Ethnography
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ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography, the study of people in a natural setting, provides an opportunity for researchers to conduct a detailed study of a group of people while being immersed in the culture of that group. Ethnography (*ethno,* "people" or "folk," and *graphy*, "to describe something"), sometimes referred to as participant observation or field research, involves the study of people or an organization though face-to-face interactions in a real-life social setting. There is no deductive hypothesis to follow or any statistical formula. Over time, this interaction yields a rich and detailed account of the culture, history, and characteristics of a social phenomenon.

Ethnography has a rich history. We can see it in the travel logs of early explorers and in the diaries of settlers. In sociology, ethnography is connected to the developments of the early Chicago School, with three primary ideas that emerged from it. First, researchers need to gain access to populations in their natural settings so that they capture the essence of human behavior without it being tainted in a false setting, such as a laboratory experiment. Second, ethnography allows researchers to become intimately familiar with their subjects by talking directly with them. And third, ethnographers gain an understanding of the social world and make theoretical statements about the subjects' perspective, which is the goal of ethnography as a research method.

Ethnography is ideally suited for research topics that are very broad, ambiguous, or have poorly defined boundaries. Topics such as these allow researchers to define the limits of the study, which is sometimes difficult after spending time in the field and continuing to collect data. Topics that are best suited to field research are attitudes and behaviors that we can understood more readily when they unfold over time in their natural settings.

The Practice of Ethnography

We can consider ethnography a collection of techniques rather than a single technique. In-depth interviews, life histories, unobtrusive measures, secondary analysis of text, and historical comparative methods are a few of the techniques enthographers use.

Grounded in an approach called *naturalism*, ethnographies involve observing ordinary events in natural settings rather than in contrived, invented, or researcher-created settings. This approach emphasizes that, to be successful, researchers must consider numerous forms of data collection. Ethnographers try to establish themselves in a community and become a natural part of the setting at the same time they take on the role of researcher. How, then, do ethnographers remain loyal to their research agenda and to living their everyday lives among those they are studying?

Dualistic Nature of Ethnography

The nature of qualitative research is nonlinear and flexible. Rather than focusing on the end results, field researchers may let the situation dictate the direction of their research and thus may follow a loose set of steps.

First, ethnographers select a topic. As with most research, personal interests provide the seed for research topics, as being close to the subject and having a strong interest in the topic are advantages for field researchers.

Second, researchers must distance themselves from the subject of their research, including the results that other researchers have reported in literature on the subject. As researchers defocus, they let go of preconceived stereotypes about their subjects and tell themselves to observe everything, not just what they may consider important at the onset.

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Third, successful ethnography involves research strategies. Field researchers must consider how to enter the group, organization, or society they intend to study, including finding gatekeepers and various informants. Ethnographers must decide how much to tell the subjects about their own personal lives, experiences, interests, and belief systems. The very role of researchers might cause the group members to behave differently than if they believed they were simply welcoming a new member. This presents an ethical dilemma. Do researchers disclose nothing at all, deceive the subjects, and get better data? Or do researchers risk affecting the subjects and tell them about the research agenda? As field researchers gain more trust, are exposed to more sensitive information, and become parts of the groups, this issue must be resolved.

Throughout the ethnography, researchers act as both members and scientists. The dualistic nature of this work forces ethnographers to be constantly aware of their roles as participants and as observers. This can affect reliability and validity in terms of overall generalizability. Are the researcher's observations about an event or member consistent and accurate to the meaning put forth by the group's members? Does it make a coherent picture of the situation and setting? Do the data and conclusions fit with the overall context of the study?

Qualitative researchers are more interested in depth of knowledge than breadth of knowledge. Ethnography often involves not simply what is said or done but the underlying context of what is expected or assumed. This highly depends on researchers' insights, awareness, suspicions, and questions.

Classic Ethnographies

A number of ethnographies emerge as classics in the field of anthropology. Among these are the works of Malinowski (*The Trobriand Islands,* 1915; *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* 1922), Radcliffe-Brown (*The Andaman Islanders,* 1922), Mead (*The Coming of Age in Samoa,* 1928), Turnbull (*The Forest People,* 1962), and Evans-Pritchard (*The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People,* 1968). These researchers develop stories of the cultures and situations in which they studied, and thus have provided insights into specific cultures that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Ethnographies expand awareness of global culture, reduce ethnocentric views, and establish significance for ritual, practice, and cultural idiosyncrasies.

— *Erin Elizabeth Robinson-Caskie*

See also **Participant-Observer**

Further Readings

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