
Interviews, focus groups, and social media: lessons from collaborative library ethnographies in America and Kazakhstan

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Abstract:

Ethnography is a way of understanding not just what people say, but what they do within their larger environment. In libraries, ethnography is used to understand how patrons interact with each other and with our information resources. Ethnographic methods includes tools such as observation, interviews, photo diaries, mapping, and in-person focus groups—and the digital age has expanded our toolkit to study users using things like digital surveys and observations.

This paper presents reflections on ethnographic and user experience projects at the National Academic Library and Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, and at Colby College and UC Berkeley in America, highlighting the methods used and the ways in which collaboration strengthened the outcome. A final section notes both challenges and opportunities for truly effective collaborative work—and how important collaborative study of social science research is for developing libraries that fully meet these users' needs.

Keywords: library ethnography, collaboration, user experience methods, methodological reflections.

What does it look like to do collaborative ethnography in a library? In this paper, I will review the ethnographic projects I have done with fellow social science librarians in university libraries in both America and Kazakhstan. I'll talk about ethnography as a research method, and how it can be useful as a librarian. I'll give you a picture of several projects we've done, and discuss the benefits and challenges of working collaboratively on these kinds of projects—in line with this year's IFLA theme. And finally, I'll talk about why, even with all this complexity, we still need a nuanced ethnographic understanding of our libraries!

Ethnography, in Michael Agar's definition, is "the process of learning a new culture through close observation" (2001, 4857). Within the context of libraries, this means learning how our librarians and patrons act and interact, and understanding their choices within a broader cultural or institutional context—within the hustle of our everyday lives, in offices crowded with books, or at study spaces in the library and nearby cafes. Library ethnography is most often to study *students*, as in Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons' landmark project on student information habits at the University of Rochester (2007). As a method, ethnography

comes from cultural anthropology, a social science that Wade Kotter notes as one of the broadest and most complex for faculty and students to master (2005, 76). Cultural anthropologists use ethnographic methods to better understand human beings—how we live, how we work, how we relate to each other, and how we negotiate competing opportunities and challenges in our everyday lives. A great example of how ethnography can be used to study libraries and information dynamics is the team of librarians and anthropologists who worked together in the 2000s to study the information economy of rural Romania, including how people disagreed over who owned local cultural heritage (Klimaszewski et al., 2012), how village residents used—or didn’t use—local libraries when seeking information, and how mayors and local elites controlled the flow of information in a town (Whipple and Nyce, 2007; Closet-Crane et al., 2009). This is a great example of how ethnography can be used to understand libraries within a broader context, including how people engage with them and with other information resources in their environment.

Making Use of Ethnography in the Library

But what can we do in the context of our own libraries? Many of us have already finished a master’s or doctorate, we have a busy work schedule, and we’re not actively doing the kind of intensive research that lets us go into a strange library and observe people’s habits and interactions. In this paper, I’ll be focusing more on how ethnographic methods can work in service of what we do as librarians, and how we can adapt these methods to our needs.

First, we typically pick up our “ethnographic toolkit” when responding to user needs. Perhaps we’re redesigning our building—we can do a *spatial ethnography* to learn how people use our spaces on a daily basis and how we might make their research processes easier. Maybe we’ve realized no one can find anything on our website, and they’re running away to Google! We could complement *usability testing* with *informal observations* of how people browse at a public computer in the library, how desk workers guide fellow students in finding a book, or how people go out into the information wilds in the internet at a nearby cafe.

Or maybe we want to know how users see our library, so we design a *web survey* to capture what they know and feel about our services. Perhaps we want a read on users’ cognitive maps, so we recruit people for *mapping exercises* where they actually draw a map of the library or other places they go on campus each day, so we can see how our spaces fit into the larger patterns of their lives (Clark 2007, Lanclos 2013). It will be interesting if they don’t draw the librarians anywhere—do they think we’re not a part of the library, or are we simply not visible enough? Similarly, we could have them keep *diaries* or take photos of how they find information in daily life, to know how what they do beyond the library influences what they do in the library.

Or perhaps we want to understand how librarians and administrators balance all of their competing responsibilities—working alongside them with *participant observation*, we might capture their experiences and how they manage their time. If we wanted to know how students feel when doing research, we could *semi-structured interviews* to explore when they feel anxious and when they feel confident in approaching the librarian (Naveed 2016). Say we find a group of people with shared interests or needs. A guided conversation in a *focus group* with 4-6 people could be a great way to get them thinking together about the library in relation to those needs. Or perhaps we do *digital observation* on public social media sites like Instagram or Yik Yak, to capture what people say about the library—even if they’re not saying it to us.

I hope you can see that there are many options for understanding our users. It's common to use surveys and circulation statistics to estimate our *impact* on users, but we may learn more about the actual *outcomes* of our work by reaching deeper to understand what faculty, students, and other researchers in the social sciences actually *do* in research (Shen 2013, Emmelhainz 2015), and how we could help them out. I would also note here that picking a “cool” method in isolation from a research question is fun—but not particularly useful. It's more useful to think about what you want to understand, do a literature review, and then design a project that chooses qualitative methods based on the specific questions you're asking (Kuckartz and McWhertor 2014).

Next, I'm going to talk about some of the ethnographic projects I've been involved with, starting with the “light” ones and moving to more complex projects. I'll discuss the strengths and limits of the methods we chose, and what we learned from collaboration in those projects.

1. Web Survey of Study Abroad Students from Maine

In 2015-2016, I worked with Marilyn R. Pukkila to survey students from Colby College who were studying abroad or had recently returned to this small liberal arts campus in Maine. Marilyn had experience leading interviews and doing video recordings of faculty research (Freeman and Pukkila 2012), so it was great to collaborate with someone who had already done qualitative studies of library users. We developed survey questions and sought IRB approval, then invited 155 students who had studied abroad to respond, getting 35 completed responses—a 22% response rate. A mix of numeric and qualitative answers gave us a good picture of the types of research students were doing abroad and how they were approaching libraries or not—and mostly not!

A challenge with web surveys is that your responses are only as good as the questions you ask. Another is that many users feel ‘over-surveyed’ across the web, and may not have the inclination to respond or offer extra information through an anonymous venue (Emmelhainz 2015). Surveys take more time from the users collectively, and less from the librarian—and yet we're the ones that directly benefit. So the incentives are often unbalanced unless you're able to pay someone for their time.

In this instance, the benefit of a survey is that it let us capture a broad snapshot of a group of library users we hadn't contacted before. Well-designed polls and surveys are also relatively simple to replicate with other populations and over time. By repeating this survey one year after we made some changes to our library guides and outreach to study abroad students, we were able to assess whether our outreach was actually helpful to students off-campus. Collaboration was also a benefit for us as librarians, as Marilyn and I could develop better survey questions and interpretations due to cross-generational differences and varying experiences with library research in the past.

2. Ethnographic Interviews and Workplace Observation in Kazakhstan

Another common way to understand library users is to invite them in for interviews. Following a brief survey of user needs at the Nazarbayev University Library in Kazakhstan (Emmelhainz and Bukhtoyarova 2012), my Kazakhstani colleague Darya Bukhtoyarova and I began, as trained anthropologists, to discuss our observations of the library from within.

This kind of *workplace ethnography* has its strengths and limitations. On the plus side, by working within an organization we can go deeply into observing everyday interactions, using existing connections to find “students who will obediently complete surveys, colleagues who will willingly agree to be interviewed...” (Hannabuss 2000: 103). Yet by these same formal roles, we are limited from asking too many sharp questions about the “interpersonal and institutional relations” around us (Moeran 2006: 123-124), or from deploying not just ethnographic methods, but also the *ethnographic lens* or perspective to uncover “the issues of power, authority, and economy that make ‘information’ a discursive construct” (Thomas and Nyce, 1998: 112).

As people embedded in a library, we may also lack the “creative estrangement” of an outsider who is both trained social dynamics and “receptive to insights that go unnoticed or unanalyzed by most natives” (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1995: 170). It’s easy to miss the “tacit knowledge” that we ourselves operate by. It’s also easy to take what people say in interviews for granted, without closely attending to what they do (Forsythe 1999: 128). In short, we miss many insights because of over-familiarity, or because we can’t provoke our employers unduly.

So after working in other libraries for two years, I came back to Nazarbayev University in 2014, while completing a master’s in library science. I wanted to study the needs of social science faculty and students in more detail and with more freedom—because I no longer belonged to the organization. For this project, I led ethnographic interviews with librarians, students, and faculty in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (Emmelhainz 2015).

Such *semi-structured interviews* are guided yet allow flexibility and exploration. This is a useful tool because you can adjust as needed to catch a patron’s particular insights, then compare to others using qualitative text analysis. Another advantage is that interviews provide more depth and better capture a user’s “voice.” And although they take more of a reader’s time, they also give more in return, as you hear and affirm the reader’s experience with research. On the downside, interviews take more time to arrange, lead, take notes on, transcribe, import into an analysis program, analyze, write up, and publish—and as a result, many interview projects are never fully analyzed or written up.

Once again, because I was coming into the library in an instrumental role and through existing friendships, I didn’t try to “rock the boat” by talking to people at all levels in the hierarchy, such as the IT staff or library director. I focused on the researchers themselves, but a full-time anthropologist might well come in with a broader view, looking to cross boundaries and understand the library from many angles. Their goal might be to understand the full complexity of a 21st century social science library, and act based on that understanding.

3. Focus Groups with Library Workers

Another method of exploring readers’ thoughts is to bring them together. At the University of California, Berkeley, we brought together library staff to discuss and share their experiences through a pilot focus group (Emmelhainz and Polio Canas, 2016). Given that professional librarians often hear ourselves best, we wanted to set aside time to hear from library staff about their insights into issues like work overload, information literacy, and managing student workers. For this project, I served as a moderator, developing questions and nudging the conversation. But focus groups take several people to implement, so other collaborators were as follows: Susan Edwards helped to organize the event, Monica Singh took notes and

transcribed the recording, and Jose R. Polio Canas, a library staff member and former anthropology student, worked with me to develop a poster and present results to librarians within the UC system. Yet even in this collaboration, I found myself in a position of relative privilege as I was the ethnography “specialist” and in a formal librarian role.

One of the benefits of focus groups is that they let us capture ideas as people interact and form perceptions together—often using 4-6 library users in a short amount of time (cf. Conrad and Alvarez, 2016). They can be conversational and enjoyable for participants, and give us a range of views in a short span of time. A limitation of focus groups, of course, is that we hear less from any one participant and can’t draw out one person’s insightful ideas at length—because we want to keep the conversation going. And as with interviews, they capture what people feel like they can or should say, not what they actually do. Leading focus groups within a workplace gave us limited time for the project, and also required political sensitivity to ensure that questions or answers did not expose anyone person to a wider audience of peers.

4. Digital ethnography of posts within a social media app

One of our more entertaining collaborative ethnographies was a review of comments about university libraries on the anonymous *Yik Yak* mobile phone application. I worked with a fellow anthropology librarian, Miriam Rigby, to download the app and look at student chatter at over sixty college campuses in America and Britain. We downloaded student comments about the library and noted common themes of library as study space, social dynamics, and library as “site of suffering” where students had to force themselves to do their research.

Students may be reluctant to share critiques or wry humor with a librarian in person or in surveys—but because this was part of their anonymous chatter online, they shared insights we wouldn’t have heard otherwise. A downside of using *digital observations* of student internet sites, of course, is that the posts could be racist, sexist, and full of foul language. This app is currently on the wane, yet our insights remain useful for design and outreach in each of our libraries. And collaboration greatly strengthened this project, as we worked together to evaluate posts and write a short article sharing the benefits of digital ethnography with librarians (forthcoming).

5. Questionnaire, Interviews, and Participant Observation at a National Library

And the most challenging project I have completed was a series of interviews and observations at the National Academic Library in Kazakhstan, a state library designed for both public and academic users in Kazakhstan’s capital city. Darya Bukhtoyarova and I used connections between library heads to observe cultural events like a *Nauryz* spring festival, interview library workers, and distribute a questionnaire asking librarians about their experiences in joining the profession and perceptions of the library’s role in society (Emmelhainz and Bukhtoyarova 2016). We faced numerous challenges in this project, from making the connection, to partial language barriers with Kazakh speakers, to political dynamics that we did not fully understand. Yet there were also benefits to a project embedded in a non-“western” institution, as we grew to understand the experiences of post-Soviet librarians who spoke only Russian or Kazakh, and got to listen to and share their experiences in an English-language publication.

Collaboration was especially important in this pilot ethnography, as important here, as people made connections for us, student workers helped to type up and translate some of the results, and Darya and I worked together to check our understanding of each interview or interaction,

and provide each other with feedback based on our varying perceptions as a Russian-speaking and English-speaking librarian. There is a huge need for more observational research in non-English-speaking libraries, and this happens best when people can work across multiple cultures or perspectives in bringing voices into the literature from outside of dominant countries.

The Strengths and Challenges of Collaborative Ethnography

At this point, I will speak to the opportunities and challenges of not just ethnography, but *collaborative* ethnography in particular. The first challenge in collaboration is *inequality*. The researcher with more power, connections, or funding may have a stronger voice, while their colleague finds it harder to be heard effectively. The person with less experience may be hesitant even when their observations or analysis have value. Because ethnography is strengthened by collaboration and reciprocation (Emmelhainz et al, 2010), leading partners do well to step back and let a less experienced co-researcher lead in some areas.

The second is a *lack of time, money, or resources*—always a challenge for librarians! The more collaborators involved, the more our attention is absorbed toward these projects and away from other personal or institutional tasks. Seeking out input and support from senior managers is practical for people trying to do ethnography within their own workplace.

And a third challenge is that co-researchers may have *different priorities* as well as experience *different rewards*. Many of us have differing interests: perhaps we care about specific groups of library users, or perhaps some topics or projects “count” more for promotion within our careers. If a librarian is evaluated on their research but a staff member is not, the staff member may naturally find there is less benefit for them in the project. Finding ways to adjust workload and rewards based on each person’s position can go a long way towards making collaboration a truly beneficial venture on all sides.

Yet there is also opportunity in collaborative ethnography, as I hope you’ve seen in my examples so far. In person or online ethnography lets us deeply understand the experiences of social science researchers who are using our libraries—whether they physically enter our libraries or not. And collaboration makes this ethnographic research stronger. Collaboration lets us take advantage of the *positionality* of both partners, as a senior librarian asks the same questions but gets different answers than a student assistant or graduate student does. A Kazakhstani librarian might have knowledge that leads to more insightful observations of a Bolivian library than an American librarian would have, for example. So in collaboration, each research partner has the chance to reflect on how their position (their role, experience, race, gender, class, values, and beliefs) impacts the design, implementation, and results of the project.

And this makes our research stronger. Working together, we also complement each other in skills, connections, and perceptions. Working together, we can develop a richer project than one person alone. Collaborators are more likely to catch research design and publication errors, and to challenge statements which their partner makes which are not justified by the material collected. Collaboration also develops capacity among younger library workers, and even among study participants themselves. Collaborative observation can show us “how people learn, access, and present information” in a digital age—but most of all, can help us improve our libraries to succeed in that same digital age. With collaborative ethnography, we can move beyond surveying users and into understanding the broader cultural, political, and

economic situations (Asher 2013, Bodo 2015) within which we develop and share our libraries in service of our readers.

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