Extended Abstract: Ethnography in Times of Uncertainty—A Comparative Analysis of Methodologies

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The third decade of the 21st century is defined by compounding crises: human-induced climate collapse, increasingly frequent economic crises, pandemics, intensifying social inequalities, and the erosion of trust in established institutions and narratives are shaping an environment of widespread uncertainty.

At the same time, the integration of new digital technologies is driving a profound restructuring of everyday life, as a vast array of digital information penetrates the most personal aspects of our social existence, creating a continuum of hyper-connected and ever-accelerating daily experiences. Screens and sensors—on streets, in workplaces, in our homes, and even on our bodies—are merely the tangible manifestations of a network of tools we have invented in our ongoing attempt to tame uncertainty, yet another expression of our fear of the unknown.

In response, resilience has become a focal point in public discourse, emerging as a set of ideas and techniques to address these uncertainties. While local communities play a crucial role in resilience-building, those most affected are often excluded from shaping relevant policies. To understand their collective agency in this context, we must adopt qualitative methodologies that recognize individuals as part of open, complex systems—interwoven with bodies, objects, information, ideas, practices, and environments, as carriers and expressions of all possibilities and alternatives.

Ethnography—a methodology rooted in immersive fieldwork and interpretive analysis—offers a vital framework for understanding collective agency in the face of adversity. This study explores how ethnographic methodologies, both traditional and emergent, can be adapted to investigate emerging collective initiatives in times of crisis. A comparative analysis—a systematic approach widely used across disciples—is adopted to examining similarities and differences, to identify patterns, evaluate effectiveness, and understand variations of potential ethnographic approaches.

Ethnography originated in the early 20th century as a cornerstone of anthropology and sociology, disciplines that prioritized firsthand exploration of cultural and social settings. Anthropologists like Malinowski and Boas pioneered immersive fieldwork in remote communities, seeking to decode cultural patterns through prolonged participant observation (Frey, 2021). Sociologists of the Chicago School, such as Robert Park, applied ethnographic methods to urban contexts, blending scientific observation with literary techniques to study social change. These traditions established ethnography's core principles: thick description (interpretive analysis of social behavior within its cultural context), participant observation (immersive engagement balancing participation and detachment), and triangulation (combining methods like interviews and archival research to

validate findings). However, ethnography has since transcended its disciplinary confines, evolving into a pluralistic methodology adaptable to diverse contexts—from digital spaces to crisis settings.

Traditional ethnography, exemplified by works like Bronisław Malinowski's Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922), emphasizes prolonged immersion in a community to build trust and contextual understanding. This approach focuses on uncovering shared cultural meanings and social structures, often culminating in monographs that synthesize observations into cohesive narratives. For instance, Malinowski's study of the Kula exchange system in Papua New Guinea underscored the importance of learning local languages and participating in daily life to decode cultural logic. Despite its foundational role, traditional ethnography has faced criticism for historically centering "the Other", marginalized groups, contibuting to colonialist perceptions of the Global South. Additionally, its reliance on extended fieldwork makes it less adaptable to the fast-paced, fragmented nature of modern crises.

An other iteration of ethnographic studies, the critical ethnography explicitly addresses power dynamics, focusing on systemic inequities and resistance. Paul Willis' Learning to Labour (1977), a critique of class reproduction in British schooling, exemplifies this approach. Modern applications include studying grassroots movements like climate justice collectives to expose structural barriers and amplify counter-narratives. By collaborating with communities as co-researchers, critical ethnography empowers marginalized groups but must navigate political tensions and balance advocacy with academic neutrality.

Digital ethnography addresses the challenges of contemporary hyper-connectivity by studying interactions across physical and virtual spaces. This subcategory leverages multi-sited fieldwork to capture ephemeral digital traces, such as social media posts, memes, and viral videos. Sarah Pink's Digital Ethnography (2016), for example, explores how technologies like wearable cameras and mobile apps reconfigure everyday experiences. Researchers analyze hashtag movements like #BlackLivesMatter to understand intersections between digital activism and offline protests. While digital ethnography accelerates data collection and broadens scope—such as documenting real-time pandemic mutual aid networks—it also faces challenges like ephemeral data loss, algorithmic manipulation, and ethical concerns around surveillance and consent.

Autoethnography centers subjectivity as a methodological strength, using researchers' personal experiences to explore cultural phenomena. Carolyn Ellis' Final Negotiations (1995), a study of grief and relational dynamics through autobiographical reflection, illustrates how this approach bridges emotional and analytical understanding. In crisis contexts, autoethnography amplifies marginalized voices by foregrounding lived trauma, democratizing knowledge production through personal narratives. However, its reliance on anecdotal evidence requires careful balance with theoretical rigor to avoid oversimplification.

Sensory ethnography employs multi-sensory engagement—sound, visuals, and embodiment—to capture lived experiences beyond textual analysis. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's The Undercommons (2013) combines poetic theory with sensory fieldwork to study fugitive social

practices, while projects in crisis zones document the affective dimensions of displacement through films or soundscapes. Though innovative in conveying emotional realities, sensory methods require technical skills beyond traditional ethnography and risk aestheticizing suffering.

Contemporary researchers make use of methods that blend traditional rigor with innovative adaptability. The need for an ethnography that merges elements of all the mentioned types and beyond comes as a response to a constantly changing world, in a society where all processes are accelerating, intensifying the sense of uncertainty, and in technological developments that fragment space and time. A digital-critical ethnography, for instance, might analyze algorithmic bias in pandemic policies while collaborating with marginalized communities to co-design equitable solutions. Similarly, an auto-sensory ethnography could use personal narratives and audiovisual media to document climate-induced migration. These hybrid approaches address key tensions in modern ethnography: temporality (balancing digital speed with depth) and representation (ensuring marginalized agency through reflexivity and collaboration).

Ethnography's evolution introduces challenges like digital ephemerality, where platforms like TikTok prioritize fleeting content, complicating longitudinal analysis. Surveillance risks also loom, as vulnerable communities may face retaliation for participation. Researchers must confront their positionality, especially when studying crises they are not directly impacted by, ensuring ethical rigor and inclusive practices.

Ethnography's adaptability positions it as a valuable tool for studying resilience in uncertain times. By integrating diverse methodologies—such as participant observation and digital trace analysis—researchers can explore how collective initiatives navigate crises, challenge oppressive systems, and collaboratively develop alternatives. Subcategories like autoethnography and critical ethnography emphasize marginalized perspectives, while sensory and digital approaches help document the fragmented, accelerated rhythms of contemporary life. For ethnography to remain relevant, ongoing evolution is essential, fostering a reflexive, inclusive, and ethically informed practice that seeks to understand—and contribute to reshaping—complex social realities.