

THE EFFECTIVE RESEARCH PROCESS: UNLOCKING THE ADVANTAGES OF ETHNOGRAPHIC STRATEGIES IN THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

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Abstract

In doing academic and educational research activities, many researchers especially, the doctoral students find it very hard and challenging in choosing the best and appropriate research method for a particular research. While some people are overwhelmed by the plethora of research designs, many researchers still believed that it is difficult and complex in making the selection of the right research approach and methodology for any research study. This exploratory study examined the ethnographic approach in the qualitative research design as an effective process in educational research protocols. The ethnography design as one of the qualitative research methods became significantly popular in the academic globe in the 1980s as well as a useful tool for doing research related activities from the cultural and natural settings. The purpose of this investigation is focused and centered on helping the present and future doctoral students unlock the benefits of using the ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods to conduct their research study. Data for this study were collected from 26 present and future doctoral students from San Antonio, Texas. The findings that emerged from the data suggested that while there are some other research designs associated with the qualitative method, many doctoral students prefer to use ethnographic paradigm as the most effective and appropriate process in conducting qualitative research.

Keywords: Qualitative research, Ethnographic, Interview, Observation, Fieldwork, Methodology

Introduction:

The ethnographic design (ED), which is the art and social science research method that literally means the ‘portrait of a people in a cultural setting’, is often referred to as the interpretive, constructivist, naturalistic or

post-positivist approach that answers the questions about the challenging and complex nature of phenomena, with the aim of describing and understanding the phenomena from the informants' perspectives. The ethnographic approach that is used in the qualitative research design was adapted from the field of anthropology (psychology, sociology) as a way of describing human behavior, social life, and is centered on the study of different cultures of the group of people in their natural settings while using the historical, holistic, and comparative designs. In their views of ethnographic strategy, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that qualitative inquiry relies more on apparency, verisimilitude and transferability.

In reality, the issues, challenges, and discussions regarding the ethnographic method in the qualitative research paradigm is still evolving and ongoing across the globe, academic world, among doctoral students' researchers, and scholar practitioners in the field of education. There are some arguments and discussions across the academic globe regarding the quality and standards for assessing the ethnographic paradigm in the qualitative research methodologies both in the education and business settings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized on the importance of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in qualitative studies. Because the field of qualitative research is still evolving, the criteria and terminology for its evaluation are not yet agreed upon by some researchers and scholars regarding clarity and distinction on this strategy. Discussions about standards for qualitative research have failed to emphasize adequately one important dilemma, the privatization of this type of analysis (Goetz & leCompte, 1984, pp. 241 – 242) and it is basically due to these complexities and challenges associated with the qualitative method that the author of this work undertook this study, which has its aim centered on helping the present and future doctoral students to unlock the benefits associated with the ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods. In this work the writer is determined to create an awareness by letting the doctoral students and other researchers using qualitative method know that the ethnographic strategy allows them the opportunity to immerse themselves thoroughly in the lives of their audience or informants through active observation and unstructured, focused group, and in-depth interviews to gain access, clarity, knowledge, and distinct information in the research design challenges (Ejimabo, 2015). His main aim and purpose in this work is also to allow the student researchers the ability to understand the historic nature of ethnography, differentiate it from other common types of qualitative approach, and to help them appreciate the core benefits of using this strategy in research activity which is mainly used to study, learn, and understand people or groups of people from their diverse culture and natural settings.

Qualitative Approach

The qualitative research method or paradigm is understood as one of the means of doing comprehensive, systematic and authentic research projects both in the academic and secular society. A qualitative research paradigm places emphasis on understanding through observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of people's words, actions, and records. In this study, paradigm means essentially a worldview, a whole framework or systemic network of beliefs, values and methods within which research takes place. For Merriam (2001), the basic interpretation of qualitative study is seeking to discover and understand phenomena, a process, and the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved. In this study, ED in the qualitative research method was used to discover patterns in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people brought and associated with them.

According to Ejimabo, (2010) a qualitative research paradigm as a process examines the patterns of meaning, which emerge from the data collected from the participants. It is focused on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of participants in a very conducive and natural setting. Under this approach, data collection is done through observation – participant and direct, in-depth interviews, group interviews, and collection of relevant documents, photographs, and videotapes as opposed to doing surveys in quantitative study. The researcher used a qualitative research method to discover patterns as well as to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of/ or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring and associate with them. In qualitative study, people's words and actions represent the data of qualitative inquiry. This requires methods that allow the researcher to capture language and behavior. To undertake qualitative research - requires a strong commitment to study a problem and demands time and resources for effectiveness and efficient results. There are so many reasons and values in doing qualitative research project. For instance in this study; the researcher found the qualitative design very useful and valuable, because the participants were receptive to qualitative research. Likewise, the researcher was allowed the consideration to present a detailed view of the research topic, for the topic needs to be explored; to study individuals in their natural setting and theories need to be developed. Moreover, the researcher took the role of an active learner who could tell the story from the participants' view, rather than as an "expert" who passes judgment on participants, and was also able to bring himself into the study (Ejimabo, 2010).

The Common Types of Qualitative Methods

Although there are many forms of qualitative methods or approaches, the most common types used by most doctoral students and other qualitative researchers include: (1) *Grounded theory*, (2) *Case study theory*, (3) *Historical research theory*, (4) *Ethnographic theory*, (5) *Narrative research theory*, (6) *Participatory action research*, and (7) *Phenomenology theory* (Ejimabo, 2015).

Grounded theory: It is the theory that studies interaction as they occur naturally and used to generate a valid and general explanation that clarifies a process and interaction among people, as well as to gain a better understanding of what is being studied. It is associated with identifying the key variable which explains what is occurring and goes on to develop an emerging theory in the study. It is the study of “abstract problems and their processes... the purpose of which is to generate concepts and their relationships that explains, accounts for and interpret the variation in behavior in the substantive area under study” (Glaser, 1992, p. 19).

Case study theory: It is a theory that is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). It is associated with the telling of a real or life stories.

Historical research theory: This theory is associated with the information of the past events. It seeks to learn and study how the past events are related to or have influenced the present both in values, interest, and meaning while identifying the topic of significant interest to the researcher with regard to the present and future (Ejimabo, 2015).

Ethnographic theory: It a research method located in the practice of both sociologists and anthropologists, which should be regarded as the product of a cocktail of methodologies that share the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular culture or social setting. Participant observation is the most common component of this cocktail, but interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography, life histories all have their place in the ethnographer's repertoire. Description resides at the core of ethnography, and however that description is constructed it is the intense meaning of social life from the everyday perspective of groups members that is sought (Hobbs, 2006).

Narrative Research theory: It is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus....Simply stated...narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). This theory is associated with connecting events, actions, and

experiences and moves them through time (Kramp, 2004, p. 110). It is a process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling.

Participatory Action Research: This is ‘a process that simultaneously includes adult education, scientific research and political action, and which considers critical analysis, diagnosis of situations and practice, as sources of knowledge’, while constructing the power of the people (Fals Borda, 1985, p. 14). It is associated with people and groups researching their existence, beings, values, culture-natural settings, and experience while examining their goals and objectives as well as their position, interest, needs, motives, vision, values, and shared philosophy in life.

Phenomenology Theory: This theory is centered on essence or structure of a lived and shared experience of the individual or group. It always seeks to answer the critical question - what is it like to have a certain lived or shared experience (Ejimabo, 2015), and this approach, most often used by psychologists, seeks to explain the "structure and essence of the experiences" of a group of people (Banning 1995). Phenomenology does greatly overlap with ethnography, but, as Bruyn (1970), points out, some phenomenologists assert that they "study symbolic meanings as they constitute themselves in human consciousness" (p. 286).

Ethnographic Strategy and Meaning

The ethnographic research design has no particular generally accepted definition; rather, it has been defined differently by many researchers and scholars in the field. For McMillan & Schumacher (1997), they maintained that ethnographic research, or ethnography, is both a study of interactive strategies in human life and analytical descriptions of social scenes, individuals, and groups that recreate their shared feelings, beliefs, practices, artifacts, folk knowledge, and actions. In other words, it is both a process and product of describing and interpreting cultural behaviors. Ethnographic methodology was born in anthropology. It unites both fieldwork and artifact such as written text. Fieldwork, undertaken as participant observation and ethnographic interview, is the process by which the ethnographer comes to know a culture; the collection of artifact is how culture is portrayed. There is general agreement that culture itself is not visible or tangible but is co-constructed and reconstructed by the act of ethnographic writing (<http://der.org/docued/>).

While there are different forms of ethnography, realist ethnography and critical ethnography are the two popular approaches often discussed when using this particular design in the qualitative research (Ejimabo, 2013). The realist ethnography is associated with the traditional approach used by

cultural anthropologists that reflects an objective account of a particular situation taken by the researcher in reporting the data learned from research informants at a field site and is always reported in the third person's point of view. In the other hand, ED which is often referred to as "critical approach" (Carspecken, 1995; Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Thomas, 1993) is a kind of ethnographic research in which the investigator advocates for the emancipation of groups marginalized in our society (Thomas, 1993). Critical ethnographic researchers typically are politically minded people who seek, through research, to advocate against inequality and domination (Carspecken & Apple, 1992). In this piece, both ethnography and critical ethnography as a research design was used intermittently to mean the same thing, to avoid chaos and ambiguity, while creating a pattern of meaning, comprehensiveness, and clarity in the usage of the term (Ejimabo, 2015).

Ethnographic approach in the qualitative research design is a method that enables, supports, encourages, and helps the investigator to explain the valid information, shared learned patterns of values, behavior, beliefs, philosophical way of life, and language of a culture shared by a group of people in particular natural settings and environment. It is a particular form of research process in the qualitative that allows researchers to examine the patterns of meaning which emerge from the data collected from a selected group of participants in any given study. A good research undertaking begins with the selection of the topic, problem or area of interest, as well as a paradigm (Creswell, 1994; Mason, 1996). In qualitative study, design (ethnography) for example, which is an ongoing process, is the patterning of the thinking of a person; it is a principal example among examples, an exemplar or model to follow according to which study actions are taken. It is an action of submitting to a view (Stanage, 1987) when used as a critical theory assumes that cultural and social reality is historically constituted and that it is produced and reproduced by people. Although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, critical theorists recognize that their ability to do so is constrained by various forms of social, cultural, and political domination.

Support of Literature

While sometimes ethnographic strategies have been ignored and overlooked by some researchers as a vital alternative in the research methodological process, many research students believed that it is an appropriate form of qualitative design that involves practically, a particular submission into the realm of work to be researched as well as a solid roadmap to a broad range of research explorations and discoveries in the cultural, social, academic, natural, education and organizational settings (Ejimabo, 2015). Ethnographic method is an approach that delves beneath

the surface to examine the power relations and influences affecting phenomena by using field methods not only to identify culture, the “consciousness” or the “lived experiences” of others, but also to expose the political, social and material disempowerment of individuals and disadvantaged groups in order to elicit change (Forester, 1992).

Ethnographic methods are a means of tapping local points of view, households and community "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990), a means of identifying significant categories of human experience up close and personal. Ethnography enhances and widens top down views and enriches the inquiry process, taps both bottom-up insights and perspectives of powerful policy-makers "at the top," and generates new analytic insights by engaging in interactive, team exploration of often subtle arenas of human difference and similarity. Through such findings ethnographers may inform others of their findings with an attempt to derive, for example, policy decisions or instructional innovations from such an analysis (Genzuk, 2003). The review of some related literatures in this study reveals a great concern for understanding and identifying the major benefits of the ethnographic paradigm among present and future doctoral research student in San Antonio, Texas. Thus, the review of literature regarding this study consists of 4 main sections which is meant to help students understand the concept (ethnography) clearly as well as its usage in conducting a research, namely: (1) Ethnographic design as a social scientific research theory, (2) The Ethnographic paradigm used as a scientific research tool, (3) Ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods, and (4) The importance and advantages of ethnographic research design. In a broader sense, ethnographers study schooling, public health, rural and urban development, consumers and consumer goods, any human arena. While particularly suited to exploratory research, ethnography draws on a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, moving from "learning" to "testing" (Agar, 1996) while research problems, perspectives, and theories emerge and shift (Genzuk, 2003).

Ethnographic Design as a Social Scientific Research Theory

Clarity in the understanding of the appropriate research design process will enable the research students the opportunity to clearly describe the correct approach appropriate for the study or rather, that the procedures used to ensure that data obtained is representative of the required expectation and result in the work. According to Hycner (1999), “...the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants” (p. 156). It is important to help student researchers become aware from the onset that ethnographic “design is an ongoing process that involves ‘tracking’ back and forth between different components of the design, assessing the implications

of goals, theories, research questions, methods and validity threats for one another” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 3).

Theories are vital to research design because they tend to be internally consistent and usually do not contradict themselves. They act as a guide to researchers’ thinking and ideas by enabling them to draw from the knowledge of findings that existed before the research study. For Denzin and Lincoln (2000) a research design is defined as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action’ dealing with first principles, ultimate or the researcher’s worldviews (p.157). A theory or paradigm is a systematic set of beliefs and assumptions with their accompanying methods. It enables researchers to have a clear and distinct understanding of realities and their pattern of meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 15). Students of research need a distinct, systemic, and thorough research design or suitable vast range of research approaches that would allow them to select the most fitting methodology, or a combination of appropriate methodologies that are suitable for a particular study or group research (Creswell, 2002).

Research is an important personal journey that suggests an improvement for an existing practice in any given phenomenon. In his view, Creswell (1998) maintained that: “Besides dialogue and understanding, a qualitative study may fill a void in existing literature, establish a new line of thinking, or assess an issue with an understudied group or population” (p. 94). For ED researchers, it easier to make clear, consistent predictions from a consistent theory due to the fact that theories are constructed by systematically collecting data and carefully analyzing the data for patterns. Theories do not ignore facts; instead, they provide the best means to deal with challenges and difficulties associated with the researcher’s role, helping the researcher in data collection, analysis, and interpretations and writing the final report (Flinders & Mills, 1993).

The aim of this study is centered on helping the present and future doctoral student researchers understand the most appropriate ways of ethnographic research strategies in the qualitative study while offering them the opportunities to examine questions and challenges with clarity and certainty in comprehending the best approach that meet the needs of the researchers in any particular study. Mertens (1998) maintains that in order to guide their thinking and practice, researchers should identify the worldview that most closely relates to their own. It assists the researcher in the entire research process regarding the ways of looking at things and clarifying one’s ideas as well as providing the means to deal with complexities associated with the study.

The Ethnographic Paradigm Used as a Scientific Research Tools

The Ethnographic paradigm used as a scientific research tool represents diverse research approaches (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001), and the form and content of ethnographic reports thus vary considerably. It a research method located in the practice of both sociologists and anthropologists, which should be regarded as the product of a cocktail of methodologies that share the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular culture or social setting. Participant observation is the most common component of this cocktail, but interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography, life histories all have their place in the ethnographer's repertoire. Description resides at the core of ethnography, and however that description is constructed it is the intense meaning of social life from the everyday perspective of groups members that is sought (Hobbs, 2006). While the critical ethnographic method is associated with the describing of the culture and social interactions of a particular group or subgroup, it involves extensive immersion in a natural setting of the people or group people, with regard to their cultural, historical, and natural environments.

Ethnography is an important and well known form of qualitative research process in the social and natural sciences with particular reference to cultural anthropology that centers on people as a group and their culture in their natural settings and environment. According to Harris and Johnson, (2000) ... ethnography is a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior - based on information collected through fieldwork. Students of qualitative research should know that the understanding of research design to be used in any research study is as important as doing a good research. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described research design as a "flexible set of guidelines that connect theoretical paradigms, first to strategies of inquiry and, second, to methods for collecting empirical material" (p. 14).

In this study, the author addressed some of the important ethnographic strategies and tools that include: (a) the core principles of critical ethnographic research design, participants, (b) data gathering process, (c) unstructured in-depth critical ethnographic interviews, (d) field notes from the focus groups, (e) development of themes and categories, and (f) a triangulation of findings as a solid roadmap to doing a critical ethnographic research in the qualitative research methodology. Although, it is understandable that sometimes authors may contradict one another in their discussions and explanations of ethnography as a relevant tool and a suitable explorative research process in the qualitative study, this work offers a step-by-step approach in the basic aspects of planning, conducting, analyzing, and evaluating the critical ethnographic paradigm in the qualitative research. It

also addresses elements and concepts useful for assessing the methodological challenges and analytical defensibility of the critical ethnographic paradigm in the qualitative research design (Ejimbabo, 2015).

Ethnographic Strategies in the Qualitative Research Methods

In qualitative research method, ethnographic design is generally considered to be an approach that questions the traditional separation of theory and method of interpretation and data, subjective and objective, and of ethics and science; and particularly the treatment of solely the second term in each pair as constituting valid research. It is considered to very useful because it adopts a complex theoretical orientation toward culture (Nastasi, 1999) and prefers to see the binary constructs as interconnected, making mutual contributions to knowledge (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, J., & Lofland, L., 2001). It also focuses on the oppositions, conflicts, and contradictions in contemporary society, and seeks to help eliminate the causes of alienation and domination (Habermas, 1997).

Ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods are typically aligned with the post-Enlightenment philosophical tradition of situating research in its social context to consider how knowledge is shaped by the values of human agents and communities implicated in power differences, and favorable for democratizing relationships and institutions (Anderson, 1989). It distinctly assumes that cultures are positioned unequally in power relations, and sees descriptions of culture as shaped by the interests of the researcher, the sponsors of the project, the audience, and the dominant communities. Therefore, cultural representations are acknowledged as always being somewhat partial and partisan (Cortazzi, 2001).

ED in the qualitative research consists of the observation and analysis of human groups considered as individual entities. According to Ngwenyama (1997), this philosophical approach to research is fairly different from those approaches traditionally adopted whereas traditional social theorists contribute to the preservation of the status quo; critical social theorists seek to emancipate people. The major task of the ED in the qualitative research is seen as being one of social critique, whereby the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo are brought to light. Its main methods of data gathering and analysis include participant observation, structured and unstructured interview, field notes, archive records, documents and photographs. In his perspective, Darnell, (2001) stated that besides participant observation and interactions with participants, these sources might include life histories; and narrative analysis (Cortazzi, 2001), photography, audio or video recordings (Nastasi, 1999), written documents (Brewer, 2000), data documenting historical trends, and questionnaires and surveys (Salzman, 2001).

In ethnographic research process, the researcher needs to have good knowledge of cultural anthropology and the meaning of a social-cultural system as well as the concepts typically explored by ethnographers. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note that, humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. In other words, people's lives consist of stories. Thus, while narratives are written in a literary, almost storytelling's approach, the ED approach questions the traditional separation of theory and method, interpretation and data, subjective and objective, ethics and science, and particularly the treatment of the second term in each pair as constituting valid research. Crabtree and Miller (1992) suggest that the best way to determine if the choice of a particular qualitative research design is appropriate is to ask how the particular topic of interest is usually shared in the group or culture of interest. Ethnography thus aims at recording as accurately as possible the perspective modes of life of various groups (Levi-Strauss, 1963). ED requires the research investigator to show evidence of residing or spending considerable lengths of time, interacting with people in the study setting, observing, and recording their activities as they unfold through means such as field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), audio and video recordings.

The Importance and Advantages of Ethnographic Research Design

In the ethnographic design, researchers seek and strive to understand how people make meaning and interpret phenomena in their natural settings in order to discover a pattern of meaning about their world and experiences (Ejimabo, 2013) and it is associated with allowing researchers the opportunity to investigate dynamic, very complicated or critical design issues and challenges in research activities. Ethnography according to Trinh (1991) has traditionally functioned as that method that allows the writer to grasp the native's point of view, to realize his vision of the world and to present that vision to the world of the reader (p. 65). These processes are in affirmation with the anthropologist's objectivity that merges with the native's subjective view of the world, producing a text that allows the observer to get inside the other's skin (Trinh, 1991, pp. 67- 68).

ED seeks to discover and connect the meaning of a situation (complex or not) to a broader system or structures of social life, political power, and control while challenging the status quo and at the same time asking the question – “Why it is so” and in this paradigm, the context is what defines the situation and makes it what it is in the study. For example, ethnographic design is aimed at understanding the worldview through the eyes of the group being studied while avoiding urgent and early use of theories and concepts prior to the whole investigations in the research. In lieu of this idea

stated above, Maines (1993) maintains the need, to wait with 'reducing' until after it has been collected. It helps researchers immensely when observing and/or interacting with target audiences in their real-life environment in their research and often used to understand the design challenges with regard to the processes, objectives, meaningful domain, participants, audience, and goals, values, and context/s in the study. ED as a research process helps to authenticate the transcribed and interpreted data collected in the research. In like manner, this approach in the data collection is associated with a term known as "Reflexivity" which indicates the investigator's intent- to explore the ways in which the researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999).

The Reflexivity mentioned here is about contextualizing the research without allowing context to either steal the whole picture or distort the information collected from the audience, and thereby allowing the multiple narratives that are bound to come out of the research stand out while avoiding the process of imposing a larger single narrative on the study (Ejimabo, 2015). In this approach, researchers immerse themselves in the life of people they study (Lewis, 1985) and seek to place the phenomena studied in their social environment, natural, and cultural context. The purpose of ethnography is interpretive and critical, and that the pursuit of social justice is aimed at developing insights into symbolic meanings of experiences as well as to obtain a deep understanding of people and their culture. A hallmark of ethnography is extended, firsthand participant observation, fieldwork, and interactions with participants in the study setting (Ejimabo, 2013).

The importance and advantages of ethnographic research design can be linked with the different ways in which qualitative researchers have recognized and used this method that include: (1) for developing a solid, clarity, and valid understanding of the design issues, challenges, and problems, (2) the ongoing complexities or complications associated with research design, (3) that process and all data collected be a true representation of the, participants, audience, and group of the people in their original settings, (4) the best process of dealing with the research – bearing in mind that an error can affect their work negatively, and (5) seen as one of the most in-depth research methods possible. Other major functions of ethnographic design include: multifactorial, field – based, inductive in nature, holistic, dialogic, personalized, dynamic, and involves extended period of time. In their discussion of ethnographic research method, LeCompte and Schensul (2010) who maintained that there are seven defining characteristics of ethnographic design that include:

1. Being carried in a natural setting and not in the laboratory

2. Involving intimate, face - to – face interaction with participants
3. Presenting an accurate reflection of participants perspectives and behavior
4. Utilizing inductive, interactive, and recursive data collection to build cultural theory
5. Using both quantitative and qualitative data
6. Framing all human behavior within a socio-political and historical context
7. Using the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret study results (p. 356).

Thus, in order to use the ethnographic critical design, researchers must endeavor to be knowledgeable, competent, and very highly efficient and skilled in ethnographic characteristics and usage capabilities that would enable them to design a better and comprehensive solution.

Research Questions

The purpose of this investigation was focused and centered on helping the present and future doctoral students unlock the benefits of using the ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods to conduct their research study. Thus, based upon the review of theories and related literatures on ethnographic design in the qualitative methods and research in the academic settings, the following research questions were designed: They are as follows:

1. *What are the major factors that make the ethnographic research process challenging among doctoral students?*
2. *How does the ethnographic strategies and characteristics affect and influence current researchers?*
3. *What do you think would be the best approach and benefits for using ethnographic design in conducting a qualitative research?*

The author firmly believed that the answers generated from the above and other related questions that have emerged in the course of this study may provide meaningful and useful insights to current and future doctoral students to unlock the benefits of using the ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods to conduct their research study.

Methodology

According to Silverman (2005), a methodology is how the researcher goes about studying a phenomenon. In this study, the author used the ethnographic design in the qualitative method to help the present and future doctoral students to unlock the benefits associated with the ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods. ED in the qualitative research study places emphasis on understanding through observation, careful

documentation, and thoughtful analysis of people's words, actions, and records (Creswell, 2004). The purpose of this work was centered on helping the present and future doctoral students unlock the benefits of using the ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods to conduct their research study. Thus, the methodology was based on the views, perception, and experiences of the researcher (as a university faculty member) and 26 present and future doctoral students from San Antonio, Texas. According to Groenewald, (2004) to arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure 'phenomena' and the only absolute data from where to begin (p.4). Thus, the researcher in this work was disposed to discovering a pattern of meaning through the natural setting, was interested in the process rather than outcomes, in context rather than specific variables, and in discovery rather than confirmation (Merriam, 1998).

The ED was selected in this study because it is seen by many scholars as one of the most effective means of doing comprehensive, systemic, and authentic research (Ejimabo, 2013) and when compared to other qualitative approaches has the ability to deliver a detailed and faithful representation of investigator's experiences, knowledge, ideas, behaviors and attitudes in their selected study of interest. It is considered to be of vital importance and; due to its relative and subjective nature, an ethnographic researchers can be very useful in discovering and analyzing relevant participants' behaviors, attitudes, and emotions in their natural settings (Ejimabo, 2015). A good research undertaking begins with the selection of the topic, problem or area of interest, as well as a paradigm (Creswell, 1994; Mason, 1996) and in this study, ED, was seen as the patterning of the thinking of a person; it is a principal example among examples, an exemplar or model to follow according to which study actions are taken. It is an action of submitting to a view (Stanage, 1987).

In their discussion about the use of ED as a useful qualitative approach in research, LeCompte and Schensul (2010) recommended that ethnographic paradigm should be used to: define the problem when the problem is not clear, identify participants when the participants, population sectors, stakeholders, or the boundaries of the study population are not yet known or identified, explore the factors associated with a problem in order to identify, understand, and address them either through research or intervention studies, when they are not known, identify and describe unexpected or unanticipated outcomes, ... answer questions that cannot be addressed with other methods or approaches, and ease the access of clients to the research process and its products (p. 356).

The Participants/Informants in Ethnographic Research Design

According to Hycner (1999) "...the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants" (p. 156). In this research, 26 present and future doctoral students from different universities in San Antonio, Texas were selected as participants in this study. They consist of 12 women and 14 men of doctoral students with an average age of 35. In ethnographic design, the author recognizes that it is important to note that the selection of the research informants must be based on the researcher's judgment and the purpose of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997) and in looking for those who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988, p. 150). The researcher was able to accurately select research informants for this study from a very reliable and valid source with regard to: culture, location, environment, education, skill, experience, knowledge, moral value, and good behavior with the solid aim of discovering a new pattern of meaning and an avenue towards a problem solving and solution. For the main task of ethnographers in research activity is to document the culture, the perspectives and practices, of the people in these settings. The aim is to 'get inside' the way each group of people sees the world (Hammersley, 1992). In this work, the role of each participant was clearly explained in details by the investigator as well as what each member would do in the study recognizing that each participant's active involvement is necessary and was considered as a part of the whole research project.

The Role of Ethnographic design Researcher

The role of the researcher in ethnographic design is to be an observer, a full participant, the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, participant observer, an interviewer and an investigator, and he/she must be aware of his/her own assumptions/biases about the phenomenon being investigated. It is the work of the ethnographic researcher to create an understanding among selected participants and encouraged respect, tolerance, effort to know each participant of the team, bond, and to treat everyone the same. Together, both the researcher and the participants must agree on the modalities to be followed in the interview encounter. The doctrine of reflexivity argues that "one is free to choose personally relevant issues of research, to draw on and make explicit, personal experience, to enjoy the wisdom and companionship of the 'subject'" (Bannister, 1981, p. 199).

The main task of ethnographers in research activity is to document the culture, the perspectives and practices, of the people in these settings. The aim is to 'get inside' the way each group of people sees the world (Hammersley, 1992). The ED researcher must have the experience,

knowledge, skill, and ability to understand and work positively with his research informants while being aware of the usefulness of team effort as well as how an effective team can help its members produce a successful result the research projects and activities. Thus, from the beginning, it was the responsibility of the researcher to make it very clear that each participant had something different to offer in this research project. Other important criteria for evaluating ethnographic study are interconnected with standards for ethics in qualitative research. They include principles for good practice in the conduct of qualitative research, and for trustworthiness in the interpretation of qualitative data (Creswell 2001).

Data Collection Procedures

The two most prevailing methods of data collection associated with ethnographic study are interviews and observations. The interview process was used in this study as the primary strategy for the data collection in conjunction with observation and document analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Collecting data from three different sources provides “data triangulation” to contrast the data and validate the data if it yields similar findings (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bloor, 1997; Holloway, 1997).

In this study data were collected from 26 full time doctoral students selected from different universities in San Antonio, Texas. The data which include: individual and semi-structured interviews, fieldwork, and observations were collected through a series of in-depth group discussions that was centered on the benefits of using ethnographic design in the qualitative research projects. The study was confined to 26 selected participants and those with at least four years of university doctoral course work experience and, are in process of completing their doctoral dissertations. These selected informants consist of 12 female and 14 male with an average age of 35.

Interviews

In views of Briggs (1986), the use of interview techniques presupposes a model of social interaction. The interviewer specifies the issues to be covered, while the respondent supplies the information (p. 46). At the interview encounter, as the first order of business, the researcher presented the participant with an informed consent form to read and sign. The researcher went over every element of the form and ascertained that the participants fully understood what was expected of them, how interview data would be recorded, transcribed and stored, and how the interview tapes would be destroyed after transcription. Merriam (1998) suggested the use of interview: when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people

interpret the world around them. It is also necessary, to interview when we are interested in the past event that, are impossible to replicate (p.72).

The research questions provide the major step for the investigation and the key point for the data analysis; here the researcher used an unstructured in-depth interview process to explore the experiences of his audience. Here, the investigator chose the researcher's role as an active listener and collaborator "to tell the story from the participants' view rather than as 'expert' who passes judgment on the participants" (Creswell, 1998, p. 18). All interview sessions were tape recorded with participant's permission and used as a check to the field notes of the researcher. This method is encouraged in conducting critical ethnographic research - because ethnographic analytical procedures vary by researchers' schools of thought, quantitative as well as qualitative procedures and instruments may be incorporated if appropriate (Bernard, 2002).

Methodically, during the interview process, the researcher was aware that research design and questions deal with answering the questions; who, where, what, how, and why in order to capture information in the collection of data. Kvale (1996) remarks, with regard to data capturing during the qualitative interview said that it: "is literally an interview, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest," where researcher's attempt to, "understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold meaning of peoples' experiences" (pp. 1-2). The interview protocols helped the author of this study to identify some themes that were directly associated with the research questions on which they wanted to collect information and then built questions around those themes. These questions were - "directed to the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the themes in question" (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 196). Thus, the importance and usefulness of interview process was in line with the views of Seidman (1998) who maintains that:

Interviewing...is a basic mode of inquiry. Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experiences (p.2).

Observations and Field Notes

In ED, observation as one of the means of data collection in the qualitative method provides rich information that cannot be obtained through statistical sampling techniques. Equally, in ED, the researcher requires a solid understanding of the research paradigm and guided practice in the use of qualitative observation and analysis techniques, in order to discover and interpret the importance of what is observed, and to establish a plausible connection between what is observed and the conclusions drawn in the research report. In this study made out time to observe all the participants in

different and natural settings recognizing in ED, observation of the participants in the context of a natural sense is among some of the classic elements of data collection in naturalistic or field study are observation (Ejimabo, 2015). Observation as an important research tool can lead to deeper understandings than interviews alone because it involves looking at and attentively watching what is going on at the site. It also provides knowledge of context in which events occur and may enable the research investigator to see things that participants themselves are not aware of or that they are unwilling to discuss (Patton, 1990).

The field note data is of vital importance in the ED research process. This researcher used fieldwork notes in this study that include: drawings, maps, running descriptions of events, setting, behavior, people, activities, emotions, fear, and sounds as he observed his participants in the site. Miles and Huberman (1984) emphasized that memos (field notes) must be dated so that the research can later correlate them with data. Fieldwork notes or journals are of great importance because, in some research studies, researchers are easily absorbed in the data collection process and sometimes do forget or fail to reflect on what actually happened on the site. Lofland and Lofland (1999) maintain that because the human mind tends to forget quickly, field notes by the researcher are crucial in qualitative research to retain data gathered. The writing of field notes during the research process compels the researcher to further clarify each interview setting (Caeli, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in ED of the qualitative method, which is primarily inductive and recursive process, enabled the researcher to organize the data into categories in order to identify themes or patterns evolving as data collection proceeded rather than imposing them a priori (Anderson, 1989), as these facilitated a deeper knowledge and understanding of the benefits of using the ED among doctoral students in conducting their research projects. The study followed a sequence of distinct steps in order to secure the reliability of the data based on participant's recall. Here the researcher begins with identification of the themes emerging from the raw data, a process sometimes referred to as "open coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In their view about qualitative research study, Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p. 6) regard analysis as the "systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships. It is a process of transforming the collected data through interpretation in order to discover a pattern of meaning, as well as a process of "bringing order, structure, and meaning to a mass of collected data" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 111).

For clarity, the researcher studied and emphasized on participant's attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and practices, as the objective of ethnography is to come to a deeper understanding of how people in particular contexts experience their social and cultural worlds. He distinctly practiced reflexivity in this research study, a process of self-examination and self-disclosure about aspects of his own background, identities or subjectivities, bias and assumptions that can influence data collection and interpretation (Brewer, 2000).

Validity and Trustworthiness

In ED, “validity is often used to refer to the correctness of credibility of a description, explanation, conclusion, interpretation, or rather, other sort of account found in the data” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 106). According to Seidman (1998), researchers must inform what they did by using concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability in their research. The author allowed the selected participants to serve as a check to the study to ensure immediate validation as to the accuracy and credibility of the narratives in the data. The constant communication between the researcher and the selected participants added to the confidence and validity of the interview transcripts (Ejimabo, 2013).

In evaluating this work, the researcher personally examined the study to see how well he used triangulation data (corroborating evidence), member checks (the accuracy of the account), peer reviews, and researcher's reflexivity to show that the study is both credible and trustworthy (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). This approach was conducted with several participants to avoid misunderstanding, accuracy in the interpretations, or transcription of the interview information given by the participants (Ejimabo, 2015). Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) explained triangulation as a tool to ensure accuracy and alternative explanations in case study research. Triangulation attempts to address issues of validity through the use of multiple sources of data. This author used all data the collected from documents, interviews, fieldwork, and observations in order to create the chronicles, narratives, and most importantly, scrutinize the project with regard to ways to report the research findings that are reported and included in the study: “stories and narratives were used both for the gathering and the representations of data which were usually created and revised collaboratively between researchers and the subjects (Conle, 2001, p. 22).

Findings

To obtain findings, this researcher focused his ability on the development of themes (which took approximately 18 months and allowed the researcher to spend considerable time immersed in the data). He applied the first

strategy - which is the meaning of condensation, “through which long interview passages are distilled into shorter statements, retaining fidelity to original words of the interview participants” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 296). During the open coding of the data, the researcher was able to identify and tentatively name the conceptual categories and continued to sift through the data until themes emerged, a strategy known as meaning categorization. Because interpretation in critical ethnography values not only the validity of the study (e.g., enhanced by triangulation of data or the sophistication of methods used), but also the social usefulness of the research and the ways it addresses issues of social justice, human development, and ethical integrity, themes were sorted by relevance to the research questions (Nastasi, 1999).

The purpose of coding in the ED data analysis is not only to describe but, more importantly, to acquire a pattern of meaning and new understanding of a phenomenon of interest and significance. Thus, the findings in this study were based upon the purpose, objectives, and research questions of this research as well as examined in multiple levels (Creswell, 2003) that include three major sources: (a) open-ended questions posed through interviews, (b) demographics, (c) observation, and (d) fieldwork. Based on the research questions, the interview questions were developed thematically.

Demographics of the Participants in the Study

In this research, the key participants were limited to the perceptions, experiences, and views of 26 present and future doctoral students from different universities in San Antonio, Texas and those with at least four years of university doctoral course work experience and/ are in the process of completing their doctoral dissertations. They consist of 12 women and 14 men (doctoral students) with an average age of 35. The researcher was able to accurately select research informants for this study from a very reliable and valid source with regard to: culture, location, environment, education, skill, experience, knowledge, moral value, and good behavior with the solid aim of discovering a new pattern of meaning and an avenue towards a problem solving and solution. There was no data on either race or ethnicity collected. More information on the demographics of the selected participants is shown below:

Table 1. The description of the participant’s gender in the study

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	14	53.85%
Female	12	46.15%
Total	26	100%

The description of the participant’s gender in the study as shown above in Table 1 indicated that 12 (46.15%) women and 14 (53.85%) men (doctoral students) participated in this research. The number of men in this

study was more than the number of women by a different of 2 participants. It is the aim of this research to discover a pattern from the experience and knowledge of these informants that would allow them unlock the benefits of using the ED in the qualitative research projects. The Table 2 below clearly showed the descriptions of the participants' age in the study.

Table 2. The description of the participant's age in the study

Average age	Number of students	Percentage
01 - 15	0	0%
16 - 25	3	11.54%
26 – 35	8	30.77%
36 – 45	7	26.92%
46 - 55	5	19.23%
56 - 65	3	11.54%

The information on Table 2 above among other things showed that participants who are between the ages of 26 – 35 were greater in number (30.77%) of those doing their doctoral research projects. While no participant under the age of 15 participated in this project, 3 (11.54%) students between the ages of 56 – 65 were the oldest in age that participated in the research.

Table 3. The participant's years of studies in the doctoral level

Years of studies	Number	Percentage
0 – 1	0	0%
2 – 3	2	7.69%
4 – 5	17	65.38%
6 – 7	5	19.23%
8 - 9	2	7.69%

The information contained in Table 3 showed the number of years the research participants have been doing their doctoral course studies and activities at the individual's respective universities. The above record clearly indicated that students with 4 -5 years of doctoral work were greater in number than other participants in the study. They were 17 (65.38%) of them in this group. Surprisingly, there were some participants who are still in their 8 – 9 years of the doctoral studies, an appropriate indication that the doctoral levels of studies are hard and challenging for students.

Table 4. The Participants with previous research experience

Number	Gender	Experience	No experience
12 (46.15%)	Female	4 (15.38%)	8 (30.77%)
14 (53.85%)	Male	6 (23.10%)	8 (30.77%)
Total	26 (100%)	-	10 (38.46%)
			16 (61.54%)

The information above in Table 4 reflects an accurate account of the number of participants with previous research experience. While the record showed that a total number of 10 (38.46%) participants that comprised of 4

(15.38%) female and 6 (23.10%) male had previous research experience, a total number of 16 (61.54%) informants that includes 8 (30.77%) male and 8 (30.77%) female had no previous research experience whatsoever prior to this study. In like manner, Table 5 below contains the description of the participants using different forms of qualitative methods in their individual research projects. Thus, the record indicates that 8 (30.77%) of the doctoral students (participants) used the “Ethnographic theory” which is a higher number when compared to other participants that used the other forms of the qualitative methods in their research project (See the information on Table 5 below for clarity).

Table 5. The participants using different forms of qualitative methods

Forms of Qualitative method	Number	Percentage
Narrative Research theory	2	7.69%
Grounded theory	3	11.54%
Case Study Theory	5	19.23%
Historical research theory	2	7.69%
Ethnographic theory	8	30.77%
Phenomenology Theory	6	23.10%

Discussions

While the purpose of this investigation was focused and centered on helping the present and future doctoral students unlock the benefits of using the ethnographic strategies in the qualitative research methods to conduct their research study; this part of work presents the discussion of results and incorporates related literatures in identifying a pattern of meaning in this research. The knowledge, stories, history, and previous research experience of some the participants were the tools and elements used in this work in order to discover a pattern of meaning and achieve a valid result in this study. There are seven central themes that emerged in this research that include: (1) involves intimate, face - to – face interaction with participants (2) fieldwork – based, (3) utilizes inductive, interactive, and recursive data collection to build cultural theory, (4) holistic and dialogic approach, (5) presents an accurate reflection of participants’ perspectives and behaviors, (6) uses both quantitative and qualitative data, and (7) involves extended period of time.

The discussion of the above mentioned themes was meant to support and enable the present and future doctoral students to better understand the central benefits of using ED in their qualitative research projects as it allows them the opportunity to work from a natural setting and environment as well as an extended to time to learn and work with their participants. Basically, in the perceptions of the participants, many of them commented on the need and usefulness of using ED in the qualitative method as one of the most appropriate research paradigm in conducting any qualitative research project.

Thus, the roles of the participants could be seen in most of what some of them shared with the researcher during the interview protocols and encounter. For instance, Participant XXXOP-21 maintains: “In my doctoral studies, I was happy to learn that ED allows me the opportunities to use both the qualitative and quantitative method in my research work with a problem in the overall methodology” (April 12, 2014). In like manner, Participant XXXOP- 07 stated:

... the ED involves intimate and face - to - face interaction with the researcher, while ensuring a good understanding between the researcher and participants in accordance with the consent form. For me the constant communication between the researcher and all participants helped to build my confidence in the research encounter (June 21, 2014).

Seemingly, for others, in sharing their narratives, knowledge, stories, and previous research experiences commented greatly on the values, importance, and advantages of using the ethnographic approach in the qualitative research work. Most of the participants (21 out of the 26 doctoral students) believed through the past research experience that the ED is one of the most effective means of doing a clear, systemic, and authentic research and when compared to other forms qualitative method, has the ability to deliver a detailed and faithful representation of both the informants and investigator’s experiences, knowledge, ideas, behaviors and attitudes in their selected study of interest. In affirmation of the above statement, one of the participants said:

I do consider the critical ethnographic design very significant because of its relative and subjective nature, and it helps authors in discovering and analyzing relevant participants’ behaviors, attitudes, and emotions in their natural settings and social-cultural environments (Participant XXXOP- 07, June 21, 2014).

It is worth noting that all the participants commented positively on the rich benefits of the ethnographic research approach in the qualitative method. Finally in this work, the participants were given the opportunity and allowed to review the transcribed data from the interviews prior to the writing of the document to ensure understanding between the researcher and participants in accordance with the consent form. There was a constant communication between the researcher and the selected participants which strongly added to the confidence and validity of the interview transcripts. In this work, the author took his audience beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, avoids chaos, explains the unclear challenges, and unsettles both neutrality and neglected assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control with the aim of creating a pattern of meaning and systemic clarity in the study that would enable the present and future student researchers the opportunity understand and use the ED in their research projects.

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