Ethnography in Congregations

Anna Mitchell Hall
University of Georgia

Ethnography in Congregations

Anna Mitchell Hall, University of Georgia, USA

Abstract: Ethnography is increasingly used in research conducted in congregations. Ethnography can provide rich description and is able to navigate between the stories of congregational members and the story observed by the researcher. Quality ethnography in congregations requires attention to ethics, navigating insider/outsider dynamics, and research aims.

Introduction

The religious lives of individuals and groups have long been a rich ground for anthropological and other social research. From the beginnings of anthropological and sociological study, from the work of Claude Levi-Strauss (1964) on myth in South America, to Marvin Harris' (1966) work on sacred cows in India, to Clifford Geertz' (1971) work on Islam, researchers have worked to capture the actions and ideas that represent the religious lives of groups under study. Other researchers have chosen religious groups as particular samples for studying political and personal cultures, such as Gregory Bateson's (1958) study of the Naven ritual to explore social structure and politics and Worsley's (1957) Marxist analysis of cargo cults.

The Nature of Ethnography

While qualitative research methods are often used in congregations, one particular type of qualitative research study used in congregations is ethnography. Ethnography is essentially “cultural description” (Spradley, 1979, p. 10) or thick description (Geertz, 1973) and commonly employs participant observations, field notes, interviews, journals, and document analysis (Webb-Mitchell, 1992). Researchers may join in on the activities in the setting where they are conducting their research, and attempt to understand what those activities and actions mean to the people in the setting. One strength of ethnography is its ability to produce “historically, politically, and personally situated accounts...of human lives” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). While there are many ways to define the boundaries of what can be considered an ethnographic study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), individual ethnographic techniques such as those listed above are used in most qualitative research due to their aforementioned strengths. Ethnographic techniques are used to study a wide variety of phenomena and contexts, in contrast with ethnography, which primarily seeks to understand culture (Wolcott, 1999). Wolcott (1999) notes that ethnographic techniques can be used to examine a context or experience holistically, finding connections and/or comparisons. Spradley (1979) observes that use of ethnographic techniques can also include participant-generated data.

Examples of Ethnography in Congregations

Ethnography has been used in a number of research studies in congregational contexts. Tweed (2002) cites several: Ammerman's (1987) study of a fundamentalist congregation, Nietz's (1987) study of a Catholic Charismatic prayer group, Warner's (1988) study of a small-town protestant church, Griffith's (1997) study of a women's fellowship, and Numrich's (1996) study of Buddhist temples. More recent ethnographic congregational studies address a wide variety of contexts and emphases. Moon (2005) looked at how protestants navigated issues of homosexuality in light of power, authority and boundaries. Immigration was addressed in both Cao's (2005) examination of a congregation of Chinese immigrants regarding their assimilation and Zambiras' (2008) study of Presbyterians navigating polarization around issues of immigration. Leong's (2006) study of an AIDS ministry in an African-American church explored resistance to dominant culture. Zerai (2010) studied three congregations with different racial and theological make-ups focusing on their navigation of U.S. Politics and racial identity. Several studies, including Shuttleworth's (2010) ethnography of a mosque, Peele-Eady's (2011) ethnography of children in an African-American church, Snow, Bany, Perla and Stobaugh's (2010) ethnography of several megachurches, and Magrini's (2006) ethnography of children in a Methodist church, explored personal, psychological, and faith development.

Ensuring Quality in Ethnography in Congregations

These ethnographies can provide some insights into methodological considerations in the congregational context. Religious ethnography has specific issues: entry into another culture if applicable, sacredness of faith experiences and stories, the role of the researcher in the community, and tension between dispassionate observation vs. ministry to those sharing stories and experiences (Crain and Seymour, 1996). Certainly researchers need to consider the same issues of quality and rigor that apply when conducting qualitative research and ethnography in general, such as ensuring that research practices are minimally disruptive to the environment studied (Moon 2005; Webb-Mitchell 1992) and using data collection methods that reduce the impact of researcher bias (Snow, Bany, Perla and Stobaugh, 2010; Leong 2006). Many researchers note the necessity of increased attention to issues of insider/outsider status. In one case, Leong (2006) notes the importance of disclosure about the researcher and their intentions, while Shuttleworth (2010) observes the limitations of research in a congregation where the researcher cannot participate in the full range of religious activities due to their outsider context. Some researchers benefit from both insider and outsider status in the congregations they study due to a similar religious upbringing or affiliation, but this does not mitigate their researcher role when navigating boundaries around interactions (Peele-Eady 2011). The tricky waters of congregational ethnography require expert navigation due to the ethical issues present. In Magrini's (2006) words, "The representation of research participants, particularly children, is an ethical and justice issue....a holy responsibility to represent the research site and research participants in all their complexity....the sacred task (p. 79)."

Conclusions

Reviewing the literature on ethnography in congregations highlights the contextual considerations for conducting ethnography in congregations. Many aspects of congregational life can explored most effectively through the qualitative and intensive approach ethnography can provide. Even researchers using just one of the techniques contained within ethnography can benefit from the thoughtfulness and reflexivity recommended here for congregational ethnographers. Congregational ethnography can provide insight into faith and meaning-making as they are lived out through encounters with others on a similar path, and if done well, can produce quality research findings that can increase understanding of the congregational context.