Abstract: Qualitative research in health provides insight into the experiences, perceptions and interactions of clients, caregivers, health professionals and the broader community. In this paper, the use of ethnography is discussed as a qualitative research technique to facilitate the understanding of the practice of speech-language pathology in different cultural and linguistic contexts around the world. A description is provided of the different types of data collection methods that can be employed in e ...
Understanding the world through ethnography:
The experience of speech-language pathology practice in culturally and linguistically diverse settings
Sarah Verdon

Qualitative research in health provides insight into the experiences, perceptions and interactions of clients, caregivers, health professionals and the broader community. In this paper, the use of ethnography is discussed as a qualitative research technique to facilitate the understanding of the practice of speech-language pathology in different cultural and linguistic contexts around the world. A description is provided of the different types of data collection methods that can be employed in ethnographic research (such as observation, interviews, photography, video-recording, and personal reflection) and their usefulness in facilitating understanding of complex practice situations. Important considerations for designing and undertaking ethical and culturally appropriate qualitative research are explored and the benefits of qualitative research to the speech-language pathology profession are discussed.

Qualitative health research acknowledges that there are different ways of viewing the world. In qualitative research the key to enhancing understanding is not to reduce research findings to figures or statistics, but to expand knowledge by considering multiple viewpoints. In essence, qualitative research adds “flesh to the bones” of understanding provided by quantitative research. Qualitative methods first appeared in health contexts in the form of ethnographic studies of practices in the 1950s (Morse, 2011). Since then, ethnography has been used to study practice in a number of health care fields such as nursing and medicine (for example, Antrobus & Kitson, 1999; Carroll, Iedema, & Kerridge, 2008).

Ethnography
Ethnography is a type of qualitative research, which involves the study of people in naturally occurring settings through observation and data collection methods which capture ordinary activities and their social meanings. Social scientists use these observations to write ethnographies. The word ethnograph simply means folk (ethno) and writing (graph). Therefore, ethnography is the social science of writing about particular folk and the activities they undertake.

The aim of ethnographic research is to “try to get inside the fabric of everyday life” (Silverman, 2011, p. 113). Ethnographic observation differs from other forms of data collection in that the researcher must enter the field and be physically present in the activity that they are trying to study (Eberle & Maeder, 2011). In entering the field they experience “the architecture, the furniture, the spatial arrangements, the ways people work and interact, the documents they produce and use, the contents of their communication, the timeframe of social processes and so on” (Eberle & Maeder, 2011, p. 54). Being present in the field allows real-time experience and interpretation of events in a way that reflections, interviews and second-hand accounts do not.

In ethnographic research the emphasis is typically placed on exploring and understanding the nature of a particular social phenomena (for instance, the practice of speech-language pathology in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts) rather than testing a specific hypothesis developed by the researcher (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Ethnographic research usually involves studying a small number of cases in great detail, rather than seeking the breadth of a large number of cases or representative sample as is common in quantitative research (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). The product of ethnographic research is usually presented in the form of written descriptions and explanations of the meaning of human activity rather than quantifiable results (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

There are a number of key elements to effective ethnographic research: observation, description, contextualism, process, and flexible research designs (Bryman, 1988, see Box 1). Achieving the key elements of effective ethnographic research can be assisted by using various forms of data collection which together provide multiple viewpoints of the research site. By shadowing participants and taking fieldnotes the researcher is trying to see through the participants’ eyes, but at the same time it is important not to assume what participants are thinking or feeling based upon observations. This is why accompanying fieldnotes with interviews can help to clarify what was observed and add information about how participants felt and what their intentions and motivations were during observed sessions.
The essence of ethnography is to describe the details of mundane activities in every day settings and to find the extraordinary among the ordinary (Silverman, 2011). Therefore, careful description and attention to detail is essential (Bryman, 1988). It can be easy to overlook or feel it is unnecessary to document certain elements of a setting if they seem familiar or un-noteworthy to the researcher. However, detail is the key to effectively capturing the true nature of what is being observed and understanding the complexities of a research site. For this purpose, the use of photographs and audio-visual data can be particularly useful in capturing detail that may be missed in other forms of data.

All activity must be situated in a context in order for it to be interpreted and understood. This is referred to as contextualism (Bryman, 1988). Multiple forms of data can be used to assist in capturing the context of a research site. One particularly useful tool is the writing of personal reflections by the researcher. This enables a description of the social, political, physical and organisational context (as experienced by the researcher) within which the research site is located.

**Undertaking ethnographic research**

Silverman (2011) outlines four main components for undertaking ethnographic research in order to achieve the key elements outlined by Bryman (1988):

1. **Defining the research problem**
2. **Adopting a theoretical orientation**
3. **Using rigorous methods to collect data**
4. **Using rigorous methods to analyse data**

In the following sections, the enactment of these four elements is described and examples of each are provided from an ethnographic study entitled “Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality” (Verdon, in preparation), a multi-site study of speech-language pathology practice in different cultural and linguistic contexts around the world undertaken by the current author.

**Defining the research problem**

A research problem may be identified either through professional experience or through a review of the literature. Both of these elements played a key role in defining the research problem that initiated the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study. First, the motivation to undertake this research was instigated through personal and professional experiences of people with communication needs in culturally and linguistically diverse settings in Australia, Vietnam and the United Kingdom. Second, the need for this research was highlighted by a review of the literature in this field which consistently identified speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs’) challenges when working with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Caesar & Kohler, 2007; Stow & Dodd, 2003; Williams & McLeod, 2012) but provided limited practical examples and suggestions for modifying practice to facilitate optimal engagement with this population. The inability of existing literature to inform the complexities of practice with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds highlighted the need for a new approach to research in this field. Ethnography was selected as the most appropriate research method to address the research problem identified in the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study given its historical use in the understanding of cultural diversity and its potential to provide insight into complex everyday activities.

**Adopting a theoretical orientation**

The use of a theoretical lens aids in providing a scaffold for interpreting and making sense of the large amounts of qualitative data collected during ethnographic research. In the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987) was used as the theoretical framework for interpreting and analysing the data collected. CHAT is a practice-based approach to academic inquiry that acknowledges the complexity of human activity systems and provides a framework for analysing and understanding these complexities. CHAT divides practice into a number of elements: object, subject, mediating artifacts, rules, community and division of labour (see Figure 1). Together these elements form an activity system that works towards a desired outcome. The application of CHAT to SLPs’ practice with culturally and linguistically diverse children is outlined in detail in a paper by Verdon, McLeod, and Wong (2014).

![Figure 1. Cultural Historical Activity Theory](https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)

Using rigorous methods to collect data

The first step in ensuring rigorous data collection methods is to consider the ethical issues that may arise through the research. It is essential that research is approved by the ethics committee of the host university or organisation. Such organisations will outline the types of risks to be aware of and important considerations for minimising potential harm and maximising benefit to the participants and the field being studied. For example, the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study involved working with both children and participants who did not speak English as their primary language and therefore a number of strategies were put into place to ensure that informed consent could
be obtained and that methods of data collection were culturally safe and appropriate. One strategy for safeguarding participants was providing the opportunity to have information and consent forms interpreted in their primary language. Additionally, it was important to allow for variation in data collection methods. Participants were given the option to only participate in aspects of the study in which they felt comfortable. Participants were free to withhold consent for any aspect of the study such as interviews and the taking of photographs.

Conducting rigorous data collection during an ethnographic study often involves collecting various types of data including, but not limited to, fieldnotes, interviews, audio-visual data and personal reflections. Each type of data fulfills a different purpose and has a unique ability to add to the larger picture of what is being described and experienced by the researcher.

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are a vital part of ethnographic research (Wolfinger, 2002). During ethnographic observation, the researcher determines what aspects of an observed site are considered worthy of documentation (Wolfinger, 2002). Thus, structured fieldnotes can be useful in guiding the research to ensure that the information recorded is consistent between sites while also allowing for the diversity of each site to be documented. In the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study, observations were recorded using both structured fieldnotes (which were designed to facilitate identification of certain elements of CHAT within sites), as well as unstructured fieldnotes that were written incidentally to document events that took place. Structured fieldnotes were useful in ensuring that basic descriptive information was gathered about each observed site, such as the physical context and setting, while also allowing space for free text observations of events (see Appendix).

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are used to guide conversations with participants by using open-ended questions to explore the participants’ experiences and attitudes and to allow for clarification and discussion of the activities that have been observed (Al-Busaidi, 2008). In the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study semi-structured interviews were used to gain insights regarding practice from multiple viewpoints (SLPs, parents and children) about their experiences of speech-language pathology. For the purpose of ensuring accurate recollection and analysis of data obtained during interviews, each was audio-recorded and transcribed. To ensure rigour in this form of data collection transcripts were sent back to the participants, where possible, to gain their approval of the content and ensure that their meaning was clearly expressed in the transcript. This is known as member checking (Irvine, Roberts & Bradbury-Jones, 2008).

Both sources (the audio and the written transcript) should be used in conjunction when reviewing and analysing data because the audio-recorded version contains non-verbal aspects of the interaction such as hesitations and tone of voice, which can be very useful in understanding the meaning of spoken utterances. For example, in the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study one participant described a child’s linguistic competence by saying: “it’s so ridiculous”. This could be interpreted with a negative connotation if the words were only read. However, when listening to the audio-recording it is clear that the participant is laughing at the interesting patterns of code switching that occur in their interactions. Therefore, the additional information provided by the audio-recording changed the way this utterance was interpreted by the researcher.

Photography

The use of photography in data collection stems from anthropology, where images were initially used to enhance the sharing of the researcher’s experiences of other cultures and communities (Bateson & Mead, 1942). Photographs are useful in providing an added dimension to data about cultures, activities, people, or experiences that are otherwise inaccessible or difficult to share and describe through other means such as the written word (Grbich, 1999). Photographs can contribute both subjective and objective data. Photographs should be used as data which are “one-off, context bound images” (Grbich, 1999, p. 137) and open to interpretation. In the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study, the use of photographs allowed for observations of similarities and differences between aspects of sites, countries, and continents such as the clinic room set up, resources, tools for assessment, uniforms and so on. For example, Figures 2a and 2b are photographs of clinicians’ resource cupboards, one from Asia and one from North America. It can be seen that these were remarkably similar between the two sites. On the other hand, the differences between sites were also made apparent through the use of photographs. For example, uniforms worn between sites varied greatly with an SLP from Europe wearing a scrubs-like hospital uniform (Figure 3a), an SLP

Figure 2. Resource cupboard in (a) Asia and (b) North America
from South America wearing a lab coat (Figure 3b) and the SLP from Asia wearing professional plain clothes (Figure 3c).

**Video**

Video data enables experiences to be re-lived and shared with others. Video data are useful in accounting for both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication that may not be able to be conveyed through transcripts of audio-recordings or through still photographic images (Grbich, 1999). In the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study video data were used to document therapy techniques used by SLPs. Video data were useful in capturing the complexity of such interactions. For example, the use of ultrasound technology with a child during one session was recorded to show how the technology worked and how the SLP interacted with the child and the technology to provide instruction and feedback on therapy targets.

**Personal reflections**

Personal reflections provide important insight into how the researcher thinks, feels and acts. This is important given that qualitative data are collected, interpreted and reported using the lens of the researcher (Grbich, 1999). Writing personal reflections enables researchers to be critically reflective of their experiences and processes in data collection. In the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study personal reflections were used to capture the researcher’s experience of being exposed to such culturally and linguistically diverse situations. These documents proved to be useful as they captured the “culture shock” that is often forgotten after being immersed in a new setting after a period of time. This quote is an example of a personal reflection, which describes the experience of walking through the streets in the location of one of the research sites: “People lay sick and crying in the streets, some had even passed out in the heat with no one to give them medical care. During the day felt quite safe but it was frightening to go out at night …” Such reflections provided insight into the broader context of the research sites which could not be captured through documentation of the clinical setting alone.

**Using rigorous methods to analyse data**

Qualitative data analysis is scaffolded and underpinned by the use of a theoretical lens or framework. There are countless theories which have been applied to the study of practice. Each theoretical lens allows the data to be viewed from a different perspective with a common purpose, that is, to gain an understanding of what has been observed. In the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study one such theory, CHAT, was used as an analytical framework for interpreting the collected data. Using the framework, data were coded and organised into one or more of the six elements of CHAT (i.e., object, subject, mediating artifact, rules, community and division of labour). The data contained within each element were then considered and main themes arising within each element were identified using grounded theory. The themes identified within each element were then considered individually as well as collectively to create an understanding of the interconnected nature of all things occurring in the activity system and how they work with or against each other. Understanding the barriers and facilitators to practice can be used to identify possible means to address the challenges identified within the activity system to improve practice.

A number of different tools can be used to assist in the analysis of qualitative data. These tools help with organising and coding large quantities of data into to make sense of what has been observed and collected. In particular, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Silverman, 2011) is often used to facilitate the analysis of qualitative data. In the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study, NVivo 9 software (QSR International, 2009) was used as an organisational tool to assist in the analysis of interview transcripts, fieldnotes, photographs, video-recordings, and personal reflections. This software enabled the systematic coding of all data forms into the six elements of CHAT. Some data were assigned to more than one category if appropriate. Coding allowed for the identification of themes arising in the data and a synthesis of similarities and differences in speech-language pathology practices around the world, which will form the findings of the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study (forthcoming). It is hoped that the results of this study will generate new insights for engaging in culturally appropriate practice in speech-language pathology and pave the way for such methodologies to be used more broadly to address other areas of need in the profession.

**Important considerations when undertaking qualitative research**

There are a number of important considerations for those attempting to engage in qualitative research for the first time. The most important aspect of qualitative research to be acknowledged is its inherently subjective nature. All experiences, as well as the interpretation and reporting of data, are undertaken through the lens of the researchers and their personal, social, and cultural context. While some
objective data are collected (such as photographs of the physical setting), the interpretation of what this means and how it impacts upon the activity being observed is subjective and constructed through the lens of the researchers and the theoretical framework being applied to the research (Silverman, 2011). This can be confronting for researchers who are used to searching for one “truth” or “fact” using quantitative research. However, the very nature of qualitative research is to seek experiences and understandings of the world through multiple viewpoints, so this subjectivity is not considered a limitation.

The motivation to undertake qualitative research is often driven by a theoretical perspective, even if it is unbeknownst to the researcher. For example, in the case of the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study, the motivation to undertake the research was driven by the theoretical perspective that all children deserve equal access to, and benefit from, services regardless of their cultural or linguistic background. This perspective informed the development, implementation and interpretation of the research. After some reading and conversations with others in the field using qualitative research, CHAT was selected as the appropriate framework to structure the study. This theoretical perspective acknowledges the complex and diverse nature of practice and the impact of cultural and historical context upon human activity.

Another important aspect of qualitative research is that research methods must be flexible (Bryman, 1988). This can be a challenging paradigm shift from quantitative research which emphasises that uniformity and replicability are key elements of a rigorous research design. However, flexibility can be key to capturing the true nature of a research site which may not otherwise be discovered if the researcher maintains a strict regime of data collection methods. This was especially true in the Embracing Diversity – Creating Equality study as it would have been in contradiction to the whole concept of the research, which focused on “embracing diversity” to keep the methodology the same in all contexts when at times it was culturally inappropriate to do so. For example, the initial intention was only to observe practice in the research site, but the presence of the researcher in the room and the fact that the researcher was an “insider” in the world of speech-language pathology meant that on many occasions in different cultural contexts it was necessary to become a participant-observer. In these situations the role of participant-observer was taken on by the researcher to work with the natural flow of the session rather than against it, meaning that distance as simply an observer was unable to be maintained. Either choice by the researcher in such a situation would have impacted on the session. If participation was refused it may have appeared rude, culturally inappropriate or have impacted on rapport and relationship with the participants. Conversely, choosing to participate in the activity inevitably changed the very nature of the activity being studied. Research flexibility was also required when data collection was unable to be carried out in exactly the same manner in each site. This was because at some sites it did not seem culturally or contextually appropriate to conduct some forms of data collection. For example, conducting interviews with parents and children was not always appropriate when a language barrier was present or when trust had not been established due to a shortage of time at some sites. These examples demonstrate that the nature of qualitative research does not allow researchers to control for unpredicted variables in the way that quantitative clinical trials are controlled. Rather qualitative research provides a more accurate reflection of real-life situations, which are neither predictable nor controlled. This means researchers must adapt to fit the reality of the situation, rather than trying to make it fit predetermined research goals or outcomes. Rather than a limitation, this could be argued as a strength of qualitative research.

**Benefits of qualitative approaches to research**

Qualitative approaches to research have the potential to empower researchers to work in different ways to create new understandings of both professional and client/participant experiences of care. By allowing insight into multiple viewpoints, qualitative research can identify potential opportunities to optimise these experiences. Practitioners and researchers alike have the opportunity to employ qualitative techniques such as those outlined in the current paper. The key to effectively utilising qualitative research in health and education settings is to think critically and reflectively about practice with clients and their families to support the best possible outcomes for people with communication needs.

**References**


Sarah Verdon is a speech-language pathologist undertaking international research regarding practices with culturally and linguistically diverse children.

Correspondence to:
Sarah Verdon
Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning, and Education
Charles Sturt University
Panorama Ave, Bathurst, 2795 NSW, Australia
e-mail: sverdon@csu.edu.au

Appendix. Data collection record form

Celebrating and supporting cultural and linguistic diversity in the provision of services for multilingual children with speech sound disorders

Setting: ...........................................................................................................................................................................
Day/date: ......................................................................................................................................................................
Professional participant: ..............................................................................................................................................
Child participant: ..........................................................................................................................................................
Family/others present: ....................................................................................................................................................

Environment/setting description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Supporting documents/data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outside</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside (group/common area)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside (individual therapy/work room)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Activity description – Cultural Historical Activity Theory framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>People</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Tools used</th>
<th>Object of activity</th>
<th>Supporting artefacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fieldnotes – observations

...................................................................................................................................................................................
...................................................................................................................................................................................

Anything especially innovative, interesting, or important?

...................................................................................................................................................................................
...................................................................................................................................................................................

Reflections

...................................................................................................................................................................................
...................................................................................................................................................................................

To do for next visit?

...................................................................................................................................................................................
...................................................................................................................................................................................