

Origins of ethnography

Ethnography can be traced back to anthropological studies of small societies undertaken in the early 1900s, wherein researchers such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Franz Boas participated in these societies over long periods of time and documented their social arrangements and belief systems (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994). The early ethnographies from this discipline were closely linked with colonialism and therefore characteristically involved studies of the 'other', or foreign and exotic social groups. The ethnographic text was initially produced at this time and involved the writing up of fieldwork when an ethnographer returned home. This thick, naturalist description became a rite of passage for students and scholars wanting to study anthropology.

The ethnographic approach was later adopted by members of the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920–1930s (e.g. Everett Hughes, Robert Park, Louis Wirth) to a variety of contemporary social problems (e.g. homelessness, immigration) linked to the urbanization of Chicago. In the 1940s, the second wave of Chicago School of Sociology focused on the ethnographic study of professional groups, occupations work and education (Reeves et al. 2008).

Subsequently, the use of ethnography as a research methodology has proliferated across the social sciences and within different academic fields such as education, healthcare sciences and business. There was also increasing interest in connecting cases studied ethnographically across space and time (Eisenhart 2001). In health services literature, the focus on the professions, occupations and clinical work has continued, and produced some illuminating studies such as Strauss et al.'s (1963) study of achieving and maintaining order between managers, clinicians and patients within psychiatric hospital settings and Allen's (1997) study

of boundary-work between nurses and doctors. In the Section “Methodological and theoretical developments”, we provide information about the growing use of ethnographic work in medical education.