

# **A SYNTHESIS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

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### **AN ETHNOGRAPHY**

"When used as a method, ethnography typically refers to fieldwork (alternatively, participant-observation) conducted by a single investigator who 'lives with and lives like' those who are studied, usually for a year or more." -- John Van Maanen, 1996.

"Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people.' An ethnography is a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior - based on information collected through fieldwork." --Marvin Harris and Orna Johnson, 2000.

"Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture. The description may be of a small tribal group in an exotic land or a classroom in middle-class suburbia." --David M. Fetterman, 1998.

Ethnography is a social science research method. It relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation, not just observation, by researchers trained in the art of ethnography. These ethnographers often work in multidisciplinary teams. The ethnographic focal point may include intensive language and culture learning, intensive study of a single field or domain, and a blend of historical, observational, and interview methods. Typical ethnographic research employs three kinds of data collection: interviews, observation, and documents. This in turn produces three kinds of data: quotations, descriptions, and excerpts of documents, resulting in one product: narrative description. This narrative often includes charts, diagrams and additional artifacts that help to tell "the story" (Hammersley, 1990). Ethnographic methods can give shape to new constructs or paradigms, and new variables, for further empirical testing in the field or through traditional, quantitative social science methods.

Ethnography has its roots planted in the fields of anthropology and sociology. Present-day practitioners conduct ethnographies in organizations and communities of all kinds. Ethnographers study schooling, public health, rural and urban development, consumers and consumer goods, any human arena. While particularly suited to exploratory research, ethnography draws on a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, moving from "learning" to "testing" (Agar, 1996) while research problems, perspectives, and theories emerge and shift.

Ethnographic methods are a means of tapping local points of view, households and community “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990), a means of identifying significant categories of human experience up close and personal. Ethnography enhances and widens top down views and enriches the inquiry process, taps both bottom-up insights and perspectives of powerful policy-makers "at the top," and generates new analytic insights by engaging in interactive, team exploration of often subtle arenas of human difference and similarity. Through such findings ethnographers may inform others of their findings with an attempt to derive, for example, policy decisions or instructional innovations from such an analysis.

## **VARIATIONS IN OBSERVATIONAL METHODS**

Observational research is not a single thing. The decision to employ field methods in gathering informational data is only the first step in a decision process that involves a large number of options and possibilities. Making the choice to employ field methods involves a commitment to get close to the subject being observed in its natural setting, to be factual and descriptive in reporting what is observed, and to find out the points of view of participants in the domain observed. Once these fundamental commitments have been made, it is necessary to make additional decisions about which particular observational approaches are appropriate for the research situation at hand.

## **VARIATIONS IN OBSERVER INVOLVEMENT: PARTICIPANT OR ONLOOKER?**

The first and most fundamental distinction among observational strategies concerns the extent to which the observer is also a participant in the program activities being studied. This is not really a simple choice between participation and nonparticipation. The extent of participation is a continuum which varies from complete immersion in the program as full participant to complete separation from the activities observed, taking on a role as spectator; there is a great deal of variation along the continuum between these two extremes.

**Participant observation** is an omnibus field strategy in that it "simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection. In participant observation the researcher shares as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the people in the observed setting. The purpose of such participation is to develop an insider's view of what is happening. This means that the researcher not only sees what is happening but "feels" what it is like to be part of the group.

Experiencing an environment as an insider is what necessitates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, however, there is clearly an observer side to this process. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the experience as an insider while describing the experience for outsiders.

The extent to which it is possible for a researcher to become a full participant in an experience will depend partly on the nature of the setting being observed. For example, in human service and education programs that serve children, it is not possible for the researcher to become a student and therefore experience the setting as a child; it may be possible, however, for the research observer to participate as a volunteer, parent, or staff person in such a setting and thereby develop the perspective of an insider in one of these adult roles.

It should be said, though, that many ethnographers do not believe that understanding requires that they become full members of the group(s) being studied. Indeed, many believe that this must not occur if a valid and useful account is to be produced. These researchers believe the ethnographer must try to be both outsider and insider, staying on the margins of the group both socially and intellectually. This is because what is required is both an outside and an inside view. For this reason it is sometimes emphasized that, besides seeking to "understand", the ethnographer must also try to see familiar settings as "anthropologically strange", as they would be seen by someone from another society, adopting what we might call the Martian perspective.

## **METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES**

Following are three methodological principles that are used to provide the rationale for the specific features of the ethnographic method. They are also the basis for much of the criticism of quantitative research for failing to capture the true nature of human social behavior; because it relies on the study of artificial settings and/or on what people say rather than what they do; because it seeks to reduce meanings to what is observable; and because it reifies social phenomena by treating them as more clearly defined and static than they are, and as mechanical products of social and psychological factors (M. Hammersley, 1990). The three principles can be summarized under the headings of naturalism, understanding and discovery:

1. **Naturalism.** This is the view that the aim of social research is to capture the character of naturally occurring human behavior, and that this can only be achieved by first-hand contact with it, not by inferences from what people do in artificial settings like experiments or from what they say in interviews about what they do elsewhere. This is the reason that ethnographers carry out their research in "natural" settings, settings that exist independently of the research process, rather than in those set up specifically for the purposes of research. Another important implication of naturalism is that in studying natural settings the researcher should seek to minimize her or his effects on the behavior of the people being studied. The aim of this is to increase the chances that what is discovered in the setting will be generalizable to other similar settings that have not been researched. Finally, the notion of naturalism implies that social events and processes must be explained in terms of their relationship to the context in which they occur.

2. **Understanding.** Central here is the argument that human actions differ from the behavior of physical objects, and even from that of other animals: they do not consist simply of fixed responses or even of learned responses to stimuli, but involve interpretation of stimuli and the construction of responses. Sometimes this argument reflects a complete rejection of the concept of causality as inapplicable to the social world, and an insistence on

the freely constructed character of human actions and institutions. Others argue that causal relations are to be found in the social world, but that they differ from the "mechanical" causality typical of physical phenomena. From this point of view, if we are to be able to explain human actions effectively we must gain an understanding of the cultural perspectives on which they are based. That this is necessary is obvious when we are studying a society that is alien to us, since we shall find much of what we see and hear puzzling. However, ethnographers argue that it is just as important when we are studying more familiar settings. Indeed, when a setting is familiar the danger of misunderstanding is especially great. It is argued that we cannot assume that we already know others' perspectives, even in our own society, because particular groups and individuals develop distinctive worldviews. This is especially true in large complex societies. Ethnic, occupational, and small informal groups (even individual families or school classes) develop distinctive ways of orienting to the world that may need to be understood if their behavior is to be explained. Ethnographers argue, then, that it is necessary to learn the culture of the group one is studying before one can produce valid explanations for the behavior of its members. This is the reason for the centrality of participant observation and unstructured interviewing to ethnographic method.

3. **Discovery.** Another feature of ethnographic thinking is a conception of the research process as inductive or discovery-based; rather than as being limited to the testing of explicit hypotheses. It is argued that if one approaches a phenomenon with a set of hypotheses one may fail to discover the true nature of that phenomenon, being blinded by the assumptions built into the hypotheses. Rather, they have a general interest in some types of social phenomena and/or in some theoretical issue or practical problem. The focus of the research is narrowed and sharpened, and perhaps even changed substantially, as it proceeds. Similarly, and in parallel, theoretical ideas that frame descriptions and explanations of what is observed are developed over the course of the research. Such ideas are regarded as a valuable outcome of, not a precondition for, research.

## **ETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD**

In terms of method, generally speaking, the term "ethnography" refers to social research that has most of the following features (M. Hammersley, 1990).

- (a) People's behavior is studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher.
- (b) Data are gathered from a range of sources, but observation and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main ones.
- (c) The approach to data collection is "unstructured in the sense that it does not involve following through a detailed plan set up at the beginning; nor are the categories used for interpreting what people say and do pre-given or fixed. This does not mean that the research is unsystematic; simply that initially the data are collected in as raw a form, and on as wide a front, as feasible.

(d) The focus is usually a single setting or group, of relatively small scale. In life history research the focus may even be a single individual.

(e) The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most.

As a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the sort of approach that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings. It is less specialized and less technically sophisticated than approaches like the experiment or the social survey; though all social research methods have their historical origins in the ways in which human beings gain information about their world in everyday life.

### **SUMMARY GUIDELINES FOR FIELDWORK**

It is difficult, if not impossible, to provide a precise set of rules and procedures for conducting fieldwork. What you do depends on the situation, the purpose of the study, the nature of the setting, and the skills, interests, needs, and point of view of the observer. Following are some generic guidelines for conducting fieldwork:

1. Be descriptive in taking field notes.
2. Gather a variety of information from different perspectives.
3. Cross-validate and triangulate by gathering different kinds of data. Example: observations, interviews, program documentation, recordings, and photographs.
4. Use quotations; represent program participants in their own terms. Capture participants' views of their own experiences in their own words.
5. Select key informants wisely and use them carefully. Draw on the wisdom of their informed perspectives, but keep in mind that their perspectives are limited.
6. Be aware of and sensitive to the different stages of fieldwork.
  - (a) Build trust and rapport at the entry stage. Remember that the researcher-observer is also being observed and evaluated.
  - (b) Stay alert and disciplined during the more routine middle-phase of fieldwork.
  - (c) Focus on pulling together a useful synthesis as fieldwork draws to a close.
  - (d) Be disciplined and conscientious in taking detailed field notes at all stages of fieldwork.
  - (e) Be as involved as possible in experiencing the observed setting as fully as possible while maintaining an analytical perspective grounded in the purpose of the fieldwork: to conduct research.

- (f) Clearly separate description from interpretation and judgment.
- (g) Provide formative feedback as part of the verification process of fieldwork. Time that feedback carefully. Observe its impact.
- (h) Include in your field notes and observations reports of your own experiences, thoughts, and feelings. These are also field data.

Fieldwork is a highly personal experience. The meshing of fieldwork procedures with individual capabilities and situational variation is what makes fieldwork a highly personal experience. The validity and meaningfulness of the results obtained depend directly on the observer's skill, discipline, and perspective. This is both the strength and weakness of observational methods.

### **SUMMARY GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWING**

There is no one right way of interviewing, no single correct format that is appropriate for all situations, and no single way of wording questions that will always work. The particular evaluation situation, the needs of the interviewee, and the personal style of the interviewer all come together to create a unique situation for each interview. Therein lie the challenges of depth interviewing: situational responsiveness and sensitivity to get the best data possible.

There is no recipe for effective interviewing, but there are some useful guidelines that can be considered. These guidelines are summarized below (Patton, 1987).

1. Throughout all phases of interviewing, from planning through data collection to analysis, keep centered on the purpose of the research endeavor. Let that purpose guide the interviewing process.
2. The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms.
3. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of different types of interviews: the informal conversational interview; the interview guide approach; and the standardized open-ended interview.
4. Select the type of interview (or combination of types) that is most appropriate to the purposes of the research effort.
5. Understand the different kinds of information one can collect through interviews: behavioral data; opinions; feelings; knowledge; sensory data; and background information.
6. Think about and plan how these different kinds of questions can be most appropriately sequenced for each interview topic, including past, present, and future questions.
7. Ask truly open-ended questions.

8. Ask clear questions, using understandable and appropriate language.
9. Ask one question at a time.
10. Use probes and follow-up questions to solicit depth and detail.
11. Communicate clearly what information is desired, why that information is important, and let the interviewee know how the interview is progressing.
12. Listen attentively and respond appropriately to let the person know he or she is being heard.
13. Avoid leading questions.
14. Understand the difference between a depth interview and an interrogation. Qualitative evaluators conduct depth interviews; police investigators and tax auditors conduct interrogations.
15. Establish personal rapport and a sense of mutual interest.
16. Maintain neutrality toward the specific content of responses. You are there to collect information not to make judgments about that person.
17. Observe while interviewing. Be aware of and sensitive to how the person is affected by and responds to different questions.
18. Maintain control of the interview.
19. Tape record whenever possible to capture full and exact quotations for analysis and reporting.
20. Take notes to capture and highlight major points as the interview progresses.
21. As soon as possible after the interview check the recording for malfunctions; review notes for clarity; elaborate where necessary; and record observations.
22. Take whatever steps are appropriate and necessary to gather valid and reliable information.
23. Treat the person being interviewed with respect. Keep in mind that it is a privilege and responsibility to peer into another person's experience.
24. Practice interviewing. Develop your skills.
25. Enjoy interviewing. Take the time along the way to stop and "hear" the roses.

## **SITE DOCUMENTS**

In addition to participant observation and interviews, ethnographers may also make use of various documents in answering guiding questions. When available, these documents can add additional insight or information to projects. Because ethnographic attention has been and continues to be focused on both literate and non-literate peoples, not all research projects will have site documents available. It is also possible that even research among a literate group will not have relevant site documents to consider; this could vary depending on the focus of the research. Thinking carefully about your participants and how they function and asking questions of your informants helps to decide what kinds of documents might be available.

Possible documents include: budgets, advertisements, work descriptions, annual reports, memos, school records, correspondence, informational brochures, teaching materials, newsletters, websites, recruitment or orientation packets, contracts, records of court proceedings, posters, minutes of meetings, menus, and many other kinds of written items.

For example, an ethnographer studying how limited-English proficient elementary school students learn to acquire English in a classroom setting might want to collect such things as the state or school mandated Bilingual/ESL curriculum for students in the school(s) where he or she does research, and examples of student work. Local school budget allocations to language minority education, specific teachers' lesson plans, and copies of age-appropriate ESL textbooks could also be relevant. It might also be useful to try finding subgroups of professional educators organizations which focus on teaching elementary school language arts and join their listservs, attend their meetings, or get copies of their newsletters. Review cumulative student records and school district policies for language minority education. All of these things could greatly enrich the participant observation and the interviews that an ethnographer does.

Privacy or copyright issues may apply to the documents gathered, so it is important to inquire about this when you find or are given documents. If you are given permission to include what you learn from these documents in your final paper, the documents should be cited appropriately and included in the bibliography of the final paper. If you are not given permission, do not use them in any way.

## **ETHICS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

Since ethnographic research takes place among real human beings, there are a number of special ethical concerns to be aware of before beginning. In a nutshell, researchers must make their research goals clear to the members of the community where they undertake their research and gain the informed consent of their consultants to the research beforehand. It is also important to learn whether the group would prefer to be named in the written report of the research or given a pseudonym and to offer the results of the research if informants would like to read it. Most of all, researchers must be sure that the research does not harm or exploit those among whom the research is done.



## **ANALYZING, INTERPRETING AND REPORTING FINDINGS**

Remember that the researcher is the detective looking for trends and patterns that occur across the various groups or within individuals (Krueger, 1994). The process of analysis and interpretation involve disciplined examination, creative insight, and careful attention to the purposes of the research study. Analysis and interpretation are conceptually separate processes. The analysis process begins with assembling the raw materials and getting an overview or total picture of the entire process. The researcher's role in analysis covers a continuum with assembly of raw data on one extreme and interpretative comments on the other. Analysis is the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units. The analysis process involves consideration of words, tone, context, non-verbals, internal consistency, frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity of responses and big ideas. Data reduction strategies are essential in the analysis (Krueger, 1994).

Interpretation involves attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions. Once these processes have been completed the researcher must report his or her interpretations and conclusions

## **QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTION**

Reports based on qualitative methods will include a great deal of pure description of the program and/or the experiences of people in the research environment. The purpose of this description is to let the reader know what happened in the environment under observation, what it was like from the participants' point of view to be in the setting, and what particular events or activities in the setting were like. In reading through field notes and interviews the researcher begins to look for those parts of the data that will be polished for presentation as pure description in the research report. What is included by way of description will depend on what questions the researcher is attempting to answer. Often an entire activity will be reported in detail and depth because it represents a typical experience. These descriptions are written in narrative form to provide a holistic picture of what has happened in the reported activity or event.

## **REPORTING FINDINGS**

The actual content and format of a qualitative report will depend on the information needs of primary stakeholders and the purpose of the research. Even a comprehensive report will have to omit a great deal of the data collected by the researcher. Focus is essential. Analysts who try to include everything risk losing their readers in the sheer volume of the presentation. This process has been referred to as "the agony of omitting". The agony of omitting on the part of the researcher is matched only by the readers' agony in having to read those things that were not omitted, but should have been.

## **BALANCE BETWEEN DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS**

In considering what to omit, a decision has to be made about how much description to include. Detailed description and in-depth quotations are the essential qualities of qualitative accounts. Sufficient description and direct quotations should be included to allow readers to understand fully the research setting and the thoughts of the people represented in the narrative. Description should stop short, however, of becoming trivial and mundane. The reader does not have to know absolutely everything that was done or said. Again the problem of focus arises.

Description is balanced by analysis and interpretation. Endless description becomes its own muddle. The purpose of analysis is to organize the description in a way that makes it manageable. Description is balanced by analysis and leads into interpretation. An interesting and readable final account provides sufficient description to allow the reader to understand the analysis and sufficient analysis to allow the reader to understand the interpretations and explanations presented.

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