Is this Ethnography? The Role of Labels in Contemporary Qualitative Research

Phoenix Kenney

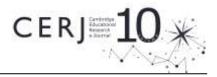# Is this Ethnography? The Role of Labels in Contemporary Qualitative Research

Phoenix Kenney
Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

Corresponding email: Kenney, pmk45@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

In this reflexive piece from the field, I explore answers to the question: is my current doctoral project ethnography? Furthermore, I question the necessity of finding and claiming a pre-established label for my emergent work. I first provide a brief overview of my current research based in Kathmandu, Nepal and the personal and institutional challenges I faced in preparing for fieldwork. Ambiguity, though sometimes uncomfortable, occupies a comfortable space within my research paradigm. It takes deep reflexivity of positionality and power to navigate different perspectives – mine, institutions', and those of the people with whom I interact in the field. Each interaction, though argued in academia as laden with dynamics of power, doesn't always feel that powerful. Some moments, in fact, feel really boring. However, in my approach to research, over time these moments reveal patterns. Recognizing the value that I place on the momentary and the emotional, I come to the main question of this article: is my work ethnography? Rather than develop a specific answer, I review the academic boxes I've checked that could suggest what labels I can place on this work. However, after considering Creighton's (1920) definition of "catchwords", I argue that the process of labeling, rather than pushing us deeper into our research, becomes a test, a gauging of our willingness to fit in to traditionally accepted scholarship. From the field, I argue it is more important to focus on making choices rather than labeling them.

Keywords: Ethnography, Reflexivity, Positionality, Moments, Fieldwork

Introduction

As a qualitative researcher and doctoral student, I seek to practice *reflexivity* and question my *positionality* as a foreigner conducting social science research in Nepal. I have attended seminars about *decolonizing* research methods, and I have taken to heart the importance of confronting typologies and concepts crafted in the *Global North* and imported elsewhere without change or adaptation to context specifics. Simultaneously, as I navigate the messiness and complexity of research with young people in Kathmandu, I also must find a word or short phrase in English that fully describes a *phenomenon* and my methodology in understanding that phenomenon. I've come to realize that the words celebrated in academia are not my own and the requirement to place labels on diverse lived experiences feels false. Constructivism, feminism, ethnography – I feel expected to claim these, and strongly. In this article, I argue the expected use of labels in contemporary academia is a contradiction, a limitation, and, at times, a cop-out. The process of labeling, rather than pushing us deeper into our research, becomes a test, a gauging of our willingness to fit in.

First, I will offer a brief background on my study, focusing on how I prepared for field research in Nepal from my university in the UK. Then, I will consider how my various identities play out in the field, giving extra attention to how I am a foreigner in Nepal. I will describe how my methodological approach is built on moments. In doing so, I embrace emotionality and subjectivity, as well as the time needed to see patterns within moments. It would be easy to therefore label my work as "ethnography" because of what I value in my approach. However, as I describe, I am unwilling to place a label on my work just to check a scholarly-accepted box. Rather, I want to focus on making choices for myself, not following the steps of an *ethnography* pre-determined by *ethnographers*. I call upon Creighton's (1920) critique of "catchwords" to show how such a label may limit thinking and my confidence as an early career researcher. Ultimately, I embrace "imposter syndrome" by refusing to use labels for the sake of using labels.

Study background

My current doctoral project engages with youth development practitioners and activists in Kathmandu, Nepal. It connects to research I started in 2015 and furthered during my master's study in 2020. Though I had spent considerable time in Nepal prior to starting my PhD fieldwork in late 2022, I had not visited the country since 2018. My personal and academic reflexive practices therefore had me questioning how, why, and who I was to do this research. Oddly enough, this process started in Cambridge, a university town some 4,500 miles away from my research setting. From Cambridge, I had to determine my research questions, targeting a certain labeled phenomenon I wanted to study in Nepal. While youth development in Kathmandu was something I was very familiar with across social media, newspaper articles, and academic literature, it was something I had yet to see – or feel – for myself.

My first year can only be described as spent "lost in the literature". I searched and searched for the perfect word or phrase that encapsulated my proposed study. Based on virtually available resources, I thought perhaps *global citizenship*, *leadership*, *entrepreneurship*, or *life skills* defined what I was trying to understand; but, as I dug deeper into each of these concepts, nothing seemed quite right. They all had origins in the Global North and while used in the Nepalese context, still seemed defined by outside expectations, assumptions, and values. Methodologically, I argued that through a participatory approach to research, I would, over time, find the correct vocabulary, perhaps even in Nepali language. I was fine with ambiguity; after having lived, traveled, and studied in Nepal previously, I knew it would be better to be flexible than have a concrete plan. On the other hand, I was sweating: without specificity, it would be difficult to meet the procedural requirements and prove to the University of Cambridge I was prepared.

Reflexivity and positionality in context

Institutions love labels. At Cambridge, there are numerous labels placed on me: student, international student, doctoral student, Murray Edwards College member, REAL Centre member, Faculty of Education member, NOFTA, probationary, registered doctoral student. These categories probably make things easier. They know how many of what there are and where they are. But when it comes to qualitative research, what counts? And who is counting? I was good at math in high school but when it came time for me to choose what and how to learn, I turned hard towards the humanities. I am a kinetic and social learner, someone who wants lessons grounded in experience and interaction. I want to touch and see what I'm learning and understand its use in daily life. I was always the student who asked, "Can we have class outside?"

From the field, I reflect on my life of learning. I have to: as a white 28-year-old female Cambridge student researching youth experiences in Kathmandu, my identity matters. Luckily, I'm still a *youth* according to Nepal's policies and am welcomed into youth spaces. My femaleness has made it easy for me to build relationships with one of my research partners, an organization dedicated to empowering young female leaders in the development sector. My gender also matters when I am the only or one of the only women who stays after work to play cards in the office with my research partners. My foreign-ness is obvious – my skin, my hair, the way I dress. Due to "dollar farming" in Nepal's development history and continued reliance on international donors that fund and determine the in-country projects run, people think I am a representative of whatever foreign body is funding the programs I attend.

My most complex identity is about being a US citizen studying at a highly reputable UK institution. Many young people in Nepal dream about going abroad for higher education and many do. An Instagram account I (as well as 1.2 million other people) follow often posts about issues related to Nepal's higher education. In figure 1 for example, they posted about a university fair happening in Kathmandu where 30 UK and Irish universities would be participating and giving student one-on-one counseling (Routine of Nepal, 2023). Another post (figure 2) reported the "Craze for Australia" after a 90-day period in which over 200 Nepalese students were given scholarships to Australian universities (Routine of Nepal, 2023).

Figure 1

An event promoting a university fair featuring UK and Irish universities

Figure 2

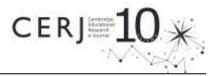*An event promoting a university fair featuring UK and Irish universities*

I work with young people, and I get asked almost daily "How can I go to the USA to study?" Conversely, the young people I've met who have secured visas for foreign universities tell me they aren't excited to go. In thinking about the future, I realize going abroad is less about choice and more about a lack of them: "if all my friends are abroad, why am I still here?" I wonder how to answer this question, whether to be realistic about the challenges of living abroad or validate the sentiment that anywhere is better than Nepal. Because of these global educational aspirations (or, perhaps, inevitability), Cambridge often becomes a ticket in. I'm often introduced by others as a "Cambridge Scholar" which grants me almost instant authority and respect. I have seen the power that comes with my various identities. But this power, I've found at times, can flow both ways. My Cambridge label is something others can benefit from, such as posting on their Facebooks I led a session at their organization. In that way, my association becomes theirs. Each interaction, though laden with dynamics of power, doesn't always feel that powerful. Some moments, in fact, feel really boring. I arrived in the field late 2022 and since then, have spent a lot of time drinking tea, rearranging Excel spreadsheets of relevant literature, and cleaning out my email inbox. As a social science researcher, I look for meaning in these moments.

A methodological discussion: moments matter

Moments are emotional and fleeting, yet Gabb and Fink (2015) argue their value as epistemic units, or in other words, individual sources of knowledge. Moments are simultaneously micro and macro, influenced by complex networks of relationships, whether long-term or short, as well as location, weather, and what was eaten for lunch. Through this lens of the personal, quotidian existence becomes dynamic (Gabb & Fink, 2015; Shotter, 2005). Leaning into moments means leaning into emotionality. Traditionally, emotionality and subjectivity have been seen as disruptive to research rigor. Instead, I pull from scholars such as McLaughlin (2003) and Russi et al. (2021) who argue that emotionality and subjectivity can actually improve the quality of qualitative research as it can build our capacity for observation and connectivity.

In this framing, my own experience matters. I must notice how I am in a certain space, as well as the space itself: the cushion of the chair I'm sitting on, the sweetness of the Nepali *chiyaa*, the changes in temperature as it moves from winter to spring to monsoon in Kathmandu. These bodily sensations, "rather than

interfering with our ability to perceive reality or truth, our bodies define how we are in the world" (Jager et al., 2016, p. 18). My experience of embodiment firmly roots me in my experience and its specific location (Gabb & Fink, 2015). My emotions, as they rise and fall, determine what I see and how I see it. This is part of my individualized experience of learning within the messy everyday-ness of human existence – in other words, the complex ordinary (Stewart, 2007 in Gabb & Fink, 2015).

I've come to see everything as data (Hargraves, 2016) – people, places, Instagram, my own embodied and emotional experience. My research setting is the entire city. My informants are everyone I come across. Each and every moment matters. I see posts related to my research as I passively scroll through social media. I dream about my pants falling down in front of my research partners. I read about the social prestige of development jobs in a novel set in early 1990s Nepal. The woman I live with tells me how her children studying abroad say how much they miss Nepali food and want her to visit. I practice my Nepali as I eavesdrop on conversations happening in the cafes where I study. Whether or not I am actively trying to collect data, new information comes to me.

Over time these moments add up. They become patterns, trends, or outliers. And it takes considerable time to recognize moments as such, as they are configured and reconfigured (Agar, 2006; Shove & Watson, 2012 in Gabb & Fink, 2015). As I started to collect moments as data for my doctoral research, I started to see the necessity for me to spend more time in the field, to be able to learn and relearn from people I interact with here. Time becomes both a resource and a variable in research. Some people spend years in the field while others might only spend a few weeks. The PhD in the UK is a 3-year degree compared to the indeterminate timeline for many US-based programs. Choosing to be in the field for almost a year might be questioned; I've been asked if it will leave me with enough time in Cambridge to analyze and write up? Oddly, this is the opposite of my concern: will spending too much time in Cambridge limit the understandings I can derive from the field? It seemed to do so in my first year.
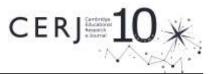
Is this ethnography?

I emailed my supervisor that I'm extending my visa, claiming my "ethnographically inspired methods" as the reason for needing more time in the field. I thought this phrasing would show-off my critical engagement with methodological ideals. More importantly, I was afraid my direct use of the word "ethnography" would elicit a reaction. Although I was confident in how I was approaching my research, I wasn't yet ready to defend my reasons why, or furthermore, call it something specific. Linguistic vagueness gave me space. It bought me time.

Now, I must ask: is this ethnography?

But I am not an anthropologist. I have no training in anthropology and therefore am unfamiliar with many of its philosophical assumptions. I do not know any of the big names in anthropology's methodological literature. I'm torn. Do I do a few quick searches on Google Scholar and iDiscover, cite those whom others have frequently cited? Challenge those whom others have frequently challenged? In writing that could give the appearance of *knowledge* and help me check that box of having methodological *breadth* and *depth.*

I could do the same with regard to my research philosophy and theory. Google "constructivism" or watch a YouTube video to get a general sense, then cite an article that seems to say the same thing. Check. Contextually, I need to cite Bista (1991), Hutt (2020), Liechty (1995, 2003), Snellinger (2018), and Zharkevich (2009) to show I have a grasp on literature describing the role of youth and the development of Nepal. Check. Yes, after watching YouTube and reading a few articles, I might come to agree with the main tenets of constructivism. After all, my ontology and epistemology does value social interactions and human dimensions in creating knowledge. I might come to label my work "feminist" as Judith Butler (1988) does help me to understand how I'm performing and not performing my gender in the mostly male dominated spaces of my research. And of course, Liechty's (1995) analysis of turn-of-the-century globalized youth culture does provide historical background as to why young people in Kathmandu today seem so eager to go abroad.

While I do have a *grasp* on this literature cited, I'm concerned what unquestioningly applying these labels to my research may do. I have deeply engaged with the theoretical *ongoing scholarly conversation* of those I've cited, but who else might be out there talking? What might they be saying? And how might they be changing the terms I'm using? Philosophical advancements go beyond the boundaries of published scholarship.

Besides, I was told that in post-earthquake Nepal, anything written before 2015 is no longer relevant (Anil Chitrakar, personal communication, Patan, 16 March 2023). Yet, I make the citations.

I again return to my titular question: is my research ethnography? Furthermore, is it feminist? constructivist? Regardless of the label I might be tempted to use to define this work, that word is not my own. It comes laden with a pre-determined definition and an assumed set of actions.

Labels shm-abels

The choices I make in the field should coalesce into what and how I define this research, not the other way around. I don't want to get caught up in what Creighton (1920) termed "catchwords": those big terms created by philosophers, or in this case academics as philosophers, who present themselves "as alone possessing the skill and the right to prepare the catchwords upon which the multitude shall live" (p. 225). In other words, the creation of words becomes a privilege and those who do not have that privilege are forced to follow the words of others. In calling my work *ethnography*, it is expected that I follow the definition of *ethnography* put forth by *ethnographers*.

I, like Creighton (1920), want to challenge the creation and application of such labels in contemporary research. In doing so, "We are not then obliged to accept such an account of thought" (p. 230); it becomes again our duty to think on our own. Or in this case, be in the field how I want to be in the field. So, regardless of what label I am using now, I will continue making the choices that feel right to me. I will continue to spend time with my participants, drink *chiyaa* and eat *khaajaa*, send them DMs and like their stories on Instagram, and laugh at emerging inside jokes. I will talk to as many people as possible, hear their ideas, get their input on what I'm trying to understand, and offer my own if asked. I will continue to learn Nepali, listen to Nepali music, read (translated) Nepali fiction, and eat Nepali food. My research will continue to be immersive, flexible, and socially driven.

Perhaps, after all this, after my final moments in the field, I will move closer to claiming ethnography. Perhaps, I will move farther away. Likely (hopefully), I will be more articulate about how and why I made these choices, using language of my own choosing.

Conclusion

Knowing and using catchwords – or not knowing and misusing catchwords – often feels like a test, gauging how well I belong in academia and whether other academics will accept my work. Leading a session with bachelor students in Kathmandu, one asked if I ever feel imposter syndrome (M*, personal communication, 10 April 2023). I told her yes. I told her no. I told her it depends on the day. Most importantly, I told her imposter syndrome should be construed as an institutional tool to keep young researchers in bounds. Fear of being told "you're wrong" has made me as an early career researcher use scholarly-accepted catchwords in a frantic effort to prove I belong.Now, after recognizing the "fallacies that lie hidden in words" (Creighton, 1920, p. 225), I ask one final time: is my research ethnography? Perhaps yes. Perhaps no. And for now, as I'm still navigating moment after moment in the field, I'm comfortable with that ambiguity.

References

Agar, M. (2006). An Ethnography By Any Other Name ... *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *7*(4). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-7.4.177

Bista, D. B. (1991). *Fatalism and development: Nepal's struggle for modernization*. Hyderabad : Orient Blackswan, 1991 (2015 [printing]).

Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, *40*(4), 519–531. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893

Creighton, J. E. (1920). Philosophy as the Art of Affixing Labels. *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, *17*(9), 225–233. https://doi.org/10.2307/2940079

Gabb, J., & Fink, J. (2015). Telling Moments and Everyday Experience: Multiple Methods Research on Couple Relationships and Personal Lives. *Sociology*, *49*(5), 970–987. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515578993

Hargraves, V. (2016). Research as entanglement. *ETD - Educação Temática Digital*, *18*(3), 541–552. https://doi.org/10.20396/etd.v18i3.8646104

Hutt, M. (2020). Before the dust settled: Is Nepal's 2015 settlement a seismic constitution? *Conflict, Security & Development*, *20*(3), 379–400. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2020.1771848

Jager, A. de, Tewson, A., Ludlow, B., & Boydell, K. (2016). Embodied ways of storying the self: A systematic review of body-mapping. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung (FQS)*, *17*(2), 32.

Liechty, M. (1995). Media, markets, and modernization: Youth identities and experience of modernity in Kathmandu, Nepal. In V. Amit-Talai, H. Wulff, & V. Amit (Eds.), *Youth cultures: A cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 185–202). Routledge.

Liechty, M. (2003). *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv173f1m3

McLaughlin, C. (2003). The feeling of finding out: The role of emotions in research. *Educational Action Research*, *11*(1), 65–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790300200205

Routine of Nepal [@routineofnepalbanda]. (2023, February 2). Event alert: SI-UK Nepal is organizing a "University fair" on 4th February, Saturday from 10 am to 5 pm at [Post]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CoKW_qZKBwF/

Routine of Nepal [@routineofnepalbanda]. (2023, February 18). Craze for Australia: Students can Find out how 200+ students availed Australian scholarships worth Rs 10 Crores through IDP in [Photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CowgFU9vEu5/

Russi, L., Shaw, P., & Daly, M. (2021). *Withdrawal to the 'always already there'* [Preprint]. https://doi.org/10.21428/d2eb3cdf.00290fb5

Shotter, J. (2005). Acknowledging unique others: Ethics, "expressive realism", and social constructionism. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, *18*(2), 103–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530590914761

Snellinger, A. (2018). *Making New Nepal: From Student Activism to Mainstream Politics*. University of Washington Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnhnn.1

Zharkevich, I. (2009). A New Way of Being Young in Nepal: The Idea of Maoist Youth and Dreams of a New Man. *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, *14*(1), 67–105.