Lonely ethnographer seeks research similarities: Comparing ethnographic research methodology and internet dating

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Abstract
My best mate invited me to a dinner party and I was purposefully sat next to his denture wearing, yet single Aunt. She periodically pinched my knee under the table and gave me a gummy smile. It was at that point that I decided to use the internet to find a girlfriend. However, from the thousands of profiles, it seems all of the single women who have their own teeth live in Camden, Lambeth and Islington. [Field Journal Entry Day 1]

Key words: Healthcare Research - Ethnographic Research – Performative Ethnography - Lonely Hearts

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According to Gold (2009) fifteen million people in Britain are single, and almost five million are shopping for love online. Internet dating and social networking is the great solution to 21st-century loneliness; in a world of infinite possibility, you can theoretically meet anyone. This article attempts to illuminate some of the potential analytic similarities in the format, concepts and frameworks such cyber-space encounters have with the ethnographic research process. The author argues that there are parallel between the cultural drama of the mating game and the application of ethnographic research methodology. The simple internet dating site responsibilities of snooping, stalking, checking, deciding, categorising, displaying, performing and engaging provide useful metaphor for discussing typical ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews, naturalistic enquiry, participation and purposeful observations. The comparison offers a vehicle to playfully assess the constructionist influences on ethnographic
methodology and the way language interpolates meaning within the performance of cultural representation.

BACKGROUND AND AIMS
This article has the following 3 aims:

1. To encourage the reader to consider ethnography as a feasible, strategic and pragmatic approach to dealing with ‘messy’ healthcare research projects.

2. Offer the reader a contextual and playful repositioning of the ethnographic approach and highlight some significant similarities with the development of social networking sites.

3. Discuss a number of themes related to the assumptions made of ethnography and show how the principles of participation, identity, and performing are all pertinent.

INTRODUCTION
Cyberspace is like a bubble with bright screens, pop up boxes and a peculiar sense of isolation which allows for multiple identities and impersonal contact points. The strange and insular behaviours may at first, appear to be very different to the inclusive practices usually associated with the system orientated values espoused by ethnography. Yet, the act of logging on into a simulated community provides a platform from which to re-think the participatory concerns of the average ethnographer. Because, apart from the obvious seclusion of the screen to eye relationship there are some strange and eerie similarities in the way online communities norm, form and constitute social connections. Internet dating and social networking sites encourage the passing viewer to become a participant. They promote a pixelated voyeuristic space ripe for describing, exploring and interpreting hyper-real cultural phenomena. The process of making contacts, sustaining alliances, establishing bonds and then breaking them off share in the anthropological roots which promote naturalistic enquiry, direct observation and an active involvement in data collection and analysis. As such, whether ethnographer or lonely heart both are seen as being an active research tool or ‘player’ (see Box 2 for a full folk-term glossary) and thus, enabled to enact in cultures (whether physical or cyber) where there are hierarchies, rituals, customs and language which impact on dynamics, rites of passage and communication between actors.

The exploration of these similarities in the structures and processes commonly employed by social networking, internet dating websites and ethnographic research design can be used to encourage all healthcare professionals (whether single or not) to consider ethnography as a feasible, pragmatic and credible approach to collecting, managing and interpreting their data. According to Denzin (1997) ethnography has developed through a number of stages and is now firmly established as a credible methodology. Likewise, the development of social networking sites during the relatively
short period of the last 5 to 10 years offers an insight to a number of strange phenomena related to how we may re-think the positioning of what constitutes research. In particular, the authority of a single voice, notions of identity, subject positioning as a site and lens of power, the use of language, the motivation of individual actors, the community policing of methods and the increasing acceptance of internet dating behaviour as a social norm (and in ethnography’s case a research norm).

**ETHNOGRAPHY**

Ethnography forms part of a research tradition related to anthropology (Crang & Cook, 2007; Bloor, 2007). This is the study of the social and how humans live together in cultural settings. Today, ethnography is well positioned to tackle what Denzin (1997) describes as the ‘messy texts’ which make up the many million multiple voices of the post-modern internet experience. The classic process of direct observation and participation is a defining research method of ethnographic engagement and offers a model for studying most healthcare cultures which also, when honestly reflected, present as ‘messy’ no matter how ordered we may wish them to be. The ethnographer will have study aims concerning socially orientated research questions which are able to make sense and some type of order out of most mess. According to Gobo (2008) ethnographic enquiry has its roots in the categorising work of Husserl (Ricoeur, 1967), the very human existential musings of Merleau-Ponty (1945) and the even earlier work of the American theorist Lindeman (1924) who formulated a model for analysing categories for casual connections between social phenomena. As such, ethnography draws upon a long research pedigree founded on key principles of humanness, symbolic interactionism and the social cultural space such as the internet chat-room.

Some important and influential ethnography include the work of Malinowski (1922), Mead (1962) and Bateson (1974) which are quoted as being seminal anthropological works related to mapping out family ties, cultural rituals and exotic rites of passage. More recent healthcare care ethnographies, as previously noted by the author (Holyoake, 2001, 2002), include the work of Holland (1993), Parfitt (1996) and Townsend (1996) who all make use of Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic Developmental Research Sequence (DRS see Figure 1) as their principle framework. This model was influenced by the structural and post-structural movements in Europe (particularly France) in the 1960’s and 1970’s and promotes the emic (participant voice) under study. Similar to the privileging of emerging identities in any average internet chat room, the subsequent development into this ‘messy texts’ period as described by Denzin (1997) shows how ethnography is definitely embracing the now post-modern era. It is one of the few methodologies which can offer an underlying worldview for considering what Denzin (2003) now terms performances, complex visualities
(Rose, 2007) and marginalised human and social concerns, including fragmentation (Bloor, 2007; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). The work of Bloor (2007) enables a summing up of ethnography in healthcare settings. He states that four themes have been identified. First, the theme of *symbolic interactions*, second, the *socially constructed* character of medical categories, third, the *experience of illness* and fourth, the challenges of *postmodern fragmentation*. Thus, it is with the fourth theme that this article has attempted to mischievously re-think ethnography as befitting the current period of social networking and now something beyond the Chicago School of sociological research known to Mead, Malinowski and Bateson.

**ETHNOGRAPHY – KEEPING IT REAL (IRL – SEE FIG 2)**

First things first, ethnography like internet dating is not for everyone. Researchers similar to lonely hearts want different things. Both ethnography and internet dating have specific goals and relative methods for achieving small to large scale cultural exploration. Yet, those of us who dabble in the interplay of internet dating will also recognise the first similarity between the cyber-text experience and the use of ethnography. This usually involves a notion of fantasy, desire as well as the afore mentioned postmodern fragmentation. For both the ethnographer and on-line dater, there is the desire for a defined outcome, some type of aim to be satisfied which at first might be difficult to articulate in the specific sense, but one which loosely directs the initial stages of engagement. In the author’s case, this was the want for social inclusion at dinner party invites and a girlfriend who appreciated a poor sense of humour. For the budding ethnographer, the aim will be, much to the annoyance of many fixed design researchers, one of similarly lose methodology, but one indicative of some type of similar social inclusion. That is, negotiating the practical access to healthcare sites, deciphering the nature of cultural representation (Webb, 2009) and coming to terms with what Baxter (2011) terms the ‘voicing’ of relationships.
A voicing which for both internet dating and ethnography allows for well paced stages which reflex and inform each other.

Internet dating like ethnography (see Box 1) has set stages. It starts with a strap line similar to a research aim. Something like: ‘Knight in Shinning Armour Looking for His Princess’ or, as in the author’s case: ‘Desperate, Please, Please I Beg of You’. This well worn mating call is perhaps no different to the usual research aim such as: ‘Exploring the use of language in defining the experience of care’. From these humble beginnings the next stage, like the need to establish ethical considerations and review literature, takes the form of creating a history and a reason for wanting a partner. In other words a funky profile (research proposal) that will stand out like the best project in a research bid. The primary consideration being a balance of the truth and what you can reasonably get away with. Similar to the feasibility, the over-stretched aims of your ethnography and the fact your research supervisor will let you down. The final stages include uploading flattering (taken from above and pouting) fairly recent photos, filling in the blurb and of course making it quite clear what it is you want ‘in your ideal partner’. In all seriousness, this initiation is really about joining a community, an experience which IRL would not be possible. Something not ‘real’ like meeting a potential partner by the photocopier, in a corridor or outside the taxi-rank.

Internet dating, although rapidly changing in perception has connotations of ‘second best’. It is viewed as not being as good ‘as the real thing’ (Walters, 2011). Similarly, ethnography can be measured against the dominant narrative of fixed design experimental research projects which usually attempt to locate casual relationships between well defined variables and employ a random controlled method of selection. Even though internet dating appears to mirror the random selection notion it is really the case that like ethnography there is a purposeful selecting throughout all of the stages of research design and application. The ‘keeping it real’ feel of ethnography is really about how as an ethnographer you have to make considered choices about what data to collect, about what data to analyse, about what questions to ask, who to ask and many other considerations. Similar to the serious dater who has to correspond and keep up with multiple potential partners, be active in responding to messages and regularly in touch with the sample, data and conditions in which cultural and dating meaning is constituted. Thus the continuing themes introduced in this article about the messiness, the stages and the sense of fragmented identity provide a sense of ‘realness’, something active and very much about interactions.
DOING ETHNOGRAPHY- RE-AUTHORED INTERACTIONS

The idea that all meaning is created in the interaction between people regardless of medium is one at the (lonely) heart of ethnographic theory. The desire to explore the interactions and the symbolic representations of performance between actors fosters a direct and practical can do mentality in most ethnographers. It offers possibilities to explore topics such as ‘the role of a healthcare practitioner’, ‘the impact of hierarchy / anger / emotion generally in nurse – patient relationships’, ‘the rituals and tensions in team dynamics’, ‘comparisons between cultural practices in outpatient departments’ and of course, ‘how the cyber world of internet dating reflects the key principles of research design’. Possibly more akin to speed dating, but all of which can be summed up in the central point that ethnography like internet dating is about facilitating and performing interaction.

Internet dating sites have developed in particular operating platforms for interacting. They work similar to the fixed method design by funnelling and unwittingly determining the correct mind set, frames and lens through which participants perform and make their ‘choice’. With terms such as ‘get the right one for you!’, ‘check your first 10 perfect matches’ and ‘complete the simple survey to find love’ the unsuspecting Romeo or Juliet does not notice that there is little or no scope for authentic exploration. Yet even though the parody with dominant research narratives may be apparent, it remains the case that social networking is successful. As a concept and now established cultural norm it continues to grow and grow and there are some good reasons for this. First, people are social. Second, people are more social than older sociologists would like to mention because it makes for ‘messy research proposals’. Therefore, the prospect of participating (whether in ethnography or dating) reminds us that we enjoy the gimmicky techniques and opinions of others even if we can’t predict or be certain of any pattern or response. We like to interact. We like to survey, to be private voyeurs and enjoy the spectacle that the objectification and ‘spam’ of human affairs offer us.
This is why the active and participatory nature of ethnography continues to prosper against the backdrop of a desire and over confident funding in outcome driven research. Ethnography might not be ‘the real thing’, but 5 million online British daters don’t care (well actually 4, 999, 999, because the author does!).

We are also turned on to what Steedman (1997) terms the ‘autobiographical injunction’. For the ethnographer and dating site user this has ramifications related to notions of personhood, what Giddens (1991) identifies as ‘self-history’ and the creation of new identities. Whether via the previously mentioned more flattering photo, over zealous self account of wealth or enthusiastic approach to messaging, these issues point up the very personal, reflexive and yet flexible nature of personhood. In short, whether symbolic, aesthetic or simply dialectic internet dating like ethnography is an interactive method by which one event leads to choices made about the next. It recognises the funnelling bias of self-history and the autobiographical without dismissing the witnessing and thus confirming phenomena where the public meets the private.

Thus, participant observation as a primary facet of ethnography encourages the healthcare professional to interact and become an active member the culture being studied. There is little regard for the effects of bias because the emphasis is on the emic (the privileging opinion of the population under study) including that of the ethnographer (reflexivity). As with the novice internet dater, the ethnographer aims to learn from the natives as a process of autobiography and reflexive creation. But instead of randomly placing preferred characteristics into drop down boxes, scanning the mildly risqué images of potential partners and eventually plucking up enough courage to send JoJo73 a message the ethnographer will use in-depth interviews, questionnaires and purposeful shadowing (observing) in order to begin an exploration of what informants do within a culture.

This use of multiple methods to gain and analyse data is often referred to as Triangulation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) and for the ethnographer helps to give the research credibility, trustworthiness and emphasises the case study genre so often accredited to the approach. It is the search for ‘how things are done’ that allows for an understanding of cultural practices and the same validating of trustworthiness is just as paramount for the internet dater, because the process of clarification and genuiness goes from viewing the profile, to a sequence of ‘private’ messages possibly with emoticons until you go on the first date. It turned out that JoJo73 was a ‘time waster’ and really a man from Coventry. Thus calling into question the serious issue of multiple identities, personhood and autobiographies.
Like the data gleaned from profiles and personal messages the ethnographer sees data in everything. Data comes in many forms. The little observations, off the cuff utterances and the artefacts that are used within a culture such as types of medical equipment, uniforms, unusual perceptions, the symbolism of the wedged open door and various types of paperwork, wall posters and memo’s. For the ethnographer everything is useful data to help build a picture or performance (an ethnography) which would be recognisable to every informant of the culture under study. Like in cyberspace, data is collected ‘in the field’ and is recognised as reflexive in that, it is the actual process of interacting which creates meaning. The ethnographer makes use of informant’s personal accounts, written notes, drawings, photographs, doodles and almost certainly a field journal of some type. The ethnographer aims to become saturated in the culture, its artefacts and its meaning. It is in this immersion that themes, profiles, strategies and ideas are drawn and pulled together (Denzin, 1997).

THE CONTEXTUAL, MUNDANE AND PRAGMATIC AIMS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

The idea of attempting to universalise and discover all encompassing foundations relevant to other settings is not the aim of ethnography. As previously highlighted, the reflexive nature of autobiographies, representation and self-history emphasises that meaning is constructed and constitutes the particular culture under study. For example, in healthcare this will mean a world of health and care which is not necessarily about genetics, biology and quantifiable concepts, but rather a privileging of more sociological and culturally derived research objectives. For this purpose, ethnography is often cited as being a qualitative approach to research because it often purposefully neglects correlative ambitions (often symbolised by statistics and experimental research design) and concerns itself with the seemingly simple and straight forward cultural aspects of how groups of people construct, make sense of, perform in and represent cultural meaning.

For this end, ethnography lends itself very well to many of the healthcare issues requiring research in both practice and academic settings, because it is pragmatic and feasible, just like the switching on of a social network as part of an average daily routine. The simple logging into weak yet trivialising banter whilst dipping in an out of comments to relieve boredom, distract from everyday chores and titillate long distance and sometimes mundane analytic connections. This making of rational methodological, yet relative method, as noted by Walters (2011) can not camouflage the fact that internet dating unlike research methodology is about the most intense of human emotions and unpredictable nature of love which is only marginally more understandable than astrology.
Instead of needing to develop questionnaires, interview schedules and surveys before collecting data the ethnographer has to ask is a number of simple questions related to what is happening here? In a similar manner to the novice internet dater who asks ‘who do I fancy?’ and ‘how much can I get away with on disguising my profile bad points?’ Because ethnography is concerned with the social aspect and experiencing culture the best type of data collection is contextual (participant observation). Similar to actually using a social network site there is no substitute for data collection being performed out of setting. For most healthcare professionals this will mean being on the ward, in the clinic or waiting room. The first stage of collecting data might typically take the form of asking some descriptive questions about the core topic under investigation. For example, if the researcher is interested to explore the nature of staff supervision they might simply ask: ‘Tell me about all of the different types of staff support here in this ward.’ Remembering that all data is useful, especially the way people say things, it is possible to start adding connecting descriptive questions. For example: ‘describe your average day’, ‘what are all the different types of supervision here?’ ‘What would your colleagues say are the best ways of attending supervision?’ The answers can then be collated, as an internet dater might collect ‘favourites’ into analytic sets, groups and taxonomies which grow and thicken over time ready for analysis (Mckee, 2006).

The initial phase of data collection will quickly reflect the second which is where the ethnographer begins to learn from the informant and be curious about the on-going conversation, cultural narrative and what Prus & Puddephatt (2009) describe as the ‘pragmatic examination of everyday life’. This emphasis on the very real, small and mundane occurrences between social actors allows for a rich and fertile research space similar to the free from convention arena of most internet chat-rooms. The types of questions can become more specific topics dialectically constrict and then open to illicit ‘trolling’ or the connecting alternatives of cultural meaning. It is within this context of uncertainty and flexible method that ethnographic research can appear flimsy and a soft option because it does not attempt to confine, specify or limit the collection or analysis of data. Both collection and analysis take place in tandem. One step informs the next in a type of hand holding metaphor.

**DISCUSSION- THE SOCIAL SPACE & THE CULTURAL DRAMA**

Ethnography allows you to explore the practices of documentation, the rituals that occur in the nursing office, the distribution of contact between professionals and patients, the impact of language and the power of various grades of colleagues.
In addition, ethnographers can be interested in the use of artefacts and objects such as the positioning of beds, the layout of bays, the way uniforms are worn as props and the way medical trolleys are used as camps for certain interactions. It asks questions about how young medics playfully enact class stratifications and how young nurses allow it. As noted by Jacobsen (2009) it is an ambitious thing to make ‘the unnoticed noticed’. Yet, ethnography can make for a very anthropological research study that has real political and policy changing criteria.

For example, if you start to realise that certain patients are often excluded from attending the dinning room because of staff attitudes or expected to go to bed at a set time what does this say about the way attitudes are condoned on your ward? Perhaps you have set visiting times, what are some of the hidden meanings associated with this? What are the rationales given for the continued practice? These issues may not appear to be proper research because they are not measurable, appear mundane and are so often ‘unnoticed’, but they occur all the same. The aim of the ethnographer is to explore, interpret and even perform the rituals, rites of passage, clichés, associations, clans and relationships that groups of people in a culture create and maintain. Thus ethnography like the cyber space social network offers more than just method, but also a different type of phenomena to perform, e.g. The social space and the cultural drama.

**SUMMARY – MESSY LONELY ETHNOGRAPHER STILL FRAGMENTED**

![Figure 3: Interesting Similarities for Debate.](image)

- Research tells us one thing, but the truth is in the pudding – people are doing internet dating.
- The method allows for easy access from the comfort of my armchair, I need no baby sitter.
- The self delusion of actually being better than you really are. The attention, the linking, the lack of context, the tags of love-robber …..
- Attempts to distance and perhaps reduce bias as a scientist might.
- A contagious lack of honesty in the competition known as the research bid…. Pouting upword looking photo cropped shot with honest hesitation.
- Lies, eyes and a few extra pounds - the method feels sleazy yet seems to open a whole new arena of possibilities.
- The desire is to conform to a society norm, to no longer be single, to be invited once again to the dinner party.
- It possibly feels like a second best choice -- somehow not as good as the ‘real thing’.
- Authority – not only is the internet responsive to the behaviours of the modern world, but also constitutes these behaviours.
- Subscription costs – encourage set times and promise outstanding results – for reasonable outlays.
- Lies – you, the user are not being used, like the scientist, you make rational methodological choices.
- Website claims are like those of formal research methods. They offer choice and rationality and interject what Walters (2011) describe as business speak based on the 'factuality of data'.
- Likewise, the way the sites work are akin to the way fixed method design funnel and determine unwittingly.
- The surveying method of most sites leave very little scope for authentic exploration -- whilst all the time reminding us how very human and unpredictable we really all are – even if we are not free thinking.
- Such objectification of humanness offers a whole array of symbolic and semiotic analysis to this growing phenomena.
- There remains a lack of other socially cementing relationships to support the method.
- Photo’s – biography (past & present) – ideal mate (the future).
- Snooping on others to compare and write you own narrative identity.
- The automated rejection message symbolises the gift.
- Multiple storied identities and fluidity in a space of the public gaze and pantheon
- The global village and the fact that men are men the world over (it is a new and emerging cultural space which is policed differently).
- New hierarchies rise and then fall quickly.
- The new values attached to the visual.
- The desire of the hidden. Isolation, guilt and shame of the known.
- Back to pre modern of arranged marriage.

Ethnography does not aim to reduce bias or control the collection of clean and pure data, but rather, encourage the generation of as much data as possible. The work of Clarke (2005) actually promotes the notion of creating bias in an attempt to stir up more reflexive data to inform the research.
In an opposite attempt to ‘oversimplification’, the examination of the unnoticed, mundane is anything but simple. The realisation that the attempts of discovering and or generating grand narratives is what Gergen (2009) might describe as a modernist project. This primary idea feeds into the second major difference for ethnography and that is the role of the researcher, like that of an active internet dater is anything but non bias creating or neutral, but as an active doer and research tool in their own right. Instead of the researcher following a prescribed and pre arranged design, the ethnographer is faced by many challenges, conflicts and anxiety creating decisions about what to do next as ‘messy’ data presents, ‘fragments’ and as such, it is the researcher who is the difference and the person who needs to flag up their profile and get noticed.

Thus the notion of the cultural difference in so many ways replicates the continuing development of internet social network and dating sites. It is a seemingly lawless place, but one which is actually full of convention, ritual and norms. Where there are people, there is discourse. Cyber dating is a place where Gobo Jordan’s Law as cited by Gobo (2008) is definitely pertinent: ‘an informant who never produces misinformation is too deviant to be trusted’. Ethnography like cyber-space is well equipped for the untidy uncertainties of postmodern living.

REFERENCES


