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Abstract: Focused ethnography is a pragmatic form of ethnography, which is focused on a specific phenomenon and conducts short, intensive fieldwork. In this article, I contribute to the development of focused ethnography as an innovative, efficient, and effective qualitative methodology. In addition to augmenting general definitions and understandings of focused ethnography, I evaluate the appropriateness of this methodology for research on community development non-profit organisations. As such, I unpack the advantages and disadvantages of focused ethnography regarding its convergence with or divergence from community development practice principles including bottom-up programming, active participation, locally led action, inclusion of marginalised groups and local wisdom, devolved decision-making, and social justice agenda. Additionally, I outline which types of research projects situated in community development settings may be suited or unsuitable to a focused ethnographic approach, and provide strategies for enhancing the methodology's alignment with organisational principles.

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1. Introduction

Focused ethnography is a pragmatic form of ethnography for investigating a specific problem in a particular context via truncated fieldwork at each research site. This context tends to be one with which the researcher is deeply affiliated; for example, researching one's own sub-cultural group rather than exploring the largely unknown *other* (WALL, 2015). In this approach, a research problem and topic are defined prior to data collection, which includes gathering material from an often small number of information-rich subjects to enable relatively rapid fieldwork (BIKKER et al., 2017). Through this, researchers aim to produce findings that highlight beliefs and practices in particular settings, among particular sub-cultural groups, rather than offering generalisations (NIGHTINGALE, SINHA & SWALLOW, 2014). The methodology can be used with multiple methods and, as is argued in this article, should include some form of observation to align with ethnographic approaches and some form of in-depth participant inquiry, such as semi-structured interviews. Focused ethnography is suited to research that spans single or multiple sites as it can be applied flexibly and nimbly. This responsiveness makes the methodology particularly useful for applied research that requires findings to rapidly inform policy and practice decisions (BIKKER et al., 2017). While the scholarly literature suggests that it is most commonly utilised for research in medical and health related disciplines (NIGHTINGALE et al., 2014; RASHID, HODGSON & LUIG, 2019; WALL, 2015), I argue for focused ethnography's broader applicability. [1]

Focused ethnography is a novel methodology, most clearly articulated by KNOBLAUCH (2005). While KNOBLAUCH presented an intriguing offering, there has been scant methodological attention paid to the approach ever since, despite evidence of its use in research practice (BIKKER et al., 2017; CRUZ & HIGGINBOTTOM, 2013; NIGHTINGALE et al., 2014). As guidance around adopting a focused ethnographic approach is limited (CRUZ & HIGGINBOTTOM, 2013; HIGGINBOTTOM, PILLAY & BOADU, 2013), and the methodology is "underspecified" (WALL, 2015, §1), I offer a new perspective on focused ethnography by augmenting its definition and unpacking advantages and disadvantages that have been under-theorised. This aims to support methodological decision-making processes and guide researchers around the types of projects that may be suitable or unsuitable for this approach. [2]

Throughout this article, I contribute to the limited methodological discussions about focused ethnography and clarify the aspects that differentiate it from similar approaches including short-term, rapid, and quick ethnography, as well as from ethnography in general. I specifically assess the applicability of focused ethnography to research on/with community development non-profit organisations. Community development practices value bottom-up programming, active participation, locally led action, inclusion of marginalised groups and local wisdom, devolved decision-making, and social justice agenda. As such, I critique the suitability of focused ethnography against these values. [3]

Beginning with an overview of how focused ethnography aligns with, and is distinct from, ethnography in general in Section 2, I then present a case study research project in Section 3 to illustrate examples and draw reflections throughout the remainder of the article. Presentation of the case study project is followed by a discussion around five key elements of the methodology in Section 4: short site-visits, intensity, focus, need for prior knowledge, and use of audio-visual technology. While I contribute to refining the methodological approach in the first half of the article, from Section 5 onward, I critique aspects of focused ethnography that could contradict community development practice principles. This provides rationale, based on reflection from the case study project, for how, with some thoughtful adjustments, focused ethnography can be a useful methodology for research on/with community development non-profit organisations. [4]

2. The Essence of What Makes Focused Ethnography an Ethnography

There is no clear, precise consensus regarding what constitutes ethnographic research. Despite this, there are mutually agreed defining features that are shared by all forms of ethnography (SCOTT JONES, 2010). At its core, ethnography is about *being with* and studying groups of people who are members of a shared culture (CRESWELL & POTH, 2018; MADDEN, 2017). It is "situated in human activity, bearing both the strengths and limitation of human perceptions and feelings" (RICHARDSON, 2000, p.254). Through ethnography, researchers aim to understand and describe a group of people by following, watching, interacting, and participating in their everyday lives within their naturalistic context (ATKINSON & HAMMERSLEY, 2007; MADDEN, 2017). Thus, participant observation is at the heart of ethnographic research (CRESWELL & POTH, 2018). While participant observation is central, ethnographers regularly triangulate observation with other methods including, as in the case of the example project presented later in this article, document review and interviews (ATKINSON & HAMMERSLEY, 2007; CRUZ & HIGGINBOTTOM, 2013). [5]

Ethnographic inquiry is predominantly a qualitative and interpretivist methodology, through which researchers collect large amounts of deeply meaningful and contextualised *thick* data and participant quotes to draw theory through iterative interpretation of patterns and inductive reasoning (CRESWELL & POTH, 2018; SCOTT JONES, 2010). Contemporary ethnographic practice compels researchers to utilise findings to promote the voice and agency of everyday people (SCOTT JONES, 2010). This social change agenda aligns with community development principles, which seek to strengthen communities' ability to advocate for themselves through self-awareness consciousness-raising and active locally led participation (KENNY & CONNORS, 2017; LEDWITH, 2011; WARE, WARE & KELLY, 2022). Ethnography's capacity to enrich and support the practice of community development non-profits highlights the rationale for utilising ethnographic approaches to conduct research with these organisations (SILVERMAN & PATTERSON, 2015), a notion that will be expanded upon in the second half of this article. [6]

Ethnographic research shares many traits with other forms of qualitative research. What separates ethnography is its deep focus on understanding the culture of the research setting and the actors within that sphere, primarily through observation. This focus highlights the grounded-in-context nature of ethnographic research. For example, while interviews are commonly used across qualitative approaches, the interviews conducted in the case study described later in this article were held in the research setting (wherever possible) and were overlaid with simultaneous observation. As I asked the interview question, I was also observing the actions and interactions between respondents and others in the environment. As such, interviews were a method located *within* the method of observation. Conversely, in other qualitative approaches, interviews can be used as a standalone method where the data centre on what was said rather than what was said *plus* what was observed. [7]

The word *ethnography* conjures images of researchers who spend years living in the field. However, over the past decade, scholars have identified that the methodology is transitioning away from lengthy, immersive fieldwork. Rather than multi-year immersions, ethnographers are conducting research with significantly shorter periods of fieldwork that may be only weeks or days in length (MADDEN, 2017; PELTO, 2013; SCOTT JONES, 2010). Despite this identification that traditional ethnography can be undertaken with truncated fieldwork, I argue that fieldwork with very short observation timeframes should be distinguished from traditional ethnography in a form such as focused, short-term, rapid, or quick ethnography. While beyond the scope of the current article, a clear and considered separation of these short forms of ethnography is lacking in the literature. [8]

KNOBLAUCH (2005) was the first to clarify an emerging ethnographic methodology using the designation *focused ethnography*, although he highlighted that this form of ethnography was around long before its latest name, notably discussed by scholars such as MUECKE (1994). The similarly titled *focused ethnographic studies* (FES) contributed to, draws from, and bears many likenesses to focused ethnography but is a more prescriptive branch of applied social research with manuals and clear structures for researchers to follow (PELTO, ARMAR-KLEMESU, SIEKMANN & SCHOFIELD, 2013). While there is some disagreement surrounding similarities and differences, in their systematic review VINDROLA-PADROS and VINDROLA-PADROS (2018) suggested that short-term (PINK & MORGAN, 2013), rapid (VINDROLA-PADROS & VINDROLA-PADROS, 2018), and quick (HANDWERKER, 2001) ethnography are alternative names for focused ethnography. However, I argue a few small differences, unpacked later in this article, particularly surrounding focused ethnography's prerequisite for prior knowledge, ability to accommodate sole investigator projects, and concentration on a specific phenomenon or sub-culture. In this article, I mostly refer to KNOBLAUCH's delineation of focused ethnography. This is augmented and contrasted with information from the literature on short-term, rapid, quick, mini, and micro ethnography, noting the numerous similarities. [9]

3. The Case Study

Throughout this article, I use my PhD research as a case study to unpack the appropriateness of focused ethnography as a methodology for research on/with community development organisations. My PhD project examined how and why small community development non-profits conduct, utilise, and think about evaluation (findings reported in KELLY, 2021a). I approached the project with a pragmatist epistemology that aimed to judge "action and experience according to the success of their practical application" (KELLY, 2019, p.81; see also KELLY & CORDEIRO, 2020). Understanding how small non-profits do, use, and think about evaluation required investigation across several organisations to assess variance of practice. 57 non-profits fit within the selection criteria. The criteria required that the non-profits were registered in Victoria, Australia (although they could be operating globally), have an annual revenue of less than one million Australian dollars, and align themselves with community development principles that value bottom-up programming, active participation, locally led action, devolved decision-making, inclusion, and social justice (KENNY & CONNORS, 2017). [10]

From the total cohort of 57 non-profits, I used simple random sampling to identify a sample. I allocated each non-profit a number through the Microsoft Excel randomisation function, ordered them numerically, then chose every third entry. This provided a random sample of 20 organisations to give an approximately one-third representation of the total group as recommended sufficient for small cohort sizes and qualitative research by WOLFER (2007). A brief overview of the participating organisations is provided in Table 1. Examining the topic in several non-profits was considered important to pursue "data source triangulation" (RASHID et al, 2019, p.5). Three methods were used to investigate evaluative processes in the 20 non-profits: participant observation (251.5 hours), semi-structured interviews with 50 purposively sampled, information rich staff members, and review of 244 organisational documents including evaluation reports, annual reports, and funding proposals. These three methods were chosen as they each complemented the other and provided different angles of information with which to comprehensively understand the topic. Interviews were semi-structured and deliberately open-ended to give respondents scope to provide information I had neglected to prompt, and to enable rich discussions about staff insights and perceptions surrounding evaluation (PATTON, 2015). Observation was mostly participatory and through it, I was able to surface elements of evaluative practice that interviewees failed to mention or to perceive as evaluative. I collected observation data using the iPhone "notes" app and camera, with complete fieldnotes written up every evening using techniques highlighted by ethnographers including EMERSEN, FRETZ and SHAW (2011) and MADDEN (2017). Organisational documents provided a static record of evaluative histories that were unaffected by my presence.

Region of operation	Setting	Sector or key program area
Eastern Europe	Urban	Sex worker support
Africa	Urban/rural	Education
Africa/Asia	Urban/rural	Micro-finance/utilities
East Africa	Urban	Education
East Africa	Urban	Micro-finance
East Africa	Rural	Development
East Africa	Rural	Agriculture
West Africa	Rural	Development
South-East Asia	Regional/rural	Development
South Asia	Urban	Utilities
South Asia	Rural	Education/utilities
Australia	Urban	Sex worker support
Australia	Rural	Education
Australia	Suburban	Homelessness
Australia	Suburban	Family violence
Australia	Urban/rural	Community regeneration
Australia	Urban/rural	Pro-social behaviour
Australia	Suburban	Migrants
Australia	Urban	Sex worker support
Australia	Regional	Children

Table 1: Location and program focus of participating organisations (from KELLY, 2021b, p.4) [11]

The data were analysed thematically starting with inductive analysis of the interview data using constructivist grounded theory methodology to identify themes without a pre-conceived framework (BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). The constructivist grounded theory approach aligned with the project's pragmatist epistemology and meant that I was able to clearly articulate and consider how my prior knowledge (from practice and the literature) influenced my interpretation of the data (SEBASTIAN, 2019). The data from observation and organisational documents were then analysed deductively, using the themes identified through the interview data as an analytical framework. Any patterns or subjects from the observations and organisational documents that did not fall within the interview themes were separated into emergent themes. [12]

The pragmatist epistemology driving the project outlines that choosing relevant and useful methodologies that effectively and efficiently address the research

question is of paramount importance (KELEMEN & RUMENS, 2012). An ethnographic approach was considered appropriate as the research context is under-explored and evaluative processes in these settings were previously unrecorded. Ethnography provided the tools to scope the "beliefs, language, behaviours, and issues facing the group, such as power, resistance, and dominance" (CRESWELL & POTH, 2018, p.93). Aligned with ethnographic research, qualitative methods were necessary for helping me surface subtle evaluative practices that would likely be overlooked if I had used briefer, more structured, and less probing methods. [13]

While traditional ethnography with long immersive fieldwork would have enabled useful findings, as a single investigator project with a deadline, a traditional approach would mean that only a single organisational case study could be properly examined. As the operations and perceptions of small non-profits and their staff are largely unknown, inclusion of several organisations was optimal. I considered utilising organisational ethnography, as outlined by scholars such as GARSTEN and NYQVIST (2014), KOSTERA and HARDING (2021), and NEYLAND (2008). However, focused ethnography more specifically fit with my particular project through the pre-requisite of prior knowledge and the ability to sharply focus observations on a certain phenomenon within a short, intensive timeframe, as is discussed in the following section. Through adopting a focused version of ethnography, I was able to research 20 organisations. This pragmatic trade-off between depth and breadth was chosen under the rationale that a large sample size may provide more trustworthy and useful findings, and data source triangulation, than a single case study for the topic under investigation (BIKKER et al., 2017; RASHID et al., 2019). However, on further reflection, I noted some potential flaws with using this approach to research community development non-profit organisations. As such, I now evaluate the application and appropriateness of using focused ethnography to research these organisations and offer ideas to ameliorate concerns. [14]

4. Focused Ethnography's Divergence from Traditional Ethnography

While focused ethnography bears many complementary and comparable aspects to traditional ethnography, several key differences distinguish focused ethnography as a separate, alternative form of ethnography. The divergences surround duration of field-visits, intensity of data collection and analysis, scope of focus, prior knowledge of the setting, and utilisation of technology for data collection. These differences are presented in Table 2 and discussed in more detail in the following subsections.

Traditional ethnography	Focused ethnography
Lengthy duration in the field	Short duration in the field
Immersion	Visitation
Time extensive	Time intensive
Open, holistic	Focused
Studies whole field	Targets specific phenomenon or sub-culture
Social groups, institutions and events	Actions, interactions and social situations
Unknown	Prior knowledge
Field-notes and narrative intensity	Field-notes plus audio-visual technologies

Table 2: Traditional and focused ethnographies (adapted from KNOBLAUCH, 2005, §14) [15]

4.1 Short site-visits

There is no consensus about the amount of time in the field required to consider focused and other shorter fieldwork ethnographies to be *real* ethnography. Guidelines outlining what research constitutes ethnography and what does not are vague at best. VINDROLA-PADROS and VINDROLA-PADROS' (2018) systematic review of rapid ethnographies clarified that these methodologies engage in research periods, from conception to completion, of five days to six months. HANDWERKER's (2001) tome on *quick ethnography* identified that, to be *quick,* research periods should be between three and ninety days. ARMSTRONG and ARMSTRONG (2018) commented that rapid ethnography can consist of field-visits from one-day "flash ethnographies" to week-long observations (p.13). Similarly, ISAACS (2013) spent one day visiting each site for her multi-site research project. This suggests that rapid forms of ethnography measure fieldwork duration in hours and days rather than months or years (CEFKIN, 2013). [16]

While the scholars cited above highlight that most rapid forms of ethnography should take less than six months from conception of the research to its conclusion, this timeframe is misleading. The length of the research period itself, including the planning, analysis, and write-up, is irrelevant to the methodology. The distinctiveness of focused ethnography is in the duration and orientation of the *fieldwork* in each site, not (necessarily) in the truncation of any other aspect of the research process. For the case study of my PhD project, the entire research process spanned a three-year period. The fieldwork portion ran for eight months from January until August 2017. According to the scholars cited above, this is far too long to be considered an ethnography that fits in the focused, rapid, short-term, or quick category. However, what aligns it with these methodologies is that the face-to-face visitation in the field, the observatory portion of the research, consisted of short visits of one to nine days *per site*. The case study project observed practice in 16 of the 20 non-profits totalling over 250 hours of

observations, the equivalent of 31 eight-hour days or just over six working weeks. While this fits more neatly into the expected fieldwork durations outlined above, these *total* fieldwork duration figures are immaterial to determining the type of ethnography. The suitability of shorter-term ethnographies to the research project in question should be based on the duration of fieldwork at each research site *individually* rather than cumulatively. As the focused nature of this methodology refers to the short duration of fieldwork in each site, rather than the total duration of the fieldwork or research project, the number of field-sites and cumulative hours of fieldwork does not affect the research's ability to be a focused ethnography. Thus, focused ethnography could potentially be an appropriate methodology for a research project examining hundreds of sites and spreading over several years. [17]

Focused and other shorter fieldwork forms of ethnography have been unfairly maligned and erroneously cast as *quick and dirty* (GREEN & THOROGOOD, 2014). Inferior quality and lack of rigour are not characteristic properties of focused ethnography, which when done well can produce trustworthy and credible findings (PINK & MORGAN, 2013). These findings can be assessed using criteria to evaluate ethnography, as put forth by RICHARDSON (2000). The other aspects of focused ethnography listed in Table 2 above and discussed further below contradict the notion that short and intensive data collection in each site equates to poor research. These aspects that distinguish *focused* from other forms of ethnography deepen focused ethnography's worth as an innovative and valuable methodology. [18]

4.2 Intensive

The intensity of data collection and analysis separates focused ethnography from other forms. Rather than the more relaxed and unstructured observation of sites in traditional ethnography (PELTO, 2013), researchers adopting focused ethnography must plan their site visits for maximum efficiency and gather copious amounts of information about the specific aspect of interest to the research topic (KNOBLAUCH, 2005; PINK & MORGAN, 2013). While not referring specifically to short forms of ethnography, ATKINSON (2013), in his ethnographic article on a one-day glassblowing workshop, highlighted the level of information he was able to acquire over several hours of intense participatory observation. [19]

In the PhD project case study example, this involved long days of data collection (some from dawn until past midnight, depending on the organisation). Additionally, the visits were planned for high impact by aligning them with important meetings or other events that would likely offer useful data for the project. The visits were organised with non-profit staff to fill the time with as many opportunities for data collection as possible. This did not involve organisations changing their operations or re-scheduling items to suit me as the researcher; rather it involved me working with them to organise the most appropriate and data rich time for my visit/s. As experienced by rapid ethnographers ARMSTRONG and ARMSTRONG (2018), this resulted in "a wealth of rich data" (p.9). Further, when working with organisational heads to identify personnel for interviews, a key

criterion concerned incorporating information rich respondents. This links to the concept of *information power,* which recognises "that the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower amount of participants is needed" (MALTERUD, SIERSMA & GUASSORA, 2016, p.1753). Seeking information power helped ensure a rich quality of relevant data. As such, the interview transcripts were packed with useful insights, with very little information tangential or superfluous to the research topic. Verbatim transcription was another technique that promoted full utilisation of data collected over short, intensive fieldwork. [20]

While *intensity* refers to the amount of data collection pressed into a short timeframe, the next section that details the *focused* nature of this methodology refers to the sharp honing of what is in and out of scope. To illustrate the difference between these two aspects using the PhD case study, intensity meant interviews were sometimes conducted back-to-back with up to seven interviews per day, each taking around an hour. The focused approach meant the interviews, document analysis, and observations centred on evaluative practices and all interactions were drawn back to the key research questions. Where traditional ethnographers may have the luxury of time to absorb aspects of everyday life that fall outside of the key research questions, the focused ethnographer needs to concentrate on the narrow topic area due to limited time in the field. [21]

4.3 Focused

The image of traditional ethnography is as an immersive practice whereby researchers situate themselves within a community to seek understanding of the subjects' culture and habitus (MADDEN, 2017; PELTO, 2013). Focused ethnography differs in that the topic of investigation is narrowed onto specific variables. Instead of seeking to capture the milieu of everyday life, this focused approach hones researcher attention on a certain phenomenon (HANDWERKER, 2001; KNOBLAUCH, 2005), or sub-culture (RASHID et al., 2019). In the PhD case study, I centred on evaluative elements of organisational culture and witnessed everyday practices through this lens, filtering the vast quantity of information observed for its relevance to evaluation. [22]

Sharply focusing the inquiry in this manner enables fieldwork to be conducted efficiently and effectively, whilst still identifying the unexpected through keen observation. Despite copious amounts of data gathered quickly over a short space of time, the collected data are highly relevant and targeted to address a specific and narrow research focus. Having a precise and narrow lens through which to observe practice helps researchers exclude the out-of-scope and focus on the most useful data to quickly build a picture of what is occurring in relation to a given topic (ISAACS, 2013). [23]

4.4 Prior knowledge

According to KNOBLAUCH (2005), an essential facet of focused ethnography is "an intimate knowledge of the fields to be studied" (§4). While some scholars such as RASHID et al (2019) suggested that focused ethnographers "may or may not have familiarity" (p.2)—and that they can make up for unfamiliarity through extensive pre-planning, prior knowledge is a vital element of the methodology's success. As well as being hugely timesaving, prior knowledge furnishes researchers with nuanced, experiential contextual insights that are difficult to gain through pre-planning alone. [24]

Prior knowledge allows researchers to *hit the ground running* when entering the research site as they already understand the setting (RASHID et al., 2019; WALL, 2015). While researchers adopting traditional approaches to ethnography acquire a "degree of competence in ... systems of knowledge" via immersion in the field (ATKINSON & MORRISS, 2017, p.323), in focused ethnography, a baseline degree of competence exists prior entry to the field, allowing the researcher to concentrate on acquiring "knowledge-in-action" (ibid.). In my case, I had spent years working as an internal evaluator in various small-sized non-profits and had a post-graduate degree in community development. As such, upon entry to the research sites, I understood the purpose and intention of non-profit activities and staff behaviour, I understood the acronyms and jargon in use, and I had a good knowledge of the external context, organisational relationships with stakeholders, and organisational compliance and accountability expectations. I did not know the specifics of each non-profit site or have pre-suppositions about how or why they do or use evaluation, as that was what I was there to investigate. However, I knew enough about the everyday routines of life in a non-profit to quickly grasp relevant information without needing to spend precious time learning the basics of the small community development non-profit setting. Additionally, this prior knowledge resulted in me having much in common with the research participants (non-profit staff), which helped facilitate effective use of time in the field through quick rapport development and me being seen as *one of them*. This differs from traditional ethnography where engaging with "people who aren't like you" takes time and patience for research subjects to trust and open up to the researcher (JENKINS, 2010, p.85). [25]

The emphasis on prior knowledge for focused ethnography can have particular implications and relevance for *pracademics*—or academics who are also practitioners in their field of study (PHILLIPS & PITTMAN, 2015). Practice-based researchers can struggle to frame their positionality and note their unique stance alongside their research subjects and within their research contexts (LOTTY, 2021). Focused ethnography values researchers' extant knowledge and experience and uses those as a foundation to develop new insights and understandings drawn from new sources of empirical evidence. [26]

The necessity for prior knowledge deviates from traditional ethnography where research sites are often strange and unfamiliar settings inhabited by unknown *others* (SCOTT JONES, 2010). KNOBLAUCH (2005, §7-9) outlined this

difference as "strangeness" in traditional ethnography versus "alterity" in focused ethnography. Strangeness holds that the researcher and researched are unknown to each other and operate, think, and are guided by different norms and mores. According to KNOBLAUCH, alterity also acknowledges *otherness,* but it holds that the researcher and researched have much in common as well as much in distinction. As such, my prior experience and knowledge of evaluation in small non-profits constituted preparatory reconnaissance that enabled me to enter the research sites under conditions of alterity and strengthened my ability to collect relevant data quickly without needing to first learn the aspects of context with which I was already familiar. [27]

4.5 Recorded with the aid of technology

Another key aspect of focused ethnography is the use of audio-visual technology in data collection (KNOBLAUCH, 2005; WALL, 2015). While these technologies may be utilised in traditional ethnography, they are particularly beneficial in focused ethnography as they extend the researcher's ability to capture complete data and re-engage with primary data. Utilising audio-visual technology, including recording of interviews and site photography, enables a post-site extension of the observation with researchers able to hear and see and then re-hear and re-see multiple times over. In this manner, a one-day site-visit might more than double in length via post-site re-engagement. Of course, the use of audio-visual technology is not always possible and requires contextual flexibility. For example, while I was able to audio record the interviews, and take several photographs during observations, it would not have been appropriate for me to film this data collection. [28]

The additional information gleaned from post-site extensions is incredible. There were several occasions where I was amazed to notice something of outstanding interest and relevance to my research that I had completely missed on the original occurrence, and even missed on the initial re-hearing or re-seeing. Through multiple engagements with the same set of data, layers of meaning become increasingly apparent and researchers are presented with the ability to saturate a depth of meaning from data that single engagement cannot achieve (ISAACS, 2013). [29]

5. Conducting Focused Ethnography in Community Development Non-Profits

In the second half of this article, I critique focused ethnography as a methodology to conduct research on and within community development non-profits. Focused ethnography has already been deemed appropriate for research on organisations (KNOBLAUCH, 2005), so I move away from re-arguing organisational suitability towards unpacking focused ethnography's appropriateness to the principles and practices that underpin community development. While I specifically examine community development in this article, there are strong and overlapping links to related disciplines within social programming including international development, social work, and other human services. [30]

The disadvantages identified in the second half of this article are not unique to focused ethnography. They raise the *clash of values* inherent in many research methodologies applied in non-profits (IFE, 2013; KELLY, 2021c; SPRINGETT & WALLERSTEIN, 2008), which are also applicable to other forms of ethnography. While these issues can be addressed by using additional or different methodologies including participatory action research, Indigenous research methods, and other human-centred co-inquiry approaches, these are not always feasible or appropriate depending on the research topic and resources available. Thus, I argue that focused ethnography could offer a suitable alternative, particularly in cases where the research deals with non-profit staff or other personnel rather than direct investigation with community members. [31]

5.1 Community development

As there are multiple understandings of community development as a theory and practice for social justice and positive change, it is important to provide a brief overview. Diluted versions of community development have been co-opted by neoliberal governments and welfare-minded human services organisations that provide individual and community support, which maintain the status quo and systemic power structures (COOKE, 2004; KELLY, 2016; MASON & NIEWOLNY, 2021). Conversely, I understand community development as a strengths-based process of collective action that seeks to disrupt the status quo through participatory and democratic means with underpinning values of social justice and equity (IFE, 2016; KENNY & CONNORS, 2017). Broadly, the conceptualisation of community development adopted in this article is a radical Marxist-inspired vision of paradigm shift where power is held by the masses and development is driven from the bottom-up, led by communities for communities seeking the type of change and definition of the good life that they deem valuable (KENNY & CONNORS, 2017; LEDWITH, 2011). [32]

Within this framing, in the following subsections I discuss potential advantages and disadvantages of an external investigator (such as in the case study project) adopting focused ethnography for research on/with community development organisations. On the surface, a research approach that includes short-term involvement with the organisation, is researcher-led, and extracts data for analysis, interpretation, and dissemination without significant input from the researched seems broadly antithetical to community development practice. Through the following critique, I unpack these concerns to assess the balance between advantage and disadvantage. Additionally, I highlight some adjustments to the methodology that could help better align focused ethnography for research in community development and similar settings as well as improving its ability to align with good qualitative research practice. [33]

5.2 Short-term involvement

Sustainable community led change is often a slow process of incremental improvement that requires patient persistence over time. Community development usually necessitates long-term involvement whereby workers walk alongside communities to support them to build on their existing strengths and develop additional capacity and capability. When research (or evaluation for that matter) is conducted externally, this presents issues in terms of contextual sensitivity and understanding, limits the inclusion of local wisdom, and is unlikely to have time to build sufficient rapport to hear the most marginalised voices. Despite best intentions, investigators arriving at a new research site for a short-term field-visit will not have the capacity to observe and fully understand the dynamics at play. [34]

A few elements of focused ethnography can help resolve these issues. Firstly, the prerequisite of prior knowledge gives focused ethnographers an important head start and a good foundational knowledge of general context on which to build. The advantages of this pre-existing knowledge should not be under-estimated. Starting with a strong foundation of understanding allows the investigator to quickly identify, collect, and examine the nuanced site-specific information. Building that foundation from the ground up would involve significantly lengthened immersion in the field and hence pinpoints why prior knowledge is so important in focused ethnography, perhaps particularly so in human and social services settings as contexts are complex and problems faced are intractable and take time to comprehend. [35]

Additionally, short-term involvement in each research site is bolstered by triangulating methods. Focused ethnography, like other forms of ethnography and applied social research, encourages the use of multiple methods to cross-check information and gather different perspectives (HIGGINBOTTOM et al., 2013; RASHID et al., 2019). When coupled with a short visit to the field, triangulation becomes even more important, and I argue that some form of in-depth inquiry with information rich participants is a vital component of focused ethnography. In the project case study, participant observation was complemented by semi-structured interviews with non-profit staff and review of non-profit evaluation reports, evaluation tools, annual reports, and other relevant documents. The research topic focused on staff actions and beliefs, so the ability to hear their voices and incorporate their wisdom into the research was unaffected by the short site visit. Staff could speak for as long as they wished in the interviews and they all had access to emails that allowed them to easily provide additional information after the fieldwork stage, and member-check their verbatim transcripts. Projects where the research participants are marginalised and harder to reach would need to consider whether focused ethnography is a suitable methodology for their research. [36]

The initial recruitment of non-profit organisations included a plain language statement that offered organisations some limited monitoring and evaluation consultancy work in terms of peer-review, skills development, and advice. The

non-profits' eagerness to be involved in the project (demonstrated by an 87% acceptance rate of invitations) may have had something to do with this offer, as well as the relevance of the topic to their operations. Many of the non-profit staff requested support with their monitoring and evaluation as a result of their involvement with the research and several noted the value of the interview as a site for reflective dialoguing. This aligns with community development notions regarding the role of technical specialists who should be invited by communities (or non-profit staff in my case) to support and augment their work through upskilling and building capacity of local people and organisations in the short-term, with the objective of training locals to make specialists redundant in that community (KENNY, 2011). Framing focused ethnography, or other forms of ethnography, to fold in capacity building provides an immediate benefit to respondents and helps the investigator conduct research *with* and *for* instead of *on* respondents and their organisations. [37]

5.3 Researcher led

An important aspect of community development is that actions are led from the bottom up. For non-profit staff or other stakeholders to dictate a community's needs and the solution to those needs is disempowering and the product is likely to be irrelevant and unsustainable (KENNY & CONNORS, 2017; LEDWITH, 2011; TWELVETREES, 2017). Focused ethnography, like other forms of ethnography, is by necessity a scientific, researcher led method, which fundamentally prevents its potential to work as a community led method. [38]

The researcher led condition could be mitigated to some extent by thoughtfully incorporating a consultative process at the beginning of the project to facilitate community determination of the research question, focus and priority. Again, this is another situation where the case study project's focus on non-profit processes with *staff* as the key research subjects helped the focused ethnographic approach align with community development principles. Had the focus been on community recipients, this alignment would have been more difficult and may have necessitated adoption of a different methodology, such as participatory action research or Indigenous research methods, which do not have the requirement of top-down scientific research expertise. [39]

Because the case study project focused on non-profit staff, it was easy to access these actors at the planning stage of the research and incorporate their views and priorities into defining the problem and forming the focus topic. As the project was underpinned by a pragmatist epistemology, the importance of ensuring practical relevance of the research findings was a driver for warranting non-profit staff inclusion in shaping the research topic and in interpreting the data, as discussed in the following subsection. In this manner, the research was researcher led, but focused ethnography provided space for incorporation of non-profit staff control where they, as research subjects, had the power to direct the research in ways that were meaningful and would be useful to their practice. [40]

5.4 External interpretation

Focused ethnographic research as an externally led intervention can help surface findings that are taken for granted in the everyday operations of a non-profit (ARMSTRONG & ARMSTRONG, 2018). Despite benefits of an *independent* eye, the potential for misinterpretation of findings is a challenge common across qualitative research approaches (TUHIWAI SMITH, 2021). As a methodology, focused ethnography is clearer around processes for data collection and less prescriptive about how that data should be analysed (BIKKER et al., 2017). This allows focused ethnographers to utilise analysis techniques that align best with their theoretical framing. [41]

Despite allowances, focused ethnography is designed for sociological analysis, which requires analysis of data by researchers who are embedded in a scientific context different from the one studied. As such, this necessitates data extraction and external analysis. While focused ethnography highlights the benefits of group data analysis sessions where several researchers come together to view, discuss, and analyse the data (BIKKER et al., 2017; KNOBLAUCH, 2005), these analysers are necessarily researchers with social scientific expertise and knowledge of data analysis techniques. Team-based data analysis design could be utilised in community development settings by shifting the emphasis from teams of researchers to teams of respondents (who then become researchers in their own right). However, ethnographic restrictions of who is able and *qualified* to analyse the data means that a participatory research methodology, rather than an ethnographic one, would be required. [42]

In the project case study, I did not engage respondents in group analysis sessions; partially due to data collection across 20 sites in four continents and further because I debated whether these sessions would be an effective use of respondents' time. Avoiding time wastage was especially pertinent as all respondents mentioned their lack of time, highlighting that staff in small non-profits struggle to be everything to everyone (KELLY, 2019). As such, I had to find a more efficient way for respondents to, at the very least, check my interpretations of the data. I approached this through three channels:

1. regular communication with respondents including having them member-check verbatim transcripts and sense-check other outputs from the research;
2. triangulating the coding and analysis by having a staff member in a community development non-profit cross-code samples of the de-identified data; and
3. using thick description through provision of stories and quotes to include respondents' voices and enhance authenticity of the findings (RASHID et al., 2019). [43]

While these strategies helped increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the research, it is important to note that data interpretation in the case study project was largely my own. However, the back-and-forth dialogue that continued with participants after the fieldwork phase contributed significantly to enhancing my

interpretation of the data. My interpretations were checked, reworked, and extended through ongoing engagement with participants regarding the research and their day-to-day evaluation activities and needs. Further, my contributions toward enhancing their evaluation capacity, which I offered as a benefit of their involvement in the research, consolidated my knowledge of their situations and fed into my findings. [44]

Additionally, while the inclusion of quotes and stories helped to give the study authenticity, it was me who chose which quotes and stories to include or discard. Being highly reflexive and clear on researcher positionality is important for transparency around these problems, and for seeking to bracket or suspend personal bias (HIGGINBOTTOM et al., 2013). Further, being aware of our power as researchers in making these choices and seeking to mitigate them could help research move closer towards a community led approach that privileges local wisdom. As previously mentioned, this could include shifting analysis to respondents who could interpret their own thoughts and feelings through group data analysis sessions where they choose which data and quotes are important and what themes are key; however, this would move away from an ethnographic approach and necessitate adoption of a different methodology. [45]

5.5 Data extraction

An aspect of contention for oppressed and marginalised people across the globe has been the extraction of their resources by people with more power than them and without appropriate recompense. The powerful have plundered and looted the less powerful for millennia, taking their wealth, labour, liberty, and other capital. One of the historically less recognised capitals in this context is knowledge. Proponents of Indigenous research methodologies have been particularly vociferous in their denouncement of data and knowledge extraction from the *researched* to the *researchers,* advocating for research done *with* and *by* communities rather than *on* them (CHILISA, 2012; TUHIWAI SMITH, 2021). Extractive research has been the norm, particularly in previous decades, when researchers have entered a research site, gathered data, and taken that data away, leaving the researched with nothing. [46]

As well as being an ethical issue, this problem is antithetical to community development practice, which seeks to empower and strengthen communities rather than weakening them by mining their capital. There is nothing intrinsic within focused ethnography that prevents it from coupling with knowledge translation to ensure that the research process works collaboratively to develop ways of disseminating the findings back to respondents and community stakeholders (RASHID et al., 2019). It was necessary for the case study project, due to its underpinning pragmatist and community development principles, to report back relevant and useful information to respondents and non-profits. Without prioritising this step, the research would offer theoretical contributions to knowledge but fail in its aims to contribute to policy and practice, a pragmatic aspect of research to which shorter fieldwork forms of ethnography are well suited (BAINES & GNANAYUTHAM, 2018). Engaging in regular communication

with respondents helped facilitate this information transfer and ensure the research was investigating questions of value to non-profit staff as the primary intended users. Consideration of forums accessed by the non-profit sector (particularly practitioners), guided the means for broadcasting the findings to a wider audience. [47]

Due to the truncated fieldwork that defines focused ethnography, this methodology is not suited to long-term collaborative participatory approaches such as action research. As such, as previously mentioned, this means that focused ethnographies could have negative impacts if used for research with communities and is not well suited to investigations with this focus. However, research projects that focus on non-profit staff or organisational processes are quite different. The power differential between the researcher and non-profit staff is likely to be less pronounced and staff may see their involvement in the research project as a means for pro bono consultancy work (unless their organisation commissioned the research). In the case study project, it was easy to compensate respondents for their time through provision of peer-review, connections, and monitoring and evaluation support. Additionally, while data were extracted, those data were synthesised with data from other similar organisations and fed back into operations via the open communication channels and dissemination plan. [48]

6. Conclusion

Focused ethnography is a useful and rigorous methodology for conducting sociological research. This is particularly beneficial for researchers, such as pracademics, with pre-existing knowledge of the research subjects, topics, and/or setting. The diligent pre-planning of site-visits, and prior knowledge necessary, enable fieldwork to be conducted quickly and intensively, resulting in copious amounts of data targeted to the specific topic of inquiry. As these data are largely recorded with the aid of audio-visual technology, the fieldwork is extended and the researcher can re-hear and re-see the primary setting until extraction of the information presented in each clip is exhausted. [49]

The observation element of focused ethnography adds a vital dimension as it can provide insights into subtle and hidden practices that respondents may not recall in interview settings (RASHID et al., 2019). Additionally, incorporation of in-depth participant inquiry, such as through semi-structured interviews, is an important vehicle for quickly providing a targeted wealth of information on the research topic and should be incorporated into a focused ethnographic design. [50]

I argued throughout the second half of this article that focused ethnography is a highly suitable methodology for research on organisations, including community development ones. Incorporating some careful additions to the methodology can help it align better with community development principles, but also help it align better with good practices in qualitative and applied social research. These include engaging research subjects in the pre-planning stage to define a meaningful and useful research topic, keeping research subjects informed

throughout the research process and providing them with multiple opportunities to input and check the investigator's interpretations. Additionally, building a strong dissemination plan back to research participants is vital for authentic demonstration of respect, enacting ethical promises of participant benefits from the research, and for practical utilisation of findings. [51]

The findings of this critique suggest that focused ethnography led by an external individual investigator is appropriate for conducting research on community development non-profit organisations, particularly on topics focused on organisational process that require discussion mainly with staff, board, donors, or other non-community recipient stakeholders. However, it is likely unsuitable for research with community recipients if wishing to operate within a community development frame. While the short-term involvement, researcher led stance, and external extraction of data for interpretation and dissemination can be ameliorated at the staff level, these challenges are more serious and difficult to resolve at the community recipient level and would be more appropriately addressed by research methodologies specifically devised to align with bottom up, community led principles. [52]

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