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Historical Ethnography: Key Characteristics and the Journey Before, During, and After the Archival Field

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Key words: historical ethnography; archives; indexing; temporal codes; abductive; deductive

Abstract: The aim of this article is to elaborate on the overlooked strategy of historical ethnography. Drawing from the literature and sharing vignettes from my research at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees archive, I advance in two stages. First, by reviewing key works, I provide an overview of historical ethnography, focusing mainly on its distinct characteristics: The historical reach and reliance on a wide range of materials. I also present the inductive-deductive debate to consider the role of theory. Then I provide informed reflections about the different research stages: Before, during, and after leaving the archival field. Becoming immersed in the subject matter prior to the actual empirical examination opens the path to the archives and to a meaningful data collection endeavor. In turn, informed decisions, rather than luck, fuel the ongoing movement between data collection and analysis. Lastly, acknowledging the interpretive mindset involved with thinking ethnographically, I present indexing and temporal coding as helpful strategies for organizing a large corpus of historical data.

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1. Introduction

This article is about historical ethnography. Providing a brief personal sketch will help clarify where both I and this article stand and how we got here. Nearly two decades ago, I traversed Western Mongolia on foot and often found myself drinking cups of *kumis* (fermented mare's milk) with the nomads I met along the way. It was there—between the steppes and the mountains—that my initial interest in culture and development was born. Working as a research assistant a decade later, I worked to establish an analytical distinction between the concepts of crisis and emergency (SAMIMIAN-DARASH & ROTEM, 2019). I found myself eagerly reading ethnographies on the everyday life of relief workers, and conceptualizations of humanitarian governance; thus, I discovered humanitarianism. [1]

That initial research project set me unintentionally on my current path of inquiry. And while back then I was focusing on the difference between crisis and emergency, more recently I have become intrigued by the distinctions between humanitarianism, development, and human rights, wanting to understand where the lines cross. With direct implications for the lives of millions, these phenomena form a central part of the common global discourse. While reading about their histories, I realized that an intertwined picture emerges. The literature sometimes speaks about their deep history, pointing to imperialism and even further, to their roots in the big cultural transformations of the Enlightenment. The contrast between what seems like shared origins on one hand, and contemporary attempts to draw distinctions on the other was puzzling to me. This interest swiftly transformed into an extensive research project (between 2016 and 2020) in which I conducted a historical ethnography to better grasp the shifting situation and boundaries between these phenomena (ROTEM, 2022). [2]

Building on that experience, in this article I provide an overview of the qualitative strategy of historical ethnography alongside reflections about the research process—from the project's initial stages until the actual analysis after leaving the field. Trained as a sociologist with a background in anthropology, I stumbled upon a historical case; hence, historical ethnography as my chosen approach came quite naturally. Yet, little was written about how to systematically engage with this strategy, despite growing attention in the social sciences towards archival research (BENZECRY, DEENER & LARA-MILLÁN, 2020; MOORE, SALTER, STANLEY & TAMBOUKOU, 2017) and the use of documents (GRANT, 2018; SMITH & TURNER, 2014), as well as the longstanding traditions of historical sociology (e.g., KALBERG, 1994; SKOCPOL, 1984) and historical anthropology (e.g., BHIMULL et al., 2011; COMAROFF & COMAROFF, 1992). Therefore, my fundamental purpose with this article is to provide novices with an introduction to historical ethnography which relies on my "baptism by fire." [3]

As the following pages will demonstrate, I see historical ethnography as the agile journey of ethnographers who traverse history with the aim of reconstructing culture and recovering "meaningful worlds" (COMAROFF & COMAROFF, 1992, p.xi). The social world under investigation can be in the near past or the more distant one, and the link between past and present takes on different qualities. Likewise, the range of materials that are used may vary substantively, from oral history alone down to a complex corpus of sources which capture "the sedimentations of social practices" (MAY, 2011, p.191). What runs across these variations is the adoption of an *ethnographic perspective*. Not merely a fieldwork method, this vantage point involves a mode of "encountering, thinking about, interpreting, and acting in the world" (CAMPBELL & LASSITER, 2015, p.1). When applying a historical orientation to it, such an ethnographic perspective comes forth as "a historically situated mode of understanding historically situated contexts" (COMAROFF & COMAROFF, 1992, p.9). [4]

Drawing from insights gleaned during extensive research on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in this article I explore these ideas and present an overview of historical ethnography. In the first part, by reviewing key works, I elaborate on its main characteristics—the historical reach (Section 2.1) and reliance on a wide range of materials (Section 2.2) which facilitate the engagement with the field—and I consider the role of theory (Section 2.3). Presenting the inductive-deductive debate, I argue that even if theorizing is not the researcher's main objective, due to structural considerations, historical ethnography is highly informed by theory. In the second part, I reflect on the different research stages, divided into before, during, and after visiting the field (Section 3.1-3.3). Becoming immersed in the subject matter prior to the actual empirical examination opens the path to the archives and to a meaningful data collection endeavor (Section 3.1). In turn, informed decisions, rather than luck, fuel the ongoing movement between data collection and analysis (Section 3.2). Acknowledging the interpretive mindset involved with thinking ethnographically, I present indexing and temporal coding as helpful strategies for organizing a large corpus of historical data while thinking ethnographically (Section 3.3). Lastly, I conclude with a brief summary (Section 4). [5]

2. Recognizing Historical Ethnography When You See It

In the early stages of my project in 2017, I paused to consider my methodological toolkit. I was an experienced interviewer who had been previously engaged in a couple of ethnographic studies, so my initial reaction was to plan where to visit and who should be interviewed. It did not take long to acknowledge the passing of time; decades after the early days of UNHCR (established in 1950), my prospective informants were no longer available for interviewing. I also sought as much as possible to touch upon the "big story"—the undercurrents of the organization—and not to trace the specificity of a given case. [6]

Since I would be working mainly with textual materials, the next step was to find a suitable framing, to name my approach. I wanted to think like an ethnographer who looks backwards at this historical plot. What does thinking ethnographically mean? Following the tradition of the genre (ATKINSON, 2017; CAMPBELL & LASSITER, 2015; HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007), data collection is generally unstructured, there is a strong case-based orientation, the goal is primarily of an interpretative nature, multiple sources are used, and the research takes place in "the field." I aimed to retain this complexity and hold on to the ethnographer's identity while approaching past events and societies. [7]

2.1 Historical scope

Studying the past has distinct characteristics. One of them is the question of historical scope. How far does the researcher stretch back into the past and what are the ties with the present? In my case, the humanitarian-development nexus is a hot and contested issue for humanitarians. For instance, it constituted one of the major themes in the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the largest event of its kind. It was quite possible to focus on this recent example, or to study current relief operations such as the long-term humanitarian campaign to assist Syrian refugees, which greatly resembles the logic of development aid. In this sense, it was feasible to carry out conventional aid ethnography informed by historical background. However, I wanted to establish a solid understanding of the long-term dynamics between these fields, together with the field of human rights. My underlying research question was: Were they truly separate in their earlier phases of development, and had they begun to merge only recently? Or was this entanglement a key characteristic of the apparatus? [8]

This issue of historical scope overlaps with what BURAWOY (2009) identified as an archeological revisit, where the ethnographer digs into the past, striving to reconstruct history and track the processes that link past and present. For example, to gain in-depth insights about the cultural ethics of the post-Soviet transformations, ROGERS (2009, p.28) studied "the history of the present," by covering three centuries of history of a rural Russian town. Studying the construction of the modern Israeli narrative of Masada, BEN-YEHUDA (2009, p.334) figuratively referred to this approach as having "one foot in the past and the other in the present." In this way, he studied the historical creation of a national ethos, alongside the social mechanisms that sustain it in the present. [9]

At other times, however, the present is omitted. The "historical imagination" (COMAROFF & COMAROFF, 1992) and the exploration of the human condition (BHIMULL et al., 2011) motivate researchers to study historical moments located in the more distant past. For example, VAN BEMMELEN (2017) investigated the changing kinship and marriage of tribal societies in North Sumatra during the colonial period; NKWI (2015) examined the patterns of mobility and the general trend of modernization in Northwest Cameroon from 1800 onward; COHEN (2001) unpacked the shifting patterns of citizenship in a nineteenth-century Irish town; and HSIUNG (2017) focused on the reconstruction of the discipline of sociology in post-Maoist China. [10]

As my own work demonstrates, the distance between these two poles—both near and far—is not always so hermetically sealed. While I was mainly interested in the early dynamics within UNHCR and the exchange of humanitarian, development, and human rights knowledge, this far-reaching perspective allowed me to frame contemporary debates over the humanitarian-development nexus (such as in the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit) as old news. Thus, historical ethnographers can be driven by a range of research motivations, leading them toward different historical moments, which have varied relationships with the present. The common ground rests in their "attempt to elicit ... structure and culture from the documents created prior to an event" (VAUGHAN, 1996, p.61). [11]

2.2 A plurality of materials

Another noteworthy characteristic alongside the question of the historical horizon and its relationship with the present is the range of materials used. Like conventional ethnography that incorporates a diversity of sources such as participant observation, conversations, and the analysis of artifacts and online realities (CAMPBELL & LASSITER, 2015; HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007), ethnographers embarking on a historical voyage have a range of materials to rely on. The main difference can be found in their retrospective orientation, as they all open a window to investigating historical worlds. [12]

At one end of the spectrum, DALBELLO and McGOWAN (2020) used oral histories to convey details of the Great Migration from Europe to the United States from the immigrants' perspective. Relying on these memory narrations, they emphasized the human story and the experience of migration. In contrast, COHEN (2001), who studied the cultural hegemony of the state versus colonial towns, turned to formal reports, census data, and secondary sources. At other times, a mixed approach was used such as in HUNTER's (2013) urban historical ethnography geared to reconstruct the life of Black residents in Philadelphia's Seventh Ward. In his revisit to DUBOIS's classic work "The Philadelphia Negro," HUNTER wove together multiple sources such as news media, formal records, court records, letters, and oral history. Still others incorporated interviews alongside the analysis of documentary realities. For example, SAVELSBERG (2021) drew on biographies, memories, conversations with survivors, and additional sources to trace the crystallization of collective memory of the Armenian genocide among Armenians and Turks. [13]

In the early stages of my UNHCR project, I envisioned myself conducting interviews with former personnel as another aid in reconstructing the organization's culture and institutional logic during its early days. Becoming immersed in the archives, I realized the incredible scope of materials. This first-hand experience also made me more conscious of the fact that too much time had elapsed, making interviews nearly impossible to conduct. On the one hand, I kept failing to identify potential interviewees while on the other, I had a growing sense that the story is too broad to be told by informants, centrally positioned as they were. Hence, I took into account two considerations. First, when studying past events, often there are no live respondents who can be contacted and oral histories are not always available. Second, when studying recent events, it is sometimes preferable to rely on sources other than interviews. For example, when studying the development of policies (KINNEY & ROWLAND, 2021) or macro-social processes (CARR et al., 2018), a broader perspective might be desirable. [14]

Importantly, while there is great plurality in terms of historical scope and range of materials used, a qualitative characteristic of historical ethnography is that the study is conducted in "the field." Of course, the field takes on a somewhat different meaning compared to traditional ethnography, but fundamentally this is how I perceived my case: As the field "where the phenomenon can be said to exist" (NÆSS, 2016, §2). I did not enter a physical (or virtual) site to observe rituals or the mundane directly. Instead, I engaged with it indirectly through the archives. MERRY (2002) referred to it as doing ethnography in the archives, intending to recreate the social setting of a situation, learning about culture and society from various sources. By using material-based evidence, the social world is recreated, the field opens up, and ethnographers establish knowledge that transposes the "gradient of unfamiliarity" (WOOLF, 2011, p.17). [15]

Tackling the issue from a different perspective, archival research bears inherent similarity with ethnographic work: "In archival work, what you find determines what you can analyze, and what you analyze structures what you look for in archival collections" (HILL, 1993, p.6). Put differently, the archive "resembles the ethnographic field site" (BENZECRY et al., 2020, p.298) in the fluid sense-making it entails. [16]

Moving beyond the similarity in the naturalistic mode of inquiry of these two traditions, the coupling of ethnography and the archives can be framed as archival ethnography or "ethnography of archiving" (PUNATHIL, 2021). Here, the focus shifts to the power dynamics around the archival making, i.e., to researching "the cultural perspective of those responsible for the creation, collection, care, and use of records" (GRACY, 2004, p.337). Both documents, viewed as "artifacts of modern knowledge" (RILES, 2006), and the archives that contain them are viewed not as objective relics but as representations of Foucauldian's discursive practices and the power/knowledge dynamic. They are often created by gatekeepers of knowledge, follow a specific template and structure, and meant for specific audiences with intentional content and structure. Researchers, therefore, navigate the thin line between seeing documents and the archives as "total facts, or complete fictions" (MOORE et al., 2017, p.21) as they investigate their nature (TRACE, 2002). [17]

Whereas archival ethnography focuses on the social construction of the archives and their content, such mode of inquiry is insightful for historical ethnography in general. It fits with BURAWOY's (2009) call for reflexivity, particularly the need for ethnographers to be mindful of the internal and external forces that shape the field. One should be cautious from a simplistic reading of the narrative ingrained in the documents, à la the positivistic tradition. Questions such as who the intended audience was, what information was recorded, and what was left out of the archives should be carefully considered. One solution is to consult multiple sources to compare different perspectives. Another option is to situate the findings within a broader context, by comparing the knowledge reflected in the archives against previous insights and theories. [18]

2.3 On the role of theory

While it is neither a dimension of variation nor a characteristic, the issue of theory and its role in historical ethnography deserves attention. I still recall my graduate training when asked to state my theoretical ground and consider if my approach is more data-driven or theory-driven. Accepting ZERUBAVEL's (2021) positionality on the inseparability of theory and methodology, the following question emerges: How do the distinct qualities of historical ethnography affect these considerations? The short answer is that such ethnography is usually well informed or even initiated by theoretical assumptions. [19]

As observed by TAVORY and TIMMERMANS (2009), two main ethnographic traditions invoke theoretical framing in very different ways. On the inductive side stands GLASER and STRAUSS' (2006 [1967]) "Discovery of Grounded Theory" in which they called for the simultaneous collection and analysis of data, systematic coding, the use of memoing, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation. GLASER and STRAUSS asked researchers to arrive and observe their research site theory-free, with the objective of building theory from the ground up. Thus, arriving at the field with pre-defined theoretical ideas is undesirable. [20]

On the deductive side, TAVORY and TIMMERMANS (2009) positioned BURAWOY (2009) with his "extended case method." In his manifesto for reflexive science (set against the positivist foundations of grounded theory methodology), and his elaboration on casing, BURAWOY argued that ethnography and theory are inherently connected: "We begin with our favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory" (2009, p.43). For BURAWOY, therefore, theory is a prerequisite for understanding the field, and in return, theory is refined through engaging with empirical realities. Here, exploration without theory is inconceivable. [21]

TAVORY and TIMMERMANS not only mapped ethnography's theoretical terrain, they also introduced a third approach, based on abductive reasoning and pragmatist philosophy. They emphasized the dialectic between observation and theory and, in their own words: "We view research as recursively moving back and forth between a set of observations and a theoretical generalization" (2014, p.5). The researchers enter the field theoretically informed, and unexpected findings push them to systematic examination and further theorizing. [22]

I suggest that TAVORY and TIMMERMANS's abductive analysis and BURAWOY's extended case method are not so distinct from one another. Pointing towards the structural (and relational) foundation of his approach, BURAWOY (2017, p.275) articulated his own macro (theoretical) and micro (observational) dialectic in the following words:

> "The ethnographer seeks out the macro conditions of micro-processes, but those micro processes always remain in focus. Indeed, micro-processes are conditions of the

> macro; but they can also challenge or reconstitute the forces shaping them; they can even create conditions for macro forces to transform or crush micro-institutions." [23]

This attitude towards the role of theory within the research process is evidential in historical ethnography, where theory and the field are often inseparable. Two prime examples bring theorizing to the fore, thus reflecting the methodological spirit advocated by the extended case method and abductive analysis. While the series of mistakes underscored by VAUGHAN (1996, 2004) in her examination of the Challenger disaster may seem arbitrary, she treated them within a broader and more explicit mode of theory building, namely, analogical theorizing. Thus, she deliberately picked NASA with the aim of expanding the empirical basis for her theoretical argument. Likewise, studying the shifting political epistemology in the German Democratic Republic, GLAESER (2011) referred to his mode of analysis as analytical ethnography which set the social world and theoretical constructs in a dialectical bond from the onset of the project. With a strong "consequent processualism" orientation, for GLAESER, "theory and the story which is developed as an answer to the empirical puzzle at hand, are developed pari passu" (p.56). [24]

Perhaps this is not so surprising. Researchers are unlikely to enter an archive unprepared but rather tend to be driven by a profound interest in a social problem or phenomenon of some sort. Their desire to solve a given empirical puzzle drove them to the archives in the first place (ZERUBAVEL [2021] recently framed this as concept-driven). Moreover, formal archives may be extensive, sometimes covering thousands of meters of shelving space. Additionally, researchers who work in archives often must set appointments in advance and identify relevant files they want to review. Even with the growing availability of digital archives, the problem of pre-selection remains. Data are so readily available nowadays following the digital revolution, and the mushrooming of online sources only exacerbates the "problem of information overload" (GROSSMAN, AMANO & PEDAHZUR, 2022, p.2). Therefore, in either case, historical ethnographers would be wise to establish in advance what it is that they are interested in, and that requires an orienting theory. [25]

To conclude, alongside sharing the general ethnographic perspective—a mode of understanding culture—some characteristics of historical ethnography are distinct. With at least one foot in the past, researchers rely on a palette of sources to reconstruct culture *ex post facto*. They are less likely, therefore, to engage with the field in what WACQUANT labeled as a "catholic fashion, [that is] on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space" (2003, p.5). Instead, and quite heretically, their engagement with the field is mediated by "documentary reality" (SMITH, 1974) of some sort. Finally, while conventional ethnography is more open to inductive reasoning (O'REILLY, 2009), historical ethnography tends to be theory-driven. Even without openly thinking about theorizing, theory provides guidance to this archaeological excavation, if to revert to BURAWOY's (2009) terminology. [26]

3. Shifting Through the Research Stages

Thus far I have argued that historical ethnography is about utilizing the ethnographic imagination when studying historical realities, whether they occurred relatively recently or in the distant past. Approaching the research project, scholars apply deductive or abductive reasoning. Yet, how does the actual research look from the inside? Here, based on my research on the UNHCR, I wish to reflect on what happens before, during, and after visiting the field. I will do so strategically, tying the conversation around the role of the literature, the researcher's active position in the (archival) field, and strategies that facilitate a historically informed ethnographic analysis. As is the case of qualitative research in general and ethnography in particular (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007; O'REILLY, 2009), the distinctions between the research stages have a substantial degree of arbitrariness. The different stages are relational, and ample interplay takes place across the lifespan of the project. Analytically (and stylistically), however, separating between them provides much needed lucidity.[1] [27]

3.1 Before embarking on a journey

There is a wide range of considerations and preparations required before entering the field. As it would be impossible to cover all of these, my more modest aim is to draw the lines that connect theory and the field. As explained above (Section 2.3), we approach the historical field with a given degree of familiarity. Sometimes we may have direct involvement with these past realities. For example, in the case of KINNEY and ROWLAND (2021), one author took part in the development of the grading policy under investigation. Similarly, MUTONGI (2007) studied the social position of widows in Maragoli, Kenya, which is her hometown. Other times, however, such as in the case of the current work, familiarity has to be attained. [28]

Therefore, the first step (as is the case for most studies in the social sciences) is with a classic review of the literature, used as a "map" (TIMMERMANS & TAVORY, 2022, p.32) to organize and acquire knowledge about the research topic. For example, I began by reading abundant materials to become knowledgeable about the comparative histories of humanitarianism, development, and human rights. Specifically, what are their origins, and how were they viewed across time? I was equally eager to learn about their current manifestation: Contemporary humanitarian activity, pitfalls, and considerations that guide everyday operations. This provided me with a "theoretical vantage point" (TAVORY & TIMMERMANS, 2014, p.90), a broad understanding of the macro social forces at play, which is needed for a meaningful interpretation of the micro situation at the UNHCR, my "ethnographic locale" (BURAWOY, 2009, p.42). [29]

1 When studying the past, sometimes there is a clear data collection stage, as researchers often need to visit a physical archive for data collection. With the growing availability of online sources, it becomes increasingly easier to acquire missing documents or follow new leads without leaving one’s desk. Such developments further blur the boundaries between the research stages.

By becoming familiar with the broader social context and scouting the literature, I laid the groundwork for theorizing. I came to think of humanitarianism and development in terms of ideal types. Following WEBER, I understand ideal types not as "a description of reality," but rather as an analytical device "to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description" (1949 [1922], p.90). Over time and drawing from the literature, I developed basic ideal types of humanitarian activity and development work—as an ideology and practice—which functioned as a gauge against reality. As simplified models, they provided me with a solid understanding about humanitarianism and development. I view the first as the organized action to save lives, manage emergencies, and reduce the suffering of others, and the latter as a project and a cultural mode that builds on the rhetoric of progress, choice, and the transformation of society (ROTEM, 2022). Importantly, setting them apart also enabled me to think about their boundaries and soon enough, about possible overlaps. [30]

The point to be made is not that using ideal types is vital for historical ethnography. Instead, it is about finding a way of becoming knowledgeable about the topic prior to the actual empirical examination. Furthermore, in my own project, roughly sketched ideal types were valuable and served as a hinge between thematic and theoretical literature. To clarify, the literature often treats my three research phenomena as social fields, a conceptualization that casts light on the empirical world. It provides a way to "organize" and characterize social activity and underlines the logic and stakes that guide the actors operating in these social fields. Put differently, the concept of social field serves as an ideal type of how such social activity (humanitarianism, for example) ought to look (SAVELSBERG, 2015). Consequently, and as I read more dedicated literature on social fields (to enrich the theoretical background), I came to realize that the issue of ties and engagement across social fields is a blind spot. During my preliminary reading of the thematic literature, I noted that the boundaries between humanitarianism and development are not always clear-cut. Hence, reading about humanitarianism and development, I established ideal types and came to realize that the existing literature provides examples of variations and partial contradictions without an adequate explanation. Fields' boundaries became the driving concept of my "theoretico-methodological" (ZERUBAVEL, 2021) quest; I wanted to demystify this puzzle. Moreover, tracing the phenomena across time reveals whether and how fields' boundaries change; it allowed me to identify the infiltration of knowledge between these seemingly distinct social spheres. [31]

Finally, as mentioned above (Section 2.3), the literature provides the initial orientation in the archives. Thinking about the UNHCR, the organization's Geneva-based archive spreads across ten kilometers of shelving space. Before arrival, I had to reserve a desk in the research room and submit a dedicated form listing all the files I was interested in. Thus, based on the literature I had to define specific areas of interest and use them to direct my initial search through the archive catalogue. In fact, during my six-week visit, I was never allowed to enter the actual archive, pick at a random box of documents, or experience the romantic view of archival wanderlust. These structural factors invite making informed decisions, and the path to such decisions passes through theory. To clarify: These decisions and at least a minimal degree of theory were prerequisites for initiating my research in the archive. [32]

3.2 In the (archival) field

Visiting the field may signify different activities, particularly given the wide range of possible sources and materials. BEN-YEHUDA (2009) joined guided tours in Masada and interviewed veteran archaeologists alongside a textual examination. GLAESER's (2011) project took him to the Stasi archive in Berlin, to which he added interviews with former Stasi officers and other relevant figures. KINNEY and ROWLAND (2021) went on a shorter trip, relying on documentation produced by a university with whom one of them has ties. Moreover, as an archive is essentially a "repository of some kind" (MOORE et al., 2017, p.1), fieldwork may be based on informal repositories such as internet websites, personal collections of letters, or photograph albums. My own work led me to the physical archive of UNHCR, and to a minor degree, also to reports produced by the organization which are available online. Considering this wide variation, and precisely due to the undefined meaning of "the field," any attempt to summarize this stage in a coherent and step-by-step fashion is likely to fail. [33]

Instead, I wish to reflect upon one issue: The ethnographer's active position during the data collection stage. Sometimes when conducting research in archives, the issue of pure chance emerges. When stumbling upon a significant finding, serendipity (FINE & DEEGAN, 1996) occurs. However, here I align myself with TAMBOUKOU (2016) who argued that "perceptive experience" is equally (if not more) important. I would not claim to be especially perceptive, but I do wish to link this point with MOERAN's (2009) distinction between participant observer and observant participation. Based on his fieldwork in a Japanese advertising agency, MOERAN emphasized the *rite de passage* that ethnographers undergo as they attain meaningful access to local knowledge, to the "backstage" activity, borrowing GOFFMAN's (1956, p.78) terminology. To MOERAN (2009), this involves becoming active—shifting from participant observation to observant participation—which is associated with a qualitative leap in the insights that ethnographers may garner. [34]

Becoming active while working with documents or materials of different types may seem irrelevant. After all, these are pre-existing objects. Yet I believe that this is precisely the point of becoming knowledgeable about the archive, organization, or phenomenon under investigation. Maintaining good terms with the archivist is always wise (MOORE et al., 2017) but this is not enough. By having a solid understanding of what the archive contains, and relatedly, of the phenomenon under investigation, perceptive experience becomes more feasible. Suddenly the researcher is in a position of making better choices in the quest for significant findings. [35]

Reaching this degree of cognizance requires time. During my stay at the UNHCR archive in Geneva, I spent long hours scanning documents, attempting to collect every piece of evidence that may come in handy. While doing so, I realized that some of the files I pre-ordered contained very different documentation than I had anticipated. For example, many files that were labeled in the catalog as human rights turned out to be quite useless, with dry information about states' ratifications of human rights treaties, data that are readily available online. Thus, during this vexing and unexciting scanning operation, I experienced the gap between my own notions of human rights (mainly as political imagination and a cultural program) and the formal, legal orientation that they are sometimes associated with. Too often I felt that my initial choices regarding which files to order were misguided, and that I was not making any progress. [36]

Thankfully, there were meaningful findings too. In an attempt to learn about the changing state of mind at UNHCR headquarters, I reviewed the documentation of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's (ExCom) annual meetings. In these weeklong meetings, UNHCR's seniors present an overview of the past year's situation and plans for the coming year to state delegates, and general policy is debated. As it turned out, each file contains minutes of the meetings and copies of the reports which were presented to the committee members. Some were the size of a telephone book, containing plain descriptions and statistics about the different operations. Other reports, however, were highly informative. For example, I discovered the Note of International Protection that provides an account of UNHCR actions towards the legal safeguarding of refugees' rights. Reading the Notes over time allowed me to see the plurality of ways that UNHCR understands human rights. Suddenly, it was not only dry information on the ratification of human rights treaties by states or a legalistic debate about providing legal protection. Rather, the conversation turned to refugees as rights-bearing individuals and to right-based approaches. Thus, while the decision to review these reports was somewhat of a coincidence, their inclusion stemmed from my past experience, resulting in meaningful interpretation. [37]

Furthermore, these insights which were gained months after my return from the archive sent me to yet another round of data collection, this time on the virtual shelves of UNHCR. Specifically, I wanted to better understand the development of women's rights policy and the turn to community-based solutions, two topics that I did not consider initially but which had been mentioned in the Notes since the 1980s. By identifying UNHCR reports and guidelines on refugee women, I unpacked the organization's internal conversation about their protection which gradually became framed from a women's rights perspective. I also investigated the numerous policy reports and practical guidelines about the issue of capacity building; the rights-based approach that ties empowered individuals and their communities with what was presented as an ideal solution. [38]

Another example deals with the association between refugee aid and development. Reviewing the materials, I read the High Commissioner's opening statement, made at the beginning of the 1981 ExCom annual meeting.[2] There, a short paragraph was devoted to the necessity for providing long-lasting solutions that will contribute to the economy of the region. With this in mind, reading the

2 Statement by the High Commissioner, October 12, 1981, Geneva, ExCom 32nd Session, Fonds UNHCR 12.

opening statement of the following year, I spotted a section where the High Commissioner stated that the UNHCR is not a development agency but a provider of aid during the emergency phase.[3] This infused tension into the story, suggesting the existence of conflicting forces. In the High Commissioner's opening statement from 1984, I came across a casual reference to a conference on assistance to refugees in Africa, which was followed by two paragraphs devoted to the link between operations in Africa and the question of national development.[4] A short reference to a paper on "refugee aid and development" concluded this part of the speech. Following this chain of evidence, I reviewed the paper, which presented the conclusions from an expert meeting hosted by UNHCR that was devoted to this topic.[5] Shortly afterward, I identified files that contained records of the conversation which preceded this expert meeting, as well as additional documentation from the actual meeting. Together, these materials enabled me to assess the role of development in UNHCR activity in these years. [39]

On one hand, this story speaks for the snowball characteristic of doing this type of qualitative research, whereby one finding leads to another. The devil's advocate would shout: luck! On the other hand, however, it also emphasizes the power of informed engagement with the materials. Facing a massive corpus of materials, I came to appreciate these opening statements as an effective instrument to guide my reading. Delivered at the beginning of each ExCom annual meeting, they tended to focus on key issues that were on the organization's agenda and therefore provided me with an effective way to identify change. Thus, out of abundant materials at my disposal, I decided to read these statements with extra care. Furthermore, working systematically and advancing year by year, I noticed that the topic of development received growing attention by UNHCR with the march of time. When I finally read that specific statement, I was on the lookout for any development-related references in the text. To bring these points together, by being well-informed and watchful, I was able to follow and make sense of this new lead. Rather than chance, this is a matter of perceptive experience (TAMBOUKOU, 2016). [40]

To conclude, during and after data collection, there is an ongoing movement between stepping back to get a broad perspective of the field and diving in to examine more closely a specific situation or an unexpected development. This movement testifies to the inherent connection between the different research stages (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007; O'REILLY, 2009) where the literature informs the data collection, and new insights drive further data collection. This very process led to a qualitative shift; active engagement with these materials combined with the theoretical background support reflexivity. [41]

3 Statement by the High Commissioner, October 11, 1982, Geneva, ExCom 33nd Session, A/AC.96/614 Annex, Fonds UNHCR 12.

4 Statement by the High Commissioner, October 8, 1984, Geneva, ExCom 35nd Session, A/AC.96/651 Annex, Fonds UNHCR 12.

5 Refugee Aid and Development, August 28, 1984, Geneva, ExCom 35th Session, A/AC.96/645, p.2, Fonds UNHCR 12.

3.3 Back at the desk

Whereas the different research stages are hard to set apart, the analysis in particular is "not a stage in a linear process" (O'REILLY, 2009, p.13) but an integral element to the historical ethnography. Moreover, when analyzing collected materials, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, i.e., "there is no formula or recipe for the analysis of ethnographic data" (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007, p.158). Instead, thinking ethnographically requires an interpretive mindset, in which "we must *work* with our data ... *making* sense of what we observe" (ATKINSON, 2017, p.16). Therefore, and acknowledging that ethnographer analysis is "something of a messy business" (O'REILLY, 2009, p.13), I do not aim to engage with it directly. Rather, I propose several strategies that I found helpful for organizing historical data which set the groundwork for historically informed ethnographic analysis. [42]

Back home and sitting at my desk with a plethora of materials at hand, my early inclination was to closely read everything I collected, with the idea that all of it should be coded. I was guided by prior experience with interview-based studies, where the main objective was to identify major themes and reduce the complexity of the data. In other words, I initially focused on coding the materials word by word, line by line. The task proved monumental: Just reading 10,000 pages took a good amount of time, and coding every sentence was not feasible. Moreover, with data that span across 70 years of operation, I recognized that the coding should maintain, not disrupt, the empirical temporal flow. Without realizing it, I experienced the same concerns raised by VAUGHAN (1996) a quarter of a century ago. [43]

The solution to this dissonance is to turn to a deductive approach to coding. Rather than searching for data-driven codes (inductive), turning to a deductive investigation means using a ready-made and theoretically informed list of codes. The point is to focus in advance on the central issues that spawned the investigation in the first place (SKJOTT LINNEBERG & KORSGAARD, 2019). Similarly, an abductive-inspired coding system can be used. Here, the dialogue between pre-selected codes and insights driven by the data is openly acknowledged and encouraged (TIMMERMANS & TAVORY, 2022; ŽELINSKÝ, 2019). [44]

In order to apply these ideas while revisiting the past and working with a complex set of materials, I suggest indexing data can be a helpful strategy for scope reduction. Initially suggested by DETERDING and WATERS (2021) for projects that involved large-N in-depth interviews, the idea is to associate content with the interview protocol, resulting in large chunks of text organized by questions that can be further analyzed. When working with historical data, there is no interview protocol. Instead, it is possible to use the topics that were identified during the review of the literature, or dimensions of ideal types. In practice, during the initial round of reading, instead of coding sentence by sentence, I looked for sections that dealt with the topics I was interested in. For example, I searched for references to humanitarian principles (such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence); the mandate and role of UNHCR; development activity; and human rights. Gradually, the scope of the data became more manageable, while not losing any of the information. Even if some data were not currently used, all were saved for later analysis, if needed. [45]

Additionally, indexing is especially helpful in situations when examining multiple types of materials which may significantly differ in terms of content and structure. Meetings' minutes, oral histories, formal speeches, financial reports, or policy reports are structured differently in terms of their internal logic, the intended audience, the way information is presented, and so forth. The minutes I worked with, for example, recorded weeklong conversations between multiple state delegates and UNHCR personnel. Not only did they cover different topics, but they also reflected numerous views. Or consider the yearly operation reports which, alongside vital information about new programs or policies, contained detailed statistics from the areas of budgetary planning and accounting. In these situations, coding sentence by sentence was not needed, as only some parts of the information were relevant. Indexing thus assists in focusing the investigation on the sections deemed necessary. [46]

A set of documents enabled me to identify what I came to understand as the first stage of development. In the early 1960s, UNHCR began its involvement with refugee situations outside of Europe where its initial mandate rests. As I reviewed the summary report of the 11th session of the ExCom, an effective instrument for getting a sense of the overall conversation in that year (1964), a subheading caught my attention: "Proposals for assistance to refugees from Rwanda in the Kivu Province of the Congo (Leopoldville) and in Burundi."[6] The four pages that followed provided an explanation about projects to assist refugees from Rwanda living in rural areas in the Congo and Burundi. The goal of these projects was to "raise the standard of living by the expansion of agricultural and other activities ... The local population and the refugees alike would benefit." As development logic was notably present, I indexed these pages under community development. [47]

Next, I turned to the High Commissioner's opening statement from that year.[7] Attuned to any mention of these new projects, I noted a couple of paragraphs in which they were introduced to the audience. One particular sentence stood out, in which the High Commissioner argued that providing assistance exclusively for refugees is risky, as it may stir resentment among the local population. The solution, therefore, was to cooperate with the local government and assist refugees in a way that would also benefit the local population. Suddenly, another piece of the puzzle fell into place. From there, I skimmed that year's operational report, which provided a summary of UNHCR past year's activities.[8] Within its 40 pages, five were devoted to refugees from Rwanda located in Burundi and Kivu.

6 Report on the Eleventh Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, A/AG.96/240, June 3, 1964, §81-92, Fonds UNHCR 12.

7 Statement by the High Commissioner, May 1964, Geneva, ExCom 11th Session, A/AC.96/248 Annex, Fonds UNHCR 12.

8 Report on the Implementation of the Current Programme for 1963, A/AC.96/229, April 15, 1964, Fonds UNHCR 12.

They provided additional background for the situation that initiated the new assistance projects. With these extracts in mind, I dove into the pages of two dedicated reports providing detailed descriptions of the proposed projects in the Kive Province of the Congo and in Burundi.[9] In short, by indexing all these sections as rural development, I was able to set them aside as important. [48]

Establishing these rough blocks of information is one task, but the historical nature of this type of study provides another consideration that should be addressed. Events unfold in different moments, and the understanding of social realities and concepts shifts across time. Essentially, social life is organized around trajectories and turning points and is made up of social processes (ABBOTT, 2001). They have their own tempo, and time is important in terms of the sequence of events, their duration, pace, trajectory, and cycle (AMINZADE, 1992). Therefore, it is best to be mindful of time when working with indexes and codes. [49]

A simple strategy to facilitate a historically informed analysis is to organize the materials according to year. One option is to use the year as a prefix to the file names and folders, which can also be done within qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) like NVivo and ATLAS.ti. Doing so ensures that the initial reading as well as more meticulous ones will follow the temporal occurrence of events. When working on specific themes during the analysis, it is possible to keep track of what came before what. I, for example, used NVivo where references in codes are displayed chronologically (the same is true when displaying quotations in ATLAS.ti). [50]

Additionally, when reviewing the materials in chronological order, a more complex and accurate understanding of the investigated social condition can be gleaned. Following the above example, I read the relevant sections about the development activities of UNHCR. Doing so, I recognized that the story could be broadly classified into two periods, the first and second stage of development. Each stage was characterized by specific activities and its distinct development-minded discourse. During the analysis, I noted that these stages were followed by a thunderous silence, an abrupt disappearance of a topic from the general conversation. I treated these moments as institutional amnesia, a rhetorical device that amplified the fact that after each round of oblivion, the topic of development resurfaced anew. Moreover, this attention to the cycle of time (AMINZADE, 1992) within UNHCR enabled me to better conceptualize the operation of the humanitarian field, following the Bourdieusian insight that agents attempt to maintain the purity of their field (SAVELSBERG, 2015). [51]

These stages are linked with turning points, i.e., situations of change when the temporal flow of ideas and events shift their course (ABBOTT, 2001). Importantly, these do not have to stand for specific events (e.g., a new policy or an emergency), and can be associated with large-scale cultural transitions such as the institutionalization and growing dominancy of human rights in global culture.

9 1964 Programme, New Projects, April 13, 1964, Geneva, ExCom 11th Session, A/AC.96/236, Fonds UNHCR 12.

For instance, UNHCR "discovered" women's rights in the 1980s only after they became an integral part of global discourse. [52]

From a methodological perspective, these periods and turning points can be treated as temporal codes or meta-codes. Using this strategy enables quick and simple temporal organization of information, complementing the indexing. In Table 1, I demonstrate this idea, showing some of the broad categories from my research on the UNHCR. Dividing the organization's development activity into two stages enabled me to identify the continuity of long-term planning, which was maintained despite the transition from provision of aid to host communities on a local scale to operation on a national one (i.e., broader economic development). Thinking about human rights, there is clear continuity with the legal function of securing the right of asylum which forms a central element of UNHCR internal logic. However, the rise of community-based methods and the turn to women's rights reflect the emergence of a deeper meaning of human rights in the social imagination, both inside and outside the organization.

Broad themes / temporal coding		First stage of develop-ment (1960s)	Second stage of develop-ment (1980s)	Thin take on human rights (1950-60s)	Thick take on human rights (1980s onward)
Indexing	Analytical coding				
Development	Aid to host communities / rural development	X			
	Economic / regional development		X		
	Long-term planning	X	X		
Human rights	The right of asylum			X	X
	Community-based approach				X
	Women's rights				X

Table 1: Analytical and temporal coding [53]

Being back at the desk is obviously only a figurative expression, as collecting and analyzing data are highly integrative activities throughout the research process. Moreover, due to the elusive nature of analysis in ethnographic circles, I focused on practical data-organizing strategies that help facilitate historically informed analysis, i.e., they help address HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON's cardinal commandment to "*know* one's data" (2007, p.162). These strategies do so by reducing the data to a manageable scope and reinforcing awareness of time. And while they can be applied to a range of ethnographic settings, they are particularly suitable for historical ethnography which inherently contains a time element and relies heavily on materials. In sum, indexing as well as analytical and temporal codes lay the groundwork for the conventional principles of ethnographic analysis which involves meaning making, searching for patterns, paying attention to action vis-à-vis structural forces, building typologies, establishing ties between concepts, and so forth (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007; O'REILLY, 2009; TIMMERMANS & TAVORY, 2022). [54]

4. Past-Based Epilogue

In this article, I have relied on my own experience to set forth an account of historical ethnography. I blend insights from past literature with those gained from my research project tracing the historical logics and modes of operation of UNHCR. The article both mirrors and elucidates my decision-making process along the way, starting with thinking about the topic and its ties with the literature, down to the hands-on elements of clearing a pathway through mountains of materials. The article evades, therefore, clear-cut distinctions between method, methodology, and the epistemology of inquiry. As a multi-genre piece, it provides what I see as a more faithful description of the actual research process. [55]

Above all, historical ethnography involves *thinking* ethnographically about past realities; we apply the ethnographic epistemological perspective when studying historical social worlds. Knowledge is situated, and a wide range of materials from personal collection of letters to well-established institutional archives are used to access it. Treating the case as the field reflects this orientation as it brings forward the notions of specific cultural contexts and intersubjectivity where ethnographers are active in their engagement and construction of meaning. This is not gained through a dialogue with live informants. Rather, being well-informed and familiar with the materials and the broader context (e.g., theory) facilitate the shift from participant observation to observant participation (MOERAN, 2009) and leads to perceptive experience (TAMBOUKOU, 2016). [56]

The theoretical framing of historical ethnography is also important. Unlike most conventional ethnographies, "Catholic" in WACQUANT's (2003) terms, when approaching historically situated culture, deductive or abductive reasoning is often used. Even when theory building is not the ethnographer's stated goal, theory is integral to the process of working with archives. It allows making informed decisions in the early stages of the research, prior to the entry to the field. It is linked directly to the notion of perceptive experience and the ability to think critically about the materials we encounter during the research. It also serves an important role during the stage of reading and organizing the collected materials, that is, during the coding operation that takes place after visiting the field. [57]

Lastly, whereas coding in itself might sound unorthodox in ethnographic circles, it reflects the issue of scale and the scope of the data. While most ethnographies are case-specific and build on meticulous observations, conversations with informants, and the analyzing of artifacts, historical ethnographers often deal with a massive body of materials. They aim to gain both breadth and depth. As an aid, deductive or abductive coding is helpful where prior knowledge inspires the codes. Indexing, which operates on a higher level (thus less nuanced than coding) is another useful tool as it assists in identifying important segments of information that can be then coded more thoroughly. When combined, the result also allows engagement with the temporal quality of the data. Periods and turning points become notable and can in turn be organized into temporal codes. In this way the flow of events and the sense of change can be acknowledged, and a comparative logic can be applied. [58]

My aim with this article is to provide a simple introduction to an overlooked qualitative strategy. I see it as an invitation for others to follow and engage ethnographically with historical realities. Maintaining the sense-making spirit of the ethnographic tradition, I also call for the need for thinking systematically—and with profundity—about our data, especially now in an era in which there is constantly more and more of them. [59]

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