

Ethnography

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Ethnography is "the science of contextualization" often used in the field of social sciences--particularly in anthropology, in some branches of sociology, and in historical science--that studies people, ethnic groups and other ethnic formations, their ethnogenesis, composition, resettlement, social welfare characteristics, as well as their material and spiritual culture. It is often employed for gathering empirical data on human societies and cultures. Data collection is often done through participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, etc. Ethnography aims to describe the nature of those who are studied (i.e. to describe a people, an ethnos) through writing. In the biological sciences, this type of study might be called a "field study" or a "case report," both of which are used as common synonyms for "ethnography".

Data collection methods

One of the most common methods for collecting data in an ethnographic study is direct, first-hand observation of daily participation. This can include participant observation. Another common method is interviewing, which may include conversation with different levels of form and can involve small talk to long interviews. A particular approach to transcribing interview data might be genealogical method. This is a set of procedures by which ethnographers discover and record connections of kinship, descent and marriage using diagrams and symbols. Questionnaires can be used to aid the discovery of local beliefs and perceptions and in the case of longitudinal research, where there is continuous long-term study of an area or site, they can act as valid instrument for measuring changes in the individuals or groups studied. Traditionally, the ethnographer focuses attention on a community, selecting knowledgeable informants who know well the activities of the community. These informants are typically asked to identify other informants who represent the community, often using chain sampling. This process is often effective in revealing common cultural common denominators connected to the topic being studied. Ethnography relies greatly on up-close, personal experience. Participation, rather than just observation, is one of the keys to this process. Ethnography is very useful in social research.

Differences across disciplines

The ethnographic method is used across a range of different disciplines, primarily by anthropologists but also frequently by sociologists. Cultural studies, economics, social work, education, ethnomusicology, folklore, geography, history, linguistics, communication studies, performance studies, advertising, psychology, usability and criminology are other fields which have made use of ethnography.

Cultural and social anthropology

Cultural anthropology and social anthropology were developed around ethnographic research and

their canonical texts which are mostly ethnographies: e.g. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) by Bronisław Malinowski, *Ethnologische Excursion in Johore* by famous Russian ethnographer and naturalist ("The moon man") (1875) Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) by Margaret Mead, *The Nuer* (1940) by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Naven* (1936, 1958) by Gregory Bateson or *"The Lele of the Kasai"* (1963) by Mary Douglas. Cultural and social anthropologists today place such a high value on actually doing ethnographic research that ethnology--the comparative synthesis of ethnographic information--is rarely the foundation for a career. The typical ethnography is a document written about a particular people, almost always based at least in part on emic views of where the culture begins and ends. Using language or community boundaries to bound the ethnography is common. Ethnographies are also sometimes called "case studies." Ethnographers study and interpret culture, its universalities and its variations through ethnographic study based on fieldwork. An ethnography is a specific kind of written observational science which provides an account of a particular culture, society, or community. The fieldwork usually involves spending a year or more in another society, living with the local people and learning about their ways of life. Ethnographers are participant observers. They take part in events they study because it helps with understanding local behavior and thought. Classic examples are Carol Stack's *All Our Kin*, Jean Briggs' *"Never in Anger"*, Richard Lee's *"Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers,"* Victor Turner's *"Forest of Symbols,"* David Maybry-Lewis' *"Akew-Shavante Society,"* E.E. Evans-Pritchard's *"The Nuer"* and Claude Lévi-Strauss' *"Tristes Tropiques"*. Iterations of ethnographic representations in the classic, modernist camp include Bartholomew Dean's recent (2009) contribution, *Urarina Society, Cosmology, and History in Peruvian Amazonia*.

Bronisław Malinowski among Trobriand tribe

A typical ethnography attempts to be holistic and typically follows an outline to include a brief history of the culture in question, an analysis of the physical geography or terrain inhabited by the people under study, including climate, and often including what biological anthropologists call habitat. Folk notions of botany and zoology are presented as ethnobotany and ethnozoology alongside references from the formal sciences. Material culture, technology and means of subsistence are usually treated next, as they are typically bound up in physical geography and include descriptions of infrastructure. Kinship and social structure (including age grading, peer groups, gender, voluntary associations, clans, moieties, and so forth, if they exist) are typically included. Languages spoken, dialects and the history of language change are another group of standard topics. Practices of childrearing, acculturation and emic views on personality and values usually follow after sections on social structure. Rites, rituals, and other evidence of religion have long been an interest and are sometimes central to ethnographies, especially when conducted in public where visiting anthropologists can see them.

As ethnography developed, anthropologists grew more interested in less tangible aspects of culture, such as values, worldview and what Clifford Geertz termed the "ethos" of the culture.

Clifford Geertz's own fieldwork used elements of a phenomenological approach to fieldwork, tracing not just the doings of people, but the cultural elements themselves. For example, if within a group of people, winking was a communicative gesture, he sought to first determine what kinds of things a wink might mean (it might mean several things). Then, he sought to determine in what contexts winks were used, and whether, as one moved about a region, winks remained meaningful in the same way. In this way, cultural boundaries of communication could be explored, as opposed to using linguistic boundaries or notions about residence. Geertz, while still following something of a traditional ethnographic outline, moved outside that outline to talk about "webs" instead of "outlines" of culture.

Within cultural anthropology, there are several sub-genres of ethnography. Beginning in the 1950s and early 1960s, anthropologists began writing "bio-confessional" ethnographies that intentionally exposed the nature of ethnographic research. Famous examples include *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The High Valley* by Kenneth Read, and *The Savage and the Innocent* by David Maybury-Lewis, as well as the mildly fictionalized *Return to Laughter* by Elenore Smith Bowen (Laura Bohannon). Later "reflexive" ethnographies refined the technique to translate cultural differences by representing their effects on the ethnographer. Famous examples include "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" by Clifford Geertz, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* by Paul Rabinow, *The Headman and I* by Jean-Paul Dumont, and *Tuhami* by Vincent Crapanzano. In the 1980s, the rhetoric of ethnography was subjected to intense scrutiny within the discipline, under the general influence of literary theory and post-colonial/post-structuralist thought. "Experimental" ethnographies that reveal the ferment of the discipline include *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* by Michael Taussig, *Debating Muslims* by Michael F. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *A Space on the Side of the Road* by Kathleen Stewart, and *Advocacy after Bhopal* by Kim Fortun.

Sociology

Sociology is another field which prominently features ethnographies. Urban sociology and the Chicago School in particular are associated with ethnographic research, with some well-known early examples being *Street Corner Society* by William Foote Whyte and *Black Metropolis* by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Jr.. Some of the influence for this can be traced to the anthropologist Lloyd Warner who was on the Chicago sociology faculty, and to Robert Park's experience as a journalist. Symbolic interactionism developed from the same tradition and yielded several excellent sociological ethnographies, including *Shared Fantasy* by Gary Alan Fine, which documents the early history of fantasy role-playing games. Other important ethnographies in the discipline of sociology include Pierre Bourdieu's work on Algeria and France, Paul Willis's *Learning To Labour* on working class youth, and the work of Elijah Anderson, Mitchell Duneier, Loic Wacquant on black America and *Glimpses of Madrasa From Africa*, 2010 Lai Olurode. But even though many sub-fields and theoretical perspectives within sociology use ethnographic methods,

ethnography is not the sine qua non of the discipline, as it is in cultural anthropology.

Communication studies

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, ethnographic research methods began to be widely employed by communication scholars. Studies such as Gerry Philipsen's analysis of cultural communication strategies in a blue-collar, working class neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, *Speaking 'Like a Man' in Teamsterville*, paved the way for the expansion of ethnographic research in the study of communication.

Scholars of communication studies use ethnographic research methods to analyze communication behaviors, seeking to answer the "why" and "how come" questions of human communication. Often this type of research results in a case study or field study such as an analysis of speech patterns at a protest rally or the way firemen communicate during "down time" at a fire station. Like anthropology scholars, communication scholars often immerse themselves, participate in and/or directly observe the particular social group being studied.

Other fields

The American anthropologist George Spindler was a pioneer in applying ethnographic methodology to the classroom.

Anthropologists like Daniel Miller and Mary Douglas have used ethnographic data to answer academic questions about consumers and consumption. In this sense, Tony Salvador, Genevieve Bell, and Ken Anderson describe design ethnography as being "a way of understanding the particulars of daily life in such a way as to increase the success probability of a new product or service or, more appropriately, to reduce the probability of failure specifically due to a lack of understanding of the basic behaviors and frameworks of consumers."

Businesses, too, have found ethnographers helpful for understanding how people use products and services, as indicated in the increasing use of ethnographic methods to understand consumers and consumption, or for new product development (such as video ethnography). Naked Eye Research is a UK based company that specialises in video ethnography, which involves participating, observing and describing how people from particular cultural groups respond to the situations they find themselves in. The recent Ethnographic Praxis in Industry (EPIC) conference is evidence of this. Ethnographers' systematic and holistic approach to real-life experience is valued by product developers, who use the method to understand unstated desires or cultural practices that surround products. Where focus groups fail to inform marketers about what people really do, ethnography links what people say to what they actually do--avoiding the pitfalls that come from relying only on self-reported, focus-group data.

Evaluating ethnography

Ethnographic methodology is not usually evaluated in terms of philosophical standpoint (such as positivism and emotionalism). Ethnographic studies nonetheless need to be evaluated in some manner. While there is no consensus on evaluation standards, Richardson (2000, p. 254) provides 5 criteria that ethnographers might find helpful.

Substantive Contribution: Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social-life?

Aesthetic Merit: Does this piece succeed aesthetically?

Reflexivity: How did the author come to write this text...Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view?

Impact: Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Does it move me?

Expresses a Reality: Does it seem 'true'--a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the 'real'?

Ethics

Gary Alan Fine argues that the nature of ethnographic inquiry demands that researchers deviate from formal and idealistic rules or ethics that have come to be widely accepted in qualitative and quantitative approaches in research. Many of these ethical assumptions are rooted in positivist and post-positivist epistemologies that have adapted over time, but nonetheless are apparent and must be accounted for in all research paradigms. These ethical dilemmas are evident throughout the entire process of conducting ethnographies, including the design, implementation, and reporting of an ethnographic study. Essentially, Fine maintains that researchers are typically not as ethical as they claim or assume to be -- and that "each job includes ways of doing things that would be inappropriate for others to know".

Fine is not necessarily casting blame or pointing his finger at ethnographic researchers, but rather is attempting to show that researchers often make idealized ethical claims and standards which in actuality are inherently based on partial truths and self-deceptions. Fine also acknowledges that many of these partial truths and self-deceptions are unavoidable. He maintains that "illusions" are essential to maintain an occupational reputation and avoid potentially more caustic consequences. He claims, "Ethnographers cannot help but lie, but in lying, we reveal truths that escape those who are not so bold". Based on these assertions, Fine establishes three conceptual clusters in which ethnographic ethical dilemmas can be situated: Classic Virtues," "Technical Skills," and "Ethnographic Self."

Much debate surrounding the issue of ethics arose after the ethnographer Napoleon Chagnon conducted his ethnographic fieldwork with the Yanomamo people of South America.

Classic virtues

"The kindly ethnographer" - Most ethnographers present themselves as being more sympathetic than they actually are, which aids in the research process, but is also deceptive. The identity that we present to subjects is different from who we are in other circumstances.

"The friendly ethnographer" - Ethnographers operate under the assumption that they should not dislike anyone. In actuality, when hated individuals are found within research, ethnographers often crop them out of the findings.

"The honest ethnographer" - If research participants know the research goals, their responses will likely be skewed. Therefore, ethnographers often conceal what they know in order to increase the likelihood of acceptance.

Technical skills

"The Precise Ethnographer" - Ethnographers often create the illusion that field notes are data and reflect what "really" happened. They engage in the opposite of plagiarism, giving credit to those undeserving by not using precise words but rather loose interpretations and paraphrasing. Researchers take near-fictions and turn them into claims of fact. The closest ethnographers can ever really get to reality is an approximate truth.

"The Observant Ethnographer" - Readers of ethnography are often led to assume the report of a scene is complete - that little of importance was missed. In reality, an ethnographer will always miss some aspect because they are not omniscient. Everything is open to multiple interpretations and misunderstandings. The ability of the ethnographer to take notes and observe varies, and therefore, what is depicted in ethnography is not the whole picture.

"The Unobtrusive Ethnographer" - As a "participant" in the scene, the researcher will always have an effect on the communication that occurs within the research site. The degree to which one is an "active member" affects the extent to which sympathetic understanding is possible.

The ethnographic self

The following appellations are commonly misconceived conceptions of ethnographers:

"The Candid Ethnographer" - Where the researcher situates themselves within the ethnography is ethically problematic. There is an illusion that everything reported has actually happened because the researcher has been directly exposed to it.

"The Chaste Ethnographer" - When ethnographers participate within the field, they invariably develop relationships with research subjects/participants. These relationships are sometimes not accounted for within the reporting of the ethnography despite the fact that they seemingly would influence the research findings.

"The Fair Ethnographer" - Fine claims that objectivity is an illusion and that everything in ethnography is known from a perspective. Therefore, it is unethical for a researcher to report fairness in their findings.

"The Literary Ethnographer" - Representation is a balancing act of determining what to "show"

through poetic/prosaic language and style versus what to "tell" via straightforward, 'factual' reporting. The idiosyncratic skill of the ethnographer influences the face-value of the research.

Eight principles should be considered for observing, recording and sampling data according to Denzin:

The groups should combine symbolic meanings with patterns of interaction.

Observe the world from the point of view of the subject, while maintaining the distinction between everyday and scientific perceptions of reality.

Link the group's symbols and their meanings with the social relationships.

Record all behaviour.

Methodology should highlight phases of process, change and stability.

The act should be a type of symbolic interactionism.

Use concepts that would avoid casual explanations.