

## **The Dimensions of Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research: An Introduction**

Pinaki Dey Mullick<sup>1</sup> and Koel Mukherjee<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Haldia Government College, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India

<sup>\*</sup>Assistant Professor, Haldia Government College,  
Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author: Dr. Koel Mukherjee

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**Abstract:** Through the present exertion, the authors are inclined and intended to reflect the theoretical and methodological multiplicity on taking notes in the field, the process of inscribing the meaning from the texts and contexts, and writing fieldnotes in the frame of ‘reflexivity’ and contemporary ethnographic practices. To attain the objectives, the authors have gone through selective literature to stand their focus on. The prime concern of us was to find out – are there any standardized categories of taking and writing fieldnotes in ethnographic researches? To explore the answer and to reflect the dimensions of fieldnotes in ethnographic research to our ‘perceived’ audiences, we have argued with each other that (re)framed us and our positions repetitively. Being conscious in our focus, we have tried to outline a combination of ‘self’, ‘contexts’, and ‘reflexivity’ that may help the beginners of ethnographic studies to think and (Re)think to reflect their identity into their research and at the same time they can enrich the ongoing discourse of ‘fieldnotes’ and ‘ethnography’.

**Keywords:** *Fieldnote, Reflexivity, Ethnography, Self, Perceived Audience*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Fieldnotes are one of the key essences of ethnographic research, but, a very little attention has been dealt with the process and implementation of taking fieldnotes in social researches<sup>1</sup>. The significance of fieldnotes is gaining more attention among the ethnographic researchers in the purview of contemporary trends of social sciences. Emerson<sup>2</sup> discussed two fundamental conditions of an ethnographic research- (a) getting closer to the participants of research to explore the insiders’ perspectives and (b) to make a written record of the process of involvement with the participants.

In the very process of ethnography when the ‘others’ are becoming the ‘self’, fieldnote bridges the prime path of ethnographic representation<sup>3</sup>. The concept of ‘fieldnote’ varies in the context of research orientation, the perception of the researcher, the interpretation of symbolic ambivalences in the ‘field’- the space of disciplinary, cultural, subjective and intense web of significant interaction<sup>4</sup>. To participate in the participant’s perspectives, the researcher should strive to produce and contextualize more inclusive and extensive fieldnotes<sup>5</sup>.

Thus came, fieldnotes are not simply the experiences and observations of human interactive phenomena; rather it entails the researcher’s reflexivity and interpretation on it<sup>6,7</sup>.

### **II. ETHNOGRAPHY AND FIELDNOTES: A FOCUS ON THE RELATIONAL BACKGROUND**

The study on the relationships between ethnography and the participants, and the ethnographic texts and its readers; expanded the scope of ethnography to be ‘self-conscious’ at its contextual stake<sup>1, 2, 8, 9, 10</sup>. In account to study culture, ethnography includes participants’ experiences and exemplifies those experiences form multiple disciplinary understandings<sup>11</sup>. This trend of ethnography leads the process of note taking very worthy. Wolfinger<sup>1</sup> in 2002, explains three fundamental theoretical stands of note taking that an ethnographer may desire to implement in contexts- a) taking notes in the field that can outline a frame of experiences of the researcher at the end of the day, b) writing notes according to the choices of an ethnographer when ethnographic observation narrows with time, and c) taking or writing notes considering the ‘perceived audience’.

In terminological sense, 'ethnography' and 'fieldnotes' appears to mean as two distinct concepts i.e. doing fieldwork and writing fieldnotes, but getting deep with an interpretative stance, these two terms are the overlapping processes that represent the living and life-ways of the research settings having the writing choices of the ethnographer and the ways she/he desires to narrate the stories<sup>2</sup>. In ethnography, the fieldnotes actually conveys the 'temporal' and 'social' contexts of the study conducted that might help its readers to visualize the phenomena through which she/he is undergoing<sup>12</sup>. Differing the conventional practices of ethnography, Nader<sup>13</sup> pointed out that ethnography is not just a mere description of the reality; rather, it is a theory of description. Unlike the functional view of ethnography, the contemporary ethnographic endeavour promotes a deep focus on fieldnotes that reflects the positional, emotive, struggling, and other concerned realities that may enrich the readers about the entire process of the ethnographic fieldwork not only the factual evidences of phenomena<sup>14</sup>.

### **III. REFLEXIVITY AND FIELDNOTES: THE ETHNOGRAPHERS' DILEMMA**

What we are trying to portray in this section of the article is how an ethnographer relates the identity of the 'self' to share and generate knowledge within the entire research process. 'Writing', being the nucleus of ethnography still lacks intensive attention on fieldnotes as the most scholars of ethnographic studies feel 'uneasy' to represent their fieldnotes, rather they protect it as their private document; that left the research findings and discussions 'unexplored'<sup>15</sup>.

In a reflexive paradigm, writing fieldnotes is an applied and operational strategy within the diversity of conventional spaces that mirrors the process of making senses, 'situational usages' and personalization of the contents that needs to be included to expand the scope of merging the subjectivity of the 'self' in contemporary ethnographic practices<sup>16</sup>. Reflexivity is a theoretical output of postmodern inclination that differentiates its practices from 'modern' theories like- objectivism, realism and empiricism<sup>17</sup>.

The ethnographer has to comprehend why she/he supposed to reflect their thought process, personal experiences, and 'embodied' knowledge of their own to practise ethnography as a 'discourse' that would highlight the matrix of the story 'teller' and the 'told'<sup>18,19</sup>. This perspective of ethnographic approaches towards the 'society' and the 'self' represents a self contradictory frame that hunts for the validity of the self reflexivity; because, the dilemma of an ethnographer and his reader transcends the 'actual' representation of self report and/or understandings that might be 'manipulative image of the self', as it is very difficult to express for an ethnographer 'what are the positional stands of an ethnographer' rather they are interested to reflect themselves that think they should 'appeared to be' to the readers<sup>17,20,21</sup>.

### **IV. THE LAYERS OF FIELDNOTES: A QUEST FOR THE CONTESTED REALITY**

An ethnographer always seeks the ways for representing their research as the more contextual in nature. In doing so, they situate and describe the phenomenon as they wished to reflect it to its perceived audiences. In this juncture, the relevancy of fieldnotes appears to be one of the key concerns to discuss the entire process of the research in a reflexive mode. To situate and relate the 'self' of the researcher within and beyond the theoretical and methodological milieu of the study concerned, it became a fundamental quest that how to accomplish such an attempt without a 'proper' referential stake of writing fieldnotes?

The task is neither simple nor a question of systematic or sincere orientation of writing or sensing of taking notes, rather, the situation instigate the choices of the ethnographer to reflect her/him 'self' within the research. Being ethnographers, we have/had an obvious inclination to look for an insight if there is any 'standardized' ways of writing notes. The response is- Yes we have multiple referential facets in our 'ethnographic vocabulary' on writing fieldnotes.

Bernard<sup>22</sup> have indicated four major types of writing fieldnotes- (a) *Jotings* that Sanjek<sup>23</sup> termed as 'Scratch Notes' directs an ethnographer to carry on a note pad all time during the fieldwork and promotes a continuous writing on the spot, (b) *Diary*- is a personal account to detail the loneliness, fear, anxieties and other difficulties related to fieldwork, (c) *Log*- an account of systematic 'synthesis' of qualitative and quantitative data that 'must' include the plan of work and its practices day by day, and (d) *Fieldnotes proper*- includes (i) *Methodological Notes*- instigate the researcher to take into account the issues related to the techniques in data collection and its relation to the researcher as an 'instrument' of data collection, (ii) *Descriptive Notes*- the key of ethnographic practices that includes the process of 'watching' and 'listening', and observing the processes of subjective actions as a social construct, and (iii) *Analytic Notes*- means to write down about the contextual ideas as a product of fieldwork that indicates how a culture or facts are organized, related, and interdependent.

The referential point of taking note for 'good' ethnographic practices somehow opens a space for the beginners of ethnographic research, at the same time it endorses a 'structured' frame of writing fieldnotes through an ideological compression of 'what to reflect' and 'how to reflect' to present an ethnography as a reflexive one. This contested reality in Bordieu's words- if we want to generate a reflexive ethnography we have to practice the 'reformist' reflexivity than 'narcissist' reflexive positions<sup>24, 25</sup>. Self-reflexive notes are deeply rooted in the memories of the researchers in each and every interactive sphere that embrace introspection,

reflexivity and anticipation which shape and reshape the experiences of the ethnographers. A valuable use of this kind of writing keep space for auto-ethnographic research which understand the self and the environment of the self rather than to generalize but to open scope to a self reflexive way of representation<sup>26</sup>. This dynamicity of the ethnographers' experiences critically been (re)explored while the researchers are engaged in writing down their fieldnotes construct a twist between the conventional ways of writing fieldnotes and 'momentary' perception to write beyond the convention<sup>18,27</sup>. Now, the question is that how one can manage his/her reflections in their writing within this contested reality between conventional form of writing and subjectively unique experiences? The possibilities emerge from the current trends of analysis of any texts and versions as 'discourses'. In Discourse Analysis an ethnographer can choose freely what and how she/he will write notes and narratives. It may be any written text, photographs, form of a play or parody, and all concerned forms of images that inspire an ethnographer to tell the story very freely<sup>28, 29</sup>.

## **V. THE POSSIBILITIES OF CONTEMPORARY ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICES: (RE) VISITING FIELDNOTES IN THE CONTEXT OF REFLEXIVITY**

Dietz<sup>30</sup> identified the reflexive turn of ethnography tended to split in two distinct directions- (a) 'Postmodern' trend of self referential and/or self-reflexive ethnography and (b) a 'militant' trend of ethnography that incorporates the sense of 'empowerment' associated with any social issues with an activist paradigm. Being an interpretative and reflexive ethnographer, we may proceed with some significant factors that have been pointed out by Watson<sup>31</sup> (1987) - (a) the ethnographer have to be conscious of techniques employed by others to ascertain their 'authority' and to distinguish the domain of the studies and their 'methods' of the 'present' research, (b) the researcher have to cognisant about employing the 'identical' methods for 'identical' objectives, and (c) the ethnographer have to ensure their readers' continuity to the entire process of research.

The changing dimensions of reflexivity with theoretical and methodological discourses of ethnographic practices in references to the position of the 'self' into the research instigate the present authors to Bourdieu's insight on reflexivity that prioritized '*the systematic exploration of the 'unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought*'<sup>32, 33</sup>.

Accordingly, the angle of taking and writing fieldnotes in contemporary ethnographic practices on a mode of reflexive way, it is noteworthy to quote of the Emerson<sup>2</sup> (1995)-*We draw four implications from our understanding of ethnography as the inscription of participatory experience: (1) The findings which obtained from observations and treated as 'data' is actually inseparable from the observational process. (2) In course of writing fieldnotes, it is the responsibility of the field researcher to give special concern to the indigenous meanings of the people studied. (3) To encompass more detailed accounts of others' lives and concerns, fieldnotes may act as an essential grounding and resource. (4) Such fieldnotes should detail the social and interactional processes that make up people's everyday lives and activities.*

## **VI. THE DISCUSSION: AN ACCOUNT ON THE SCOPE AND CORRIDOR**

The discussion here means a reflection of the authors' journey for this article. A careful stand of us makes a way to share our experiences through this rigorous journey. We, at the very beginning of writing down this article oversimplified the task, as, we are teaching ethnography and fieldnotes in the classroom and we thought that, it will be quite easy for us to make a general outline on fieldnotes in the context of ethnographic researches.

The task became complex when we started to converse and exchange our ideas regarding the concerned issue. So many questions aroused in our mind that has to be explored and we learned that how we actually oversimplify issues in case of teaching in the name of reaching towards students' mental and intellectual frames. Each and every moments of our journey challenged us to think and rethink over the issue, because multiple ways were opening to us and is next to impossible to include all feelings and searches in this entry.

What we have done?- to reply this question is not easy, but we are trying- we have figured out themes we perceived to discuss in brief, and at the same time, portrayed a glance of the parallelism of contesting theoretical and methodological discourses of the issue concerned. What we have to say? - the ethnographer or the story teller has to mirror their identity-cultural, economic, spatial, linguistic, and/or all the possible corner of the 'self'. Then, they have to write down freely as per as practicable in their own ways. After that, they have to merge their 'self' identity with disciplinary senses and then with the culture they want to study. This is our own observation and perception in our personal and academic fieldwork. We are not intended to create or recreate any generalizing constructs on fieldnotes. The 'rest'- the 'scope' and 'a corridor' is a space open for our 'perceived audiences'.

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