ISTR INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THIRD-SECTOR RESEARCH
Voluntas (2022) 33:1179–1186
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00421-y

RESEARCH PAPERS

The Pitfalls and Potential of Participant-Observation: Ethnographic Enquiry in Volunteering

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Accepted: 20 September 2021 / Published online: 4 October 2021
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Abstract Ethical issues of ethnographic research are long-debated, but the context of volunteering and voluntary organisations emphasises challenges and opportunities associated with this method. In this paper, we explore these rarely examined concerns with focus on participant-observation, in terms of 'voluntariness' of participants, responsibilities of researchers in maintaining boundaries and self-care of researchers themselves in such contexts. Reflecting on implications in ethnographic enquiry from research design to conclusions, we argue volunteering should be viewed as an important context highlighting ethical issues often seen as 'tick-box' exercises or generally accepted research limitations. The increased risks to participants through access, sampling and questioning processes, to ethnographers through emotional involvement and to volunteer-involving organisations are discussed through reflection on three distinct pieces of research conducted between 2009 and 2019. These issues are ethical as well as methodological, as data yielded may be rich, demonstrating immersion in the 'community', but also limited in credibility.

Keywords Ethics · Participant-observation · Volunteering · Ethnography

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Introduction

Our understandings of research and giving overlap: often co-existing, distracting from one or the other (Mills, 2013), alternatively (or simultaneously) they inspire and engage. While nascent research explores unique impacts, identities and relationships of the voluntary sector, methodology within this unique context and one of its key stakeholders—volunteers—is relatively little explored (O'Neill, 2001). Ethical issues and their management are rarely dealt with in this field, with exception of research in specific contexts such as health and social care (see Cox & McDonald, 2013). There is a lack of consideration of broader ethical issues surrounding volunteers as 're-searched' and researchers as volunteers.

This is not only surprising because it is such an illuminating area of research in itself, but more so given the integral associations of the key concepts and phenomena involved. Firstly, the inherent connection between volunteering actions and actors, morality and ethical principles has been discussed in academia for decades, and in society for as long as traditions of giving have existed. Secondly, this field warrants a 'brighter' methodological spotlight since 'voluntariness' provides a fundamental ethical foundation of research, and research depends on volunteers.

There are challenges and opportunities when the exploratory spotlight is placed here. Researcher responsibilities, data limitations and special considerations when studying vulnerable populations are discussed. We identify implications for research and practice which apply directly to our field and beyond considering the connections identified. Volunteering contexts highlight aspects of research methods design and conduct generally as worthy of greater attention, but particularly within them.

The focus here is on ethnography as a method encompassing a range of tools to appropriately explore and understand volunteering and the wider voluntary sector. In the research which forms the basis for discussion, volunteers are defined as individuals with recognised roles within organisations. In this case these organisations exist mainly within the UK voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE), but some (mainly museums and galleries) are public sector: all not-for-profit. While the paper highlights unique aspects of the VCSE context in terms of ethical issues and ethnography, the authors acknowledge issues raised could be significant across sectors involving volunteers, profitable or not. 'Voluntariness' is defined distinctly from volunteering as condition rather than activity, in which an individual chooses to undertake volunteering and/or research of their own free will.

The author draws from ethnographic experiences with volunteers in diverse contexts to demonstrate ethical issues, on management of volunteering in:

Cultural heritage: PhD fieldwork involved 24-month participant-observation at a public sector railway museum as interpretation volunteer, and a nature reserve and visitor centre as estates volunteer, both in Tees Valley UK.

Public events: Ethnographic research over 9 years participating in a large annual 'Wartime Weekend' re-enactment event in North Yorkshire, UK, where visitors are encouraged to 'co-produce' events by performing as part of living history events and re-enactments.

Wellbeing improvement: The author was employed by an environmental conservation charity to undertake research on the impacts of volunteering in nature-based projects on health and wellbeing, across the Tees Valley UK.

Field notes from the author's reflective research diary are quoted throughout. The former two pieces of research were awarded University ethical approval. The third was not conducted in association with any University (or the National Health Service), and so was conducted without ethical approval but followed the same guidance in design as the others in line with the researcher's training.

In writing a paper of this kind, it would be remiss to omit the authors' own philosophy and assumptions. In terms of ethical research, we believe a combination of personal moral judgement through sensitivity and intuition, as well as training in not only ethical research, but research in general is crucial. This is not to engage in a 'born or made' dilemma, and we want to outline at this point we feel ethical judgements made by individuals can be learned through experience, which alongside formal ethical training is essential. The need is even greater where volunteering and ethnography meet as this paper demonstrates.

- Key research questions tackled are: How does volunteering and the voluntary sector emphasise ethical issues in conducting research?
- How do ethnographic approaches raise ethical issues when researching volunteers and the voluntary sector?

While not within the scope of the paper to comprehensively review ethical issues raised in ethnographic volunteering research, the findings and field notes from the cases above illustrate those the authors consider to be most salient in this field. The literature in this area is limited, but key authors underpinning this are identified in Table 1.

Table 1 demonstrates awareness of these issues across methodological discussions and different contexts, but little squarely within the fields of volunteering and/or voluntary sector research. This paper highlights these key ethical issues in different contexts within that field (to one another and to those above) to aid opening up conversations about this as significant across volunteering.

Ethnography and Participant-Observation in Voluntary Studies

The increased diversity of UK volunteering opportunities in the twenty first Century has been mirrored by increased diversity of research methods used to explore, describe and explain it. While no study could feasibly purport to reveal 'everything' about giving and volunteering, there is a real need to recognise methodological approaches should be complimentary and interactive wherever possible (see O'Neill, 2001). With this in mind, the suite of tools and data available to ethnographers would suggest a highly appropriate 'fit' for those wishing to explore, describe and/or explain volunteering and the voluntary sector. Indeed, O'Neill (2001) highlights the value of ethnography, specifically longitudinal and diary-based studies.

There is a continuous need to identify the breadth and depth of the voluntary sector: who does what, how much and for how long. Ethnography cannot answer such questions as appropriately as other methods, and therefore, the knowledge we have now is generated mainly through survey methodology and its associated tools. There is some argument that as these methods are employed more they should be investigated more in terms of limitations, and are by some scholars (see Rooney et al., 2004). However, we suggest ethnographers in the volunteering context uniquely illuminate methodological issues for research of any design in this sector, to some degree beyond that.

The philosophies and assumptions underpinning many ethnographic studies associated predominantly with qualitative data limit ethical application in volunteering contexts due to increased subjectivity, discussed later. The

Table 1 Key ethical issues for ethnographic research

Ethical issue	Literature	Findings/Arguments
Context	Parker (2007)	Enfold ethic and ethnographic, explicit discussion between researchers and researched
	O'Conner and Baker (2017)	Ethical issues are emphasised by ethnography in volunteering contexts
Informed consent	Madison (2005); Parker (2007); Pels (in Strathern, 2000b)	Negotiated, moving and reflective processes needed
	DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011)	Participant-observation is ethically challenging rather than 'unethical'
	Strathern (2000a)	The 'unknowns' of ethnography deem it unethical
Data credibility	Watson and Till (in DeLyser et al. 2010)	Difficulty recording, interpreting and analysing participant-observation data expected
	Garthwaite (2016); Tinney (2008)	Exercise judgement on volunteering role undertaken, acknowledge subjectivity as volunteer and researcher
	Dewalt and Dewalt (2011)	Recognise significance of naivety and anticipation in design, conduct and analysis
	Tinney (2008)	Necessary preservation of distance between volunteer and researcher
	Garthwaite (2016)	Researcher feelings of guilt around criticality of individuals/organisations
Researcher risk	O'Conner and Baker (2017)	Role negotiation ongoing
	Mills (2013)	Ethnographic research goes beyond employment into everyday lives. Voluntarism and 'giving' research have value in understanding researchers and participants
	Goerisch (2017)	Volunteer ethnographer roles simultaneously occupied, beliefs and values can be compromised
	Augusto and Hilario (2018)	Self-reflexive approaches enable volunteer ethnographers deal with challenges
Practice risk	Garthwaite (2016); Tinney (2008)	Exercise judgement on volunteering role undertaken, acknowledge subjectivity as volunteer and researcher
	Goerisch (2017)	Philosophical conflict/fit can cause questionable 'goodness' of work

participatory nature of ethnography can cause role confusion for researchers, alongside the role of volunteers as consumers/producers, audiences/resources and beneficiaries/donors, so the fundamentals of ethnography are both mirrored and compounded by those of the culture the researcher immerses themselves in.

Ethnographic research also shares an issue with volunteering in the benefits being impossible to fully communicate or comprehend until directly experienced. Ethnography, much like volunteering, is immersive, multisensory and requires time and effort to pay off. Barriers to engaging in ethnography can also be compared to those reported for volunteering, predominantly relating to availability and accessibility (Watts, 2011). The result of this situation is that ethnographic enquiry into volunteering is rarely undertaken, more rarely scrutinised.

Volunteering is undoubtedly representative of a unique culture (Spradley, 1980), something not the norm. The complexities and clarifications above do much more than simply describe why ethnographic—specifically participant-observation—research has greater implications in volunteering contexts; they justify ethnography as a highly appropriate and valuable research method for it, one underused.

Experiences of day-to-day operations are key to volunteer satisfaction, where negative they "vote with their feet" (Walk et al., 2019). Undoubtedly satisfaction of initial motivation is involved, but motives are multiple and changeable, and inextricably linked with quality and range of relationships between volunteers and others, influenced by culture, context and perceptions. All this is difficult to fully or credibly explore through interviews and/or questionnaires. Participant-observation contributes deep, rich data to studies of volunteer motivation, sympathetic to social constructionist approaches (Weenink & Bridgman, 2017; Walk et al., 2019).

We should not consider ethnography and participant-observation interchangeably as many researchers "whimsically" do (Forsey, 2010), with the latter undeniably the core tool of the former (see Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998; Watson & Till, 2010). Use of this tool with volunteers in organisations offers opportunities, but also potentially adds confusion over boundaries identified between participant and observer.

The ethical minefield surrounding an ethnographic researcher is well acknowledged (see Dingwall, 1980; Brewer, 2000; Madison, 2005). Context, naturally central to consideration of research ethics in relation to any

method, but fundamental to philosophy behind ethnography, features in these discussions, although predominantly from a medical perspective. The profile and prevalence of volunteers in medical research have led to some rich and progressive discussions about the need to entwine ethics and the empirical in relation specifically to ethnography (Parker, 2007). There are also rare, interesting perspectives on this from design (Miller, 2014) which argue there are disciplinary differences which affect applications of ethics where ethnography is involved.

Boundary issues resonate more with volunteers than in research with many other types of participants because the position they already occupy in organisations and communities has its own fuzzy boundaries. Volunteers straddle a comparable position to researchers: they are consumers and producers, audiences and resources, beneficiaries and benefactors (Hagan, 2014). Gaining insight into volunteering through common qualitative and quantitative tools is compromised by this unique position: not knowing whether volunteers are representatives of 'supply' or 'demand', alongside boundary issues experienced by the researcher. Certain contexts and research samples further complicate the dual roles both volunteers and researchers occupy in ethnographic studies, highlighting ethical and methodological issues at each stage of the research process.

Emotional Engagement

Research conducted 2016–2017 involved young people in disadvantaged communities, many living in super lower output areas designated 'most deprived' in the UK. All participants experienced poor mental and physical health and never engaged well with education, employment or training. Projects were designed to engage these young people in society as environmental volunteers, undertaking technical and transferable skills programmes to bring them closer to the workforce and improve their wellbeing. Outcomes reported through participant-observation, qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires showed many achieved those goals, but this project highlighted the potential and pitfalls of ethnographic research with vulnerable volunteers, for researchers and participants.

Ethnographic research for anyone has its benefits and risks in terms of emotionally engagement. Where participants are vulnerable naturally risk increases, but negative impact on researcher wellbeing may be exacerbated by the volunteering context. The majority of volunteering takes place in services for people and animals in need, often in desperate situations, with 'helping others less fortunate', 'making a difference to the lives of others' and 'giving something back to an organisation that has impacted on a person's life' listed as top motivators by the National Council For Voluntary organisations (2020). Such opportunities may engender more vulnerable participants in peer support roles, giving where they have benefited, and where volunteering operates as a form of inclusion and wellbeing improvement in itself the likelihood of vulnerable volunteers is raised. Furthermore, participant vulnerability combined with seemingly selfless motives in these contexts, made research difficult for the researcher as participant, observer and human being.

Volunteering contexts and motives add ethical implications of emotional engagement for ethnographers. Where volunteers commit to human/animal/environmental need, difficulties can arise for researchers immersed, beyond how they feel about participants. Becoming part of such a strong culture involves difficulty navigating the participant-observer role, but also likely to involve emotionally stressful situations, even heightened risk when researchers fully immerse themselves to the point where placed in emotional or physical danger.

There was a personal battle during the research described above: the researcher not only felt increasing affinity, sympathy and resulting bias towards vulnerable participants, but also a need to 'prove themselves' as a participant. Tasks were taken on beyond abilities, time was extended to include social events where volunteering was not involved, but activities of some physical and emotional risk were (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). At times physical and emotional energy was not preserved (Tinney, 2008), as peer support became central to interactions. There is some work on the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting ethnographic research with vulnerable populations, but little on dilemmas faced by researchers adopting the dual role of the volunteer ethnographer (O'Conner & Baker, 2017)" (Augusto & Hilario, 2018, p.1).

Ethnographic research has documented volunteering within organisations, and some authors discuss the dual role of the researcher-volunteer (Mills, 2013; Goerisch, 2017) but few draw specifically upon the role of the volunteer ethnographer. Where ethnographic research focuses on roles of volunteers, it doesn't do so explicitly in relation to methodology, but we can glean valuable insights from reflexive accounts where researchers comment on difficulties of participant-observer navigation.

Garthwaite's research (2016) as a food bank volunteer highlights possible advantages of being a volunteer collecting data through participant-observation. Their interest is mainly in the experiences of the charity's beneficiaries, but they reflect on volunteering relationships:

> "As I do not have and never have had a religious background, to the other volunteers I do not suppose I could ever be considered a full "insider" as I lack this shared experience and perspective" (p.64).

There are two considerations here: difficulty integrating could compromise the value of data *but* if a researcher integrates well, through shared experience, ethical issues arise. The difficult balance between assimilation into a culture and environment of inherent risks for a researcher should be addressed as an ethical issue, ensuring immersion does not go too far and compromise data credibility, through bias.

Naturally there are legal issues with ethnographic research involving vulnerable participants as well as ethical. These straddle this discussion around risk to researchers and participants. The following section links in this as we move to consider risks around data credibility, but discussion of ethical/legal overlap is beyond the scope of this paper.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

> "...yesterday, returning from Wawela I had some ethnological ideas, but I can't remember what they were."
> (Malinowski, 1967, p.168).

There is wide recognition that in recording, interpreting and analysing data during participant-observation, negotiation and even disorientation are expected (Watson & Tilll, in DeLyser et al. 2010, Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011), with Watson and Till stating ethnography is about "'doing' than it is about the procurement of 'facts'" (p.134). Cultural immersion, generally regardless of context is not achieved effectively alongside recorders or clipboards. Any committed ethnographer practising participant-observation will reflect on this as something which could compromise the credibility and trustworthiness of findings.

However, challenges increase significantly where participant activity (and thus volunteer ethnographers') is engaging and absorbing. With paid employees this may be an issue as responsibilities of participants and, by extension ethnographers, mean little time or space: productivity takes precedence over the observation. This difficulty is increased further in the volunteering context. The fact that volunteers contribute time and effort for no monetary compensation can make it harder for ethnographers to fulfil their 'researcher' role, to distract volunteers' attention from contributions engaging them in interviews or questionnaires. But while participant-observation may present a less intrusive, and more faithfully ethnographic option, it does not create the best situation for robust data collection.

As highlighted above volunteering predominantly takes place in health care, disaster relief, environment supporting causes highly dependent on them to exist, often revolving around urgent need, highly focused and risk-laden activity (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011). Such environments, alongside commitment to cultural immersion, inevitably make taking full and accurate notes difficult:

> "…writing these notes in my car, during lunch break. It is the only place to keep my notebook since we're tree felling today…I'm focusing so much on remembering key things people have said so I can quote them with confidence, I'm missing other things."
> (Diary 22/4/2011).

There are also issues of perception and bias. The 1960's Rosenthal experiment showed expectations influencing how human beings are treated, and performance is rated. Perceptions of volunteers may be influenced by existing negative experience, but for a researcher embarking on an ethnographic journey of being a volunteer, it is more likely perceptions carried will associate them with integrity. This may extend to perceiving volunteers as more thoughtful and selfless than people who don't, and the organisations/causes they contribute to as in significant need of support.

Approaching research in this field demands reflexive approaches to continuously, consciously deal with bias in design, collection, interpretation and drawing conclusions. Implicit personality theory, stereotyping and the halo effect (Mischel, 1968) mean positive/negative assumptions are often made based upon one trait, encountered early in relationships. Before even meeting, participants, and their host organisations are identified with often positive assumptions, influencing what we attend to, remember, record and conclusions we draw.

> "Volunteers are not angelic humanitarians in any sense…Nor are volunteer organisations paragons of organisational virtue in any sense" (Smith, 1983 p.33).

The author agreed with Smith's argument above when beginning ethnographic research, yet contributions and efforts vulnerable participants in particular made started to overshadow conclusions being drawn about project outcomes:

> "…not sure I'm really looking at these guys as participants anymore, they're not my friends either I need to keep that distance, but I worry that because they're unwell or they're disadvantaged in some way and they're volunteering, I'm starting to get rose-tinted glasses" (Diary 8/10/13).
> "These people are giving time when they don't have to, they don't have time they don't have anything they think they will get at the end, I think they're amazing" (Diary 1/11/2010).

The first quote above is from a diary written during research with disadvantaged young people, while the second is from working with heritage volunteers representing the 'civic core': middle-class and retirement age. Participants could not have been more different, but the same potential for researcher bias at various stages of research was noted. Concerns emerged about conclusions drawn on both projects, as well as potential impact of results. These concerns specifically related to the nature of organisations as dependent upon funding, and participants being dependent on their activities. Further, the dual roles occupied by volunteers had influence too—as service users participants explained they were acutely aware services they engaged in depended upon them to continue, and so were reluctant to reveal 'reality'.

This could have implications in terms of consent too; we require full informed consent, but can we say with confidence this is made equally by everyone, where some perceive their role as producers/resources, others as service users/audiences? Madison (2005) recognises the dynamic and continuous nature of informed consent particularly in ethnography, advocating process review at points of vulnerability and sensitivity, but in reality informed consent is something 'ticked off' in the ethical approval process.

The diary notes emerging perceptions of volunteers expressing their need to 'give back' and 'help the planet', as being 'good' and 'selfless'. This raises concerns about bias in terms of data credibility, but in a different way. Volunteer characteristics developed additional risk that not all participants, or their data, were treated equally. The risk of increased feelings of responsibility and emotional engagement by ethnographic researchers in a volunteering context may be increased by volunteer motivation, and the nature of the cause/activity.

Despite Smith's assertions denying 'angelic humanitarianism' (1983), nearly 40 years later a study on perceptions of volunteers found the general public view volunteers as warmer, more generous and friendlier than paid employees, associated with pro-social traits and altruism (Peiffer et al., 2020). Aaker et al. (2010) also found people perceive nonprofit organisations as 'warm', suggesting not great deal of change in perceptions since Smith's assertions.

An entirely different context demonstrated this vividly to the other perceptual extreme, the 'horns effect'. The author researched audience participation in the annual 'Wartime Weekend' in North Yorkshire (2009–2018). The event involves all-things 1943 including re-enactments, expectations of period-appropriate costume, and taking part in 'living history-style' activities including tea dances, evacuations and ration-based eating: a perfect scenario for an ethnographer, surrounded by quasi-ethnographers. With this event limitations to recording data (recording tools still 'out of place') were noted, but perceptual bias took a very different turn during interviews with reenactors:

> "Interviewed my first SS reenactor today—felt intimidated by the uniforms and found it hard to focus on people's faces and just ask them about their experiences as volunteers. I just find it hard to understand why you would give up your free time to something like that???" (Diary 12/10/12).

The fact these participants were volunteers resulted in judgements on motivations and attitudes, making associations that leisure activity on some level represented core values. This perception changed as more reenactors were spoken with. With some SS reenactors, it became clear the subject behind the role they were playing, and even the role itself had little to do with their motivations, they simply "like the uniform" (Diary 14/10/12). Motivation to volunteer and level of enjoyment in this role was superficial and the connection to a 'cause' simply wasn't there. If these volunteers had not made this clear or had never been encountered (sampling was by convenience), interpretation of their experiences could easily have been clouded by that initial bias.

Conclusions

Considering voluntariness as a key ethical principle of all research, and how much research depends upon volunteers, it is surprising that the concept is misunderstood (Agrawal, 2003), but so are the people involved and the ways we as researchers interact with them.

Ethnography for the author became both ethical and methodological approach. It seemed the only authentic approach to appropriately deal with volunteering. Yet as symbiotic as this relationship seemed to be, actually trying to understand what it 'means' to be a volunteer through participant-observation was regularly compromised by the complex roles occupied by both researcher and participants.

This paper highlights potential implications for both research and practice, through negotiations and conflicts surrounding roles between audience/resource, consumption/production etc. Consideration of motives, context of contributions and activities, and conflicting roles should inform the full research process.

We must consider case study research, and the similarities it has to ethnography as illustrated by Parker (2018). Recognition of 'hybrids' between case study and ethnographic approaches, would highlight potential ethical issues, particularly those raised here. We also need to recognise connections between volunteer-based ethnography and organisational ethnography, learning from one

another in terms of ethical research design, conduct and reflection.

Generally, researcher self-care is considered in terms of physical safety in collecting data and emotional effects of the data itself, making assumptions around data relating to criminal activity, poor mental health, etc. Like ethics in research design it is considered as an addition, rather than part of the process. In all this, we fail to see issues in play that we couldn't necessarily predict, e.g. attachments to certain people and organisations due to their motivations and values, we fail to see some participants (and researchers) will encounter/create ethical issues in different ways on a day-to-day basis. This is where volunteering contexts and ethnographic research raises unique concerns.

The context of volunteering though should be seen as the most illuminating for those conducting ethnography, anywhere. So many parallels exist between volunteering, ethics and ethnography, and this paper only scratches the surface. We can start this movement from within by embracing the potential and pitfalls of this research form, being as transparent and self-critical of every aspect of methodological process.

Ethics detailed in a form at the start of research focusing on issues for participants, and considering reflexivity as 'a qualitative concern' is a dangerous way to research. Ethnographic volunteering research highlights this in unique ways, not least (through the research cited here) in relation to the expectations/qualifications of researchers in being able to conduct a *fully* ethical ethnographic study with limited experience of what to anticipate. The way we consider the entire process or life cycle of an ethnographic study is critical here, not simply identifying at which stage certain ethical issues are considered, but front-loading the process so everything possible is considered at 'sign-off', reflected upon at stages during the study to acknowledge the iterative and unknown nature of such research. At the same time, such 'folding' of the ethical and empirical as Parker (2007) suggested would enrich findings, analysis and our overall understanding of volunteering.

Hammersley and Atkinson argue all social research to some degree involves participant-observation, we cannot separate ourselves from the social world in study of it (1983), and so implications raised in this paper stretch well beyond the field of volunteering research.

Funding The author did not receive support from any organisation for the submitted work.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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