Ethnographic methods in libraries revisited

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Abstract

Introduction. Ethnography has increasingly been utilised by social science researchers outside of social and cultural anthropology. We report here an analysis of the extent and nature of its use in library studies research over the past decade.

Method. Our study adapts and extends a content analysis of library studies literature conducted by Khoo et al. (2012), using a systematic search process to identify potentially relevant studies published since 2011.

Analysis. We coded the resulting corpus to establish whether articles were ethnographic using two interpretations of the term (one broad, one narrower). We also coded other aspects, including specific ethnographic methods used, library sector, country of research, and time in the field.

Results. While there remains interest in ethnography, its growth appears to have slowed. We note also that the term ethnographic has been used in this corpus to describe research involving participant observation (the narrower definition) only in 55% of cases.

Conclusion. Ethnography remains underutilised in library studies research, particularly in the context of public libraries.

Introduction

While ethnography has its origins in social and cultural anthropology, it has become increasingly widely used in other social science disciplines, including library and information studies. Just over a decade ago, a study by Khoo et al. (2012) surveyed the library studies literature to determine the frequency with which ethnography, and associated ethnographic techniques, were being utilised in this particular subfield. We present in this article an extended replication of that survey, undertaken to gauge the extent to which the use of *ethnography* is being reported as such within the more recent library studies literature, and more specifically the extent to which the number of ethnographic studies, in the archetypical sense of participant observation, has increased in the subfield. Covering the library studies literature from 2012-23, we also analyze aspects of the *ethnographic methods* employed, as examined in the previous survey, and some additional aspects. These aspects include the particular methods reported (e.g., observation, interviews, focus groups), the type of library studied, and the time spent in the field (i.e., when participant observation occurred). Our survey thus provides a picture of the *ethnography* being carried out in contemporary library studies research.

We first present a discussion of the theoretical background to the study, including a brief history of the development of ethnographic methods within the discipline of anthropology and their subsequent adoption by other social sciences (and specifically library and information studies). Following a review of the literature reporting on the ethnographic methods employed in the library and information studies field, including the survey by Khoo et al. (2012), we then detail the method we used to replicate their survey and present the findings of the replication. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of our findings, and a brief summary.

Theoretical background

In a literal sense, *ethnography* is nothing more and nothing less than the description of culture, being derived from the Greek words *ethnos* (culture) and *graphos* (writing), but those who archetypically conduct ethnography (in the sense of following its original model), most notably cultural and social anthropologists, do so by adopting a particular approach for doing so that involves producing a '*detailed study and analytical description of a defined social setting*' (Elliot, et al. 2016) '*by having the researcher in the same social space as the participants in the study*' (Madden, 2017, p. 16). Ethnographers refer to the social setting as the field, so that '*fieldwork is the heart of the ethnographic research design*' (Fetterman, 2008, p. 288), meaning that ethnographic research, archetypically, is work done *in* the field, with the researcher studying a particular social phenomenon as it occurs and at its location, and thus, to some degree, whilst being part of it. Hence the term *participant observation*, which according to Madden (2017, p. 16) and many other ethnographers '*remains at the core of all reasonable understandings of ethnography*'.

The participant observer immerses themselves as much as possible in the culture under study, becoming '*a part of the group by participating in their activities. In this way the researcher becomes less of a stranger and may develop close relationships with the subjects*' (Elliot et al., 2016). Although a participant, the participant observer tries, as much as possible, to be non-interventionist: '*the ethnographer does not usually seek to distort or manage the natural setting of their research, or ask people to do things they normally wouldn't do in any given circumstance*' (Madden, 2017, p. 16). In the field, the ethnographer, as participant observer, aims to obtain an insider's perspective, to arrive at an understanding of the social activities under study from the viewpoints of the protagonists (Fetterman, 2008).

To study these activities, typically the ethnographer will utilise several methods of data collection: they are likely to observe things, listen to things, speak to people, and investigate some of the artifacts or documents at, or collected from, the field site (Angrosino, 2007). However, while methods such as observation, interviewing and document analysis may well be used in

ethnographic research, it is the participant observer's approach to studying social phenomena that, for many (including Madden, 2017), defines its archetype. As for Delamont and Atkinson (2020, p. 2), '*its unique feature is some degree of participant observation in one or more chosen social settings.*'

While *classic* ethnographic monographs from the cultural and social anthropological traditions of the last century were often holistic accounts of a particular society, or at least a detailed account of a major aspect of one, based on long spells of continuous fieldwork on the part of their authors, anthropological studies of more specific cultural and social phenomena have become increasingly common, reflecting a change of perspective that rejects the paradigm of the scientific anthropologist investigating the *other*, represented by the discrete culture of a foreign land. Instead, many anthropologists have turned their attention to particular social institutions and subcultures that form part of their own societies, giving rise to a more focused, as well as more reflexive, kind of ethnography. Rather than attempting to describe the whole culture of, say, the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski, 1922), a more typical approach in contemporary anthropology is to focus on a particular group (sometimes referred to as a total institution), such as a religious community or a prison, operating within a larger community, but with its own identity and set of mores, or on a particular (social) institution, in which people interact for particular purposes, for one *part* of their everyday lives (Caulkins, 2012). Examples of the latter include more abstract institutions, such as a kinship system, or more concrete ones like schools, hospitals, and, as Dent (2011) suggests, libraries. These more focused studies are likely to involve the same sorts of data collection methods used by earlier ethnographers, and can still be underpinned by participant observation, even if the researcher may be in the field for shorter or less continuous periods of time.

As anthropology has shifted its focus onto subjects shared with other fields, so other social scientists' interest in the methodology of ethnography has grown. This includes the interest of library and information scientists, as Khoo et al. (2012) identified a decade ago, at least with respect to the study of the institution of libraries. Adopting the narrower definition of ethnography, linked to participant observation, they found far more studies of libraries and library users employing ethnographic methods in the literature of the 2000s than of previous decades. Although the total number of these studies (sixty-seven after 1999, and fourteen before 2000) still represents a very small fraction of library studies research, the trend was clear, and their article has been cited quite often as evidence of this trend since its publication. While some of the growth in uptake could be attributed to increases in published (and indexed) library studies in general, other more recent research indicates that the *proportion* of library and information studies reporting ethnography has also increased (Zhang, et al., 2023).

The increasing interest in ethnography outside of anthropology may, however, have caused some change in the use of the term, away from its archetypical sense. It is noticeable that Khoo et al. (2012) did not always accept the claims of studies being ethnographic, despite an inclusive approach to their reporting. A different usage can be found from even a cursory glance through samples of *ethnographic* papers in library and information studies and other social science fields. Sometimes, for instance, interviews reported as ethnographic turn out to have been conducted by the researcher outside of the time and place of the social phenomenon under investigation, and without any associated fieldwork taking place. Observation too might sometimes be referred to as ethnographic, but carried out completely unobtrusively, with the researcher analysing, for example, a recording of the activity, again outside of its time and place. In the narrower, archetypical use of the term, such research methods are not ethnographic and would not constitute ethnographic fieldwork as conducted by many of those who identify themselves as ethnographers.

Literature review

The use of ethnographic methods for the study of libraries and their users grew markedly in the early years of this century, as shown by Khoo et al. (2012). Indeed, about half (51.9%) of the studies published up until 2011 that they identified were published after 2005. Although the authors only found eighty-one relevant studies altogether, their survey of the library studies literature made it clear that the use of ethnographic methods in the field was becoming more significant. Their analysis also showed that most of these studies incorporated observation (or '*watching subjects in natural settings*'), at 81.5%, and interviews ('*talking with subjects*'), at 76.6%, with significant numbers employing fieldwork ('*investigating where subjects are located*'), focus groups ('*talking with groups of subjects*') and cultural probes ('*subjects recording their own lives*'), at 44.4%, 23.5% and 17.3%, respectively (Khoo, et al., 2012, p. 83).

A criticism that has been levelled at the research by Khoo et al. (2012) was their interchangeable use of the terms *ethnographic methods* and *ethnographic studies* (Wakimoto, 2013), but it would appear that the former was used to mean methods that were employed *ethnographically*, that is, for an ethnographic study. As the authors consider participant observation to be a *key* feature of such a study (Khoo et al., 2012, p. 83), one might therefore assume that the specific methods they identified in each study were employed (or reported to have been employed) by a participant observer. However, as they did not discuss their treatment of studies consisting of *both* ethnographic and non-ethnographic approaches, in which some methods were used ethnographically and others not, it is possible that in some cases the authors coded for methods that we would consider not strictly applicable. (For example, if a study included a period of participant observation involving observation and cultural probes, but also a series of interviews conducted afterwards by a different researcher off site, we would code only for the observation and the cultural probes, and not the interviews.)

We have not been able to identify any other research that has focused on the extent to which ethnographic methods, or the methodology of ethnography, have been applied to the study of libraries or in the field of library and information studies more broadly, but several studies on the use of different methods by library and information studies researchers have been published over the past three decades, and summarised by Zhang et al. (2023). The earlier studies in this series did not cover ethnography specifically, although Hider and Pymm (2008) recommended that *ethnography* be added to the *strategy* facet of the coding scheme they adopted from a study by Järvelin and Vakkari (1990). The first study to include ethnography as a method in its coding scheme was that of Chu and Ke (2017), who classed it, in fact, as a '*meta-method*', but nevertheless employed a single, flat list of *methods* for the purposes of their analysis. Examining articles from three library and information studies journals across the period 2001-2010, the authors found that of the fifteen methods in this list, ethnography or field study came twelfth in prevalence, representing less than 1% of the total number of applications.

Zhang et al. (2023) have recently employed machine learning to identify the methods used in the research reported in over 26,000 library and information studies articles from 1991 until 2021, using the classification scheme of Chu and Ke (2017). As with many of the earlier studies, they identified growth in many of the qualitative methods, as well as in empirical methods more broadly. They found that the use of ethnography or field study had increased in frequency from the 1990s to 2000s and even more so from the 2000s to the 2010s. However, they also found that this frequency was still very occasional compared to many of the other fifteen methods; for instance, even in the 2010s bibliometrics was over ten times more likely to be used. The growth in the use of qualitive methods in library and information studies aligns with methodological trends beyond the field, as examined, for instance, by Thelwall and Nevill (2021). Their analysis, using data from the Scopus database, points to the increasing prevalence of qualitative research, including ethnography, across the academy.

The ongoing interest in ethnography on the part of library and information studies researchers is also evident in the coverage of the approach in the field's research methods texts: chapters specifically on ethnography can be found in the books of, for example, Pickard (2017), Williamson and Johanson (2018), and Connaway and Radford (2021). The ways in which ethnography can be applied in library and information studies have also been discussed on occasion. For instance, Carlsson et al. (2013) consider how ethnography can be carried out in sites of relative fluidity, and specifically in libraries, where activities are typically the product of changing users and services, proposing an '*ethnography of following and translation*'. Some authors have been particularly optimistic about the methodology for the field. Wilson (2015), for example, presents the case for library ethnography because of the richness of the data it can produce, although also notes some of its practical and methodological drawbacks, including its time-consuming nature and the ethical risks associated with participant observation. The author advocates for ethnographic explorations even within quite narrow and specific areas of library use, and in particular the use of the library catalogue.

In another advocacy for ethnography, Rosenblum Emary (2015) argues that librarians are well placed to conduct ethnography as they are already 'in the field', with ongoing access to library users. It should be noted, however, that librarians do not so much participate in the field of the library as end-users, although they certainly do also *use* their library in various ways. Moreover, while librarians can begin ethnography with a '*straightforward, low-risk data collection task*', as the author suggests (Rosenblum Emary, 2015, p. 139), more in-depth fieldwork requires a quite different level of skill, and is also likely to raise more questions concerning the power relations between the librarian-ethnographer and their client-subjects.

Two trained anthropologists who have carried out work in and for libraries are Lanclos and Asher (2016). They discuss how the turn toward ethnography particularly on the part of academic libraries in the 2000s (citing notable instances such as Foster and Gibbons (2007)) could be deepened and broadened, observing that much of the research represented by this trend has been used to solve quite specific problems in one particular library context, and lacks integration with other work, and the open-endedness that characterises the kind of ethnography that has the potential to answer larger questions. Instead of assisting with particular questions of usability, for instance, the authors call for funding to support longer-term projects that could explore more thoroughly the relationship between libraries and their users, as well as for the coordination of projects between institutions that would allow for comparisons to be made. They label much of the ethnographic research in libraries to date as '*ethnographish*'. Lanclos (2020) expands on this theme in a subsequent paper, advocating for an '*irrational*' application of ethnography in libraries that challenges the current managerialist agenda based on superficial quantitative performance measures that reinforce existing power structures rather than identify issues of marginalisation and inequality. A more basic, open-ended form of ethnography, not constrained by the '*neo-liberal cage of rationality*', could assist with a more transformative approach to library management (Lanclos, 2020, p. 1).

While those commentaries in library and information studies that consider the nature of ethnography generally present it as a methodology, or approach, or strategy, under which various specific methods of data collection (as well as analysis) can be conducted, it has already been noted that some of the other writing in the field treats ethnography as one of these methods. Griffin (2017) attempts to put the record straight by positioning ethnography in between the level of metatheory (or paradigm) and that of (data collection) method, pointing out that its flavour will depend on the metatheory under which it is employed, which in turn will influence the particular methods used. Although we do not agree with Griffin's listing of participant observation as a method, in this context, we note that it is included in all four flavours of ethnography the author tabulates, under the metatheories of scientific, critical theory, constructivism and postmodern. Its

universality in this regard suggests that it is, as we consider it, a defining component of ethnography, at least as commonly conceived.

Many of the most cited examples of ethnography in library and information studies, from the period covered by Khoo et al. (2012), come from academic librarianship, and continued interest from within this subfield is demonstrated by Ramsden's review (2016) of a selection of studies that utilised *'ethnographic-based methods'* in the college setting. As well as studies that look at a combination of academic library topics, the review gave prominence to those focusing on library space assessment, student behaviour, and the evaluation of resource usage.

Method

We aimed to replicate the method employed by Khoo et al. (2012) as far as practicably possible. To find studies that claim to be ethnographic, we used the same main search terms that they had done, namely *ethnograph** or *participant observation*, but omitted both *anthopolog** and *observation*, which both brought up mostly false positives. We searched on two of the three same key databases, namely *Library & Information Science Abstracts* (LISA) and *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts* (LISTA); the third library and information studies database used in the previous survey, i.e., *Library Literature & Information Science*, was not available to us, but most of its coverage is indexed on either LISA or LISTA, or both. As the last study identified in the previous survey was published in 2011, we limited our search to publications from that year onwards, and excluded theses and dissertations, and also non-scholarly literature. To cover the supplementary searching conducted by Khoo et al., we also searched our university library's search discovery service, Primo, but it yielded hundreds of thousands of hits, even when we combined the search with *librar**, and so we abandoned this avenue of enquiry. Even the hits in LISA and LISTA numbered into the tens of thousands, and so we decided to narrow down the searches by combining with *librar** as a term within the abstract field. We also chose not to search on *full text*, as this also would have yielded too many hits, many of which would have been false positives.

The hits from the final result sets from LISA and LISTA were deduplicated, after which one of the authors performed an initial cull of items that were clearly, from a cursory reading of the abstracts, not reporting research (e.g., editorials, opinion pieces), or reported research that was clearly not related to libraries or library users, as well as those that were not in English. This resulted in a total of 191 papers to examine in more depth. The three authors initially coded ten of these papers each, as a pilot. This was followed by a coder conference, after which the three authors coded another twelve papers, but this time the same ones. There were few discrepancies between their codes (<10% of the total codes), and so they each proceeded to code a remaining third of the papers. (The previous survey reported studies rather than papers, but we did not find multiple papers that reported exactly the same research, and so we decided to treat all the eligible papers as separate studies.)

Whereas the authors of the previous survey coded all those studies they deemed ethnographic in the same way, we distinguished between those that we deemed ethnographic only in a broad, more literal sense of the word, and those that featured some element of participant observation, which we consider to be a feature of what we have called *archetypical ethnography*. Our broad definition embraced all those studies of sociocultural phenomena, again in the broadest sense, that took place in libraries (or in the wider library environment that directly related to libraries, e.g., a study of users interacting with a library outreach service), whether they be physical or online. The study of any activity directly involving humans was considered a sociocultural phenomenon for our purpose, although this would rule out studies of, for instance, elements of libraries that could be studied independently of people, such as computer systems, collection content, and architecture. Our narrower definition was used to identify the subset of those ethnographic studies in the broader sense, in which at least some of the data collection was conducted *in person*, at the site of sociocultural phenomena under study, so that the researcher could be considered to have become

part of the site, even if only to a marginal extent. This is likely to mean that some of those studies we deemed as employing participant observation would probably not be recognised as such by those trained in the anthropological tradition, but our inclusionary approach is likely to align more with the definition of *ethnographic* employed by Khoo et al. (2012, p. 83) for their survey: while they considered ethnography to include participant observation as a *key* feature, they reported being *inclusive* in their reading of each study.

Our distinction between the senses of *ethnographic* allowed us to compare the prevalence of the different uses of the term in library studies. We could not compare this result with past usage, however, as Khoo et al. (2012) did not provide an indication of the total number of studies they found that reported research claiming to be ethnographic, and whether they deemed it as such or not.

In addition to the studies that we identified as ethnographic according to both the broader and narrower definitions, we also recorded those studies we found that reported *ethnographic* research, but which did not even meet the broader definition. Conversely, we recorded and analysed those studies we found (through the *participant observation* search term) that *were* ethnographic, but which did not explicitly purport to be.

As well as some basic bibliographic data, we also recorded for each study those data collection methods that were reported under the label of *ethnographic*, unless the study was not deemed ethnographic in either of our senses (or unless no ethnographic methods were reported, in which case those associated in the paper with the label of *participant observation* were recorded). Like Khoo et al. (2012), we coded specifically for observation, interviews, fieldwork, focus groups, and cultural probes, based on the definitions of the earlier study (as noted in the literature review above), recognising that *observation* may not be only visual, and that *fieldwork*, in the sense of used here, involved collecting data from the field site that was not directly derived from the human activities (e.g., documents and photographs of artifacts); we also recorded other techniques that were mentioned, and categorised and quantified these in the analysis.

As another expansion on the previous survey, we also recorded the time spent in the field as a participant observer for those studies we deemed to involve participant observation, when this was given, and the country in which the library or libraries of the study was located, and also the library's sector, i.e., public, school, academic or research, or other. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

Khoo et al. (2012) based their searching on the assumption that one of a few keywords would be included in the metadata, or in some cases text, of papers reporting studies that employed ethnographic methods in libraries. Our searching was further limited in this respect, as we also assumed that *librar** would be included in the abstract, whilst omitting both *anthropolog** and *observation* as search options. Given that our sources were also more circumscribed, limited as they were to LISA and LISTA, it is likely that we identified a smaller proportion of the total population of relevant studies from the scholarly literature, even though the coverage of LISA and LISTA may well have improved in the intervening years, which would offset the shortfall to some extent. Nevertheless, while libraries might sometimes not have been referred to as such in a paper's abstract, it appears that the concept of participant observation is rarely described in other terms, apart from that of *ethnograph**, given that other likely terms such as *anthropolog** and *observation* yielded few additional true positives in the pilot searching, as did other candidates such as *immersive* and *embedded.* The sample we collected should thus be reasonably representative of the total population of studies for the past decade, particularly with respect to those that claim to be *ethnographic* (in which case would have used this term).

Findings

Of the 191 papers examined in more depth, 113 represented studies deemed to be within the scope of the analysis. Most of the other papers, like the ones culled initially, did not report on research as such (in some cases they merely discussed ethnography), or their studies were based on an approach beyond ethnography in both name and substance (including e.g., meta-ethnography), or their research did not pertain to libraries. Five could not be retrieved, while three were unclear about what was being studied, or how it was being studied.

Studies that involved participant observation

Bearing in mind that we defined *participant observation* in quite a broad way (in line, we think, with the survey by Khoo et al. (2012)), of the 113 relevant studies, seventy-four were coded as ethnographic in the narrower, *archetypical* sense. This compares with the sixty-seven Khoo et al. found between 2000 and 2011, which might suggest that the application of participant observation for library studies has not markedly increased since then. It should be observed that our searching was more limited in scope than in the previous survey, as noted in the previous section, and also that the COVID-19 pandemic may have curtailed or eliminated some of the physical ethnography that might have been planned. However, within our sample, there is little indication that the use of participant observation has increased across the past dozen years (see Figure 1).
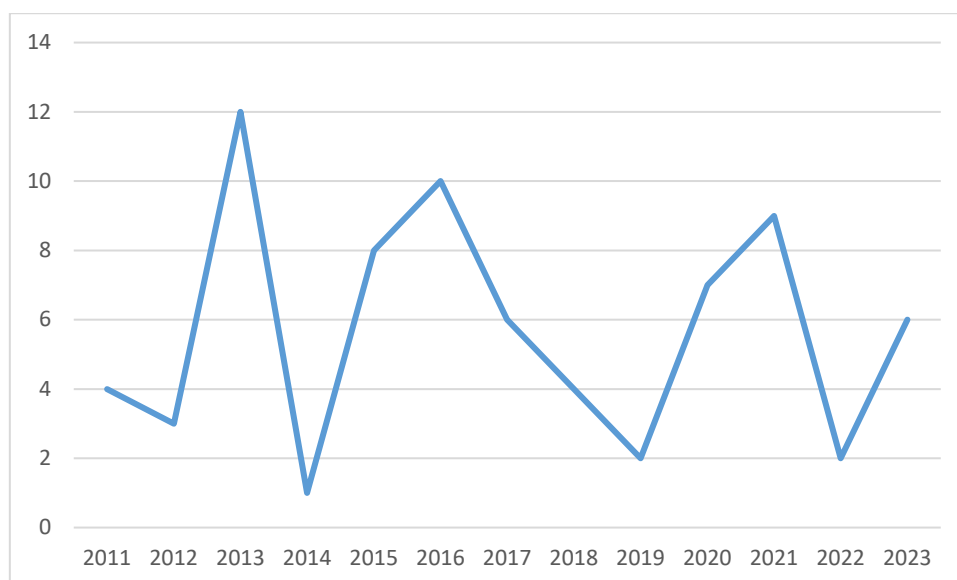

Figure 1. Participant observation studies (N = 64)

Table 1 shows the distribution of the main methods utilised in these studies (i.e., the participant observation studies), with observation an ingredient in all of them. While this was a significantly higher showing than in the case of the previous survey, in which observation was involved in 81.5% of the identified ethnographic studies, all four of the other main methods were less represented in our study, as Table 2 also shows. It is very possible that the previous survey coded for all the methods reported in the earlier studies' papers, whereas we only coded for those which were indicated to be employed as part of the participant observation, as opposed to being employed in addition to this, as noted in the previous section. Nevertheless, the ordinal distributions are the same, i.e., both surveys found that observation is the method most associated with library ethnography (in the archetypical sense), followed by interviews, fieldwork (in the sense used here, i.e., the analysis of non-human aspects of the field), focus groups, and cultural probes.

	Observation	Interview	Fieldwork	Focus groups	Cultural probes
N	74	43	19	8	7
%	100.0	58.1	25.7	10.8	9.5
Khoo, et al. (2012) %	81.5	76.6	44.4	23.5	17.3

Table 1. Specific methods

Fourteen of the seventy-four studies (18.9%) also reported other methods associated with the participant observation. The most common of these was the questionnaire survey (8); others included *conversations*, charettes and ideation sessions, and web usability exercises.

The seventy-four studies covered fieldwork conducted in twenty-eight countries, with by far the most common country being the United States, in which fieldwork was carried out for twenty-six of the studies (35.1%), followed by Sweden and the UK, with four studies each. The distribution may reflect, more than anything else, the relative amounts of library studies research emanating from different countries that is indexed on LISA and LISTA.

Table 2 shows the break-down of the studies by library sector, with the leading two sectors by a long way being academic and public libraries. It is interesting that academic librarianship tops the list, as one might regard public library activities as venues for generally broader expressions of sociocultural phenomena, but it may also be reasonably surmised that academic librarians tend to be particularly interested in research, and many of these studies involved librarian-researchers. (The non-applicable case was carried out in Second Life.)

Sector	N
Academic/research	36
Public	26
Multiple sectors	4
School	4
Other	3
Not applicable	1
	74

Table 2. Studies by library sector

As a supplementary piece of analysis, we also looked at the locale of the public libraries that hosted the studies' fieldwork, in terms of whether they served metropolitan or regional communities. Of the twenty-six studies focused on public libraries (only), fifteen were associated with metropolitan libraries, five with regional ones, four with both, one was focused specifically on the backroom of a virtual library with no physical counterpart, and the locale of the other library was not indicated.

Finally, reporting on the time spent *in the field* was analysed in the case of these seventy-four studies. Indications were in fact not given, or were not clear, or quite vague, in some twenty-eight of them. Of the remaining forty-six, twenty-three reported what we interpreted as noncontinuous periods of participant observation, ranging from two weeks to fifteen years with the median being six months. Meanwhile, eleven studies reported what we regarded as continuous periods, in that

the researcher was in the field for the whole of the time the activity under study was taking place during the period (e.g., during the library's opening hours): these periods ranged from 20 minutes to two weeks, with the median being one day. Twenty-two of the studies reported times in sufficient detail for us to ascertain an approximate total time in the field (continuous or noncontinuous), which ranged from about 4.5 hours to about 200 hours, but this does not cover most of the nineteen studies that reported noncontinuous periods of more than 200 hours, and so the median total amount of time spent conducting participant observation across all of the studies we identified as involving participant observation is likely to be approaching the upper limit of this range.

Studies that were reported as ethnographic

A total of eighty-four studies were reported as involving *ethnographic* research. Of these, sixty-nine researched sociocultural phenomena in libraries, in a broad sense, under the 'ethnographic' label; most of the other studies collected data from simulated activities, which we discounted as ethnographic even under the more general definition of the term (although a case could be made for some of these activities to nevertheless be subject to 'naturalistic inquiry'). Furthermore, of these sixty-nine studies, only forty-six involved any level of participant observation underpinning their ethnography. Thus, not much more than half of the studies claiming to be ethnographic were so in the archetypical sense, i.e., 46 of 84, or 54.8%. There did not seem to be any particular trend over the period for those studies that used the term *ethnographic* in a non-archetypical way, either: they did not appear to be increasing or decreasing particularly (see Figure 2).
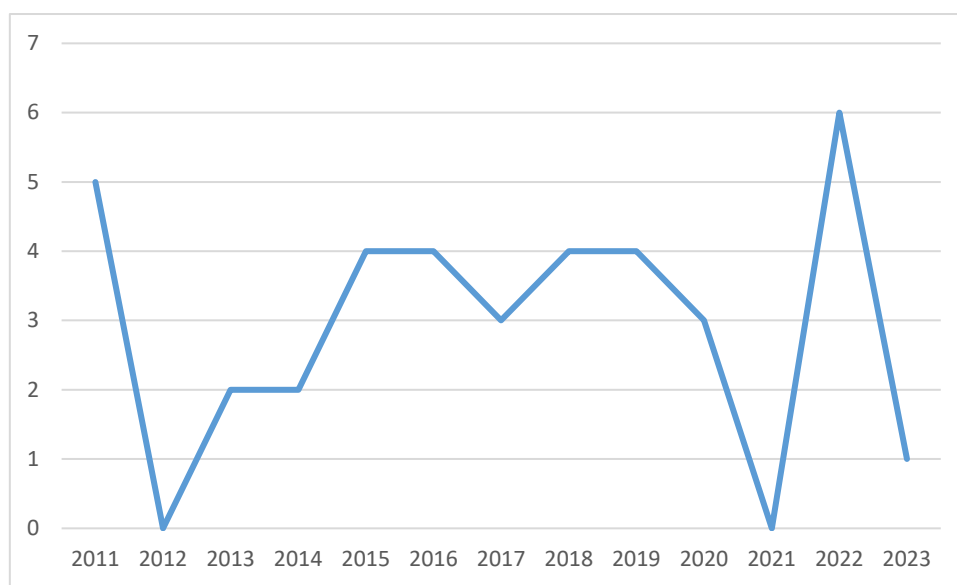

Figure 2. *Ethnographic* studies not involving participant observation (N = 38)

Discussion

Our research confirms that there remains significant interest in the application of ethnographic methods for library studies, but does not suggest that application is growing at anything like an exponential rate. Given our more limited searching than in the previous survey, it may be that there have been more ethnographic library studies, at least in the narrower, archetypical sense, in the past decade than in the one before it, as the research of Zhang et al. (2023) indicates, but the number is clearly still a small fraction of those that apply the most common methods. Although the nature of library activities might not always be particularly conducive to participant observation, we suggest, in line with Lanclos and Asher (2016), that ethnography remains underutilised in library studies.

Further, we consider it to be especially underutilised in public library research, for which we found fewer than thirty studies published over the past 12 years. Given the important social and cultural role played by public libraries, they appear to constitute a field ripe for much more ethnographic investigation. We might note here, in passing, that some of the more extensive ethnographic studies of public libraries have in fact been carried out by researchers from outside the library and information studies field (e.g., Aptekar, 2019; Williamson, 2020). The small but significant set of ethnographic studies of public libraries reported to date serve as a foundation for a larger programme of research covering more of the myriad activities that public libraries, across the world, nowadays host.

Our findings confirm that participant observation can be conducted in libraries in a wide range of ways, employing various specific methods of data collection, to examine a wide range of phenomena, although some form of observation is likely to be involved. Fieldwork, as conducted by the participant observer, is not always carried out for very extensive periods of time, nor always continuously. On the other hand, larger, more open-ended projects can, as Lanclos and Asher (2016), collect richer data and lead to deeper understandings of '*what is going on*'.

Our research has also shown that what is reported as *ethnographic* research, at least in library studies, is often *not* ethnographic in the archetypical, anthropological sense of the term;, indeed, almost as often as it *is*. This should be borne in mind when tracking the uptake of *ethnographic methods*, and when considering the outcomes of ethnographic studies reported as such. For a clearer picture of how *ethnographic research* can support the library and information studies field, and the social sciences more generally, it would be of assistance if only those studies involving participant observation were reported as ethnographic. It would also help clarify the nature of the methods, and the methodologies, of studies investigating sociocultural phenomena, whether in or beyond libraries.

Given the potential for more use of ethnography in library studies, it would be interesting to see whether this is realised over the coming years, particularly in the arena of public libraries, as they endeavour to establish themselves as central components of their communities' social fabric (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2022), as well the extent to which its use in future library studies is based on participant observation, and, if so, whether this approach yields the rich data and insights that it has yielded in other areas.

Conclusion

Ethnography remains underutilised in library studies research, particularly in the context of public libraries. When it is reported as being used, often it does not involve any form of participant observation, which could lead to the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of such research. Nevertheless, when a more archetypical version of ethnography is employed, the composite data collection methods are in line with those used for this kind of research in other fields.

About the authors

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