories: (1) *research basics* (history of the field, ethics, ethical dilemma, fieldwork danger, confidentiality, data management, IRB, consent, national certificate for ethics training); (2) *entering the field* (informant, key informant, gatekeeper, sampling, reflexivity, positionality, gaining entry, building rapport); (3) *designing research* (epistemology, research design, research question); (4) *ethnographic basics* (field notes, participant observation, direct observation, interviewing, transcription, themes, coding, analysis); (5) *ethnographic approaches* (single-site ethnography, writing ethnography, digital ethnography, visual methods, rapid assessment); and (6) *community-centered practices* (decolonizing methodologies, community/participatory research).

To assess interrater reliability, two authors (Alissa Ruth and Katherine Mayfour) separately coded a subset of segments taken from the syllabi texts. Cohen's Kappa scores for individual codes ranged from 0.789 to 1.0, indicating a high level of agreement (Landis and Koch 1977). Then, using MAXQDA2020, Katherine Mayfour completed the coding of all syllabi for the presence or absence of all thirty-five code terms. Finally, typical and atypical exemplars were selected for each of the thirty-five key terms, following the assumptions and practice outlined

Table 1. Coding Categories and Code Percentages

Category	Code	% of Syllabi
Research Basics	History of the field	19%
	Ethics	91%
	Ethical dilemma	14%
	Fieldwork danger	7%
	Confidentiality	7%
	Data management	43%
	IRB	49%
	Consent	26%
Entering the Field	National certificate for ethics training	34%
	Informant	31%
	Key informant	6%
	Gatekeeper	2%
	Sampling	53%
	Reflexivity	47%
	Positionality	18%
	Gaining entry	11%
Designing Research	Building rapport	7%
	Epistemology	41%
	Research design	83%
Ethnographic Basics	Research question	60%
	Field notes	53%
	Participant observation	73%
	Field observation	19%
	Interviewing	96%
	Transcription	57%
	Themes	37%
Ethnographic Approaches	Coding	55%
	Analysis	92%
	Single-site ethnography	90%
	Writing ethnography	77%
	Digital ethnography	27%
Community-centered Practices	Visual methods	52%
	Rapid assessment	4%
	Decolonizing methodologies	18%
	Community/participatory research	24%

in Bernard (2017). Table 1 represents all thirty-five codes and their percentages.

In general, the syllabi followed a linear progression of topics starting with ethics, research design, various methods (e.g., fieldwork, participant observation, interviewing), analysis, and write-up. While we did not code for textbook usage, we can say that we noticed that the majority of syllabi did not rely on textbooks but rather used chapters from texts (e.g., Bernard 2017; Saldaña 2015) and research articles.

What is Most Frequently Taught and How?

Based on the frequency counts of our codes, twelve topics occurred in half or more of the syllabi: interviewing, analysis, ethics, observation (including participant observation and general

observation), research design, ethnographic writing, sampling, transcription, coding, field notes, visual ethnography, and reflexivity. Here, we summarize the result for each of these codes.

Interviewing (96% of Syllabi)

Interviewing, both structured and unstructured, was typically mentioned at the top of the syllabi in the course description. Exercises for practicing interviewing were common as an in-class activity or as homework. One course schedule had the topic “Interviews and Focus Groups” on one day—which included topics of creating interview guides, finding participants, and focus groups—and the topic of “Conducting Your Interview” on another day that included topics of “rapport, probing/follow-up questions, prompts and transcribing” (Syllabus A1233). Other

courses included interviewing as part of participant observation or in the context of collecting life histories.

Analysis (92% of Syllabi)

Analysis appeared across syllabi, in course descriptions, in schedules, in assignments, and in learning outcomes. Two examples: “You will gain experience organizing and conducting original ethnographic research, including issues of research design, data collection, and analysis” (Syllabus A2124) and “[You will] demonstrate proficiency in analyzing, interpreting, and writing-up ethnographic data” (Syllabus A1329). Typically, assignments would state that students would need to “analyze” the data they collected, but only 17 percent of the syllabi provided methods for conducting the analysis. One example: “The course encompasses a broad range of analytic traditions—grounded theory, discourse analysis, content analysis, word-based and semantic network analysis, narrative analysis, and more” (Syllabus D18). In other instances, students were assigned readings about data analysis, such as Bernard’s (2017) “Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis (Pp. 354-361)” (Syllabus A1266) and Saldaña’s (2015) *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Syllabus A2393).

Ethics (91% of Syllabi)

The topic of ethics also typically appeared early in the syllabi—in the course description or the learning outcomes—and is heavily represented in the reading lists, suggesting it is foundational. For example, “Students will be able to identify and engage with research and fieldwork ethics: making sure that research designs are ethical; meeting the requirements of institutional review boards; and considering the implications of research to study communities and populations” (Syllabus A1250). Ethics was also the frame used for assignments or course discussions such as: “What ethical issues might you face with your research topic?” and “Write 300-500 words on ethical [...] approach [that] is the best for your research” (Syllabus A1418).

Some two-thirds of the syllabi in which ethics is a topic (about 60% of all syllabi) mentioned institutional review boards (IRBs), with 34 percent requiring students to obtain the CITI ethics training certificate and some requiring students to address IRB-related issues, such as consent (26%) and confidentiality (7%) in course assignments. One syllabus included role-playing: “During the first session of class, we will pretend that we are an IRB committee evaluating the ethical issues in Schepers-Hughes’ project. Each of you will be assigned a position as being either for or against” (Syllabus A1487).

Participant and Direct Observation (73-92% of Syllabi)

In total, 92 percent of the syllabi mentioned some form of observation, including “participant observation” as a singular term (73%)—cited most commonly in both course descriptions

and assignments—or just “observations” or “field observations” (19%). Participant observation was often identified as central to ethnographic practice, “Ethnographic Research implies participant observation and relevant interviewing about your observations” (Syllabus D44), and most (80%) of the courses required students to conduct research projects that included some form of observation as one component: “The field research project will involve making observations, conducting interviews, and other relevant data collection...” (Syllabus A1266). A minority of syllabi (<10%) included focused exercises, such as: “Workshops will involve activities like conducting participant observation on campus, writing fieldnotes, and roleplaying interviews” (Syllabus A1487), and less than 16 percent specified behavioral observations, structured observations (using spatial arrangement and time sample techniques), unobtrusive observation, or video observation, along with detailed information about how students were to conduct this observational work.

Research Design (83% of Syllabi)

Mentions of research design also typically occurred in the course descriptions and learning outcomes. For example, students will “Independently execute the phases of ethnographic research, including: developing a research design, assessing and mitigating risk to participants, collecting and interpreting original data, and communicating findings through written and oral formats” (Syllabus A1152). Readings provided under the headings of “Research Design” typically included those on research questions, research design, and proposal writing. The most compelling and obvious examples of a focus on research design were, however, found in the student assignments. Many of the classes included a research project (usually due toward the end of the semester) that specifically stated that research design must be identified and included. For example, “The paper should then include sections dealing with research design (research issue addressed, research questions, and methodology)...” (Syllabus D44). Still, while the syllabi mentioned the literature review and choosing research problems as elements of design, they did not cover developing research questions versus hypotheses, identifying variables, or testing hypotheses as part of design.

Ethnographic Writing (77% of Syllabi)

Ethnographic writing appeared on over three-quarters of the syllabi, most often in the course description or learning outcomes rather than in the course schedule, the readings, or the assignments. For example: “The course centers on two of the primary activities of ethnography: doing (conducting, carrying out) and writing (note taking, journaling, “writing up”)—and on the relationship between them” (Syllabus A1225). There were some assigned readings, such as “Writing an Ethnography” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Rare were instances where students engaged in reflexivity as part of a writing process, such as, “In the final portion of the course, we

continue to explore recent concerns in ethnography, including the impacts of ethnographers' identities on research, the construction of authority in the research setting and through ethnographic writing, and modes of writing" (Syllabus D50). Overall, discussion of ethnographic writing was vague and without much context provided, such as the instruction to "write up" data or noting that students would have to present a final paper on their research.

Transcription (57% of Syllabi)

Mentions of interview transcription appeared in the majority of the syllabi (57%), but only rarely were students assigned any reading about transcription. In the cases where it appeared in readings, it was signified in terms of how transcriptions are important for different types of qualitative analyses, such as discourse analysis but not with specific instructions for transcribing text. More commonly, students explicitly conducted and transcribed all or part of an interview as part of coursework or discussed the challenges they faced with doing their own transcription, such as accuracy and interpretation.

Coding (55% of Syllabi)

Coding-related terms often appeared in the sections of syllabi that discussed analyses. When present, students were provided readings on "codes and coding" and engaged with software, such as NVivo, Atlas TI, MAXQDA, or Dedoose, that facilitated coding qualitative data. Some syllabi (13%) required coursework or class activities that asked students to build codebooks, use inductive coding techniques to create coding trees, deductively assign codes to segments of text, or organize data into categories. Some courses (31%) required students to code their own field notes and interviews. One example: "Turn in your code books—of codes/themes from analyzing INTERVIEWS and FIELDNOTES. Write a 500-word statement about how the codes/themes from your field notes and interviews either match, complement, or completely diverge from each other" (Syllabus A1266). Less common practices included in-depth class discussions about coding, using multiple coders, testing interrater reliability, and processes of reflection and refinement of codes.

Sampling (53% of Syllabi)

Mentions of sampling appeared in over half of the syllabi but not as part of research design. Typically, the syllabi that included sampling did so in relation to course goals, assigned readings, and coursework (such as assignments on selecting informants). For instance, one course goal stated, "Identify qualitative data gathering methods and sampling approaches and describe their implications for analysis and interpretation of data" (A1701). Other courses had specific class days dedicated to discussing readings and engaging in students' own sampling designs for their research projects. Subsequently,

instructions for some final projects required students to discuss their sampling strategies. Less commonly (11%), we found that students engaged with different sampling techniques and approaches, such as theoretical sampling and different probability and non-probability sampling methods.

Field Notes (53% of Syllabi)

Field notes were identified in over half of the syllabi. Most often, students were instructed to take field notes as part of the coursework. Students were also typically presented with various readings on taking field notes (e.g., Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). In some instances, students were graded on their field notes and encouraged to include memos or reflections. One such example is this assignment that was worth 15 percent of students' grades, "Field notes or field diary containing reflections, rough notes, impressions, reminders, lists, sketches" (Syllabus A1619). In one example, we found the instructor gave clear instructions on what students needed to include: "... a description of the place where your observation is conducted and the social context in which it exists, who is there (including demographics), what they are doing, and at least some preliminary attempts at analyzing their behaviors within the context of what you know about this space" (Syllabus A1318). However, clearly marked readings or explanations on how to take and use field notes were not commonly provided in the syllabi examined.

Visual Ethnography (52%) and Digital Ethnography (27%)

Common examples of visual methods included using photos or visual materials as part of the class or in readings. In some instances, instructors specified the method of Photovoice. In another example, the syllabus included "drawing, maps, photographs, videos, games, scenarios" as data collection techniques (Syllabus D111). Digital ethnography appears in 27 percent of the syllabi, including readings about conducting ethnography in online settings or using digital methods with social media and online data. One class assigned readings on online focus groups and digital team ethnography (D191). In a few instances, students were assigned exercises on engaging in virtual data collection (e.g., Dengah et al. 2018; Snodgrass 2016).

Reflexivity (47% of Syllabi) and Positionality (19% of Syllabi)

Close to half of the syllabi cited reflexivity as a method, sometimes alongside positionality. These methods appeared mostly within the course schedule sections of syllabi and in the context of discussions of ethics. An example of fieldwork as a reflexive process was: "... the course intends to cultivate self-reflexivity when dealing with personal issues and understandings of the ethnographic 'Other' in students' own lives."

And another, in which students were required to engage in reflexive writing through their field notes, was “to engage in the reflective practices of fieldwork” (Syllabus D191). One example was a standalone reflexivity assignment where students were instructed to write “A reflection on how you think about your identity (but of course think intersectionally, in terms of as many axes as you can contemplate) and its possibilities and limitations in your planned field site. You can engage some of the course readings on positionality, ethics, and insider/outsider perspectives; personal reflection and voice are highly encouraged” (Syllabus A1266). The most widely used reading assigned under the topic was (Rabinow 2007) *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*.

Discussion: Identifying Gaps

Many of the topics covered in ethnographic textbooks (e.g., Bernard 2017; Fetterman 2019; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) are taught in the 107 syllabi we examined. Those topics include participant and direct observation, interviewing, ethics, research design, and writing.

Notably absent were a number of key considerations for establishing ethnographic fieldwork. For example, only a fifth of the syllabi covered the history of the field. Courses typically had students “go into the field” to collect interview and observational data, but there was scant mention of methods for dealing with gatekeepers, developing and maintaining rapport, and locating key informants. Each of these dimensions of fieldwork requires careful consideration of how to mitigate fieldwork dangers related both to the identity of the fieldworker (e.g., encountering racism, political, or gendered violence) and the realities and uncertainties of the field site (e.g., disease risks or health care availability at field site) (Clancy et al. 2014; Howell 1988; Kovats-Bernat 2002; Le Dantec and Fox 2015; Nelson et al. 2017; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Sluka 2015). While courses often address IRB and institutional ethical protocols, the syllabi reflect little engagement with broader ethical dilemmas about representation, data sovereignty, or how histories of research shape community relations (Hugman 2005; Smith 2012). Finally, given trends in both professional and community-oriented ethnography toward team-based approaches, there is little training on managing this process.

In addition, almost all the syllabi lacked some key methods for the systematic collection of some data types that ethnographers rely on in their research. For example, there is also almost no mention of, much less instruction in, methods for nonprobability sampling. And while almost all syllabi stressed *analysis*, and there is general recognition that ethnographers accumulate lots of qualitative data—text, still photos, video and sound recordings (Bernard, Wutich, and Ryan 2016; Bryman and Burgess 1994; Crabtree and Miller 1999; Glaser and Strauss 1967; LeCompte 2000; McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig 2003; Miles and Huberman 1994; Saldaña 2015; Silver and Lewins 2014; Wiljes and

Cimiano 2019; Wolcott 1994) there is almost no mention of systematic methods for managing and analyzing those data.

Much of the research conducted by professional ethnographers today is in service to applications defined through collaboration with local communities. This often requires the conduct of participatory, action, and rapid research, on which there is extensive methods literature (Chambers 1981; Dengah et al. 2020; Handwerker 2001; Hudelson 1993; Palinkas and Zatzick 2019; Pelto 2016; Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger 2020; Verd, Barranco, and Lozares 2021). These methods are not listed in most syllabi.

Going Forward

Social research, including ethnography, has been historically conducted in marginalized communities by people with greater power. Since 1969, with Laura Nader’s (1972) landmark article on the importance of “studying up” power gradients, there has been a steady call for ethnographers to pay attention to the power dynamics between researchers and research participants (e.g., Harrison 2019; Jobson 2020; Rosa and Bonilla 2017; Shange 2019). The relatively small number of syllabi that cover the history of the field and participatory and decolonizing approaches substantiates the urgency of this call.

Methods for decolonizing and decanonizing research—and for eliminating harmful outcomes in study communities—need to be integrated as core concepts and practices (Davis and Craven 2016; TallBear 2014), along with discussions of positionality and reflexivity (Bondi 2009; Harrison 2011; Hsiung 2008; Jenkins 1995). This will require many to re-envision approaches to teaching ethnography, centering Indigenous methods (Smith 2012), Indigenous data sovereignty (Carroll, Rodriguez-Lonebear, and Martinez 2019), and decoloniality in ethnography (Bejarano et al. 2019) in their teaching. Without explicit training in these important aspects of ethnography, the field is at risk of reproducing practices that do not serve the communities of practice or the practitioners. Furthermore, as students are increasingly aware and committed to decolonial approaches, future generations of scholars who find past approaches to be racist, imperialistic, and fundamentally extractive (e.g., Tate and Bagguley 2017) may disengage from ethnography. As a first step, many now recommend a syllabus review to ensure that Black, Indigenous, and other non-White authors are prioritized (Fuentes, Zelaya, and Madsen 2021; Primiano, Krishnan, and Sangaramoorthy 2020). This is just a first step but one that does represent substantive efforts to engage with a broader literature.

One important way that engaging with these literatures can inform teaching practices is by reorienting how researchers engage with research participants and communities. This includes learning about the history of the field and ethnographic compoment to be accountable to those we research (Harrison 2018). Such concerns motivate participatory approaches in ethnography (e.g., Gravlee, Szurek, and

Mitchell 2015; Gubrium and Harper 2016; Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger 2020) but are not widely taught in ethnographic methods classes. Today, a new generation of ethnographers is experimenting with and promoting novel ways to engage differently with those they study. Indigenous and decolonial ethnographers argue that scholars need to do more than engagement or mere “giving back” (Bejarano et al. 2019; Hoover 2017; TallBear 2014). One approach is to reconceptualize fieldwork as care work (Parreñas 2018; Tronto 1993; Walker and Snarey 2004; Yates-Doerr 2020). Another is to engage in new writing practices (Shange 2019), which can range from coauthorship with research participants (e.g., Bernard and Pedraza 1989; Campbell and Lassiter 2010; Kennemore and Postero 2020; Rappaport 2008), to experimentation with collaborative ethnographic performance, fiction or poetry (e.g., Aspiazu 1980; McGranahan 2020), to generating multimodal research products (e.g., Chin 2017), to writing for multiple publics (e.g., Fassin 2017; Gans 2010; Tedlock 2005). A particularly promising new approach explores “ethnographic refusal,” a range of research practices that include collaborative decisions between ethnographers and participants to refuse to publish specific information (Reese 2019; Simpson 2007; Zahara 2016). Such work may also inform addressing power dynamics at the intersection of teaching and method, inspiring teachers to engage differently with their own students.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed 107 ethnography syllabi from university courses in the United States. Based on systematic coding and analysis of the syllabi, we find that ethics, research design, participant observation, interviewing, and analysis are widely taught. However, we find that many key components of ethical, quality ethnographic practice appear to be missing from the syllabi. These less-covered elements include: IRB applications, reflexivity, positionality, field notes, transcription, theme identification, and coding. A limitation of our analysis is that we cannot draw conclusions beyond what is listed in each syllabus; actual classroom practices may engage with a wider range of topics. For instance, are there topics covered that are not listed on the syllabi, do instructors purposely leave information off the syllabus (e.g., for political reasons), and do they make changes to the course as they go? Also, the syllabi submitted may not represent what others are currently teaching. That said, it seems clear that the ethnographic methods courses we analyzed are not widely teaching some of the most urgent skills: power dynamics and “studying up,” participatory approaches to ethnography, and Indigenous and decolonizing research. These are widely regarded as the future of ethnography, and without this training, extractive and harmful fieldwork practices are likely to continue. Our findings suggest that new and enhanced approaches to teaching may be widely needed to ensure that these elements are commonly incorporated in basic ethnographic training. We hope that current and future syllabi incorporate these recommendations.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the United States National Science Foundation Cultural Anthropology Program grant (Award SBE-2017491) to the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program. This material is based upon work supported by (while serving at) the National Science Foundation. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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