

Ethnographic Methods in the Globalized and Post-Pandemic Society: A Virtual-Collaborative Fieldwork

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Abstract. This paper aims to examine a socio-cultural and humanities research method, namely ethnography, in the context of digitalized and post-pandemic society. Ethnography offers a way to comprehend community groups deeply by revealing their system of signification and way of life. Since its emergence in the mid-19th century, ethnography has had a strong tradition of researching communities outside the researcher's culture. These two activities ultimately led me to a new understanding of ethnographic research, not only to develop fieldwork techniques in the pandemic era but also to determine who the subject of ethnographic research should be in the era of a digitalized and globalized society.

Keywords: Digitalized society, ethnography, fieldwork collaboration, post-pandemic, virtual

1 Introduction

This paper aims to examine a socio-cultural and humanities research method, namely ethnography, in the context of digitalized and post-pandemic society. Ethnography offers a way to comprehend community groups deeply by revealing their system of signification and way of life. Since its emergence in the mid-19th century, ethnography has had a strong tradition of researching communities outside the researcher's culture, especially as people outside of Europe were considered as 'strange' and 'exotic'. Although several anthropologists have a movement to decolonize ethnography after the 1960s [1], it still has a specialty by persistently emphasizing the dimensions of cultural differences [2]. However, globalization and digitalization of the 21st century have made the degree of cultural differences within society increasingly blurred [3].

Ethnographers have recently challenged to separate 'us' and 'others', 'home' and 'field' [4], or which culture is 'strange' and 'familiar' [5]. The second problem is that the Covid-19 pandemic has made it difficult for ethnographers to deal with traditional fieldwork. Holistic observation requires the ethnographers to apply some fundamental research techniques; performing long-term fieldwork participation-observation, in-depth interviews, and collecting historical archives and documents. The post-pandemic situation with health protocols, social distancing, and restrictions to do fieldwork, has more or less hindered the basic techniques of traditional ethnography.

This paper offers one of the ethnographic research efforts during a digitalized and globalized society and in the era of post-covid-19 society. The methods will be more associated with sub-methods in ethnography, namely virtual ethnography [6]. However, virtual ethnography does not necessarily achieve the broad and various socio-cultural and humanities

research objectives, which cannot always be done entirely through online devices and in the cyberspace landscape. Therefore, this paper will also offer a collaborative field research, which includes collaboration between researchers and informants, 'home' and 'field', 'us' and 'others', as well as the 'familiar' and the 'strange'.

2 Research Method

The data in this paper are generated from the literature on ethnography and my own reflection on ethnographic research I have done previously. These two activities ultimately led me to a new understanding of ethnographic research, not only to develop fieldwork techniques in the pandemic era but also to determine who the subject of ethnographic research should be in the era of a digitalized and globalized society.

3 Finding and Discussion

3.1 Ethnography and Its Development

Ethnography is a method among many other approaches in the social sciences or cultural humanities disciplines nowadays. The meaning of the term can vary. In consequence, it overlaps with other terms or labels, such as 'qualitative inquiry', 'fieldwork', 'interpretive method', or 'case study'. Furthermore, it also has vague semantic boundaries [7]. To understand ethnography more fundamentally, it is helpful to refer to Bronislaw Malinowski's ideas as an anthropologist known for introducing this approach in the early 20th century. In his monumental ethnographic work in Trobriand Island east coast New Guinea with the title of *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Malinowski proposed that anthropological or ethnological research in (tribal) culture is required to understand the community holistically.

"The first condition for an Ethnographic work to be accepted is that it must involve the whole social, cultural, and psychological aspects of the community, since all of them are intertwined to one another, so none of them can be understood without considering the others. Although economic is its main theme—since it is related to exchange and trade as well as commercial enterprise—there are other references that should be made to social organization, mythology and folklore, the power of magic, and other aspects in addition to the main one." [8].

Malinowski's emphasis on a holistic approach (examining all the community's cultural elements) was a new discourse at that time, which has hitherto been considered an 'ideal' principle in cultural research. In addition to a cultural element that is always tied to other elements, Malinowskian ethnography also emphasizes understanding community from within (emic) and in-depth—in Malinowski's terms, "to understand the native's point of view, his connection to life, and to realize how he sees his world" (ibid: 19).

To grasp the community's point of view, Malinowski mentioned that the purpose of ethnographic field-work must be approached through three ways. *First*, the community organization and the anatomy of its culture must be recorded in a firm and clear outline. The statistical and concrete documentation method is the way in which such an outline has to be given. *Second*, within this outline, the *imponderabilia* of actual life and the type of behavior have to be filled in. They have to be collected through detailed observations, can be in the form of ethnographic diary, which is made possible by making a close contact with native life. And

third, a collection of ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folk-lore, as well as magical formulae has to be seen as a *corpus inscriptionum*, as documents of native mentality (ibid: 18). These three points from Malinowski become his main legacy that is still practiced in humanities or anthropology research today, namely (1) observation-participation (refers to the second point); (2) in-depth interviews (refers to the third point); and (3) documentation of field notes and archives (refers to the first point).

As a scientific development, ethnography has continued to evolve in order to adapt to various changes in the world system [9]. Simply put, the changes that affect the development of ethnography can be classified into two categories. The first is the shifting paradigm in the socio-cultural sciences, and the second is the change in the world system and society itself (even though both categories also influence each other). The paradigm shift in socio-cultural science started from the evolutionary paradigm in the mid-19th century, then cultural relativism in the early 20th century, functionalism and structuralism in the mid-20th century, critical theory, materialism, and Marxism in the decades after World War II, to the post-modernism, post-colonialism, feminism, and other post-structuralism perspectives towards the end of the 20th century. Meanwhile, changes in the world system include global social changes such as the end of colonialism, wars, the emergence of the nation-state, the regime of market capitalism, the development of transportation and media technology, geopolitical issues between the global South and North, globalization and human mobility, as well as the recent global pandemic.

One significant development is the emergence of thought among scholars to decolonize the practice of ethnographic writing, some of which are well known, such as Talal Asad [10] or Clifford and Marcus [1]. In essence, they have questioned the unequal power relations between ethnographers (usually Westerners) and the research subjects (usually Third World people), both in the fieldwork practice and writing rhetoric, which seems to extend the structure between 'the colonizer' and 'the colonized'. In addition to promote more humanist ethnographic research and writing, this critique encourages rethinking on who are 'us' and who are 'others'. Does ethnography always have to romanticize and exploit people who are considered as 'them'? Should ethnography put research subjects as primitive, uncivilized, exotic, or strange people? The answer is obviously not. Research subjects can be any community and anywhere, and they are still seen as the others, but it is necessary to avoid any objectification of people. The meaning of 'others' is less politically but is meant as a group of people who have different cultural expressions and identities, and that can include anything—from differences in language, lifestyle, consumption, hobbies, ideologies, sexual preferences, and many others. Ethnography still has a specialty by persistently uncovering the dimensions of cultural differences—“Anthropology, along with ethnography, tells about how people can be different, but at the same time also tries to figure out in what sense all humans have something in common as well” [2]. In Robert Myers' [5] terms, ethnography is an attempt to make something strange familiar and make something familiar strange, whether to the society that is considered as 'others' or to our own society.

Another significant development of ethnography is when globalization and technology have started to give impact since the second half of the 20th century. According to Arjun Appadurai [11], the phenomenon of globalization can be explained by the emergence of a global connection in which one society is connected to another more intensively. There are five *landscapes*, namely ethnoscape (human mobility), financescape (global finance), technoscape (technology), ideoscape (ideology), and mediascape (media). It causes what scholars call cultural deterritorialization [3]. Today, culture cannot be imagined as an entity with geographical and territorial boundaries (as Balinese culture is not only found on the island of Bali). Traditional cultural values and social relations that were previously established went

through changes, mutations, and displacements. Ethnographic research can cross the territory of both villages and cities or be carried out in certain areas. Ethnographers, then, re-questioned about which is considered as 'home' (as his or her own cultural environment) and which is 'field' (as the cultural environment of their research subject). A researcher can make their cultural environment becomes their ethnographic field, and explore things that are considered as 'strange' for others outside their cultural community. On the other hand, one can also research in distant places to find things that are familiar to them.

These developments in ethnography produce several models of fieldwork techniques that can be identified; classical ethnography (Malinowski's participation-observation), fieldwork expedition, rapid ethnography, multi-sited ethnography, autoethnography, and virtual ethnography. In addition to the classical ethnography, we can categorize the other five models as experimental ethnography. In the most recent developments, I follow the ideas from Gökçe Günel et al. [4] on patchwork ethnography. Citing Donna Haraway and Cerwonka and Malkki, Günel et al. [4] argue that methodological innovation of patchwork ethnography re-conceptualizes research as working together rather than against the gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, as well as various commitments that represent all knowledge production. In the discussion below, I try to contribute to the project that patchwork ethnography has been knitting or an aggregate of the previous methods I mentioned above, resulting in an ethnographic form that emphasizes collaboration between many parties.

3.2 The Models of Ethnography

I have mentioned earlier that the development of ethnography resulted in at least six models of ethnographical fieldwork. Each has its own character that is different from the others, especially in terms of (1) the number of researchers, (2) the length of the fieldwork, (3) the location of the fieldwork, and (4) the research subjects. However, each model to different degrees still practices the three techniques suggested by Malinowski above; participation-observation, in-depth interviews, and data recording and archives in the field.

In *classical ethnography* such as Malinowski's, research is generally carried out alone, single-handedly, in a place far from home to find significant degrees of cultural differences and is carried out over a long-term period. Malinowski once said that the time required to conduct an ethnography is at least a year so that the community's life cycle can be observed comprehensively. This model is still widely applied by scholars at advanced levels, such as for dissertations or produce academic ethnographic books.

The fieldwork expedition model is not much different from Malinowskian ethnography, namely choosing places and research subjects that are 'distant', which are considered to have a significant degree of cultural differences with the researchers. The difference is that many researchers in groups carry out the research. Generally, this group will choose a particular geographical and cultural area. By doing it together, the research do not take too much time; a few weeks or months is sufficient, as long as the required data are available. Fieldwork expeditions were initiated by the well-known American anthropologist Franz Boas in the early 20th century with his students while researching the American Indian community. This method is still often practiced today in anthropology classes at universities to teach students how to do ethnography in a short-term visit but can gain ethnographic experience and produce data together for a particular topic.

Rapid ethnography can be defined as a short-term qualitative research. More than one field researcher conduct this model to save time and cross-check the data [12]. This ethnographic model can be done in just a matter of weeks because it makes specific adjustments; determine

specific topics and informants (not to seek information on community life holistically); conducting in-depth interviews with various informants simultaneously (focus group discussion); seeking research answers in a participatory way with the community, and others. Rapid ethnography became popular in the 1970s along with the development issues in developing countries, where many community empowerment organizations needed methods that could explore problems in society (ethnographically) but could be done quickly [13].

Meanwhile, George Marcus [9] popularized *multi-sited ethnography* which in general is like classical ethnography (can be done alone, in a long-term period, and research subjects are far away), but carried out on more than one site. Multi-sited ethnography is also based on participatory observations and interviews in specific communities, conducted in different places (not just one place) but still in the same context. This type of ethnography is not only doing research in many places, but also many groups, objects, relation between one group to another, and the mobility of the groups from one place to another. For Marcus, this method is intended to contextualize major constructions of a large social order, like the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies, including the 'local' and the 'global', the 'lifeworld' and the 'system' [9].

The autoethnography has a considerable degree of difference from the previous four models. The most significant difference is the fact that the researcher examines himself. However, 'self-examination' means that the researcher examines himself as a member of a particular cultural group or being representative from a wider community. In other words, Autoethnography can be defined as a research method in which the researcher applies his personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno') [14]. Personal experience, according to autoethnographers, contains political/cultural norms and expectations. They are involved in strong self-reflection—particularly referred to as 'reflexivity'—in order to identify and examine the intersections between the self and social life. Fundamentally, autoethnographers intend to show "people in the process of finding out what to do, how to live, and the purpose of their struggles" [15].

The last is *virtual ethnography*. It has other terms as well, such as online ethnography, cyber ethnography, netnography, or digital ethnography [6]. Basically, this ethnographic model can be carried out by a researcher over a long-term period that covers a particular community. This method also includes participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and data collection of various archives. The difference is clear that the ethnographers doing this method in a virtual-online world using various digital technology devices. The virtual world is not the opposite of the real world. People's cultural expressions such as ideas, behaviors, relationships, language, and materials are displayed in our digital devices, which have a direct social impact on the physical world [16]. Thus, researching the mediated socio-cultural order virtually is considered to represent the actual situation of certain community groups.

In the context of a globalized and digitalized society, more researchers are experimenting on methods other than the classical ethnographic approach. Multi-sited ethnography, for example, answers the challenge of how the mobility of humans and objects is increasingly intensive in the era of globalization. Autoethnography, reflective ethnography, and other post-structural style ethnographic movements answer the question of 'us' and 'others' to the problem of separating 'home' and 'field'. In the era of globalization, socio-economic inequalities are increasingly widening (especially in the Third World), development using a 'bottom-up' approach is needed to replace the previous 'top-down' approach, which was deemed less effective. Rapid ethnography provides a fast and effective way to obtain field data by adjusting certain techniques, especially those carried out by community empowerment organizations.

Virtual ethnography came in the early 21st century due to the increasing new social order in the virtual world and the global internet. The term 'netnography' then became popular, which later could be defined as the following three things, (1) ethnographic research on communities in the virtual world/internet or virtual mediated social interactions, or (2) ethnographic research using virtual and online digital media in data collection, (3) or a combination of the two [17]. The emergence of Covid-19 which limits mobility and human activities, including fieldwork research, makes virtual ethnography seems to be a solution for doing ethnography during a pandemic. However, as virtual ethnography or netnography that we have recognized so far, it does not effectively achieve various socio-cultural and humanities research objectives, which cannot always be done entirely through online devices and in the cyberspace landscape. There are limits to virtual ethnographic practices such as observing the community directly, participating in community activities directly, and, most importantly, experiencing everyday life practices from the community in the field.

3.3 Collaborating and Collaborated Ethnography

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the ethnographic challenges in the era of globalization, as researchers cannot physically come to the field or 'be there, in Clifford Geertz's terms. The ethnographic method always explores in-depth field data holistically or so-called 'thick description' [18]. Holistic observation requires the ethnographer to apply some fundamental research techniques. *First*, the ethnographers carry out the fieldwork by staying in the middle of small communities. *Second*, the ethnographers do the fieldwork for a relatively long time to understand a community's recurring patterns. *Third*, the ethnographers participate in various activities carried out by the community in daily life, while observing and writing down relevant information (participation-observation). *Fourth*, the ethnographers need to conduct in-depth interviews, perform structured conversations in informal situations with specific individuals in the community, to reveal how local people interpret, feel, experience, and perceive things. *Fifth*, the ethnographers need to collect archives and documents from reconstructing social phenomena historically and in a broader context.

The post-pandemic situation with health protocols has more or less hindered those basic techniques of traditional ethnography. I call it a 'post-pandemic' situation, in which the word 'post' refers to situations in the world that has a new social order and behavior, such as concern for health, sensitivity to the presence of new people around, the need for vaccinations, social distancing, crowd restrictions, mandatory face masks, etc. This situation has been calculated since the emergence of the coronavirus (Sars-Cov-19), which as of this writing, no one knows for sure whether the world will be completely back to 'normal' like before 2019. With these conditions, it will be no longer easy for the ethnographers to do the fieldwork in the long-term period, participate in community activities, conduct intensive and in-depth face-to-face interviews, and collect essential archives and documents in the community. Several ethnographic models, both classical and experimental mentioned above, also cannot provide an immediate solution to these problems.

There have been several anthropologists who have offered solutions to this problem. One of the important solutions to mention here is a project called patchwork ethnography by some anthropologists, Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe. In a publication on the Society for Cultural Anthropology website with the title of *A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography*, Günel et al. addressing the issue that "the pandemic has eliminated many future fieldwork plans, and the prospect of continued ethnographic research in the same vein seems

uncertain. It suggests that long-term 'traditional' fieldwork could become impossible" [4]. Regarding what is patchwork ethnography, Günel et al. explain as follows:

In the beginning, patchwork ethnography acknowledges that the recombinations of "home" and "field" have now become necessities—even more so in the face of the current pandemic. By patchwork ethnography, we talk about ethnographic processes and protocols planned around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that oppose the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process. Instead of referring to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, patchwork ethnography rather refers to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes traditional fieldwork (<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>).

The ideas of patchwork ethnography paved the way for redefining what 'going to the field' is, what 'home and field' is, the need to find a new way of 'being there' when long-term fieldwork is no longer possible, as well as the new ways of collecting data. However, since this idea is a manifesto or just a preliminary plan, Günel has not yet elaborated further technically how this patchwork ethnography works. If we refer to the previous section of this paper, we can categorize Günel's ideas into two aspects: aggregating and collaborating with previous ethnographic models and collaboration between interested partners in setting up ethnographic research. Patchwork ethnography is a project that seeks more effective research (albeit with a high commitment), and we can see it from the number of researchers, research time, selection of field locations, and selection of research informants.

Patchwork ethnography can take a breakthrough offer from the six ethnographic experimental models above according to these four points. Malinowskian classical ethnography provides principles that should not be ignored in any ethnographic research, such as grasping the native point of view, uncovering the cultural differences in society, and producing thick description data. Fieldwork expeditions inspire collaborative ways by several researchers to conduct research together, although the use of data, or the resulting ethnographic writings, may vary. Rapid ethnography provides an element of 'time effectiveness' in field research to obtain in-depth data in a participatory way. Multi-sited ethnography offers more effective and representative research results that related to a particular theme and is carried out in a broader area, by selecting several different places but tied to the same idea. Autoethnography, not only provides researchers with a deep sense of reflectivity (alternating positions as ethnographer and informant), it also opens the possibility to do ethnography 'at home' [19][20]; research in the area of the researcher's own culture. Finally, virtual ethnography clearly offers a new landscape, namely communities in a virtual world or conducting ethnographic research using digital tools without physically visiting the field. All of these can be considered as projects of patchwork ethnography.



Fig. 1. Patchwork ethnography draws on elements from previous ethnographic models.

Another collaborative aspect of ethnographic production is research collaborators. An ethnographic study can be a joint project with different people and interests and not just a solo researcher with his or her own interest. Each ethnographic project can be led by one proponent and other collaborators as research partners, or led and managed together despite having their own tasks and areas of work. Criado and Estalella, in their book *Experimental Collaboration: Ethnography through Fieldwork Devices* (2018) give an example that their fieldwork consists of partners and collaborators such as scientists, public servants, designers, activists, and artists. This ethnographic project compels them—or provides the opportunity—to reconsider types of engagement (both its relationships and forms) in their fieldwork. Accepting this challenge, contributors explore a descriptive approach to their own projects and communicating the intimate relationships built with their counterparts in their field sites.

Several colleagues and I have also practiced collaborative ethnography in my recent research during the Covid-19 pandemic, which serves as an example. Our research is about the new marginality during the pandemic and vaccination policies in Indonesia (2021), which prompted us to choose several communities which are representative both for the issues and geographically, namely the Orang Rimba (OR) tribal community in Jambi, Sumatra, Papuan indigenous people (OAP, *Orang Asli Papua*) in Jayapura, health workers in East Java, and education staff in South Kalimantan. We invited several collaborators, (1) an NGO activist who handles the empowerment of the OR people, (2) an anthropology student in Jayapura who is also an OAP there, (3) a nurse in Surabaya, and (4) a university lecturer in South Kalimantan.

Each of our collaborators or partners has their own agenda in this research. Our partner in Jambi uses the results of this research as his and his organization's efforts to improve their health services to the OR community amid the pandemic; our partner in Papua uses the results of this research as her thesis; our partners in Surabaya use the research results to get answers about what facilities are needed by fellow nurses there, in the midst of the very severe Covid-19 situation; our partner in Kalimantan uses the results of this research to support her study about her students who were deployed as education volunteers during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the

results of this study is useful for us to answer the question regarding how the Covid-19 vaccination process produces new marginalities in Indonesia.

We have not physically visited the field to carry out this research, and the collaborators did not meet us directly. We coordinated this research by utilizing all digital devices (smartphones and laptops) and online applications such as Zoom Meeting, WhatsApp Group, Email, chat, or telephone. We have conducted video conferences via Zoom intensively to discuss and share data between one case study and another. There is an important process here, that on the one hand, our partners represent our presence in the field as researchers, but on the other hand, they become informants or 'natives' that we are researching about. It should be noted that this process does not occur asymmetrically; they also have the right to put us as their informants or as researchers who help them to find historical, literary, or conceptual data. As I mentioned earlier, there is alternating position between ethnographers and informants in this kind of ethnography. I argue that this patchwork and collaborative ethnographic research procedure is quite effective during the pandemic or other similar situations, where it is difficult for ethnographers to visit the research field like they did before. In addition, the above procedure is also an ethnographic experiment that considers aspects of changing society in the era of globalization and digitization as it is today.

4 Conclusion

This paper tries to contribute to an effective socio-cultural (ethnographic) research method in a digitalized and globalized society and the post-Covid-19 situation. First, the paper argues that in a situation of social disruption in 21st-century society, the boundaries between home and field, us and others, or familiar and strange in ethnographic research, become blurred. Socio-cultural characters that we think are familiar and feel like at home, can be found in remote fields anywhere. Conversely, even in our home society, there are many 'strange' cultural features or what is considered as "others"; thus, it can be the subject of research from ethnography (at home ethnography). Second, remote field research practices can be carried out by emphasizing not only online researches but also a transformative collaboration with local partners in the field. Therefore, research can still produce in-depth ethnographic data in pandemic situations and social restrictions.

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