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# Ethnographic Inquiry in Psychology

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The application of ethnography as a qualitative method is rapidly growing in psychology where human experiences are to be studied as situated in their socio-cultural and historical context. In this new tradition, subjectivity of both—the researcher and the researched—is given a meaningful space. The researcher is able to delineate his/her personal and academic inclinations influencing the research process and findings.

In this chapter, we explore the nature and key elements of ethnography, and their relevance and application in psychology. Methodological issues in ethnography will be clarified and elaborated utilizing the experiences of the first author, Kumar Ravi Priya (KRP), during his ethnographic study of the experiences of suffering and healing of the survivors of an earthquake (Priya 2005). A brief description of the metatheoretical roots and methodology of that study is provided next.

An intense earthquake measuring 6.9 on Richter scale struck Gujarat state, India, on 26 January 2001; 13,881 human lives were lost in the entire state of Gujarat, out of which, 12,221 deaths occurred in Kachchh district alone (Gupta *et al.* 2002). KRP adopted the bio-psycho-social model (Engel 1977;

Kleinman 1988a) of health and illness to study the processes of suffering and healing among the survivors. Kleinman (*ibid.*) points out that suffering is the experience of the damages caused to subjectivity and intersubjective connections in the sufferer's life. He also supports the view that empathic witnessing of or existential commitment to be with someone who is suffering may 'facilitate his or her building of an illness narrative that will *make sense of* and give *value* to his or her experience' (*ibid.*: 54; emphasis added). This process is known as remoralization or healing (*ibid.*; Kleinman 1988b).

The study utilized constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 1995, 2001) to analyse the narratives of semi-structured interviews and field notes of participant observation generated through fieldworks conducted in three phases at a rural and an urban area of Kachchh (with about one year of gap between the two consecutive phases), each of the duration of about one to two months. Detailed findings of the study can be found in Priya (2005).

### BASIC NATURE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Since early twentieth century, ethnography has been established as a method, a theo-

retical orientation, and a philosophical paradigm within anthropology (Tedlock 2003). However, Tedlock also points out the recent phenomenon of the adoption of ethnography as a methodology in social sciences, including psychology. She observes:

Ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into fuller, more meaningful context. It is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such information or data are transformed into written or visual form. As a result, it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives. As an inscription practice, ethnography is a continuation of fieldwork rather than a transparent record of past experiences in the field. The ongoing nature of fieldwork connects important personal experiences with an area of knowledge; as a result, it locates between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority of cultural analysis. (ibid.: 165)

This meaning of ethnography brings to the fore its important aspects: (a) ethnography as a process; and (b) ethnography as a product. The latter pertains to the findings of the research. It is the former that deals with methodology, about which we are primarily concerned in this chapter. A close look at Tedlock's meaning of ethnography reveals its various important features: centrality of emic view, fieldwork to understand culture, and dialogical nature of research.

#### Centrality of Emic View

Ethnography as a process or method, according to Geertz (1988), is an account of an ethnographer's journeys through the nuances and matrices of a culture to have an *emic* view (perspectives of the meanings that members attached to their social world) of the culture. Similarly, Brewer (2000) points out that

ethnography is the study of people by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, in order to collect data in a systematic manner without meaning, or already existing theoretical standpoints about the phenomenon under study, being imposed on them externally.

#### Fieldwork to Understand Culture

Bryman (2001) takes ethnographer's immersing themselves in the society to collect descriptive data through fieldwork to be the one of the key features of ethnography. Marcus and Fischer (1986) understand ethnography as a research process in which the anthropologist closely observes, records, and engages in daily life of another culture—an experience labelled as the fieldwork method—and then writes accounts of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail. Similarly, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), in its most characteristic form, ethnography involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.

#### Dialogic Nature of Research

According to Srivastava (1991), ethnographic method is about the strategies adopted:

1. to establish relations with the people to be studied; and
2. to comprehend the 'other' vis-à-vis researcher's own self.

Here, it is important to note the dialogical nature of the understanding that is developed

through fieldwork which involves *establishing a relationship* with people in the research setting to have a meaningful understanding their lives that begins to form as the one relative to ethnographer's understanding about his/her own self or culture. Marcus and Fischer (1986) have noted the importance of delineating the shaping of understanding of culture through ethnographer's personal and philosophical/theoretical standpoint which may be achieved through his/her reflections on the interactions with participants and other relevant events during fieldwork.

#### BRIEF HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHY

The historical accounts of the emergence of modern ethnography tend to reflect two traditions: the development of ethnography in social and cultural anthropology; and the role of such early institutions as the Chicago School in providing the foundation for a sociological ethnographic tradition (Bryman 2001). The beginning of both these traditions date back in time to around early twentieth century.

Anthropologists traditionally used to study 'other' cultures. According to Brewer (2000), the emergence of the classical social anthropological tradition in Britain in early twentieth century to support British colonialism appears to be a strong reason for this. However, in recent times, they have been studying cultures that are much closer to home—both spatially and culturally. Sociologists called their observation technique to be 'participant observation' or 'field research' to explore groups on the margins of urban industrial society in the United States (US) in the 1920s and the 1930s, with important studies of numerous deviant subgroups like prostitutes, drug dealers, street gangs, and various other unusual urban occupations (ibid.). But, in recent times, they avoid using

the term 'participant observation' (which they traditionally used for a variety of data collection activities in addition to observation, such as interviewing key informants, collecting and analysing documents, and sometimes, methods associated with quantitative research like questionnaire) and have substituted 'ethnography' in its place. One of the similarities that have been emphasized the most between the anthropological and sociological traditions is 'cultural description' (ibid.).

As Hammersley (1992) and Tedlock (2003) point out, ethnography has been adopted in various social science disciplines with the key assumption that by entering into close and relatively prolonged interaction with people in their everyday lives, ethnographers can gain better insights into the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of the participants than they can by using any other method.

#### INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

Qualitative methods in general, and ethnography in particular, are utilized to study psychological phenomena that have been conceptualized from an interdisciplinary standpoint in new paradigms of social science research (for example, social constructionist, critical theory, or participatory inquiry paradigms). Examples of some interdisciplinary research in psychology are provided in the next few paragraphs.

Researches in educational psychology and related interdisciplinary issues have frequently utilized this method. Foley (2001) attempted to understand the meaning of educational achievement in its socio-cultural context. Holland *et al.* (1996) have studied the socio-cultural processes that shape constructions of an 'educated person'.

In the Indian context, Sibia and Raina (2001) have studied the context of teaching-

learning encounters in Mirambika, a school based on Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of education. Gupta's (2008) study on children in a school in Daryaganj, Delhi, reveals that children, very early on, show explicit identification and communicated prejudices towards the 'other' religion practiced in their neighbourhood. Thapan (2006) has used ethnography to investigate the complex relationship between ideas, institutions, and the people in them by looking at the Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh.

In the domain of mental health, ethnography has been employed to study the relationship between deinstitutionalization and mental health problems (Newton *et al.* 2001); impact of a therapeutic recreation programme on people with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) (Caroleo 2001); experiences of Alzheimer's disease patient in the Netherlands (Chatterji 1998); and expressions of anxiety in African Americans (Huertin-Roberts *et al.* 1997).

Vahali (2009), in her ethnographic study of reconstruction of selves of Tibetan refugees in India, has explored the psychologically devastating consequences following refugee-hood and torture. She also has searched for symbols of human resilience—the opening up of creative possibilities and a return to renewed meanings in the lives of these exiles. Two central symbols of continuity among this community, which have been identified by her, are the Dalai Lama and the philosophy of Buddhism. Priya (2007) reports the findings of an ethnographic study among the survivors of Kachchh earthquake that occurred in 2001, which shows that survivors' experiences of suffering and healing were shaped by their belief in *karma* (internalized duty towards family, community, and nature).

In the domain of experiences and constructions of health and illness, ethnographic

studies have been conducted to explore stress and coping in military setting (Gold and Friedman 2000); Korean–Canadian women's menopause experience (Elliott *et al.* 2002); suffering associated with cancer (Peters *et al.* 2001); and sexual and reproductive health behaviour (Price and Hawkins 2002).

To explore relevant social problems and issues, ethnography has been used to study construction of disability identity (Gilson *et al.* 1997); constructions of racial and ethnic identities (De Andrade 2000; Kheshti 1998); consumption strategies of homeless people (Hill 2003); social world of homeless people (Dordick 1996); and construction of power in the Filipina domestic worker community in Hong Kong (Groves and Chang 1999).

Kirman (2008), in an ethnographic study conducted among Muslim residents a densely populated migrant colony in south Delhi, highlights the effects of religious identity on their experiences of insecurity. Residents' narratives revealed a strong influence of the memories of violent events such as partition riots, demolition of Babri mosque, Gujarat riots of 2002, and even Sikh riots of 1984 on their feelings of insecurity. By living in Zakir Nagar, the residents felt they had built a 'barricade' against the shared memories and experiences of religion-based violence and discrimination.

In the organizational setting, Hurley (1998) has discussed the use of ethnographic approach to develop research propositions and understanding change in sales organizations. Heracleous (2001) has studied culture in the context of organizational change, and Hodson (1998) provides insights into the process of pride in task completion and organizational citizenship behaviour.

Gender issues as an interdisciplinary area has also been explored quite frequently utilizing ethnographic method. Derné (2000) has

studied men's film-going in India to construe meanings of masculinity and modernity. Harris (2003) has studied the constructions of gender equality in marriage.

#### PURSuing ETHNOGRAPHY: KEY ELEMENTS

##### Decisions about the Sample

Rather than the logic of confident generalization from the sample to a larger population, the concern for 'in-depth understanding' is the key criterion for sampling in qualitative research. Therefore, in ethnography, *purposive sampling* is utilized to select information-rich cases, whose study will illuminate the question under study (Patton 2001).

As categories emerge from the data, the ethnographer seeks to add to his/her sample in such a way that he/she further increases diversity in useful ways. Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to this as *theoretical sampling*. Figure 6.1 provides an insight into such a theoretical sampling that evolved out of the need to explore a certain theme further that arose out of the preceding analysis of participants' narratives.

Further, Luborsky and Rubinstein (2001) have mentioned 'qualitative clarity' (the metatheoretical assumptions guiding the study and the pragmatic concern of the study to be sensitive to the socio-cultural context) in qualitative research as an analog statistical power in quantitative research as far as judging appropriateness of sampling goes.

##### 'First Encounter' and 'Breaking the Ice'

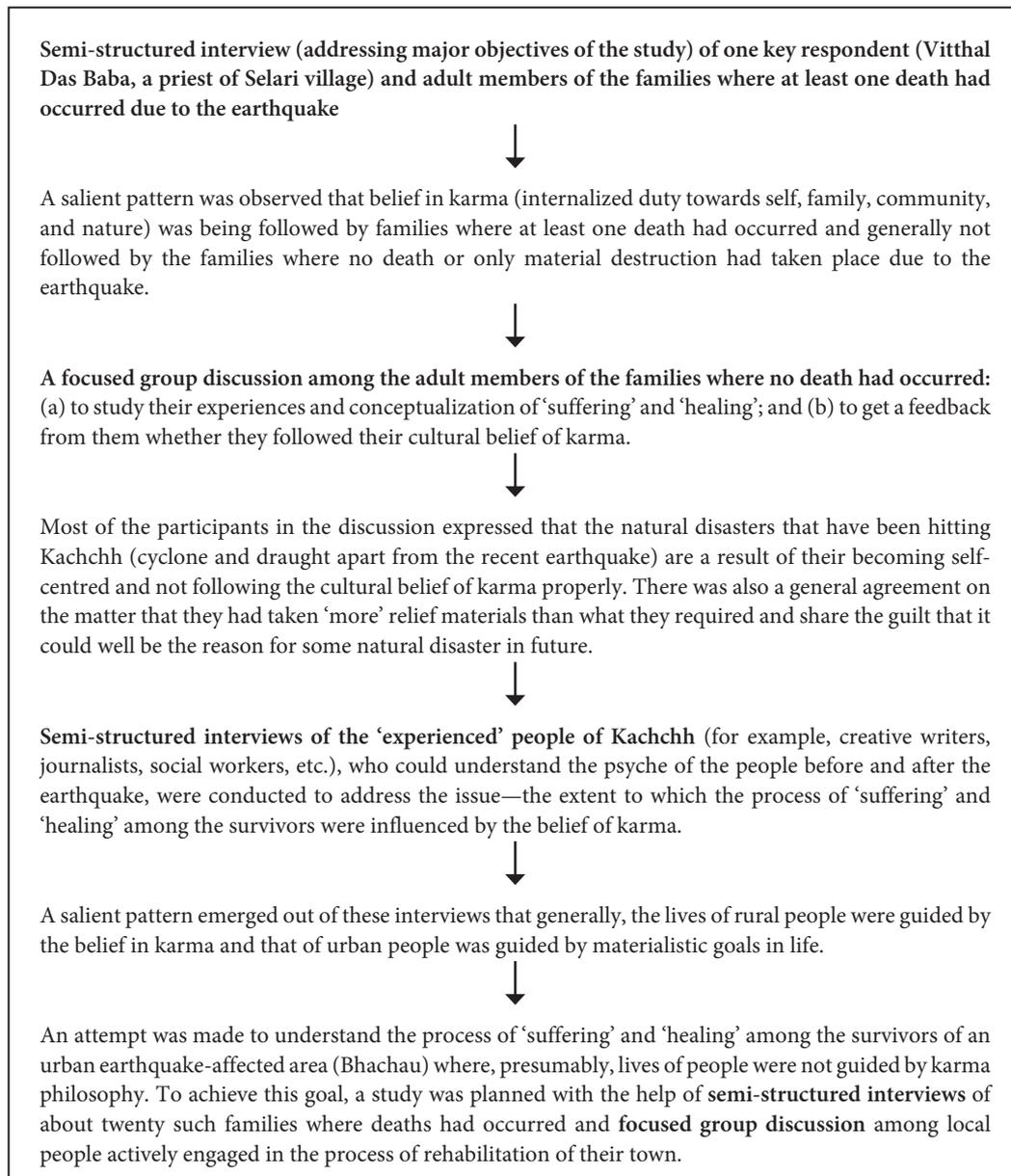
The ethnographer has to undergo prolonged immersion in the field to be able to engage meaningfully in the daily life of the people under study. Bryman (2001) has discussed various dimension of this issue. One is to do with the matter of whether to adopt an overt

or covert role. In many contexts, as he elaborates, the latter is impossible, undesirable, or not feasible. Second, the fieldworker may have little or no choice—restrictions may be imposed on his or her participation that render some kinds of role impossible. Third, the ethnographer is likely to have not one but several roles and these are likely to vary according to circumstances and the exigencies of the field. KRP adopted the role of a teacher in an ethnographic study conducted in the aftermath of Kachchh earthquake (Priya 2005).

During the initial few days of KRP's stay in the village, whenever he was seen by the children in the playground or on the road, they used to shout, 'Aa Dilliwalla chhe' (this person is from Delhi) or 'Dilliwalla aavi gayo' (the person from Delhi has come), and run away being very reluctant to come near him. He requested the principal of the high school, Dayal bhai, to allow him to take a few classes everyday at the school. A gentle and generous person, Dayal bhai allowed him to take the classes of Mathematics and English in standard VIII and IX.

In the few classes which he had taken, he had a feedback from the students that he could make them understand the lesson well. Thereafter, whenever he used to come across the children in the evening, he was shouted at as Ravi bhai or Ravi *saheb* (the suffix 'bhai' is usually added to a male member of the society in Gujarat and the suffix 'saheb' is a mark of respect for a teacher or a learned person) instead of Dilliwalla.

Importantly, engagement with the students at the school also helped him in getting acquainted with Sudhakar bhai who not only understood the purpose of KRP's visit to the village, and became friendly with him, but also agreed to be the key informant and translator in his study.



**FIGURE 6.1** A Sketch of the Evolution of Methodology based on the Feedback of the Earlier Data Collection and Analysis in the Field

### Ethnographer's Self as a 'Tool'

The ethnographer doesn't claim to be a neutral and detached observer of the psychological phenomenon under study. Moreover,

he/she takes a position that his or her subjectivity forms an integral part of the meaning-making exercise along with the research participant. The researcher arrives at some

understanding in two ways: (a) an empathic understanding of research participant's experiences; and (b) a critical analysis of affective impact of interaction (with the participant) on him or her.

Rosaldo (1993) had not been able to understand the reason of headhunters' rage after death of a family member (which subsides only after they kill another person). After the unfortunate incident of the death of his wife in an accident during the fieldwork, he experienced rage over the incident and could empathize with the rage of the headhunters.

Vahali (2003) mentions about a participant, in her study regarding reconstruction of Tibetan self in exile, for whom she had developed a mental block after finding him to be 'insensitive' towards his father's death. As she expresses in her paper, in a critical analysis of the mental block (in a discussion with her supervisor) she could decipher that her projection of a 'good' offspring on him had made her overlook the emotional deprivation from his father (having chronic depression) during childhood and adolescence. It led her to understand and appreciate his present career-oriented life pattern to be an effort to overcome the lack of nurturance he had undergone during his growing years.

### The Process of Data Analysis

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) have emphasized that the data analysis is more of a continuous process rather than a specific phase of the research work usually thought to be beginning after *data collection is over*. They posit:

In ethnography the analysis of data is not a distinct stage of the research. In many ways, it begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems, and continues through to the process of writing reports, articles, and books. Formally, it starts to take shape in analytic notes and

memoranda; informally, it is embodied in the ethnographer's ideas and hunches. And in these ways, to one degree or another, the analysis of data feeds into research design and data collection. (ibid.: 158)

Figure 6.1 provides an example of such an evolution of the methodology in an ethnographic study conducted in a post-earthquake period (Priya 2005) as a result of continuous interaction among data and emerging themes/theory.

A very important implication of such an ongoing nature of analysis that they share is to recognize that there is no mechanistic formula or recipe for the analysis of ethnographic data. As they (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 168) mention, '... the most important lessons to be learned about ethnographic analysis derive from the necessity of thinking not only *about* one's data, but also *with and through* the data, in order to produce fruitful ideas'. The idea is that an ethnographer has to engage in the process of going back and forth between data (in the forms of narratives and field notes) and the emerging themes (making use of metatheoretical and theoretical standpoints appropriate for the cultural/historical context in which data are embedded) so that a meaningful, culturally relevant understanding of the phenomenon is developed. It is for this reason that they have proposed 'general guides to analysis' (suggesting some potentially fruitful ways of analysing) rather than 'standard set of steps to make sense of data'.

Due to its emphasis on context sensitivity and openness for adoption of multiple meaningful theoretical standpoints to facilitate back and forth movement between data and themes, constructionist grounded theory (Charmaz 1995, 2001, 2006; Pidgeon and Henwood 1997) is one such viable general guides to analysis.

An example of the use of constructionist grounded theory analysis in the ethnographic

study conducted by KRP to understand the suffering and healing processes after Kachchh earthquake is provided next (Priya 2005).

### Example of Analysis through Constructionist Grounded Theory Approach

Charmaz (1995, 2001) emphasizes that a rich conceptual analysis of lived experiences of people through emerging categories can be a meaningful purpose of a grounded theory study.<sup>1</sup> KRP coded the co-constructions with the participants using initial, focused, and axial coding as per the guidelines of constructionist grounded theory given by Charmaz (1995, 2001). Initial coding began with line by line and incident to incident coding of the research narratives and notes taken about participant observation. Through the method of constant comparison, he compared the codes resulting from initial coding.

The process gradually led him to develop initial code, 'guilt associated with a family member's death', that he also took as the focused code as it seemed to substantially explain an aspect of suffering associated with participants' cultural beliefs. The process of axial coding involved refining and specifying the properties of a category by linking it to its subcategories. For example, through axial coding, he developed the focused code, 'guilt associated with death', into the subcategory of a category, 'guilt'. The other subcategory of 'guilt' was, 'guilt over departed soul's unfulfilled wishes'.

Table 6.1 presents the definitions and indicators of these categories and subcategories associated with the experiences of suffering of a participant, Meghraj bhai. A 46 year old man, tailor by occupation, who also had to work as a manual labourer when he did not have much tailoring work to earn his

livelihood, had faced the trauma of the death of his mother in the earthquake.

Further, the approach of constructionist grounded theory (Charmaz 1995, 2001; Pidgeon and Henwood 1997) also enabled KRP to recognize and explicate the influence of his personal experiences and inclination towards existential philosophy throughout the process of analysis.

### THE ISSUES OF RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

Gergen (1994) maintains that although the quantitative tradition in mainstream psychology overwhelmingly stresses the need of validity in the research outcome, this emphasis seems to be largely undue as the psychological tests and tools which are used to 'establish' the existence of a construct in a participant is based on the construct itself. Gergen maintains that the use of construct and categories to make a claim on reality doesn't guarantee validity of the study. He states:

None of these labels possesses ontological significance; all have indexical utility within circumscribed, sociohistorical contexts. And so it is with ethnographic reports. To the extent that the forms of practice to which they are wedded have practical utility for the newly arriving visitor, they may be said to have validity—not because they are accurate, but because the practices that they invoke are advantageous in the impending process of mutual accommodation. (Gergen 1990: 592)

However, one frequently applied set of criteria about authenticity of qualitative research has been proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Bryman [2001]). These are:

1. *credibility*, which is analogous to internal validity and is concerned with the believability of findings;

**TABLE 6.1** Properties of Category/Subcategories from a Constructionist Grounded Theory Analysis

Category/Subcategory	Definition	Indicator
Guilt	Feeling of suffering due to attributing loss to one's own wrong deeds in the past.	
Guilt associated with a family member's death	Guilt associated with attributing family member's death to one's own wrong deeds in the past.	'Had she [my mother] died from some old age illness, we would not have had much dukh (agony). But since she died due to a stone falling on her, we have much dukh about it. Had she died due to some old age illness, we would have time to serve her we would have had santosh (satisfaction) over it. Due to her sudden demise, we didn't get the opportunity to do it. I must have committed some paap. That's why this opportunity was denied to me.'
Guilt over departed soul's unfulfilled wishes	Guilt associated with attributing non-fulfilment of departed member's wishes to one's own responsibility.	'Had my mother been alive, she would have been quite happy seeing the engagement and marriage of her daughter. Perhaps, I should have made more efforts to search for the var (bridegroom) for my sister. I am deeply afflicted by my mother's death. For the peace of the soul of my mother, first I shall get my sister married off and then only I shall think about my daughter's (who is of the similar age as that of his sister) marriage. When I am not able to sleep, my mother comes to my mind.'

Source: Priya (2005).

2. *transferability*, which is analogous to external validity and is concerned with the contexts to which findings can be applied;
3. *dependability*, which is analogous to reliability and is concerned with the degree to which findings can be taken to hold on other occasions; and
4. *confirmability*, which is analogous to objectivity and is concerned with how far values have intruded into the collection and interpretation of data.

Finally, it must be noted that besides providing a scientific analysis of a socio-

psychological process, ethnography may also induce healing and self-growth amongst the researcher and the participant.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS: THE HUMANIZING IMPACT OF ETHNOGRAPHY

During the first phase of the study in Selari village, when KRP tried to initiate an interaction with Nirmala *ben*, a middle-aged woman whose husband had expired in the earthquake and had no children of her own, after a silence of about two minutes, she slowly uttered a sentence which meant, 'something...I do something'. Then tears came in her eyes and

neither she nor he spoke for about more than ten minutes. Her sorrow and silence made him once again feel the sorrow and loneliness that he had felt when his mother fell seriously ill after the death his eldest brother in 1982. It took his mother almost a year to recover from meningitis and another year to completely recover from the loss of memory resulting from the disease and its treatment.

This interaction with Nirmala ben made him realize the 'littleness' of his suffering in life. However, he could empathize with her positive experiences as she said that she experienced *shanti* (peace of mind or equanimity) through carrying out her duties towards their family and society. He, too, had a harmonizing experience having been able to contribute towards the healing of people who faced trauma by providing them with the emotional space through the interactions, to the best of his ability.

Ethnography, thus, may provide a humanizing space where healing of the selves of both researchers and participants is possible (Ellingson 2001; Frank 2000; Kleinman 1988a; Priya 2010).

## NOTE

1. Charmaz (1995, 2001, 2006) indicates that in contemporary social science research, the use of grounded theory method has undergone a paradigm shift from positivism towards social constructionism.

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