# Meaning not measurement

## Using ethnography to bring a deeper understanding to the participant experience of festivals and events

Immy Holloway
*Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK, and*
Lorraine Brown and Richard Shipway
*Bournemouth University, Poole, UK*

### Abstract

**Purpose** – Events research is witnessing a gradual increase in experience-related studies, reflecting a challenge to the dominance of positivist, quantitative-based studies. This purpose of this paper is to support a paradigm shift to effect a more balanced examination of events within the existing body of literature.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A search of events-related publications in both events and non-events journals is conducted in order to identify the level of use of the ethnographic approach by researchers in event studies. The literature on qualitative methods and on ethnography in particular is also examined, in a bid to show how ethnography can be used and how it is specifically suited to inquiry into the consumer experience of events and festivals.

**Findings** – Ethnography is advocated as an appropriate research approach to the events field, and this paper details the extensive potential that this approach offers. Drawing from the wider literature on ethnography, a rationale for an alternative methodology with the associated research methods of observation, interviewing and the use of documentary sources is explored and its applicability to events research is demonstrated.

**Practical implications** – The academic researcher is introduced to the potential offered by ethnography and is pointed in the direction of the relevant research methods literature that would equip them with the practical tools of investigation.

**Originality/value** – By alerting the reader to the applicability and value of ethnography, this paper aims to encourage the adoption of the ethnographic approach by event researchers. This will thereby lead to a more diverse literature on events, and will rebalance the current dominance of quantitative-based research papers, and it is for this reason that this paper makes an original contribution to knowledge in the study of events and festivals.

**Keywords** Qualitative research, Ethnography, Festivals, Entertainment

**Paper type** Literature review

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### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the usefulness of ethnography and its application to events research which might lead to a better understanding of events. Ethnography is an interdisciplinary research approach originating in anthropology, which has a strong presence in social and cultural anthropology, sociology and social psychology as well as in applied areas like health and education. A review of existing events[1] management publications reveals a dominance of quantitative research and a paucity of academic studies using the qualitative approach to investigate participant experiences. This observation supports Getz' (2008) similar summary of event tourism research.

A review of the main academic sources for published research into events from 2000 shows a scarcity of qualitative-based studies and particularly of papers based on ethnographic research, despite as the authors will argue, its appropriateness and value for researchers into the event experience. Even those that focus on motivations and perceptions are usually survey or measurement based (Lee *et al.*, 2009; Giannoulakis *et al.*, 2008). Further, satisfaction with festival visits and future intentions are not usually explored through in-depth interviewing with participants to obtain rich data but by measurement and questionnaire (for instance, see Lee and Beeler, 2009).

This paper argues for the redressing of the balance between the preponderance of papers based on quantitative techniques, which are indeed appropriate for the study of issues such as impact analysis and event evaluation, and the dearth of qualitative studies, which are more suitable for the examination of the social world of event participants and the meanings they bring to events. We advocate the need for more experience-related studies within a qualitative research approach; this will help to further the knowledge base and develop theory in the events literature. Approaches that aim to predict, explain and project and are common to the social sciences will still be appropriate in event studies as Getz argues. Nevertheless, a focus is now needed on the experiential dimension of events; the qualitative approach is best suited to capture tales from experience and meaning making (Holloway and Todres, 2003). The "paradigm wars", which were initially discussed in relation to educational research (Gage and Jacks, 1989; Hammersley, 1992), are long over, and qualitative research should not be seen as antithetical to quantitative research as they complement each other and answer different research questions (Holloway, 2008). However, as a relatively new research area in the event field, there is a requirement to ensure that a range of appropriate methodologies are applied to the analysis of events and their impact (Morgan, 2007; Ali-Knight *et al.*, 2008).

Academic legitimacy for the subject area can only be established if diversity is evident in data collection and analysis methods (Getz, 2008). Getz argues that the experiential nature of events requires a phenomenological stance, whose focus is on the "experiencing person" (Becker, 1992). With its commitment to documenting the social reality of research participants, the (initially) inductive qualitative approach is uniquely placed to access the inner world of event participants. Qualitative methods are associated with an interpretive view, exploring the way people make sense of their social worlds. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, trying to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. As Holloway and Todres (2003) suggest, an ethnographic approach enables researchers to explore both the structures and interactions within their cultural context, and the meanings that participants' give to their cultural environment. Moreover, it provides immediacy to the account given by participants (O'Reilly, 2005) so that readers can gain a picture of their experience, motives and expectations. It also provides "internal validity" – the extent to which the researcher reflects the participants' perspectives. The usefulness of the qualitative approach for the events subject area lies in its focus on the setting, the experience and the meaning attached to it. Moreover, the phenomenological nature of the ethnographic approach (Fetterman, 2010) is revealed in its focus on the emic, the insider, perspective on the social setting under study (a term first used in anthropology by Harris (1976)). Indeed, Getz points to the value of applying anthropological methods to the study of a range of event experiences: these will sit side

by side with traditional consumer research which will remain important to the event management subject area. As Getz (2008) argues, it will become increasingly necessary to "custom design" highly targeted event experiences, which must be based on greater knowledge of the event experience in all its dimensions. To illustrate, ethnographic research has been shown to be important in refining the marketing of events (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003) and could disclose how consumers purchase access to events and their motivations for attending.

## The features of ethnographic research

Ethnography is defined as the description and interpretation of a culture or social group; its aim is to understand social reality by focusing on ordinary, everyday behaviour, and to provide an in-depth study of a culture. As the oldest of the qualitative methods, it has been used since ancient times; for instance, in the descriptions of Greeks and Romans who wrote about the cultures they encountered in their travels and wars. Modern ethnography has its roots in social anthropology and emerged in the 1920s and 1930s when famous anthropologists such as Malinowski (1922) and Mead (1935), while searching for cultural patterns and rules, explored a variety of non-western cultures and the life ways of the people within them. After the First and Second World Wars, when tribal groups in the traditional sense were disappearing, researchers wished to preserve aspects of vanishing cultures by living with them and writing about them (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010). When cultures became more linked with each other and western anthropologists could not find homogeneous isolated cultures abroad, they turned to researching their own cultures, acting as "cultural strangers", that is, trying to see them from outside; everything is looked at with the eyes of an outsider. Sociologists too adopted ethnographic methods, immersing themselves in the culture or subculture in which they took an interest; this type of ethnography has been described as anthropology at home.

There are a number of methodological features associated with ethnography. First, ethnography prioritises the perspective of the members of the social group being studied: this complies with Getz' (2008) call for research that highlights the experiential. Indeed, according to Wolcott (2009), ethnographers start by "experiencing" the social world of participants before systematic enquiry and examination can begin. The emic (insider) view is presented through thick description, a term used by the anthropologist Geertz (1973) which has its origin in the writing of the philosopher Ryle. This is description that makes explicit the detailed patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context at the same time as including emotions and the meaning that these have for the participants (Denzin, 1997). As such, it is able to meet Getz's call for methods that privilege the internal world of events participants.

Second, the researcher is usually required to become immersed in the "field" – the setting – with extended periods of fieldwork enabling them to become accepted within the research setting. People are studied in everyday naturally occurring settings, interacting as they would normally do, with minimal interference and influence from the researcher (Brewer, 2000). This means that participants feel comfortable in their own environment, and that the researcher can be spontaneous in terms of when and what type of data is collected. For an ethnographic researcher immersed as a participant observer in the research setting of a particular event (usually for its duration), there are numerous observational and interviewing opportunities, providing the researcher with a wealth of rich data that can be triangulated.

Third, and of attraction to events researchers in a nascent research area, is the focus in ethnography on the inductive approach: researchers do not usually begin the research process with a theory, but with curiosity (Brewer, 2000). Spradley (1979, p. 4), the anthropologist who was particularly interested in participant observation, states that ethnographers typically start research with a "conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance". Given the relative dearth of studies on the experiential and on meaning making in the events literature, these observations are pertinent. The inductive approach associated with ethnography implies that the insider viewpoint, the lived experience of participants will be prioritised, and that the data produced will guide researchers' understanding of event participation. It should be the aim of researchers in the event setting not to impose their worldview on participants through a highly structured interview or questionnaire, but to understand social reality and emotional associations from the emic/experiencing point of view.

Fourth, according to Brewer, ethnography involves case study research, which focuses on the particular but not necessarily at the expense of the general (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Spradley (1980) recommends the following criteria in choice of setting: simplicity, accessibility, unobtrusiveness and permissibleness. The attraction of the case-study approach associated with ethnography is evident in the observation that events are by their nature finite, bound in time and place. As in other types of qualitative research, ethnographers generally use purposive sampling which is criterion based and non-probabilistic (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). This means that sampling issues are straightforward, as the sample includes all those involved in the scene, although central to ethnography is the use of key informants – those research participants with expert knowledge in the field – with whom ethnographers work to produce a cultural description (Fetterman, 2010). In observational research, time sampling is also required, particularly in longitudinal studies; however, in the context of event research, the setting is already temporally and spatially bound, and observation would commonly last as long as the event itself in order to maximise data-collection opportunities. Though this may be lamented by anthropologists who traditionally advocate immersion in the setting for up to two years (Potter, 1996), the application of ethnography has been adapted by researchers into healthcare and education over time. Thus, the continued modification of the research approach most associated with anthropology by events researchers has a long precedent.

Finally, there is a specific research approach associated with ethnography: ethnographic data collection occurs mainly through observations and interviews which fall under the umbrella of participant observation. This is possibly the earliest form of data collection, where early anthropologists and sociologists, such as Malinowski and Mead, became part of the culture they studied and examined over time the actions and interactions of people "in the field". Participant observation means that researchers are immersed in the setting; they interact with participants, observe what is going on and are able to ask questions about it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The researcher can move around in the location as they wish, without appearing unusual or intrusive, observing in detail, with access to opportunistic interviewing, as well as to spontaneous observation (Mason, 2002). Thus, using ethnography, the event researcher will be able to explore and understand the event experience by sharing, participating in, the experience (the "doing" or "being there").

Interviews and conversations will reveal to the researcher how participants describe, explain and assign meaning to their event experiences. Unstructured interviews are

most common in ethnography (O'Reilly, 2005), usually chosen as the best way to access experiences, allowing those being studied the opportunity to express themselves in their own words and at their own pace (Brewer, 2000). In-depth interviewing will permit access to participants' feelings and perceptions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998), opening a window onto their emotional world that quantitative research will not deliver (Mason, 2002). In the events context, this means that researchers will be free to explore in depth participants' motivations for attending, as well as their experiences during the event, and the implications of these experiences for personal and cultural identity. The ethnographic interview is responsive to situations and informants (O'Reilly, 2005), and for this reason, each interview will tend to be unique. Indeed, the flexibility and spontaneity associated with ethnographic data collection means that the researcher can explore many avenues as Mason (2002) states; field work can and often will lead them in unexpected directions, as it will be directed by the interests and preoccupations of the participant.

Using the twin methods of participant observation and interviewing offers an unparalleled insight into participants' world that is typical of ethnography (Spindler, 1982; Gilbert, 1993). It also acts as a way to triangulate data to achieve trustworthiness. The use of triangulation within method is the source of ethnographic validity (Fetterman, 2010), as data of different kinds can be systematically compared, to test the quality of information and to put the situation into perspective (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Seale, 1999). In qualitative ethnographic studies, the triangulation is "within method" (observation and interviews) rather than between methods with different ideologies (qualitative and the quantitative). According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), trustworthiness is improved if different kinds of data lead to the same conclusion.

## The use of ethnography in events research

The experiences and social, cultural and personal meanings attached to events by participants represents an area that until recently has received limited scholarly coverage: exceptions include studies by Getz *et al.* (2001), Morgan (2006), Frost *et al.* (2008), Morgan and Wright (2008), Shipway and Jones (2008) and Stone (2008). As Getz notes, event studies are interdisciplinary in nature; this is indicated by their appearance in non-events related journals, as we show in our citation of the following studies. Furthermore, many of the papers have been authored by researchers outside the events area, i.e. by tourism planning academics, sport sociologists or anthropologists whose aim in conducting ethnography may not be the same as that of the events researcher. Their citation here is used to bolster the case for the utility of ethnography by academics in the event field: the aim may vary but the source and value of data are similar.

First, two ethnographic studies of music festivals have been identified: one on rock music in *Popular Music* by Cohen (1993), which ended with a call for the increased use of ethnographic approaches for the study of popular music, and another by Eder *et al.* (1995) on the National Women's Music Festival, which featured in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Second, two anthropological studies of dance festivals have been found, including Cavalcanti's (2001) ethnographic study of the Amazonian Ox Dance festival (published in *Cultural Analysis*) and Xie's (2003) participant observation of the traditional bamboo-beating dance in Hainan, China: this paper was published in the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. In the context of business events, Hill *et al.* (1997) carried out an ethnographic study of the experiences of delegates at

an academic medical teaching conference: the findings were published in the *Southern Medical Journal*. A note on the focus of this paper: the business events sector is highly competitive, and as such it would benefit from a greater understanding of delegate and organiser satisfaction, as provided by this older example of qualitative research.

The above snapshot of studies features the use of ethnography by researchers outside the events academic area; we have also identified academic papers by researchers into sporting events and sporting communities, however, due to the limited opportunities for publication in events-specific journals, researchers have tended to scatter their work across various disciplinary journals. To illustrate, ethnographic studies by Shipway and Jones (2007, 2008), on, respectively, the International Running Challenge in Cyprus and the 2007 Flora London Marathon, were published in the *International Journal of Tourism Research* and the *Journal of Sport and Tourism*. A further selection of ethnographic studies in the area of sporting events has been identified, whose focus has been on the athlete perspective: Fine's (1979) study of pre-adolescent American Little League Baseball players (published in the *American Sociological Review)*; the autoethnographic study of the event and training experiences by Tsang (2000) (published in the *Sociology of Sport Journal*); Granskog's (2003) exploration of the socialisation and experiences of women participating in triathlon events, featuring in a book entitled *Athletics Intruders: Ethnographic Research on Women, Culture and Exercise*; McCarville's (2007) autoethnographic account of his personal leisure journey through an Ironman triathlon endurance event (in *Leisure Sciences*); and Atkinson's (2008) ethnography of pain and suffering among participants in Canadian triathlon events (in *Leisure Studies*). These studies demonstrate the utility of ethnography in describing and understanding sporting event cultures, which could be replicated within any event setting: ethnography alone permits the study of the culture created by participants at an event.

This paper argues that the meanings attached to events have yet to be explored in any great depth, and illustrates how the use of ethnography in a diverse range of these areas provides extensive opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the nature and meanings of event experiences for visitors, participants or organizers. It is within these areas that ethnography can make a significant addition to the existing body of knowledge within the domain of event studies. The utility of ethnography as a research approach in the field of events is clear: permitting both observation and interviews with key informants, a full picture of the event experience will be captured by researcher, who by assuming the role of participant, gains a privileged access to the subculture created by participants that is uniquely offered by ethnography. It must be noted that participation, which ranges from spending some time in a group to full immersion (Spradley, 1980), may precede the event. Researchers may choose to gain access to the world of the event participant before the day of the actual event, where an identifiable sub-group exists. In many ethnographic studies, participation is "complete", a term used to refer to the highest level of involvement which is offered when ethnographers study a situation they are participating in Spradley (1980).

The observation of a variety of contexts within one event setting is important. Spradley (1980) states that all participant observation takes place in social situations, and provides a framework in order to guide researchers when they observe a situation, although these guidelines cannot be seen as complete, or all inclusive (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010). In the list below, Spradley's framework for participant observation is

applied to the event context. Using the annual anti-globalisation rally (a political event in Getz' typology) as a point of illustration allows the reader to grasp the applicability of the technique for the study of events. Furthermore, Spradley's framework accounts for the cognitive, affective and conative elements of an event, that is the thinking, emotion and behaviour that are linked to it. This allows the researcher to concentrate on these distinct dimensions that interact to influence outcome and process.

Participating in the anti-globalisation rally (Spradley, 1980, p. 78):

- *Space.* The event location, e.g. the G20 anti-globalisation demonstration 2010.
- *Actor.* The person in the event setting, e.g. the demonstrator, the steward, the police officer and the speaker.
- *Activity.* The behaviour and actions of those in attendance.
- *Object.* The items located in the setting, e.g. barriers, cordons, street furniture and shop fronts.
- *Act.* The single action, e.g. policing the event, demonstrating and speaking.
- *Events.* What is happening (in the period post, during and pre)? For example, the political and economic context.
- *Time.* Time frame and sequencing, e.g. media build-up (traditional press and online), planning and organisation activities leading up to the main day of the event, post-event ramifications and consequences.
- *Goal.* What participants are aiming to achieve, e.g. (depending on actor role) raising awareness, causing disruption and minimising disruption.
- *Feeling.* The emotions of participants, e.g. accessible through observation on the day and of the press and online fora in the build-up to and subsequent to the event.

The above framework can be used as a template for the study of any event, though as ethnography implies an inductive approach to research, the focus of observation will inevitably bend in response to the data generated as the research proceeds. In other words, the ethnographer has to be flexible and responsive to the conditions of the research setting.

## Ethnography and ethics

Once the event research setting is identified, the most important issue is to gain access to that social world. Entrance into the event community may involve the use of gatekeepers; however, it is important to maintain a degree of control over who to talk to, when and where. While gatekeepers can provide initial entry into the event environment, if closed, it should be remembered that they may wish for a favourable portrait of that particular setting to be portrayed. In a setting where gatekeeper access is not required, the researcher faces the decision as to whether they want participants to be aware of their presence, and to consider the ethical implications of a covert stance. Covert observation is usually considered unethical unless it takes place in public settings and individual participants cannot be identified. There might occasionally be situations in which researcher identity should not be disclosed in order to safeguard the researcher's safety. An example in the area of journalism is the case of MacIntyre's (1999) (investigative journalist) study of Chelsea Football Fans.

As visual media coverage increases and as our understanding of visual cultures deepens, visual research is also growing (Pink, 2007). In terms of visual ethnography, such as the use of video recording or photographic images at festivals and events, care should be taken to respect the rights of research participants. According to Pink, the only ethically acceptable ethnography involves informants as active participants in the research, and she highlights the importance of on-going discussions with informants, obtaining their informed consent for research and eventual publication, and of "giving something back" to the communities who provide the material that can be used for ethnographic publication. Collecting images, video recording event audiences, or using other forms of multimedia for research purposes during an event or festival will also raise questions relating to the ethics of publication, given that neither researchers nor informants can control how published materials are used or interpreted. As such, researchers in the domain of events and festivals must, therefore, take care that their work cannot harm informants.

Principles of anonymity and confidentiality need to be adhered to, and researchers must be careful not to cause harm to participants in the fieldwork phase. According to Williams (2003), being ethical is about achieving a balance between being an objective researcher and being a morally bound citizen: social research should not create harm or distress even if the outcome may be beneficial to society.

## Judging ethnographic event research

There is a well-worn debate in the methodological literature over the differing criteria for judging qualitative and quantitative research, which must be taken into consideration by writers and reviewers of ethnographic studies. One criterion to be considered is that of reliability, which refers to the consistency, stability and repeatability of research findings: this is an inappropriate criterion in qualitative as social situations are not replicable, and the researcher is, in any case, the research instrument in ethnographic research (Brewer, 2000; Daymon and Holloway, 2002): it would be inappropriate to replicate the study in the same conditions and with similar participants.

Generalisability or "external validity" is also a problematic concept for qualitative research, which tends to focus on a single case or setting (Fielding, 1993). Nevertheless, ethnographers suggest that similar settings are likely to produce similar data (Potter, 1996), and that theory-based generalisation can be achieved, involving the transfer of theoretical concepts found from one situation to other settings and conditions (Daymon and Holloway, 2002): thus, the term transferability is preferred to generalisability. Hammersley (1992) describes this as theoretical inference, drawing conclusions from the features of the local events described, by identifying generic features. Thus, the findings produced from an ethnographic study of a music festival may find resonance (a criterion preferred by qualitative researchers such as Todres (1999)) in the reader of events research and other researchers. The term validity is used differently among qualitative and quantitative researchers. Indeed, in the place of validity, qualitative researchers often use the criterion trustworthiness or credibility, which means that the real world of, for example, the event participant is authentically presented (Fetterman, 2010; Brewer, 2000). Thus, when writing ethnography, an important consideration is one of voice: many ethnographic researchers will use extensive quotations, bringing a sense of immediacy and involvement in the field (Brewer, 2000) as well as empowering and prioritising the participant view. Seale (1999) suggests that central to ethnography is the adoption of a reflexive stance towards the process and the product of research.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that as social research is part of the social world that is studied, the data collected and interpreted are influenced by our biases, acknowledgement of which is central to trust-building. Many ethnographers use the first person throughout their writing to show their personal involvement in the field and consequent influence on the collection and analysis of data.

This paper also advocates the use of the first person as a writing style that should be embraced within the events literature, as is becoming the case in tourism studies (Tribe, 2008) and other areas in ethnography (Wolcott, 2009). Though academics traditionally practise "silent authorship", keeping their voice out of what they write (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1996), ethnographers often demonstrate that they take responsibility for their research and acknowledge their own involvement rather than staying anonymous. As Bateman (2009, p. 16) commented in the July 2009 edition of *The Times Higher*: "routine suppression of the first person prevents researchers from taking overt responsibility for their work". Our commitment to the use of the first person is reflected in the adoption of the active voice in this paper.

## Conclusion

This paper calls for future research into the social and emotional world of event participants. By giving primacy to the data and focusing on the emic perspective, ethnographic approaches are useful for context-sensitive research because it explores the meanings of events for the participants who experience and are involved in them. The current literature in this particular domain suffers from a tunnel vision approach, dominated by quantitative studies, and it is hoped that the suggestions in this paper will lay the foundations for more ethnographic studies that will enhance and enrich the events literature. This paper has drawn from the wider literature on ethnography (with sources as diverse as sport, education and health), in order to argue that this approach could be adopted in the domain of events to increase our understanding of behaviours and experiences.

Having outlined the benefits of ethnography within the event and festival domain, we would also suggest that there is indeed merit in further exploration of a diverse range of qualitative methods of enquiry within the emerging area of event studies. It is felt that as a new and emerging publication of research into events, the *International Journal of Event and Festival Management* would benefit from a future themed special issue dedicated to qualitative research methodologies, and drawing contributions from academics traditionally publishing in more mainstream disciplines including sociology, psychology, health and business, and management. This would to some extent serve to redress the predominance of quantitative-based publications through a more balanced overview of emerging research and methods; and second to provide a substantive and diverse contribution to knowledge in festivals and events research.

## Note

1. The global term "event" is used throughout this paper to cover all eight categories included in the typology put forward by Getz (2008): festivals and other celebrations, entertainment, recreation, political and state, scientific, sport and arts events, those in the domain of business and corporate affairs (including meetings, conventions, fairs and exhibitions), and those in the private domain (including rites of passage such as weddings, parties and social events for affinity groups).

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**Corresponding author**
Richard Shipway can be contacted at: rshipway@bournemouth.ac.uk