

Chapter 1

Outline of the Study and Researcher Backgrounds

Abstract Ethnographic teams comprise individual members who contribute vastly different knowledge, experiences and skills to the collaborative research enterprise. This introductory chapter first outlines the context, setting and research focus of the ethnographic case study in this book. The study is broadly located in the domain of learning as it occurs in the interactions between health professionals and their clients in a real-life institution, a Karitane child and family residential unit in Sydney. Following this, brief biographies of each of the team members, Dr Teena Clerke and Dr Nick Hopwood, detail their diverse professional, educational and research backgrounds and experiences.

Keywords Team ethnography • Collaborative ethnography • Team research • Qualitative researchers

As an introduction to our conceptualisation of collaboration in ethnographic teams in this book, in this chapter, we outline key features of our study. More detailed accounts are documented elsewhere (Hopwood 2013; Hopwood and Clerke 2012). We also begin to explain issues of asymmetry by describing relevant aspects of our different personal and professional backgrounds. Nick worked fulltime as chief investigator and Teena worked one day a week as research assistant. This difference in our relative status in the research project represents a significant asymmetry in power relations, on which we expand in later chapters.

1.1 The Research Study

The study was conducted in the Residential Unit of Karitane in Carramar (Sydney). The Unit offers a five-day intensive intervention for families with young children aimed at building parents' confidence and skills managing sleep and settling, breast feeding and food, parent-child relationships and toddler behaviour

management challenges. Families are supported during their stay by a range of clinical and Allied Health professionals.

Our study investigated the workings of the Unit, framed by the following three questions focusing on how staff support families to effect positive change:

- How do professionals learn from and about the families they support?
- What practices bring about learning and positive change in families?
- How is partnership accomplished between professionals and families?

Spanning 30 weeks over a twelve-month period in 2010 and 2011, between us we visited the research site at Carramar over 80 times. Six of our visits were simultaneous or at different times on the same day. While 55 staff work in the Unit and up to ten families stay each week, we focused on a subset of these during the study, totalling around 60 consenting families and 40 staff. Observations of non-participating families were not recorded.

Our fieldwork methods include: loose observation, shadowing individual staff members and families, participating in group activities, taking photos, sketching, collecting documents, collating quantitative data from existing organisational databases, and recording audio and video data. See [Chap. 3](#) for concrete descriptions of the asymmetries in our fieldwork participation and practices.

1.2 Researcher Biographies

Our personal and professional backgrounds differ enormously, which the following biographies illustrate.



In her mid-fifties, **Teena** grew up in Western Sydney and has spent a large part of her professional life as a visual communication design practitioner. She has worked as an academic in design and adult education in a number of Sydney universities since 1996, while continuing her design consultancy. Teena was employed as a research assistant on the study, while completing her doctorate, a feminist study of design scholarship. It was her first experience of ethnographic research.

In the early 2000s when her daughters were young, Teena attended a residential parenting unit in Sydney. Her sister is a qualified Child and Family Health (CFH) practitioner who provided professional support during this time.

Her early parenting experience equipped Teena with an experiential understanding of the work of CFH practitioners. She was more cognisant than Nick of the Unit's hospital-like environment and the practical work in which the staff engaged. She also had a keen appreciation of some families' less complex parenting difficulties.

Primarily visual work, design is practised through systematic observation, documentary examination, and dialogical engagement with clients and other stakeholders in the production of communication artefacts. Teena's design practices enabled her to quickly capture her observations through sketches, yet also impacted on her writing practices in complex ways (see [Chap. 5](#)).



Nick is in his early thirties, and moved to Australia from the UK in 2010 to take up a Fellowship at the University of Technology, Sydney. His experience in educational research began with his postgraduate work—an ethnographic study of learning geography in secondary schools (Hopwood 2012). From 2006 to 2010, Nick was involved in a range of qualitative studies of graduate students' learning and academic work practices. As Research and Evaluation Officer for Oxford's Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice, his academic work diversified into areas of institutional reform and evaluation of development activities.

Nick's initial contact with and learning about ethnography continues to shape his ethnographic practices: these adopt a strongly British sociology of education hue (see Mills and Ratcliffe 2012), following the likes of Geoffrey Walford and Martyn Hammersley.

It was a related ethnographic sensibility, an interest in images developed through his doctoral work, and a strong concern for empirical evidence that Nick brought to UTS, alongside understandings of learning and pedagogy that reflected several years' researching these phenomena in a range of settings.

At the time of the study Nick was not a parent and had relatively little experience interacting with very young children. This provided an important dimension of asymmetry with Teena, as well as occasional moments of bodily awkwardness,

for example when he was asked to hold a very young infant! Such actions, so taken for granted by parents, staff, and Teena, were initially new for Nick, evident in his stiff bodily response!

References

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