

Research Ethics in Ethnographic Fieldwork in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic fieldwork is a research method used by many disciplines of the social sciences to obtain reliable and practical research results. In Vietnam, this method is also widely popular among social science researchers. However, in the process of conducting ethnographic fieldwork and publishing research results obtained from this method, there have been many shortcomings, leading to dishonesty in the research process, and research results are often duplicated, which is harmful to the development of social sciences in Vietnam. Through the analysis of a few works in the field of folklore and culture using the ethnographic field method, including analysis of questionnaires, survey implementation, results analysis, and compatibility between fieldwork results and questionnaires, and the expert interview method, this article hopes to achieve the research goal of clarifying the shortcomings in the use of ethnographic field research methods in Vietnam. This article also proposes a number of solutions to overcome and contribute to improving the use of ethnographic field research methods in social science research in Vietnam and building a Vietnamese academic culture comparable to other countries in the world.

Keywords: Ethnographic fieldwork, research ethics, social science, Vietnam

Introduction

Ethnographic fieldwork

In Vietnam, ethnographic fieldwork is also a research method applied in many social sciences such as sociology, linguistics, anthropology, ethnography, and cultology, and currently, the application of this method in the social science research community is increasingly popular. In the field of social sciences, with different majors, there will be differences in the application of ethnographic fieldwork methods to research, for examples: selection of research subjects, research duration and survey sample size. Since the author's research field belongs to folklore and cultology, the examples given in the article are mainly within the scope of this research.

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Toan (2011) has defined the word “field” as follows:

1. “Field” means “in the countryside”. (Toan, 2011, p. 40).
2. “Field” means “in the field, living in the field”; or means “The area far from the city, and the place to conduct on-site investigations and surveys in science” (Toan, 2011, p. 40).

Thus, fieldwork is understood as a rural upland area, and when we say fieldwork, it means carrying out surveys and surveys in rural areas and fields. However, the broader meaning of this method is actual investigation. Researchers should survey reality and experience with real-life situations to find answers for social science research.

Ethnographic fieldwork is actual investigation work to meet research objectives in each discipline in the field of

social sciences. According to Robert (2014) "Ethnographic fieldwork is concerned with learning about groups and peoples in their daily lives" (Robert et al., 2014, p.27). These authors specify the following:

First, the field researcher enters a social setting and begins to get acquainted with the people associated with that context; often the researcher would not have been aware of this context well before. The researcher will participate in the daily rhythm of the research subject's life, develop lasting relationships with the people in the context, and observe all that is going on. In fact, the term "participatory observation" is often used to characterize this basic research approach.

Second, the researcher will regularly and systematically write down what they observe and learn while participating in the subject's daily life cycle. Through this, the researcher will generate more and more written data about such observations and experiences (Robert et al., 2014, p. 27).

According to Nghia (2013, p. 74), ethnographic studies "have the main purpose of describing a limited cultural space (...), focusing on understanding a culture (or a sub-culture)".

There are a few works that use ethnographic field methods to survey and research: Dien (2002), Dien (2005), Mai (2008), Hung (2008), Xuyen (2008), Hanh (2016), and Tuyet (2014).

Among these, the work of: Dien (2002) included the collection of Soc Trang folklore, Dien (2005) included the collection of Bac Lieu folklore, Mai (2008) collecting Han Nom heritage, Hung (2008) collection of Ha Tien folklore, Xuyen (2008) collection of Kien Giang folk legends and Tuyet (2014) studied the social, economic, and cultural life of fisher people and residents of the southern seas, which are large-scale projects conducted using many collaborators to collect information during field trips.

Hanh (2016) carried out a research project by herself in the field survey, analyzing the results, without the support of collaborators.

Thus, it is not easy to conduct a study using the ethnographic fieldwork method, because it requires the researcher to have a rigorous preparation process for the field trip and to endure difficulties in the process of contacting, integrating into a new community, or contacting the selected subjects for the interview. This method is expensive, time-consuming, and labor-intensive. Compared with the quantitative survey by questionnaire,

the ethnographic fieldwork method will take a lot of time of the researcher. For example, a questionnaire survey may take only 10 minutes to complete, but an in-depth interview can last from one hour to three consecutive hours, and sometimes, the interview might not be successful in the first round and must be conducted again to get the necessary information. In addition, there exists difficulty in reaching the interviewees. Despite the difficulties, due to numerous advantages of this qualitative research method, researchers still choose ethnographic fieldwork when necessary.

Methods

Considering the real situation of the problem and the shortcomings in using the ethnographic fieldwork method, we have used research methods to conduct research on ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam as follows:

First, we analyze a number of social science research works using ethnographic field methods such as Dien (2002), Dien (2005), Mai (2008), Hung (2008), Xuyen (2002), 2008), Hanh (2016), and Tuyet (2014). Through analysis of questionnaires and in-depth interviews and descriptive analysis of research results in the project, we analyzed the compatibility between interview questions and research results, possibly to identify whether the researcher is really knowledgeable about this method and the research results obtained using this method have high reliability or not.

Second, we analyzed the judgments and opinions of some authors of previous studies (Anh, 1997; Dien, 2005; Khanh, 1990) on how to use ethnic field methods study in Vietnam. The authors just mentioned above have paid great attention to this issue, so their opinions in some articles will be researched by the author as a basis for judgment on the actual situation of the problem. With this method, we selected some opinions of scientists with experience in ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam.

Third, we interviewed 10 ethnographic field researchers in Vietnam, and the respondents varied in their qualifications, age, and research experience. Some typical researchers in our interview list can be followed such as: Dr. Duong Hoang Loc, born in 1980, Director of the Center for Religious Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities Ho Chi Minh City; Researcher Tran Phuoc Thuan, born in 1960, Vice Rector of Bac Lieu Buddhist Intermediate School; Assoc. Prof. Dr. Phan An, born in 1955, former lecturer at the University of Social Sciences

and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City; Dr. Phan Thao Ly, born in 1985, Lecturer at Bac Lieu University.

At the same time, we followed some of the researchers mentioned above to see more of their performance. We have been in the field with these researchers at least once. During the fieldwork with them, we used the method of observation and participant observation to be able to assess the research knowledge and ethics demonstrated through the researcher's fieldwork. Besides, we also relied on our own knowledge and experience during the study of ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam to obtain highly reliable conclusions for this article. I myself have been trained in ethnographic fieldwork, practiced many times during my studies; In addition, I do a lot of research using ethnographic fieldwork.

However, this is a very delicate issue related to research ethics, honesty, and seriousness in academic activities; therefore, during the implementation process, we keep the information of the interviewees confidential and only publish the research results through these interviews.

The main questions that we used to interview in this study are as follows:

- In your opinion, how important is ethnographic fieldwork in humanities and social science research?
- How much experience do you have in conducting ethnographic fieldwork?
- In this field trip, what are the main methods you use, and why?
- How can informants honestly answer your questions?
- Do you keep your information confidential? Why?
- How long do you need to stay in the place you need to research to be able to grasp the most truthful information?
- How do you manage the associates who help you collect information during your field trip?
- Who do you usually choose to provide information to you? Why?
- In your opinion, in Vietnam, when conducting ethnographic fieldwork, what difficulties might researchers face? What inadequacies happened and how should these situations be resolved?
- In your opinion, what factors are needed to get quality research through ethnographic fieldwork?

Results and discussion

Ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam

Considering the importance of collecting materials in the locality, in "Some field methods of collecting folklore," Toan (2011) commented: "Based on the data collected in the field, in the research will avoid unfortunate errors as well as subjective opinions that are not true to science" (Toan, 2011, p. 12).

In the field of folklore, for a long time, researchers have actively searched and collected materials on folklore works in the countryside, and some people have paid for themselves because of their love and time for **research**. There were field trips organized on a large scale, collecting many results and helping to preserve the local folklore capital.

According to the summary of Anh (1997), from field trips to collect folklore since 1966, under the guidance of teacher and researcher Vi Hong, the Faculty of Literature, University Viet Bac has received results:

First, investigating the forms of folk tales and poetry. For example: stories of miracles in disguise, stories of mountain giants, stories of Tam Cam, stories of egg fairies ...

Second, investigating and comparing groups of stories and songs with the same theme about a nation, such as groups of legends, names, places, groups of poems, groups of stories, and poems formed from many forms of folk cultural activities.

Third, completing several works on specialized collection and research on a type of folk art of a certain ethnic group on a relatively large scale. For example: Treatise on Sli-Slon Tay Nung, Treatise on Tay folk tales with popular basic motifs, Treatise on Tay ritual poetry, Tay poetry stories, some topics on folklore of the Dao ethnic group, Pu Peo, Ha Nhi, Clao and Tay Thai proverbs... (Anh, 1997, p.320-321).

In addition, Bac Lieu folklore (Dien, 2005) is the result of research through two field collections in Bac Lieu from 2002 to 2003, conducted by the staff and students of the Faculty of Literature and Journalism in the class of 1998–2002 and 1999–2003.

In addition, there are a series of field works from the north to the south, contributing to a rich and colorful Vietnamese folk culture treasure.

Khanh (1990) has found that “collecting data is the leading work of scientists, it can even be said to be decisive for the vitality and permanence of theory. Some field documents have been discovered that can overturn the established theory of authority” (p.85).

In the field of ethnic culture research, ethnographic fieldwork can now be said to be an indispensable method in projects no matter how big or small. For a cultural study to be significant, this method must be used to study and survey the area and interview the research object.

In order to survey social, economic, and cultural life of fishers and residents of the southern seas, Tuyet (2014) organized a field survey in 22 communes and towns in 9 coastal provinces and cities in the south, including Ho Chi Minh City, Ba Ria—Vung Tau Province, Tien Giang Province, Ben Tre Province, Tra Vinh Province, Soc Trang Province, Bac Lieu Province, Ca Mau Province, and Kien Giang Province. The survey period was concentrated in two years (2008–2010), and the author said that there were additional surveys in the next two years. With that time and the contribution of a few researchers, the author has outlined the face of social, economic, and cultural life of fishers and residents in the South Sea covering almost all fields such as island and forest ecosystems; social life survey points such as population-population-family structure, labor structure and human resources, living standards and income stratification, environment and social issues in this region; economic life survey fishing means and fishing activities, aquaculture, salt production, handicrafts, sea tourism; and cultural life, surveying religious activities, festivals, literature, art, indigenous knowledge, and culinary culture. That is, the survey covers all aspects of human life within the scope of research.

In addition, current theses majoring in culture and anthropology also use ethnographic field methods in surveying, identifying, and analyzing research objects (e.g., Hanh, 2016). The author used an ethnographic approach to have a deeper look at the “insider’s point of view,” the views of members of the Taoist community. To do that, the author has detailed plans for fieldwork, set up a system of interview questions, and selected subjects for interview. Participatory observation and in-depth interviews are important methods of ethnography/anthropology used by the author to penetrate deeply into the village, into the relationships among the members of the village, and deeply understand its nature and approach to “interpreting culture like insiders,” respecting the voices of insiders. The author has encountered many difficulties in the process of approaching

interviewees and the process of integrating into the new community, especially the indifference, coldness, and non-cooperation of the members. The author had to overcome those difficulties with calm, perseverance, coming regularly to get acquainted and build trust in the relationship, then conduct an interview.

As can be seen, ethnographic fieldwork is an interesting method for those who are passionate about it, this method brings many benefits to the reliable collection, understanding and analysis of cultural phenomena. However, implementing this method properly makes researchers often encounter many difficulties, consuming a lot of money, effort, and time. However, this method has spread strongly in social science research in Vietnam because of its advantages that are clear, especially when studying ethnic culture. Research shows that with individual, spontaneous survey trips, stemming from a passion for research, the quality of the field trip is always guaranteed in terms of research ethics. The rest of the large-scale survey trips, if not carefully monitored, can easily lead to research results that are not guaranteed to be truthful.

Some issues raised about research ethics in ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam

Ethnographic fieldwork is clearly a particularly useful method if applied rigorously and with quality. This method has been widely applied by social science researchers in Vietnam. Within the framework of the article, some achievements have been mentioned in the collection of folk art works and in the field of ethnic culture research. However, due to a number of reasons, both objective and subjective, the application of this method in social science research in Vietnam still has a number of things that affect research ethics in ethnographic fieldwork.

First, the problem of understanding ethnographic fieldwork methods

Regarding ethnographic fieldwork, there are a number of manuals for implementation (e.g., Robert et al., 2014; Toan, 2011), as well as books on social science research methods, including a fieldwork section. However, these books were published after many works of collecting, fielding, researching ethnic culture and other social sciences have been completed. Therefore, as Tri (1991) has noticed in many works of collecting Vietnamese folk art:

A few anthologies provide only simple texts, without accompanying descriptions of other elements constituting the artistic whole (songs, dances, rituals, games, etc.,

depending on the genre) about the characteristics of the mode of performance, the bridge of life in which the folk work lives, etc. Not to mention the many folk tales, the editor intervened quite arbitrarily: Not only the narrative is modernized in many places, “cultured”, but also the details of the story are added according to their own ideas. In doing so, collecting may be present that interferes with the proper recognition of the true value of genuine folk work (p.22).

In addition, we still lack many training programs using ethnographic field methods, especially as far south of the country as there are fewer such training programs. Moreover, if training is organized, the trainees usually only learn theory but practice little, and rarely go to the “rural place”, or field place to practice under the guidance of the lecturer. Even when this method is taught in institutions of undergraduate, masters and doctoral students, the lecturer usually only introduces the theory. We still lack many experts knowledgeable in this field in Vietnam to teach and train researchers.

Therefore, if you do not really understand the method, or have never been instructed to practice the method, it will be difficult to avoid the phenomenon that many works apply ethnographic fieldwork but do not guarantee scientific validity.

Second, the issue of seriousness in fieldwork

As mentioned above, ethnographic fieldwork is a method that is not easy to implement, requiring careful preparation and investment in terms of time and effort, including funding, and if it is not done seriously, it will not comply with the ethics of scientific research.

In fact, in Vietnam, many researchers have not yet ensured the principle of three together (eating together, living together, and working together) when doing an ethnographic field trip. The following are the reasons: It is difficult for researchers to approach people in the study area, not knowing how to convince them to accept them, not knowing how to create sympathy, not being calm and patient properly, or not being able to properly realize the importance of this three-sided principle, so they do not properly implement it. Many researchers have survey sites close to their homes, so they are quite subjective while fielding because they think that they already know too well about the field, without having to follow the principle of three together, they can still understand about the survey area and subjects; besides, it is sadder that there are still cases where due to fear of difficulties and suffering, researchers do not really penetrate into

reality to get a true ethnographic description. Many students and trainees have made these errors when doing fieldwork.

Seriousness is also expressed in a general report of field results, or the publication of a field work, an ethnographic description, when some researchers are not sincere in the report. This is because sometimes there is no field visit, the report says “yes,” or sometimes there is a small survey but in the report it says “many times”; when the process of a field trip is not followed properly, it is not possible to have a correct and complete ethnographic description, even in many cases copying from other people’s research results, lack of novelty in research results, which is very dangerous for science, strongly affects the ethics of scientific research, and reduces readers’ confidence in scientific publications.

Third, the issue of time pressure for fieldwork

In Vietnam, except for the field trips of freelance researchers, who are not pressured in terms of time, the rest of the research projects usually have a certain time to carry out, forcing the researcher to carry out the research on schedule; this is true because if a specific time is not specified, it is difficult for the researcher to arrange for completion. However, it also has a significant impact on the quality of field trips. For example, in a short time, if the author chooses to survey in a very large space, then because of the time pressure of the topic, the survey process can only take place briefly and can only reach the “upper layer” of the study area; the research results are, therefore, of moderate quality, but they are also generalizable and create conditions for future studies to continue to investigate in more detail.

In addition, many authors did not know how to allocate appropriate time for fieldwork and time for other tasks. As a result, when the deadline for the new field trip was approaching, the rush affected all aspects of the field trip including preparation. This case is common among students and postgraduate students, especially doctoral students, who after graduation will become independent researchers after graduation, contributing significantly to the overall research results.

Fourth, the issue of testability and acceptance of research works

This is no less problematic, precisely because ethnographic fieldwork is a qualitative research method that is carried out over a fairly long or sometimes very long period of time by a single person or research group. If it is a research group, each site is assigned to only one person

in charge, and that person works independently in all stages, from community integration, to participating in activities, then interviews, observations, descriptions of results, and so on, so it is difficult to monitor the fieldwork of researchers.

At the same time, we also lack a toolkit to survey and check the authenticity of field surveys. The process of acceptance of a few works is not very serious, and it is still superficial and approximate. Sometimes the people sitting on the Acceptance Committee do not have a major interest to the topic, do not understand and do not fully appreciate the level of the research.

Handling solutions and remedial directions

In order for ethnographic fieldwork to take place effectively, thereby contributing to solving ethical issues in fieldwork in particular, and in social science research in Vietnam in general, from the above analysis, the author of the article would like to contribute some solutions as follows:

First, it is necessary to organize well the training and teaching of ethnographic field methods

This is a key issue to help shape the method and implementation of ethnographic fieldwork and to help researchers have the right view and right awareness of the importance of their work, thereby influencing them to make an effort to learn to do the survey properly.

Teaching should be conducted by experts who are knowledgeable about the method, especially those who have many works that have successfully applied the ethnographic field method.

In the process of training and teaching, whether the target is students, trainees, or researchers, the course must also focus on a balance between theory and practice. The content of practice needs to focus on independence, because later on, students will have to work independently during the fieldwork. After each course, only deserving and dedicated students who are capable of independent research will be granted a certificate.

Second, it is necessary to have sanctions and establish criteria for evaluating fieldwork

In ethnographic fieldwork in particular and social science research in general in Vietnam, we need to develop sanctions to minimize risks in research due to ethical violations. At the same time, once the sanctions

have been established, they must boldly apply them. When applied, it must also ensure fairness, both for well-known researchers and young researchers. Once sanctions are in place and taken seriously, the issue of ethical violations will soon be resolved. Just sanctioning a few typical cases will limit violations of research ethics in ethnographic fieldwork. However, this is the last measure applied to deterrence, because every scientific researcher has self-esteem; if they lose the prestige of science, it will be very difficult to get a foothold in the research world, so we have to be very careful in deciding to sanction and in handling situations. To do this, each unit or instructor must be responsible for monitoring, detecting, and prompting on time to avoid unfortunate situations. That is, when developing and applying sanctions rules, both emotional and logical factors must be taken into account.

As for ethnographic fieldwork, to avoid violations and detect ethical violations in research, we need to develop criteria for evaluating fieldwork results. For example, checking the field plan must be a detailed plan, including objectives, implementation steps, implementation methods, interview subjects, and sample size, or there is an unscheduled monitoring session at the field sites, including listening and observing, to assess the success of the field trip, thereby providing timely support if necessary. At the same time, it is necessary to check the questionnaire, interview content, daily notes, or interview recording file, and the authenticity of the interviewee.

Third, create a serious habit, and build an academic culture

In my opinion, the most important issue is to create serious habits of researchers, as a foundation for building an academic culture in Vietnam. Researchers need to be self-disciplined and honest when doing research, especially in studies using ethnographic field methods.

This is really not simple, because to be like that, each person must be educated and trained right from the time they are in school. In addition to respectable achievements in Vietnamese education, there are still some inadequacies that are difficult to solve. Among them, there is a serious lack of training in some institutes, universities, and colleges across the country. For example, when learning about ethnographic fieldwork, students can only sit and listen to theories and do theoretical papers, and the lecturers grade them on that theory. Will the other scores reflect the fielding ability of students? Thus, after graduation, students will not know how to conduct a field trip, which

easily leads to fraudulence in research report. This is just a very small example, and there are many similar things.

Especially for graduate training as we mentioned above, graduate students after graduation will become independent researchers and later become leading experts in the field. However, in Vietnam, most PhD students study and work, and they do not have much time for research. Therefore, many theses are of poor quality because graduate students do not spend much time on ethnographic fieldwork. Hence, there are many cases who already have a doctorate but then have no or rarely have specialized scientific activities to contribute research useful to society.

Thus, if we want to build a serious habit, an academic culture, we must look back at the process of how researchers in our country have been trained to contribute to finding solutions.

Conclusions

Ethnographic fieldwork is a qualitative research method that has been widely applied in almost all social sciences in Vietnam, bringing many achievements, especially in the collection of folk art capital and in the study of ethnic culture. However, there are many shortcomings in the fieldwork process, which affect research ethics. The article has analyzed a number of issues concerning research ethics in ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam, as well as contributed to propose solutions and remedial measures. In which, the most important thing is to review the training process in Vietnam to find a way to overcome limitations, build an academic culture, and build a scientific research team with enthusiasm, passion, real seriousness, and honesty in research. The limitation of this article is that it has not extended its scope to other specialties of the social sciences, such as psychology and anthropology, but only includes studies on folklore, so in future research, the author will study other social science specialties as just mentioned to have a broader view.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they had no significant competing financial, professional, or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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