

Comprehensive Exam:
Historical and Ethnographic Research Methodology

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January 7, 2021

Historical Research, Ethnographic Research, and Appropriateness for My Study

History enables us to understand and appreciate the past, view our current society through the lens of perspective, and project a knowledgeable glimpse of a future potential (McDowell, 2002). Historical research is “the systematic definition, collection, evaluation, synthesis and interpretation of data related to past events” (Buffington & McKay, 2013, p. 39, as cited in Thurber, 2004), consisting not just in the collection of facts but in the discovery of the correlation between those facts and any interpretations previously established by historians (McDowell, 2002). As acknowledged by McDowell (2002), historians use a systematic approach of examination to discover the content and context of past events in an attempt to separate fiction and myth from reality, a significant responsibility towards society in that history is the source influencing many of our beliefs, customs and practices. Though historical problems may be approached numerous times and from different angles in attempt at a conclusive solution, exact history may never be assuredly and irrefutably known. The attempt, however, is essential for our advancement; the future is partially conditioned by the past, and as Herbert Butterfield once stated, “a people that lived without any knowledge of its past – without any serious attempt to organise its memory – would hardly be calculated to make much progress in its civilization” (Butterfield, 1969, as cited in McDowell, 2002, p. 5).

Historiography, as explained by McDowell (2002), designates the writing of history, but historical research discovers evidence and then analyzes it. Historians are not expected to merely describe how things were, but to reveal relationships and interpret significance—regardless of the availability or amount of credible evidence—in an art of reconstruction requiring both critical and imaginative skills. In short, the purpose of historical research is to “make sense of a series of

events in a specified timeframe, establish their authenticity, understand the connection between them, and interpret their wider significance” (p. 14).

My intended thesis study is naturally inclined towards historical research, not only as it involves historical matters in its preface—the evolution of artisanal arts, from the 1500s to present day—but in that I endeavor to trace the roots of a number of those arts to discover trends, and “a primary aim of historical research is to look for connections between events so that a meaningful pattern or structure can be discerned” (McDowell, 2002, p. 78). I seek to find meaning within those patterns in my attempt to give validity to the preservations of artisanal arts, as well as strive to discover the humanity and contemporary cultural significance of their continuation. Historical research, in its examination of past events, can contribute immensely to the knowledge about people and cultures of today.

Additionally, Stankiewicz (2004) pointed out that historical research is not only recommended as an appropriate methodology when one is asking questions about past events, ideas, and people in earlier forms of art education, but that the research itself is an art, as the author inevitably creates narratives when re-creating the past from both facts and interpretations thereof. A competent historical researcher must have many qualities, including curiosity; initiative, motivation and commitment; imagination and insight; and creativity and original thought (MacDowell, 2002) and the goal is to make the findings—the re-creation—meaningful for a contemporary audience. I am by nature a storyteller, and the focus of my thesis is to present the story of the almost-lost artisanal arts so as to ascertain the affordance and importance of continuing that story through their preservation.

My research into present-day artisanal art reality, however, will rely heavily on the methodology of ethnography. Ethnography differs from other forms of research not just in its

predominantly qualitative methodology, but in its guiding principles of commitment to and extended engagement with communities and peoples in a naturalistic setting (Schensul et al., 2013). Ethnographic research developed out of anthropological methodology, involving the investigation of the cultural systems of a particular culture or peoples, in all their interpersonal, human and societal complexities (Koroscik & Kowalchul, 1997, as cited in Buffington & McKay, 2013, p.38; Shagrir, 2017). Born of an ongoing commitment to understanding the social worlds and everyday lives of other people(s), with the central focus being that of improving the lives of a community as the researcher attempts to look through its eyes to collaboratively learn of its needs, it is profoundly ethical in its endeavors (Atkinson, 2015; Schensul & LeCompte, 2016). Ethnographic research is a participatory process; in order to understand the daily life of a culture under investigation, the researcher must spend a considerable amount of time in its natural environment, employing various methods of observation and interaction for data collection (Atkinson, 2015; Shagrir, 2017). In short, ethnography is participatory and collaborative; community or site-based; directional (designed to lead towards social change); and requires interaction between its research and practice (Schensul & LeCompte, 2016).

Ethnographic research is not conducted with a single method; it embodies a “collection of possible methods, used singly or in combination” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 25), but as the core of ethnography is some form of participation within the culture being studied, and observation is elemental, then “fieldwork”—the traditional designation for the contemporary term of “participant-observation”—is at its heart of the ethnographic tradition (Atkinson, 2015). Fieldwork relies on observation and requires multiple skills and the use of varied technologies (Atkinson, 2005). It is as pragmatic as it is participatory, and must allow for flexibility; in accordance with its qualitative nature, ethnographic research is non-linear, and initial

observations will lead to new possibilities, data, and alternative paths (Atkinson, 2005). This characteristic of ethnographic research is particularly applicable to my course of study, as the particular focus of two to four specific artisanal arts will be chosen mid-research, based on findings and feasibility, and I anticipate a change in the overarching questions that the study presently poses—and, rather than imposing opportunities for change, in the ethnographic approach, strategies “emerge from the setting”(Schensul & LeCompte, 2016, p. 46). The field researcher must demonstrate flexibility in observational and analysis methods as well, playing the roles of witness, interpreter, listener, and autobiographer in the endeavor to be an internal, intimate partner in the lives of the participants, while at the same time remaining just detached enough so as to not influence the participants’ behavior (Shagrir, 2017). The immersion within culture is necessary for analysis of the data collected, as ethnography uses both etic and emic approaches for deduction, and the researcher will clarify and interpret from both an insider and outsider’s perspective (Schensul & LeCompte, 2016; Shagrir, 2017).

Ethnography is particularly appropriate for my course of study, as it produces a distinctive way of knowing that aligns it with the visual arts and other sensitivities of contemporary culture (Atkinson, 2015). My research is art-education based, and ethnography and art education in particular tend to go hand-in-hand, as the style of research resonates with teachers of art on numerous levels. Art educators are increasingly adopting methods attained from anthropology for endeavors both in and out of the classroom, to develop methods of research attentive to the concern of, and collaboration with, individuals being studied (Hickman, 2008). In a paper first published in 1991, Descombe (2008) regarded the art teacher’s preference for ethnographic research as owing to a stylistic matching of predispositions, but also suggested that art training emphasizes feelings of emotion and interpretation which are counterintuitive to

positivistic styles of research. The art teacher's tendencies manifest an affinity with ethnography in natural opposition to statistical and quantitative research analysis, and in accordance with ethnography's acts of observation, share the view that "perceiving the world is a creative activity rather than just a matter of simply receiving information" (Descombe, 2008, p. 30), with the role of the researcher "as the creator of findings rather than the reporter of findings" (Descombe, 2008, p. 30) being an additional attractor. Descombe further proposed that anthropological elements of ethnography are inherently appealing to the art teacher, whose oft-marginalized position within educational institutions offers experience and familiarity with viewing from "the outside", adding an instant rapport with the observational perspectives of fieldwork (Descombe, 2008). I intend to rely heavily on fieldwork in my investigation of the prevalence and current educational practices of artisanal arts, both within the United States, and in site-specific countries abroad.

Ethnographic Research: Historic Problems and Emerging Views

Ethnographic research has traditionally been associated with colonization or a colonial view of the world, largely because from the 1800s through as recent as the mid-1900s, it was the research method of anthropologists and other early ethnographers (Caputo, 2000; LeCompte & Schensul, 2015). All research has an element of power to it, but ethnographic research in particular lends itself to positions of dominion and subordination as one studies a group designated as "other", putting the subject of observation on a different and interpretively lesser plane (Taylor, 2002). As purported by LeCompte & Schensul (2015), in these colonial environments, the "natives" were merely documented and not involved participants in the research/their voices were not included, and the ethnographers were able to write "pretty much with impunity... since their results were considered to be 'objective' facts" (p. 4). On the

contrary, however, ethnographic portrayals were often entirely subjective reactions in the egregious one-sidedness of their descriptions (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015). Researchers were not questioned, readers did not doubt nor have the resources to critique or challenge such “facts”, and, as a result, those pictures portrayed by the researchers were considered to be true to the extent that any deviation by the culture itself, from what was represented in the researcher’s narrative, was identified as a loss of traditional culture (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015).

Social and cultural anthropology remain virtually synonymous with contemporary ethnography, though the strategies of research have become widespread across various disciplines and the definitions of culture have evolved, along with appropriate viewpoints and practice of ethnographic research (Atkinson, 2015; Staikidis, 2014). In the late twentieth century, contemporary scholars began to challenge the notion that one could speak “*for, or about, or in the voice of*” those studied, and especially not with certitude (Said, 1978, 1989, 1994; Spivak, 1998, as cited by LeCompte & Schensul, 2015). A shift has since occurred wherein the researcher’s fieldwork is increasingly immersive and involved, with the participant playing a more active role than simply a passive object of observation, becoming a literal part of the conversation about the problem and having a voice in assessment of strategies (Schensul & LeCompte, 2016). In the latter twentieth century, DiLeonardo (1988) stated that there is a “power dynamic that inherently exists between ethnographer and subject” and in 2001, Sullivan further noted that:

The tendency to try to reside on either side of the objective-subjective divide is to adopt an overly simplistic stance... in methodological terms this means there is a need to consider the observer and the observed as legitimate sources of knowledge. (as cited in Staikidis, 2014, p. 68).

Such increased engagement, however, presents a dichotomy of practice and ethics. There has always been a question of necessary distance; early ethnographers avoided intimate involvement partially on the basis of not wanting to contaminate “natural” behavior, and as an engaged approach became more acknowledged and accepted, there remained the concern that such intimacy would “alter ... behavior, skew research results, and generate charges of researcher subjectivity” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015). Taylor (2002) pointed out that the participant-observation techniques developed by early-twentieth-century anthropologists are highly suited to in-depth, immersive fieldwork; but though intimate relationships are required to gain trust and association of participants for accurate levels of data, such intimacy violates boundaries of positivist ethnography (Bourgois, 2002).

Anthropologists and critical theorists alike concur, alleging that positivistic neutrality is almost impossible to achieve or maintain, for when associated levels of social distance are regarded, the researcher is unable to “develop the rapport necessary for good ethnographic understanding and data collection” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015, p. 24).

Contributing to this divide are other necessary, intentional, and/or coincidental contemporary departures from intensive observation-participation. As emphasized frequently by LeCompte & Schensul (2015), “ethnology is a peculiarly human endeavor” (p. 113). Atkinson (2015) argued that in the process of ethnographic research becoming widespread, the heart of the practice has unfortunately become diluted (p. 12). In fear of undue displays of power and/or because of a lack of commitment to geographical engagement, much ethnographic work is being undertaken primarily with interviews and without immersion in fieldwork, thereby losing the core and driving force of the embodiment of ethnographic research (Atkinson, 2015). The definition of communities for study has been broadened to include local communities and even

simply institutions of learning (Schensul & LeCompte, 2016). Conversely, with the “deconstruction of a ‘place-focused concept of culture’” (Hastrup and Olwig, 1997, as cited in Amit, 2000, p. 13), the shift away from locale as boundaries of culture has caused ethnographic fields to be redefined to include those of migrant and transnational communities (Amit, 2000). As terrains shift, traditional ethnographic study is advantageously evolving alongside, with researchers finding the process of constructing the field to involve paths unforeseen and unplanned at the outset, instead following leads from field to field (Strauss, 2000).

Issues of ethics, formal and informal, have long been problematic with ethnographic research design, perhaps more so than in any other field or method of research (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015). In the past, researchers’ only ethical responsibility was to produce high-quality findings that would be credible to their professional peers; unethical research was simply that which was “poorly conducted or falsified” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015, p. 17). In the twentieth century, this began to shift, and the current ethics influencing ethnographic conduct in research are numerous, ranging from informal to formal, with valid portrayal of culture and protection of human participants being of paramount importance (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015). In broader elucidation, contemporary informal ethical concerns deal with boundaries of acceptable behavior in human interaction, appropriate field identities and balancing of roles, and relationships both within the research field and with professional counterparts (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015). Formal and semiformal concerns include confidentiality; compensation; concerns of danger to persons, even in benign studies; the protection and rights of those of vulnerable populations, including children under the age of 18; and even who has “the right to tell the story of, portray, or otherwise to ‘represent’ a given people’s culture” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015, p. 31). Traditional ethnographies of the first part of the twentieth century established realities shaped by

one-sided perspectives; with the advent of a bilateral view, ethnographic storytelling additionally becomes storytelling about each other, wherein the researcher must understand that we are “subjective agents—not only participant-observers, but observers of our own participation and subjectivity” (Lassiter, 1998, as cited in Staikidis, 2014).

Ethics of subjectivity are a pervasive issue of ethnographic research, in its near-impossibility of producing completely unbiased claims of “knowledge”. A critical ethnographer must accept that he or she originates from a standpoint of place, race, gender, and class, and conclusive research standpoints will largely be subjective rather than objective (Foley & Valenzuela, 2008). This seemingly negative aspect, however, can also be considered a positive force as it encourages the use of multiple, diverse and modern epistemologies of fieldwork; examples suggested by Foley & Valenzuela (2008) include “introspection, memory work, autobiography, and even dreams” (p. 287)—to gather knowledge and construct narratives.

Despite the numerous ethical considerations which ethnographic methods demand, however, Atkinson (2015) contended that, “with a very small number of egregious exceptions, *ethnography is among the most ethical forms of research*” (p. 172), and expounded:

The conduct of ethnographic research has been predicated on a set of commitments and values that arguably render it much more sensitive to the interests of ‘participants’, and make the personal values of the researcher(s) more central than most other forms of research. Ethnographic research calls for a greater personal commitment to the field and its members than virtually any other mode of research. Ethnographers spend months and years of their lives working with social actors as they go about their own daily lives. The commitment of ethnographers to engage with forms of social life is one that goes beyond virtually any other research strategy. (Atkinson, 2015, p. 183)

Advantages of Qualitative Research and Why It Is Appropriate for My Study

Though ethnography may employ quantitative research methods, it is primarily associated with qualitative research, and the two designations are often used synonymously (Taylor, 2002; Bogdan & Bilken, 2007).

In qualitative research, process is key. On basis of causation and in the attempt to establish causal explanations, the questions of a quantitative approach aim to ascertain *what* the affect of [x] is on [y], whereas the strength of a qualitative stance is that it questions what the *process* is that connects [x] and [y], and how [x] may have played a role in [y], thus giving more importance to discovering the process that leads to outcomes than to the outcomes themselves (Maxwell, 2005). It is no wonder, then, that a distinct and advantageous characteristic of qualitative research is that the act of the research is an ongoing process in and of itself, both in design and application.

When outlining research to be conducted by quantitative methods, the design thereof is often laid out in a plan that is sequential in steps, beginning with the formulation of the problem and proceeding in a specified order to a conclusion or conclusive theory (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative research, however, does not set out with a specific end or aim in mind, with a goal to prove or disprove a set hypothesis; rather, it is an inductive approach, wherein the theory evolves through the course of study, as time is spent with specific subjects and evidence is collected and connected (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Maxwell 2005). As illustrated by Bogdan & Bilken (2007), the qualitative researcher is not working on a puzzle whose picture is not evident, but which takes shape as parts are gathered, examined, and constructed, for the researcher “does not assume that enough is known to recognize important concerns before undertaking the research” (pp. 6-7). Qualitative researchers do embark on their study with some questions in mind, founded on

goals plus personal experience and prior knowledge. These initial questions will serve to guide the direction of their research and frame methods to be used, but the researcher often does not develop the culminating, focused questions of the study until further along in the interactive process of collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2005). One of the most difficult parts of establishing a study of research may be the designation or determination of the all-important thesis question(s). As properly focused questions within the qualitative approach are the result of a non-linear, interactive and inductive design rather than the starting point for the research (Maxwell, 2005), a strong advantage to this methodology is that the questions may be discovered, evolve and re-formulated throughout the process.

Equally advantageous is that the process itself is not regimented from the outset. Inasmuch as the questions and focus will change, the design of the research study must also be an ongoing process of modification with its non-linear interaction between various and changing components. Maxwell (2005) presented an interactive model for mapping research design wherein the components framing the research questions are: 1) the *goals* of the researcher; 2) the *conceptual framework* or personal experiences/background knowledge/prior research already in place; 3) the planned *methods* of data collection and relationships with subjects; and 4) the projected threats to the *validity* of the conclusions or results. There are additional factors that affect the design/plan of study, such as resources, skills, and ethical considerations, but all components are designed to be flexible. A key proponent of this model is that the goals can be flexible, and they may shift and change. For my thesis, the area of study at the outset is broad and my questions may change; focus will be developed as I collect data regarding the prevalence and active education of artisanal arts. If my pre-perceived methods cannot provide the data that I need, I can change my questions or methods accordingly (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007).

In line with the open, evolving questions of a qualitative research methodology is another advantage: the exercising of open-ended questions as methods for research. An example of this is particularly found in education research, where quantitative standardized questions are not as effective for analysis by educational practitioners. Bolster in 1983 (as cited by Maxwell, 2005) maintained that a reason educational research has not had significant impact on educational practice is because quantitative questions and methods are not in tune with the everyday experiences of a teacher. He argued that the realities of the classroom are better understood via a qualitative approach, wherein the vast “perspectives of teachers and the understandings of particular settings” (p. 24) have more potential for information.

A third advantage of qualitative research is scope of methods by which data is gathered, broad both in their variety and in the non-restrictive borders of acceptability, and in the personal/naturalistic characteristics of fieldwork. Data gathered via qualitative methods is descriptive rather than statistical. Maxwell (2005) asserted that the data is not restricted to specified “methods” and that it may include virtually anything seen or heard “or... otherwise communicated while conducting the study” (p.79). Bogdan & Bilken (2007) likewise stated that the nature of descriptive data is in direct opposition to the numerical constructs by which quantitative research is bound, taking “the form of words and pictures rather than numbers” (p. 5) and which can include “interview transcripts, field notes, photographs, videotapes, personal documents, memos, and other official records” (p. 5). They continued that the qualitative researcher must look at every detail, with the assumption that “nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential of being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied” (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007, p. 5).

In broad terms, qualitative research gathers data by observing what others do and say in order to better understand human behavior and human experience. This is done in an attempt to comprehend how others make meaning and to be able to describe that meaning (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007) but it is the personal manner in which it is observed which is key to its interpretation. Empirical observation methods are a conduit to familiarity and understanding in the hands-on nature of experience. Empirical observations are made on location, or “in the field”; fieldwork is the manner/place in which most qualitative researchers conduct their studies and observations, as data collected therein is supplemented by understanding gleaned from physically being on-site (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). Through these observations, the researcher attempts to capture how people define their worlds and construct their realities, producing through perspective a qualitative account of those definitions (Taylor et al., 2015). Qualitative researchers are apt to collect data through in-depth and sustained contact with the subjects of observation, within the normal settings of the subjects (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007), then seek to interpret that data in utilization or consideration of metaphor, symbolism, descriptions, characteristics, and other non-quantitative measures. Subsequently, a qualitative approach to a problem may place more emphasis on the individual’s personal experiences with the research and those under study. (Habib, Pathik, & Maryam, 2014).

Bogdan & Bilken (2007) suggested that fieldwork, as so termed by anthropologists, may more correctly be called “naturalistic” when conducted per qualitative methods for educational research, as the researcher “frequents places where the events he or she is interested in naturally occur” (p. 3). Being on location and conducting naturalistic inquiry is a primary focus and perceived approach of my own research methodology. Not only can place-based field inquiry help me to, as described by Bogdan & Bilken (2007) “join the subject’s world” in their natural

settings (p. 82) but the researcher's distance from his or her personal natural setting can provide "space for them to think deeply, look at their informants critically but openly", etc (p. 83).

Inasmuch as I aim to conduct fieldwork in investigation of ethnographic nature, qualitative methodology is both appropriate for my study and holds personal interest for me. I thrive on interpersonal relationships and associations, and in qualitative studies, as termed by Maxwell (2005), "the researcher is the instrument of the research, and the research relationships are the means by which the research gets done" (p. 83). Maxwell (2005) continued that such relationships have effect on both participants in the study and on the researcher, and those relationships can even affect (encourage or hinder) further study, as gaining a relationship with participants and their surroundings may lead the researcher to discover new avenues of investigation or be the instigator towards a dead-end. On the advantageous side, developing relationships within fieldwork may also assist the development and evolution of my thesis focus, in and through the act of data collection.

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