

What is action ethnography?

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Various forms of ethnography have evolved across disciplines and fields over the decades. Martyn Hammersley (2018) notes at least 42 different forms of ethnography that have emerged, usually named by adding an adjective before the word 'ethnography'. He points out that diverse 'methodological, ontological, epistemological, ethical and political ideas' are attached to each form of ethnography claimed (Hammersley, 2018, p.6). Then, he problematises the act of defining ethnography, but offers two suggested approaches: 'thick' and 'thin'. A 'thick' approach would state specific parameters and commitments for conducting ethnographic work, and justifications for these, to be considered that form of ethnography (Hammersley, 2018, p.7). A 'thin' approach would take a looser slant and 'treat ethnography simply as a research strategy that can be employed by researchers adopting a wide variety of potentially conflicting commitments' (Hammersley, 2018, p.7). He argues that each approach to define ethnography comes with its own set of issues, but knowledge production must stand in the forefront of any form of ethnography.

In this paper, I aim to advance ethnography by intentionally *not* falling into Hammersley's dichotomous categories to develop an underdeveloped methodology called 'action ethnography'. I discuss specific commitments for conducting action ethnography, and their implications, but also recognise that these may be potentially conflicting at certain points during a study. More importantly, I emphasise its significance as an accessible and impactful research strategy that researchers can utilise in a range of ways that retains synergies in action research and immersive ethnography.

I begin with a review of the literature on two extant approaches that encompass some elements of action research and ethnography by which action ethnography is influenced: ethnographic action research (Tacchi et al., 2003; Bath, 2009; Eisenhart, 2019) and action anthropology (Tax, 1975; Watson, 2019). The two reviewed methodologies link some aspects of ethnography and action research, but the synergies between the two approaches and the implications of this are rarely addressed. Additionally, in these traditions, researchers commit to devising solutions to problems, and even implementing them, and involve participants in the research process, inherited from action research traditions. These commitments may make them less likely to remain committed to ethnographic principles, such as reflexivity and understanding social actors and their social, cultural, political contexts and processes (Coffey, 2018). For small research projects or those with short timeframes, the problem-solution focus of these two approaches potentially may be a barrier to adopting them, making them less accessible methodologies.

To address these shortcomings, in the third section I offer a working definition and framework for action ethnography as an accessible approach to qualitative research that merges aspects of ethnography and action research. Rooted in ethnography, action ethnography takes its basis in participation in people's daily lives over an immersive period of time, primarily through participant observation but also a variety of other qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, participative or creative methods, in order to create a rich, detailed account of a group's culture and practices (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Since action ethnography has not been consistently developed in the literature, I suggest three main tenets of action ethnography that I see as fundamental to its research design, before exploring each one in depth:

1. Researcher participation is active, immersive, and reflexive in participants' day-to-day activities, as opposed to merely participating for the purposes of research
2. The notion of researcher 'intervention' as contributing to change or as a catalyst for change
3. The study's contribution to 'useful' knowledge to both practice and theory

To illustrate how an action ethnography project can be designed with the three core tenets interwoven through the study, in the fourth section I introduce an action ethnography that I commenced in February 2022 with a grassroots voluntary organisation, called Channel Rescue. Based in the southeast coast of England, Channel Rescue formed in 2020 to monitor the human rights of people crossing the English Channel from Northern France to Kent, England, mainly to seek refuge. In addition, volunteers monitor the maritime search and rescue activities performed by the UK Border Force, the Royal Navy and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) to ensure that authorities comply with international laws to efficiently rescue people in distress at sea irrespective of who they are, where they are from or why they have made the dangerous voyage.

I outline the empirical research context and how I am taking a ‘complete member researcher’ role (Adler and Adler, 1987) to explore volunteer engagement and commitment in Channel Rescue. I describe my positionality, the evolution of my multiple roles and how I have become immersed as an active member of the organisation by participating in ‘land spotting’¹ shifts and regular group discussions on ‘Signal’, an instant messaging platform. Channel Rescue’s members use online methods to communicate, organise and mobilise volunteers since they are geographically dispersed across the UK. I volunteered to be involved in the fundraising, research, training, land operations and weather groups, and opportunistically when the organisation was looking for coordinators for their working groups, I became one of the coordinators for the land operations and weather groups. Participant observation, both online and in-person, is the primary method of data collection, however, ‘ethnographic conversations’ (Coffey, 2018, p.49), similar to unstructured interviews, and multimodal/visual methods (e.g. internal documents, messages, photos and social media posts) are also employed.

To further delineate action ethnography, I draw on my research to analyse the flexible and emergent approach taken to formulate the initial research question: to what extent does Channel Rescue engage volunteers and keep them engaged? By allowing the fieldwork or data to drive the direction of the investigation, akin to ethnography (Coffey, 2018) and to action research (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p.71), the researcher does not allow preconceived concepts to overtake the focus of the study. However, where action ethnography diverges from action research is in the scope of the research questions. Whereas research questions stem from a problem or opportunity in action research (Levin and Greenwood, 2001), in action ethnography the research questions are not wedded to resolving a problem primarily (or seizing an opportunity) in the participating group, community or organisation.

Then, I analyse my commitment to researcher intervention in Channel Rescue’s practices as contributing to change, or as a catalyst for change, and outline how the spectrum of my impact on the organisation has been unbounded, wide and emergent thus far in my research. Finally, I emphasise the importance of planning for impact from the outset of an action ethnography project, and being open to the potential ways in which research can contribute to practice alongside contributing to knowledge.

Before concluding, I reflect on the benefits and limitations of action ethnography. In action ethnography, researcher interaction with participants, immersion in their day-to-day activities and intervention in their practices bring newfound understandings that may not have been anticipated or discovered through a less engaged approach. If the primary goal of any type of ethnographic research is to contribute to new knowledge of the social world studied (Coffey, 2018; Hammersley, 2018), then for action ethnographers this knowledge contribution is to practice, as much as it is to theory.

This paper contributes to the methodological literature on ethnography by offering a working definition of action ethnography and by drawing on an example of it in practice. Particularly for researchers who are attracted to elements of both action research and ethnography, this paper provides a foundation for negotiating tensions between the two methodologies and a set of methodological justifications necessary to be explicit in research designs. Also, it provides methodological grounding for those

¹ Land spotting refers to one of the primary activities of the organisation to ‘spot’ any small boats in distress at sea through binoculars and telescopes and to ensure that search and rescue operations are launched to assist them.

interested in impact in organisational ethnography or developing an impactful approach to organisational research.

By offering an interpretation of action ethnography in this paper, my point is not to be prescriptive or exclusive about what can, or cannot, be considered action ethnography. Instead, I wish to open-up discussion and encourage methodological innovation and consideration for impact in ethnographic research. At a time when research impact is highly scrutinised in projects, I argue that action ethnography is an important and accessible approach to consider for both academics and practitioners who are interested in engaged research *with* (not *on*) people or organisations (Heron and Reason, 2001) to better understand social worlds, lived experiences and social issues.

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