



EDITORIAL

Is the ethnographic approach a meaningful approximation to cultural understanding in the field of nutrition and dietetics?

¿Es el enfoque etnográfico una aproximación significativa a la comprensión cultural en el campo de la nutrición y la dietética?

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Addressing nutritional issues requires contributions from other disciplines, including *anthropology*. Cover nutrition from this perspective makes it possible to take up the analysis of cultures in terms of socially determined and meaningful human activities^{1,2}. For this reason, the anthropology of nutrition arises, which focuses on understanding the relationship between eating habits and nutrition. Based on the above, these practices are understood as cultural phenomena, since they encompass material, historical and contextual conditions, customs, habits and rituals that go beyond the process of ingesting food³.

As part of the development of the anthropology of food, a new branch called the *anthropology of nutrition* has emerged, whose object of study is focused on taking up the theoretical contributions of economics, ecology and nutrition. The aim is to understand sensory, economic and ecological factors, as well as perceptions of food and its classification, according to beliefs, knowledge and socially conferred meanings^{4,5}.

In this sense, both the *anthropology of food* as well as the *nutrition* become fundamental theoretical frameworks for interpreting the cultural and symbolic relationships of individuals. This is based on the use of participant observation techniques, non-directive interviews and data collection instruments such as field notes. These techniques make it possible to construct narrative information and a cultural relationship directly associated with food, which contributes methodologically to the

approach to social problems in the framework of territories and communities.

Ethnography is perhaps the most diverse method in anthropology, which is why it is appropriate to name it in the plural: ethnographies⁶. Different authors have proposed their own approaches to the subject, including Rossana Guber's proposal, who defines it *as an approach*, insofar as she gives it a conception and practice of knowledge that understands social phenomena from the perspective of the subjects. At the same time, the author recognises its character as a *method*, with techniques for the generation of information characterised by their non-directiveness, such as the aforementioned interview and participant observation. Finally, ethnography is a text that consolidates the set of arguments about the social-theoretical problems raised in relation to the subjects.

In short, ethnographies, as an approach, method and text of a cultural nature, describe, reflect and enable us to interpret the discourse of people from a naturalistic, holistic and inductive stance. This results in understanding social reality in context: "*identifying behaviour standards, values and patterns*"⁷. It is therefore a *dense description* that requires the prolonged presence of the researcher in the field to achieve a deep approach to the relationships between subjects and meanings from an integral, contextualised, reflexive and temporal perspective.

For all the above reasons, the depth and flexibility of ethnographies make them methodologically

adaptable to areas of knowledge such as nutrition and dietetics, particularly in research topics related to breastfeeding and malnutrition in rural and indigenous communities. From what has been described, not only biological, but also cultural, sensory, psychophysical, cognitive, political and even affective factors that shape these food preferences and practices are evident⁵.

In itself, the ethnographic approach to food enables us to understand how the production and consumption of food are forms of resistance to certain logics of consumption, while at the same time generating feelings of cultural and territorial identity. This is not to mention the description of the relationships between food, kinship, gender roles, social, family, bodily and health conditions over the course of life⁶.

In this way, ethnographies contribute breadth and depth to the understanding of the food cultures of communities, taking into account the ethnic and territorial diversity of populations, their subjectivities, geographical and socio-economic contexts. All of this is described in interaction with the food systems and practices that are fundamental to the subsistence of the communities.

On the other hand, ethnographies make it possible to understand multiple phenomena from a cultural approach and diverse worldviews. From the above, subject-subject relationships can be vindicated⁸ and, for this reason, ethnography is defined as a viable alternative for interpreting the meanings surrounding food within the framework of knowledge of nutrition and dietetics. This proposal seeks to develop a perspective based on the subjects, the researcher and their subjectivities; a situated perspective that collects and dialogues with the context where the phenomena occur. From this, the context is incorporated and given a place in the analysis of the construction of meanings.

Lastly, ethnographies are seen as an integrating perspective that takes into account the reflections of the researcher, beyond their profession or discipline, and that evokes the recognition of experiences, prejudices and biases as a fundamental part of their findings and conclusions. In this way,

ethnographic descriptions manage to integrate two fundamental characteristics that contribute to the strengthening of the methodological work of nutrition and dietetics: 1. It is interpretive, in the description of the flow of social discourse, in this case on food practices; 2, it is microscopic, as it addresses broader interpretations, with more abstract analyses related to nutritional issues⁸.

In itself, the contributions of ethnographies for nutrition and dietetics consist of being able to make theoretically argued descriptions that contribute to the generation of major conclusions of nutritional phenomena. This is based on the analysis of everyday and subjective facts, but which support and enables understanding the role of cultures in the construction of the eating habits of people and their food cultures.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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