

Editorial

Special Issue Meta-Ethnography E&E

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The origins of this Special Issue stem from a symposium presented in the European Conference on educational Research in Porto (2014). The intentions behind the symposium – and now of this Special Issue – were to offer a forum to investigate the potentials and limitations of the methods employed by those currently engaged in meta-ethnographic analysis, and to understand why they are relatively underused in educational research.

The journey that led us here dates to several years ago, with communication initiated by the coincidence in focus and timing of our ethnographies analysing interaction and communication between students and teachers. Inevitably, perhaps, our attention in early conversations concentrated on our findings, and our discussions in one way or another explored the scope for comparison and generalisability of the results and recommendations proceeding from our studies. At that stage we both felt our experiences preparing literature reviews and conducting comparative ethnographies, together with our reading of key publications in qualitative meta-analysis, including Hammersley's book on qualitative synthesis (Hammersley 2013), were sufficient to support initial explorations.

However, our discussions swiftly moved on to the more complex, and in some ways more interesting and creative, area of comparison and compatibility between key elements of the conceptualisations of the interactions between students and teachers suggested by the two ethnographies. Instead of exploring the similarities between the results of the studies, we found ourselves involved in a process of cross-fertilisation, sharing our understandings of our ethnographies and drawing on each other's perceptions regarding the meaning that we attributed to our results, exchanging and projecting each other's metaphors onto our analyses.

Our interest in systematising this process led us to a close examination of the, in many ways underused, educational research methodology proposed by Noblit and Hare in 1988. Our reading of their seminal publication on meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988) became more than a mere process of familiarisation with a particular methodological suggestion: it unlocked the potential for a meta-interpretation of our studies, by offering us the vocabulary to define the form of meta-analysis we were seeking.

To support our developing understanding of meta-ethnographic analysis we chose to place the method in the context of a wider set of responses to calls for the “deparochialization of educational research” (Lingard 2006). These demands have allowed educational ethnography to move beyond conventional research designs, and from the study of single sites and local situations, “to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-spaces” (Marcus 1995, 96). Viewed within such a context, the growing interest in the synthesis of ethnographic studies has opened up the prospect of allowing researchers to unpick the interconnectedness of different sites, which have been and are being studied ethnographically.

Meta-ethnography is distinguished from other forms of qualitative meta-analysis and qualitative synthesis because it allows the study of interconnectedness, as conducted through a process that remains consistent with the interpretative nature of qualitative research. The aim here is not necessarily to generalise, but to discover novel dimensions and explore new aspects of what is already an in-depth original approach to ethnographic analysis (Beach et al. 2013, 25). However, our engagement with the method has shown it does not necessarily offer consistency in terms of how meta-ethnographic analysis has been used by qualitative researchers. In the health sciences for example, which is the field in which the method is currently most widely used, meta-ethnography is primarily associated with the synthesis of results and the identification of similarities across a number of ethnographies predominantly conducted in hospitals.

Whereas most examples of meta-ethnographic synthesis are in the health studies domain (e.g. Britten et al. 2002; Pope et al. 2007; Weed 2006), Noblit and Hare’s original work was rooted in the field of education (Noblit and Hare 1988). In more recent years, several examples of synthesis in educational ethnography have been published (Beach et al. 2013; Genzuk 2003; Savin Baden et al. 2008; Tuquero 2011), and the notion and value of synthesis in ethnography has also been discussed critically. It has been asked for example, if meta-ethnography can still conform to the ethnographer’s intention to provide information regarding the complex details of individual cases; indeed, Beach (2010) pointed to problems when re-using existing research data, specifically in relation to the lack of contextual knowledge (Hammersley 2010). Additionally, there have been calls to enhance techniques, which would permit meta-ethnography to become a viable option for qualitative researchers (Doyle 2003).

Our own engagement with meta-ethnography, and our developing understanding of how the method can be used within and outside the educational community, has convinced us that it promises more than its current application in the context of educational research suggests. We locate the value of the method, not only in the possibilities that it affords us for a deeper and more creative interpretation of existing results, a scope which is not to be underestimated at a time when there is research-fatigue among school communities and a scarcity of resources that limit the opportunities for ethnographic research, but also in its educational value for those engaged in the process. Common in the experiences of the authors contributing to this Special Issue is the contribution of meta-ethnography to expanding their conceptualisations of interpretative research in general, and of ethnography in particular. This is arguably a valuable experience, as the meaning of ethnographic ‘field’ becomes more abstract and diverse.

The selection of papers available illustrates a variety of uses for methods and topics. They offer insight into the use of meta-ethnography in education in the US and Europe. In addition, as the method is much more widely applied to health studies, we have also included a paper discussing the use of meta-ethnography in this field (Uny and France), as some of the challenges confronted when adopting the method in health studies might also apply to the field of education.

All the papers have in common their differing attempts to address four key questions:

- To what extent can meta-ethnography produce richer insights than primary studies?
- To what extent is the production of generalised results in (meta-)ethnography possible and desirable?
- What challenges and risks, but also what chances and possibilities, accompany a secondary analysis of ethnographic data as undertaken in meta-ethnography, especially in the field of education?
- What standards and criteria can be identified to ensure the quality of meta-ethnographies and their distinctiveness relative to other forms of systematic qualitative review?

The aim of this Special Issue is not to give conclusive answers to the above, but to open up debate on the use and potentials of the method. The papers included here contribute to this by offering some answers, and by attempting to systematise our thinking about meta-ethnography; but they also pose new questions, both individually and in combination.

In the first contribution to the Special Issue, which refers to research in Education in the US, Margaret Eisenhart outlines approaches that she labels “multi-scale ethnography”. She focuses on three approaches: multi-sided ethnography, meta-ethnography, and the comparative (or vertical) case study. Emphasising that there have been very few meta-ethnographies in the US, she attributes this to the dominance of anthropologists in educational ethnography, and their hesitancy to consider meta-ethnography “real” ethnography. Nevertheless, she gives some examples of meta-ethnographies in US-American studies of education. In her discussion, Eisenhart states that while multi-scale ethnographies might appear to break with ethnographic convention, they also bring patterned and interrelated cultural phenomena across sites into sharper focus. She argues that such multi-scale ethnographies cannot replace traditional ethnography, but that they can complement singular ethnographies by extending their scope and reach.

In his paper, Dennis Beach re-reads a number of publications resulting from two ethnographies conducted at two middle-sized secondary schools in Swedish towns. The focus of his analysis is on the personalisation of education, and on how education in Sweden responds to calls for the recognition of every learner as an individual and the provision of educational support customised to meet individual students’ needs. Using meta-ethnographic analysis, Beach looks beyond the superficial association of such processes calling for equality and justice in education. In doing so, he describes the use of personalisation as a vehicle for the prevalence of bourgeois culture and the continuation of the history of dominance by a self-assumed superior culture as reflected in education policy and manifest in curriculum design. He argues that personalisation and the policies of enhanced education choice-making and marketization only intensify the inequalities of the past.

Teaching strategies that aim to respond to individual children’s learning styles and needs are the focus of the third paper in this Special Issue, authored by Christina Huf and Andrea Raggl. Their meta-analysis is of two ethnographic projects conducted by themselves, which analysed children’s daily practices in age-mixed primary school classrooms. Reflecting on their own engagement in the original studies, Huf and Raggl aim to “open the debate on the question of which kind of data and interpretations could be considered for a meta-ethnography, if and how a higher theoretical integration of concepts can be achieved, and how much the meta-ethnographer should be involved with the primary research” (Huf & Raggl, 2016:2). They explain that for them, the appeal of the method lay in its potential to offer protection to the particularities of the original studies, while comparing and contrasting them in order to explore

any similarities and differences. The process of translation in their meta-ethnography extends Noblit and Hare's suggestions, and involves not only metaphors and concepts, but also primary data leading to a re-interpretation of findings by integrating data. Emphasising the significance of the in depth knowledge conveyed by the original studies, in their meta-ethnographic analysis they enquire whether meta-ethnography is a study in its own right as Noblit and Hare suggest, or if it should rather be considered as a systematic elaboration and further exploration of a primary ethnographic research topic.

The focus and aims of the article by Fernando Hernández-Hernández and Juana Maria Sancho-Gil are distinctively different: their meta-analysis of five multi-sited ethnographies attempts to understand how young people learn in multi-sited environments, and to suggest possible pedagogical alternatives to the apparent disconnection between formal and non-formal learning practices. Meta-analysis here supports a comparison, leading to an evaluation of variation across cases and a description of qualitative differences. Meanwhile, their analysis remains consistent with the interpretive nature of the method; allowing a conversation between the selected ethnographic accounts, which goes beyond the search of similarities and exposes their inherent diversity. Reflecting on their use of the method, the authors point out that meta-ethnography has to respond to the need to describe the complexity and uniqueness of young people's learning experiences in their mobility and transitions inside and outside school, and their ways of recounting them in ethnographic reports. Responding to this, the language in their analysis is one of "possibility rather than of certitude" (Hernández-Hernández & Sancho-Gil, 2016:13), offering an interpretive account of the learning experiences, avoiding the temptation to code and categorise, and thereby creating in that sense an ethnography of ethnographies.

Karen Borgnakke argues in her contribution, that meta-ethnography challenges the prevalence of evidence-based models for measuring the learning effect in education, while simultaneously being challenged by it. She pleads for a recollection of the origins of meta-ethnography, to understand the benefits and limitations of involvement in the current evidence circuit. She follows three steps to clarify the conditions for meta-ethnography 'before and after PISA'. Referring to examples given in the Danish implementation of evidence-based procedures and international discourses, she analyses perturbing trends related to both the political context and the research context. Against this backdrop, she argues that throughout the 2000s and 2010s there has been a striking lack of critical debate, regarding the link between methodology and the need for practice-oriented knowledge, and no convincing relationship drawn between politically motivated reforms and the respective research question.

In their paper, Sherick Hughes and George Noblit tackle the challenge encountered when applying the method of meta-ethnography for auto-ethnographical studies. Referring to the concepts associated with meta-auto-ethnography developed by Ellis (2009), they examine a critical, systematic approach to the meta-synthesis of individualised and co-authored auto-ethnographies. They discuss to what extent the production of generalised results in meta-ethnography, especially when applied to auto-ethnography is possible and desirable. In relation to a chosen example in the field of higher education, they demonstrate how meta-ethnography can be implemented in relation to auto-ethnographies, and ask how the presented approach can work as a form of meta-ethnography to produce deeper insights than primary studies. In their conclusions, they introduce a meta-ethnographical analysis of auto-ethnographies to generate un-asked questions and improved interpretations, as well as a deeper understanding of the central phenomenon of interest explored.

Our own (Kakos & Fritzsche) contribution discusses the aforementioned meta-ethnography of two studies on interactions between teachers and students in schools situated in England and Germany. It describes the process of juxtaposing two ethnographic studies undertaken in different educational settings, with particular emphasis on the process of translation. The procedure employed when producing our own meta-ethnography is described, as are the findings, which show teachers' understanding of the pastoral aspects of their role is incompatible with performance related demands and their institutional responsibilities. In our conclusions, we consider that engagement with meta-ethnography may be accompanied by a continual effort to maintain balance between two seemingly opposite tendencies: to protect the particularity and uniqueness of single ethnographies, while developing generalisations as a basis for generating comparisons.

The final paper in this Special Issue is a contribution from health studies by Isabell Uny and Emma France. Since its inception in the 1980s, the meta-ethnographic approach has been used extensively in health-related and social care research. The paper reflects on the evolution of meta-ethnography in health-related research, and presents ongoing debates and issues surrounding the conduct and reporting of meta-ethnography, which might also apply to the field of education. It begins by describing the meta-ethnography approach, charts the rise of evidence-based research, and of the acceptance of qualitative data as "evidence" in health-related research, and then explores the growth in the rate of published health-related meta-ethnographies, before discussing issues affecting the conduct and reporting of meta-ethnographies which could be applied to any discipline. The authors put forward the argument

that both the quality and the reporting of meta-ethnographies have often been problematic; for instance, many have used the label meta-ethnography without carefully following the process or faithfully conducting the comprehensive analytical work it requires, or have performed an aggregative rather than an interpretive synthesis.

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