



Kent Academic Repository

Fitton, Triona (2022) *Interpretive ethnography: a UK charity shop case study*.
In: Dean, Jon and Hogg, Eddy, eds. *Researching Voluntary Action: Innovations and Challenges*. Third Sector Research Series . Policy Press, Bristol, UK.
ISBN 978-1-4473-5668-4.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/89619/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/researching-voluntary-action>

This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

Interpretive ethnography: A UK charity shop case study

Triona Fitton

Ethnographic research is widely used across social research disciplines examining the voluntary sector, yet the output- and impact-driven culture that directs many research agendas can lead to the value of qualitative modes of enquiry being overlooked. It is helpful therefore for voluntary sector researchers to understand the key uses of ethnography as a qualitative research tool. Drawing on an interpretivist approach, this chapter will outline the utility of ethnography when undertaking a participant observation in two different charity shops. The case study illustrates the importance of immersion within the research setting in terms of recording and analysing ‘natural’ interactions and behaviours. It also explores the issue of access, the role of researcher reflexivity, and how micro-level ‘shop floor’ studies of voluntary cultures can serve as a critical measure against data-driven assumptions about contemporary charity work.

To begin, this chapter will provide an overview of ethnography and interpretivism as a methodology, before focusing upon how interpretivist participatory research (and its relational and reflexive aspects), and thick description (Geertz, 1973) are useful tools to better understand the social world. I will illustrate these with evidence from my own ethnographic study into professionalisation in charity retail operations (Fitton, 2013). In the interest of brevity, this chapter will focus predominantly on the contribution of participant observation and field notes as a valuable method for voluntary sector research. However semi-structured interviews also formed an important part of this project (see Chapter x of this volume for a discussion of the utility of semi-structured interviewing) and ought to be of interest to practitioners or academic researchers considering a multimethod ethnographic approach.

Ethnographic research has its basis within the research paradigm of interpretivism, a qualitative methodology that emerged from the field of anthropology (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). It works on the premise that all knowledge of reality is created and constantly reinterpreted, through social constructions such as culture, systems, language, traditions, shared understandings, tools, documents and so on. Placing emphasis on how a reality is created or constructed negates the idea that there are concrete or objectively measurable facts about any aspect of social life - the voluntary sector included - that are not in some way open to interpretation.

Research into the voluntary sector, particularly when it is aimed at aiding practitioners, tends to have a strong focus on enhancing knowledge, practice, and efficiency, alongside the ability to measure and demonstrate impact with some degree of replicability. This tendency to privilege measurable, tangible results takes inspiration from the research fields of management and business, which are typically quantitative in nature (Bielefeld, 2006) – in general, the voluntary sector has increasingly taken directive from the for-profit sector in terms of how to improve its operations. In the UK, there has been enhanced scrutiny of the actions and outputs of charitable organisations in recent years, a symptom of the increasing involvement of charities in the delivery of public services (Wilding, 2017) and a number of high-profile mismanagement scandals (for example, the implosion of the charity Kids Company after receiving more than £46m of public funds [Dean, 2020]). This, alongside a reduction in available funding, has meant that those working in the voluntary sector are most likely to prioritise research that shows demonstrable impact, that can be simply conveyed, and that can be used convincingly at a policy level. There is also a misguided assumption that using statistical data is more likely to produce ‘neutral’ or truthful results – an assumption that has dogged the natural sciences for centuries. Non-profits

tend to have a preoccupation with the measurement of outputs and outcomes with an intention of strengthening accountability towards both donors and beneficiaries (Benjamin, 2007). This, as Wilding (2017) notes, leads to a desire for the voluntary sector to become more data driven, and thus reliant upon quantitative research and findings in order to prove its worth ‘objectively’.

It is commonly argued that interpretivism yields a less than objective representation of the world (see Nadel [1951] for a discussion of research objectivity). However, being ‘impartial’ and ‘holistic’ is not a prerequisite for good research, and telling the whole story is not always necessary. We do not need to document the minute detail of all interactions, but instead record and consider those situations that we regard as the most important, compelling, or concerning. We must act as metaphorical ‘pearl divers’ (Arendt, in Back, 2007), not by surveying the entirety of an ocean’s depths, but by sifting through and illuminating the most important and precious elements to be found there.

An obvious question arises: how do we know what is most precious, important, compelling, or concerning about the site we intend to research? Prior studies serve to illuminate the aspects of a social setting that have intrigued social scientists previously, and show where a research ‘gap’ may exist. Reflection upon the present voluntary sector milieu allows subsequent research to aim towards being *transformative* as opposed to generalisable or replicable. This is the primary defence against claims of unrepresentativeness in ethnographic case studies. By building upon or reconstructing existing theories and ideas about how the voluntary sector operates, we achieve ‘inclusive generality’ (Burawoy 2009: 43) by offering novel perspectives on hitherto assumed standard practices.

In my particular area of interest (charity shops), academic studies have previously explored everything from small scale quantitative studies of types of goods sold (Horne & Broadbridge, 1995), shop volunteering (Broadbridge & Horne, 1994), and the ‘archetypal’ charity shopper (Parsons 2000), to qualitative studies on aspects such as the shop’s role as a ‘cultural economy’ and second-hand marketplace (Chattoe, 2006; Edwards & Gibson, 2017), and the volunteer’s role as a practice of care (Flores, 2014). However, a large body of work on charity retail at the time of this study was undertaken was concerned with a perceived move within the sector from a social to a commercial orientation, with shops operating more like for-profit enterprises (e.g. Goodall, 2000; Horne & Maddrell, 2002). This mirrored a general perception of the voluntary sector in the UK as becoming increasingly professionalised and ‘business-like’ (Dart, 2004). Yet much of the research in this area was from the disciplines of marketing and management, and although some was qualitative in nature – interviews were often used, for example - they would not have collected ‘immersive data’: experienced, recorded and *lived* by the research themselves. This absence of ‘lived experience’ in prior literature provided the inspiration for my project.

With this in mind, I entered into my ethnographic research study with an aim of understanding charity retail professionalisation *as a shop volunteer would*, and remained open-minded about what specific elements within that setting I intended to explore. One of the core tenets of interpretive ethnography is inductive reasoning: aiming not to test a specific research question or hypothesis, but allowing your research interest to develop as you collect, explore and revisit the data. Other components of ethnographic research include non-representative samples (often a small number of cases, with a focus on depth rather than breadth), and naturalistic research fields (non-experimental settings, generally observing behaviours and interactions as they occur in

situ) (Payne & Payne, 2005). All of the above were present in the study described in this chapter, explored through participant observation.

Gregson, Brooks and Crewe (2000) had previously conducted ethnographic charity shop research in a similar way, yielding an insight into professionalisation processes by focusing upon ‘talk’ within charity shop spaces. This managerial discourse was seen as indicative of how professional authority and volunteer ‘goodwill’ intersects. Gregson, et al. highlighted how the ‘messiness’ of charity shop spaces necessitates a hands-on research approach, in order to intensely scrutinise the patterns of interaction, or ‘micro-geographies’ (*ibid.*: 1670), that are taking place. They also provided a word of warning, describing the ‘seemingly ever-outward-spiralling momentum’ of their project as overwhelming (*ibid.*: 1662). This is a common feature of ethnographic studies, where huge amounts of fieldnote data are amassed, and the research topic intuitively develops throughout. There is always another research avenue to explore, an event that could be described as important, or a series of experiences that warrant further academic attention. In this sense, an ethnographer must be strict with themselves and continually ask the question ‘is this relevant to the specific subject I am interested in’? Balance must therefore be struck between achieving your research objectives, and not neglecting important findings.

The ethnographic case study

The main purpose of case study research should be to capture cases in their uniqueness. However, charity shops are an amorphous group of shopping spaces, and vary from little more than a glorified permanent jumble sale all the way up to a slick and carefully merchandised retail store. It is wise to select your specific case study through a typological approach: organising the population into categories and then selecting one

from each category to study in depth. I used Elizabeth Parsons' (2004) typology of charity shops to select potential case study types, as it defines charity shops on the basis of how much they have professionalised and 'traded up' in business terms. Parsons distinguished between Multiple Charity Retailers (national chains of multiple charity shops operating on behalf of a large parent charity), Hospice Charity Retailers (smaller chains of shops operating within a specific locale, usually on behalf of a local hospice) and Independent Charity Retailers (one-off shops for a local charity). Two charity shops were selected – the former was a Multiple Charity Retailer (henceforth MCR) and the latter a combination of both an Independent and a Hospice Charity Retailer (henceforth Independent Hospice Retailer, or IHR).

A comparative case study method, contrasting professionalisation processes in two relatively different shop types, developed. This approach aimed to provide clearer evidence of differences when the two cases yield some basic concrete similarities – for example, both shops were associated with children's charities. Charity shops are a manifestation of fundraising endeavours, but by linking the cause associated with the shop (in this case, children and their welfare) between the case studies, the research hoped to also investigate if there was any difference in impact that this particular cause had within shops that were considered more (or less) professionalised. Children's charities, alongside animal welfare, are also one of the most popular in the UK in terms of contributions and popularity (Charities Aid Foundation, 2019) and therefore the cause had the potential to be more influential.

It turned out that the shared cause did hold some implications for the fieldwork experience and relational aspects of the ethnography; for example, in the IHR often donations came from bereaved parents, indicating the role the shop played as an

emotional arbitrator of the experience of losing a child. Also, the hospice itself was tangible within the IHR shop space: it was located nearby and many hospice workers were closely involved in the day-to-day running of the shop; volunteers often discussed it and promoted hospice events in chitchat with customers; and donations circulated to and from the hospice. This was starkly different to the more professionalised MCR, which, despite being plastered with posters of children and the charity's branding, did not have any concrete physical links to its parent cause. Ethnographic comparative research therefore allows the dynamics of a particular issue that are not self-evident in a single case to be examined in tandem across different cases.

Access and location

Ethnographic studies are also contingent upon access. Some sites can be completely inaccessible, for reasons of insurance, ethics, or data protection. A charitable organisation that works with abused children likely will not let you conduct a participant observation of their interventions, for example, although you may be able to gain access for interviews. Securing access is a key consideration when contemplating any form of interpretive ethnography. If you cannot get people to speak to you initially, you will likely experience the same impediments during the research process. Access in this particular study was not hugely problematic, although I did attempt to secure volunteer roles at two other shops before being accepted at the MCR and IHR. I assured the charities they would not be named in the research, which is one consideration to keep in mind in relation to ethics. Charities are sensitive to bad press, much like their public and private sector peers, and any form of investigative research could end up showing them in a bad light (as some of the below examples may have done, were my research not anonymised). Conversely, some organisations will be keen

to publicise their involvement, particularly if the research is seeking to build upon or improve sector practices. Because of this, it is wise to decide upon the level of anonymity that you will offer before you attempt to gain access to the field.

Location is key to understanding context within an observational setting. It impacts upon the demographic of those you interact with as well as influencing the physical space. In this study, the shop workers, volunteers, customers, donors, and the quality and quantity of potential donations/stock were all dependent upon the location of the charity shop. The shops I studied were, as the crow flies, located under five miles apart, within a city in the North of England. The larger of the two, the Multiple Charity Retailer (MCR), was situated in a busy thoroughfare near a large railway station, where the area footfall is phenomenally high, while the Independent Hospice Retailer (IHR) was on a suburban street in the heart of a local community. It was located on a road near two local schools, in a stretch of shops that encompassed a betting shop, a pound shop, several takeaways and a small supermarket. Locals popped in regularly just to chat to charity shop staff.

The assumption in Elizabeth Parson's typology is that Independent Charity Retailers have 'a responsibility to their local community to provide low cost goods' over making profits (2004: 37). However, Hospice Charity retailers are also seen as the most profitable in her typology (ibid.), meaning that the IHR was something of a contradiction. What emerged through the ethnography was how exploration of a specific research setting *interacts with prior theory* and serves to develop upon or counter it. In this case, a hospice retailer that is also small and independent maintained responsiveness to community need, as illustrated by the fieldnotes below:

This area, I don't mean it rudely but it is a poor area. A lot of people are on the social. They haven't got a lot of money...

(Derreck, manager, IHR Fieldnote)

Occasionally there are the regular customers who come in, and you know they are tight [short of money] and they've got three or four kids and... circumstances. So, I go 'Oh, alright, make it... so and so.' Without making a big fuss about it.

(Steve, volunteer, IHR Interview)

Staff awareness of the shop's role as a community hub in a low-income area was therefore mediating the professionalising processes that would otherwise be profit orientated. Also revealed in the above is the socio-emotional economy of compassion for less privileged others identified elsewhere in the literature (Flores, 2014). The excerpt demonstrates how participant observation serves to reveal findings relating to the local demographic that participants may have otherwise felt uncomfortable discussing with candour. As I was also a volunteer, Derreck and Steve knew I was familiar with the customers and the shops position, and as a result offered information that allowed for development upon existing theoretical assumptions about charity shops.

Reflexivity and hidden stories

Social scientists conducting ethnographies are often encouraged to act as 'outsiders' looking in, systematically collecting observational data, and maintaining a critical distance from that which they study. In non-participant observation, positivist principles are maintained by not actively involving the researcher in the setting they are

studying. However, this method does not heed the fact that even intentionally unobtrusive methods tend to influence findings – they can affect responses, interrupt procedures and impede natural action. The researcher role that developed over time spent in the charity shop setting was that of ‘participant-as-observer’ i.e. I was a volunteer first and foremost, whilst also doing research. I opted for this rather than an ‘observer-as-participant’ to avoid making the research conspicuous, or making other people in the shops uncomfortable.

Field notes were recorded at regular intervals on a notepad during my shifts. Good observation practice was followed at all times, including the recording of exact spoken quotes where possible, the use of pseudonyms for shop workers and regular customers, and personal feelings were differentiated from observed facts. I used inscription at intervals, when serving a customer or completing a task was necessary. Inscription refers to ‘the act of making mental notes prior to writing things down’ (LeCompte and Schensul 1999: 13); perhaps jotting down an indicative word or phrase to elaborate upon later. This was followed by the writing up of ethnographic notes in dated bullet-points using ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) to build a narrative of the recorded events. Thick description is a means of qualitative reporting that elaborates descriptions using rich, contextual information. Although my shopfloor notes might include direct quotes and a short summary of an event, the writing up process would include as much detail as possible to conjure up the scene for the reader. As such, thick description not only presents ‘what was recorded’, but also includes feelings, thoughts, voices, actions and conveyed meanings (Ponterotto, 2006).

Ethnography can serve to capture poignant moments, as the example below attests. During my research, an experience recorded in my fieldnotes from the IHR shop

demonstrated how thick description illuminates stories hidden within the voluntary sector that, via other methodologies, would not emerge:

A man comes in and goes up to Derreck [shop manager], saying he is donating a bike from a family who lost their little boy. ‘It was sudden, but it’s been a year now and they want it to go here [to the charity shop]’ is all he says. Derreck has to sign some kind of form, and takes the boy’s bike and a football in a plastic bag from the man. When he comes back in, I ask him what it was about. ‘A boy died’ is all he says. I ask why the ball is bagged up and he says ‘It’s from the police. It’s evidence.’ (IHR Fieldnote)

Fieldnotes such as this serve to reconstruct the way we see charitable donations within the charity shop space, and to likewise bring up broader questions about the interactions and co-dependencies of public sector institutions (such as the police) and voluntary sector organisations. In this sense, ethnography can provide interesting prompts for discussions both inside and outside of a voluntary sector context.

However, it also provides something more: a visceral insight into how human lives intersect, and how individuals respond, within this particular setting. Poignancy can be lost when taking on a more scientific, data-driven or hypothesis-testing approach, as Burawoy (2000) notes, this kind of research can tend to prioritise a social setting, scenario or space (such as a charitable organization, event or act) over the individuals interacting within them, and the lives they are living.

Through being present and probing this particular interaction with the shop manager (and reflecting on what was actually happening as I wrote up the field notes later), the involvement of the police, and the charity shop’s role as an emotional mediator for

situations of extreme distress, was revealed. The quiet and monosyllabic response of Derreck belies the combined sense of discomfort and respect that the incident provoked.

By contrast, in handling police evidence in the MCR shop:

[The unpaid assistant manager and I] cut into the bags with scissors and pour the stuff onto the [shop] counter. I'm pretty sure Maria [shop manager] wouldn't allow this if she were in charge as it's right in front of a customer. The contents [include] one crusty sock and a really battered, single shoe. (MCR Fieldnote)

This fieldnote raises questions around how professional responsibility (i.e. having a paid managerial role) interacts with basic humanity in the act of moral redefinition of goods in the shop. Here you can see my own pondering reflection upon how the manager may respond to what we are doing. It is pertinent to discuss here this dialogic relationship between the researcher and that which they are observing. Reflexivity requires the researcher not only to contemplate the observable activities taking place within the research setting, but also to reflect upon *how they are contemplating those activities* (Madison, 2011). Conscious mediation of the researcher's own values within their research is encouraged in ethnography, as a means to demonstrate that partiality is natural and expected, and to 'more confidently resist the slings and arrows of positivism's obsession with evidence' (*ibid.*: 130). All data collected is usually considered in relation to its temporal, geographical, historical, economic and cultural context, and in relation to the researcher's own background.

In this study, reflexivity throughout the ethnography was essential to ensure I remained aware of the opportunities and limitations my presence in the field allowed. I was a regular shopper in charity shops, and also a prior volunteer, having worked in my local

Salvation Army shop in the Midlands. I was also a PhD researcher at a Russell Group university, bringing with me previous customer service experience and other social skills. The data collected during my 340+ hours of participant observation was contingent on the person I was within that setting; including aspects of my gender, race, nationality, age, class background, and level of physical ability. For instance, I was trusted to handle cash and price up items, and work primarily in customer-facing roles, something that other volunteers and community service workers with less educational and social capital were not permitted to do.

An illustration of how reflexivity can feed into the analysis of data is given below. The fieldnote depicts a discussion about an elderly male volunteer (Alan) with the MCR shop manager:

[She] sighs and says, ‘He pesters me, he’s like “I want to go on the till. Let me go on the till,” but he’s so slow. He’s like, not that useful. So I keep him out the back, but even then he doesn’t really do stuff properly. Like this [she holds up a top with a mark on it]. We wouldn’t bother to steam and label this and put it out. He’s not checking enough.’ (MCR Fieldnote)

During an occasion when a drunk gentleman is acting suspiciously in the store, my field notes also recorded that ‘Alan does not seem to be very effective for surveillance – he doesn’t pay attention to the man at all’. In another instance, I described his work on the till alongside me as ‘slow’ but ‘methodical to ensure he doesn’t miss anything’, and his attitude ‘brusque [...] towards customers’. In these fieldnotes, the privilege of the researcher begins to be evidenced, as somebody who is judging their fellow volunteers negatively in relation to their own skill set. Yet when the notes are reflected upon, it

becomes clear that Alan's value as a volunteer is being undermined because of his lack of proficiency in commercial retail techniques, for example, offering efficient and friendly customer service. As a fellow volunteer, I was also deferring to the superiority of those qualities, and positioning myself as someone to be congratulated for possessing them. What this reflexive practice revealed was how volunteers unconsciously buy into a pervasive narrative of necessary upskilling in the voluntary sector workforce (Parsons and Broadbridge 2007), alongside a depiction of blatant ageism.

Thus, the ethnographic encounters I recorded were not only privileged to a certain level of access, but they were also inherently biased in terms of my prior experience, and the influence that experience had upon those participating in my research. Related to this is the difficulty of maintaining the divide between being a researcher and being a worker/friend to those in the field. This can be particularly difficult if you are a practitioner who feels a professional responsibility towards a cause, an organisation, or those working within it. Juggling the conflicting roles you take on during research can be extremely taxing. Whilst a 'participant as observer', I preferred to take fieldnotes when there was no one else around, for fear of being perceived to be slacking off, and also because the note-taking process was recorded as 'seeming to make other workers in the shops feel uncomfortable' (MCR Fieldnotes). Maria, the manager of the MCR, at one point said 'Don't mention me in this book, will you?'. Derreck, manager of the IHR, also joked 'Don't you go reporting back to your other shop about how we do things here!' Both comments prompted a need for a reiteration of ethical consent and reassurance that all the participants would be made entirely anonymous, as would the charity itself.

The wariness of participants was pre-empted in the planning stage, since participatory research is dependent upon being accepted by the research subjects, not just as somebody who is objectively studying your actions, but also as somebody who is *joining in* with them. Therefore, a moderate amount of participation must be genuinely engaged in. Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management summarises how one must present a positive 'front' applicable to whatever scenario you are confronted with – and in context, that 'front' may not be one of a researcher, but of a volunteer, a friendly ear, a confidante, and so on. This approach infers some deception, or covert behaviour at least (particularly in Goffman's usage of the term *manipulation*), but in fact it is a requirement in order to fit in, and not upset the delicate balance of unspoken trust in interactions by making apparent the dichotomy of roles played. 'Disruptions' to this often result in embarrassment for both the researcher and participants (*ibid.*: 212) which was my own experience when caught note-taking when I should have been tidying or undertaking other tasks. Therefore, I upheld a combination of both overt and covert roles despite both charity shops being fully aware of my research imperative.

Conclusion

There are many features of ethnographic research that merit further exploration in its consideration as a useful method for examining voluntary sector practice – particularly in relation to analysis. However, this chapter has predominantly focused upon the practicalities of gaining access and the 'doing' of ethnography. Writing up and using the data gleaned to tell stories is also fundamentally important. This is indicated in the summary of the key benefits of ethnographic research when exploring the voluntary sector detailed below. Some of these were explored in this chapter, for example, the

relational aspects of ethnography that result in the formation of bonds of trust between researcher and representatives within an organization. Relationships with the shop managers and volunteers allowed access to information that would have never been found out via other means – particularly the subtle ways the staff negotiate top-down professionalizing processes, and community interactions. However it allowed other nuances to emerge – for example, the way that each charity’s mission was important to the managers and workers in various specific ways, through the idle storytelling that went on during a quiet moment sorting bin bags ‘out the back’, similarly to how storytelling becomes a tool either for fundraising or grant applications. It is also a way to find out otherwise obscured or hidden behaviours, responses and actions. As this case study demonstrates, a core value of ethnography is that it offers a voice to the ‘half muted’ (Back, 2007) within voluntary organisations, those whose experiences and perspectives may never reach the ears of boardroom decision makers. Many of these actors work unseen and their voices often go unheard. Stories, even those that are difficult or controversial, are more compelling than statistics could ever be in illuminating the human relationships that are critical to voluntary action. How organisations choose to engage with these stories and their impact is a crucial next step.

On a practical level, ethnography also helps to evaluate how well a process is working once it cascades down from senior management. The success of professionalising processes in charity retail tends to be measured in fiduciary terms only. Yet disgruntled volunteers, profit-focused shop managers and haggling customers will all interpret and apply these processes in idiosyncratic ways. Likewise, ethnography also allows for insight into customers as end-users when charities are engaging in the act of selling something. This relationship is often overlooked in favour of the charity-beneficiary or

the donor-charity relationship, and certainly more often measured in terms of sales or stock, than in terms of the shop-floor experience.

However, the strongest case for interpretive ethnography as a voluntary sector research method lies with the researcher. Their role is to make the familiar unfamiliar, by researching and analysing the voluntary sector as if it were a set of obscure or exotic practices and institutions, rather than a taken-for-granted site of ‘doing good’. This role is integral in order to develop more nuanced understandings of how the sector operates.

In the case of this charity shop study, the researcher’s role was to dismantle common conceptions and assumptions gathered by viewing these uniquely co-ordinated sites *from the outside in*, by engaging with ‘embodied others’ within that space. In turn, that engagement influences and changes that space. Both the researcher’s participatory role during the collection of data, and the subsequent presentation of research findings and potential recommendations, have the propensity to fundamentally change and reinvent the phenomena being studied. As Anthony Giddens’ (1987: 19) argues, social science ideas and theories tend to ‘circulate in and out of the social world they are coined to analyse’. Within a dynamic and responsive global voluntary sector (especially in light of the debilitating effects of COVID-19 on all aspects of public life), assumptions based on static and scientifically representative data are, now more than ever, open to reinterpretation.

Finally, ethnography as a method tends to replicate both the positives and negatives of whichever site it is roped in to explain. This particular research study focused upon how market-based criteria are used to systematically measure and rationalise the work of actors within the charity shop space, and how the pursuit of profit is privileged over ideas of charity or care. Yet as an ethnography, the research violated positivist research

norms of replicability and reliability, refuting the idea that such work has to be measurable or rationalisable. Instead, ethnographic analysis allowed the ‘bubbles of humanness’ (Cova & Remy, 2007: 52) to break through the regimented processes of professionalisation found in the data, both in terms of the unique insights collected, and the subversion of professionalising practices by human actors. Charity shops remain messy and ambiguous spaces that are not easily rationalised by quantitative methods, and therefore are sites well suited to this method of study. As Carey (in Denzin, 1996: 285) succinctly puts it, the ethnography’s ‘faults and triumphs are pretty much characteristics of the culture as a whole’.

Further Readings

- The rich, contextual detail that underpins interactions in ethnographic accounts can be better understood through the work of Geertz (1973) on ‘thick description’.
- A useful guide for planning and conducting this kind of research is provided by LeCompte & Schensul’s (1999) ethnographer’s toolkit.
- For an in-depth multidisciplinary overview of charity shops in the UK and beyond, see Horne & Maddrell (2002).

References

Back, L. (2007). *The Art of Listening*. London: Berg.

Benjamin, L.M. (2012) 'The Potential of Outcome of Measurement for Strengthening Nonprofits Accountability to Beneficiaries.' *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. 42(6): 1224-1244.

Bielefeld, W. (2006). 'Quantitative Research for Nonprofit Management.' *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*. 16(4): 395-409.

Broadbridge, A., & Horne, S. (1994). 'Who Volunteers For Charity Retailing and Why?' *The Service Industries Journal* , 14(4): 421-37.

Burawoy, M. (2009). *The extended case method: Four countries, four decades, four great transformations, and one theoretical tradition*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Charities Aid Foundation (2019) *CAF UK Giving 2019*.

https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf-uk-giving-2019-report-an-overview-of-charitable-giving-in-the-uk.pdf?sfvrsn=c4a29a40_4

Chattoe, E. (2006). 'Charity Shops as Second Hand Markets.' *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*. 5(2): 153-160.

Cova, V., & Rémy, E. (2007). 'I Feel Good – Who Needs the Market? Struggling and having fun with consumer-driven experiences.' In A. Caru, & B. Cova (Eds), *Consuming Experience*. New York: Routledge. pp. 51-64.

Dart, R. (2004). 'Being Business-Like in a Nonprofit Organization: A Grounded and Inductive Typology.' *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 33(2): 290-310.

Dean, J. (2020). *The Good Glow: Charity and the Symbolic Power of Doing Good*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Denzin, N. K. (1996). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Edwards, D., & Gibson, L. (2017). 'Counting the pennies: the cultural economy of charity shopping.' *Cultural Trends*, 26(1): 70-79.

Fitton, T. (2013). *The "Quiet Economy": An Ethnographic Study of the Contemporary UK Charity Shop*. Doctoral dissertation, University of York.
<http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/5639/7/THESIS%20complete%20including%20bibliography.docx.pdf>

Flores, R. (2014). 'From Personal Troubles to Public Compassion: Charity shop volunteering as a practice of care.' *The Sociological Review*, 62(2): 383-399.

Geertz, C. (1973). 'Thick Description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic.

Giddens, A. (1987). *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Harmondsworth.

Goodall, R. (2000). 'Organising Cultures: voluntarism and professionalism in UK charity shops.' *Voluntary Action*. 3(1): 43-57.

Gregson, N., Brooks, K., & Crewe, L. (2002). 'Discourse, Displacement and Retail Practise: Some pointers from the charity retail project.' *Environment and Planning A*. 34(9): 1661-1683.

Horne, S., & Broadbridge, A. (1995). 'Charity Shops: A Classification by Merchandise Mix'. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*. 23(7): 17-23.

Horne, S., & Maddrell, A. (2002). *Charity Shops: Retailing, Consumption and Society*. London: Routledge.

LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (1999). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research* (Vol. 1). Plymouth: Rowman Altamira.

- Madison, D. S. 2011. 'The Labor of Reflexivity.' *Cultural Studies*. 11(2): 129–38.
- Nadel, S. F. (1951). *The Foundations of Social Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.
- Parsons, E. (2000). 'New goods, old records and second-hand suits: Charity shopping in South-West England.' *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* , 5(2): 141-151.
- Parsons, E. (2004). 'Charity Retailing in the UK: A Typology.' *The Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* , 11(1): 31-40.
- Parsons, E., & Broadbridge, A. (2007). 'Charity, Retail or Care? Gender and Managerialism in the Charity Retail Sector'. *Women In Management Review*, 22(7): 552 - 567.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Ponterotto, J.G. (2006) 'Brief note on the origins, evolution and meaning of the qualitative research concept 'thick description'', *The Qualitative Report* 11(3): 538-54.
- Wilding, K. (2017) 'Data Driven Social Change', *National Statistical, ONS blog*. <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2017/08/24/data-driven-social-change/> [Accessed 01/07/20]