

## The Basics of Ethnography: An Overview of Designing an Ethnographic Research in Anthropology and Beyond

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**Abstract:** *As a discipline concerned with cultural and social life, Anthropology has a unique scope in compare to other social sciences and humanities that addresses a thorough methodological scrutiny following the theoretical shifts over time and space. The current methodological trends in anthropology claim the role of the researcher as observer (to explore and examine a culture) to grasp the underlying meaning of the participants to interpret the action, perception and networks of the setting in contexts. In this juncture, it is necessary for the researcher to design his/her research methodology in such a way that clarifies the dimensions of the researcher, participants, selection of the research area, and/or problem and the very pros and cons that validates the research in its own essence. Ethnography as one of the major qualitative research approach in anthropology provides an opportunity to construct a specific kind of written observational manuscript about a particular culture.*

*The present authors intend to address the different dimensions from historical genesis to gradual shifts into different theoretical perspectives and critiques as well, that arises from the discussions of ethnography to encircle the possibly significant ideas and issues in as simple and straightforward manner as possible.*

**Keywords:** ethnography; methodology; research design; fieldwork; anthropology

### INTRODUCTION

The most significant essence of cultural anthropology is to understand and explain how human beings make sense of their world in wide and varied contexts (Fife, 2005). The understanding and representation of human experiences of their world are of central interest (both empirically and theoretically) within and beyond the discourses of cultural anthropology (Willis and Trondman, 2002). To enlighten a deeper understanding of human experiences and cultures, a long-term and sustained attachment with the concerned agents and settings is a necessity in one hand, and, the interpretation of the processes and meanings of a cultural system from an insider's perspective is imperative on the other (Murchison, 2010; Whitehead, 2004). The supposed concern is satisfied by such a research strategy that consents the

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researcher to explore and examine the cultural perception and performances as a fundamental part of human experiences, is identified as ethnography (Murchison, 2010; Ferraro and Andreatta, 2010).

Ethnography as a research approach developed from anthropology and adopted by the sociologists, is the study of belief, social interactions and behaviour with participation and observation over a long period of time among the groups under study and the detailed interpretations of the data collected (Naidoo, 2012). As a research strategy, Willis and Trondman (2002) opined, ethnography “*..is a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience.*” . The statement clearly indicates that the major attributes of an ethnographic research involves specific and first-hand cultural encounters, continuous participation and contacts with agencies, understanding the encounter in its own terms, recording of the same without reducing participants’ experiences and ‘thick’ descriptions of the discourse as presentations.

The term, ‘ethnography’ represents a dual meaning in anthropology- a process (fieldwork or participant observation) and as a product (ethnographic writings) that act together either as a testing grounds of anthropological theories (Sanjek, 1996), and/or a space for emerging theoretical issues with new dimensions. In this context, Nader (2011) argued that ‘doing ethnography’ and ‘ethnographic writing’ together is a complicated task to the anthropologists in reference to the question of ‘holism’ as a central feature of ethnography, indicates a lack of consensus among anthropologists regarding the basic principles of ethnography in one hand, and, inspires a dynamic process of ‘doing ethnography’ in anthropological academia on the other.

### **THE THEORETICAL SHIFTS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICES: A BRIEF OUTLINE**

In contemporary times, the ethnographic research approach is highly influential to grasp a wide breath of disciplinary and interdisciplinary researches including anthropology, sociology, education, psychology, management, marketing and other political and cultural studies arenas to reflex understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics (Murchison, 2010). The extensive use of ethnography as a major qualitative research strategy has had a theoretical shift to ensure understanding the possibilities and/or the efficiency of ethnographic approach to deal with present social, economic and political situations in contexts.

Clair (2003) identified some specific and major theoretical shifts in ethnographic practices and categorized the shifts in the following phases-

- *The first wave of colonialism*: to document the traditions and socio-political practices of the ancient world, traced back to the writings of Herodotus in terms of historical contents.

- *The second wave of colonialism*: emerged as means of ‘saving cultures’ began during the mercantilist period in Europe and continued through the 1800s. The diaries and records of the historians, travellers, missionaries, poets and explorers like- Bernard Romans and Columbus are represented as the early records of ‘other’ cultures. The anthropological writings of Morgan, Tylor, and Boas act as the representatives of this phase.
- *The third wave of colonization*: began with the effects of World War-II and aimed to dominate countries to strengthen the colonial grip. The works of Mauss and Gramsci in sociology and Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, Bateson, Margaret Mead, and, E. Evans Pritchard are represented as the pioneer figures of anthropology of this phase.
- *The fourth wave of colonization*: moved from the capitalist development in Third World countries through extended globalization of capitalist engagement around the world, led a focus of ethnography on linguistic and political dimensions of culture.
- *The linguistic turn in ethnography*: emphasised on language to create and understand culture, to guide inquiry and to express discoveries. This phase includes the interpretivist, critical, feminist, post colonial and postmodernist theories. This has further been categorized as-
  - o *The linguistic interpretive turn*: following World War II, ethnographer continued the colonial project in a new world order, focused on the symbols, text and language in terms of ‘interpretive ethnography’. Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner led the way in this phase.
  - o *Critical and radical feminist’s linguistic turn*: focused on the interpretations of marginalization of women indicating communication and act as the major means for oppression and silencing different groups of people. P. E. Willis and Mary Daly are the notable names of this phase.
  - o *The postmodern linguistic turn*: emphasized on the critique of the former ethnographic approaches for being ‘westernized’ and ‘homogenic’; extended the opportunities to frame ‘social action’ based ethnographic research. The works of this phase are influenced and guided by the postmodernist like- Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Baudrillard, James Clifford, George Marcus *et al.*
  - o *The post colonial turn*: a political approach that challenges the existence of ethnography as imperial endeavour; a few post colonial ethnographies though unveiled the complexities of colonization to reflect colonial culture and imperial practices. The era is guided by the philosophy of Edward Said more specifically.

The postmodern and post colonial ethnography opens the scope of contemporary ethnography to be very clear about the culture(s) under study and their (ethnographer's) own biases of the past with a reflexive interpretation, that speaks the ethnographer's own cultural 'assumptions' and 'prejudices'; as ethnography just not a methodology, but, an expression of history, politics, culture and the essence of being (Clair, 2003).

Murchison (2010) on the contrary argued that, the 'classical' ethnography tended to include the small and isolated groups in concern and preferred to portray a 'static' model of the cultures studied, with limited and minimum information about the methodology involved; whereas, the 'contemporary' ethnography reflects enough space for ethnographer as the major research 'instrument' to include her/his cultural values, subjective and methodological stands with the view of her/his respondents has guided them to grasp the meaning of the culture(s) under study.

Again, Doursih (2013) identified six major shifts and turns in approaches to ethnographic research, - (a) *1910's: Origins* (the era of early cultural documentary mainly by the 'arm-chair' anthropologists and the works of Malinowski, Boas and his students), (b) *1920's and onwards: Spreading Out* (includes the functional approaches to specific domains of culture like-religion, language, conflict, leadership etc. and the ethnographies on urban sub-cultures by Chicago Schools of thought), (c) *1960's: Structuralism* (pioneered by Levi Strauss; reflected the shifts in ethnography from the event to the system of events to focus on the decoding of patterns of meaning and symbolic nature of culture), (d) *1970's: The Hermeneutic Turn* (the influence of Clifford Geertz to the 'thick description' of culture to portray different frames of interpretations, layers of meaning, contradictions and elaboration of the social events), (e) *1980's: Reflexivity* (Clifford, Marcus and Fisher pioneered the era with an emphasis on the 'production' of ethnographic texts and understanding ethnography as 'writing practice'), and (f) *1990s: Globalization and Multisitedness* (the era addresses a recognition that the essence of ethnographic research moves away from its site bounds and the ideas and practices of different sites reflect the necessity and significance of contemporary ethnographic practices).

A wide range of ethnographic practices indicate ethnography as 'multimodal' to grip the 'holistic' reconstruction of culture or phenomena investigated (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Doing ethnography in holistic inclination, ethnographic researches in contemporary times emphasises attention to the level of 'event' rather than 'system', that leads the focus of contemporary ethnography to culture-making 'and' cultural production' than existing system of meaning (Myers, 2004).

The 'systematic' and 'sequential' changes in ethnographic practices demonstrate how the 'traditional' ethnographic practices has been shifted its boundaries from 'site oriented' ethnography to the analysis of the complex or assemblages of ideas and constructs in reference to the practices, coherence and operation of the constructs

to indicate a meaningful, conscious and more specifically-the 'lived' experiences of human survival.

### **DESIGNING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH: THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S CONCERN**

Before discussing how to design an ethnographic research, an obvious question comes to our mind that- why the scholars are more interested in ethnography to understand socio-cultural events? Aldiabat and Le Navenec (2011), addressed three major reasons in this ground, as follows- (a) it helps the researcher to understand and interpret the alternative realities from the participant's point of view that are salience to understand the range of experiences and performances of people in a particular culture, (b) the deeper understanding of cultural meaning extends the opportunities to frame social theories grounded from empirical instances, and (c) ethnographic studies are ideally suited to explore the constructs of complex cultures.

As per as the designing of ethnography is concerned, the mission becomes very hard when to generalize the basic principles of framing, conducting and presenting an ethnographic research since, there is lack of consensus among the scholars of ethnography regarding general guideline of ethnographic fieldwork, a vast diversity of ethnographic research practices from multiple contexts, and there is no cookbook of ethnographic methods and techniques applicable in 'all' situations (Blomberg *et al.*, 1993). However the strategies of ethnography differs in contexts, the very basic principle of ethnography is represented as a tool of social science that involves the social-scientific observer, the observed, the research report as text, and the audience to whom the text is presented (Naidoo, 2012). Therefore with the consideration of all the frequent difficulties, the present authors prefer to discuss some of the contemporary attempts and approaches of conducting ethnography that might help the new comers of ethnographic research to choose the research strategy on this ground. This effort is purely to indicate the current trends of positioning a research in ethnographic mode to reflect the fundamental essence of conducting and writing ethnography.

Whatever it may be, an ethnographic research in general, involves a few prime notions that should be followed by the researcher that - people's behaviour should be studied in the context of their living of everyday life, rather than the setting created by the ethnographer(s); contextual data should be collected by using multiple data collection techniques with a major emphasis on observation as the principal one; the modes of data collection should be flexible and unstructured in nature to avoid the presupposed categories and to focus on what people exactly 'say' and 'do'; and the analysis of data involves attribution of the meanings of the human actions described and interpreted (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, in Brewer, 2010).

Since ethnography inclines to unearth the shared meanings and practices of the social and cultural processes of the group under study, is a necessity to cultivate an 'insight' to an ethnographic study. Considering the suggestions articulated by Kahn (2011) in this regard, an ethnographer has to go through five major steps-

- *Pre-Writing*: an indication on the researcher's concern of the culture that she/he will study along with her/his biases and presuppositions about the members of the group under study. In this phase, the researcher adds the research questions that she/he is trying to search and answer.
- *Introductions/consent forms*: the step requires the consent or permissions of the respondents. The ethnographer has to introduce and communicate about her/his research for asking consent from the respondents.
- *Field notes/ interview notes/ transcripts*: this phase involves ethnographer's notes of the visits to the group or research site; notes taken during interviews with respondents; transcripts of interviews; descriptions of physical location, settings, and so on.
- *Journal*: it is a running internal monologue that clearly depicts ethnographer's thinking (what the ethnographer observes, what seemed to be significant, to what the researcher is confused about and what the ethnographer thinks is important to keep into the track) throughout the research.
- *Drafts and revisions of ethnographies*: the ethnographer's write up of the research includes multiple drafts and major overhauls in organization/structure, voice and contents, and all, that helps to understand the researcher's point of view to their readers.

Now, the session of conveying the discussion about the steps for conducting an ethnographic research may be inaugurated through the categorization as recommended by Henry (2009) in this regard, are as follows-

- *Identifying the objectives*: the ethnographer should identify and determine the direction of the research to develop research question(s).
- *Context*: incorporating a social context in research not only provides more rounded descriptions of culture under study, but, is one of the major denominators of ethnography.
- *Fieldwork/ Participant Observation*: the phase includes the observation of people 'in situ' by participating and performing the daily routing of the setting to extend a deep attachment with the people and feel the essence of what is going on.
- *Immersion*: indicates subjecting the self- the body and personality to the set of situations of the respondents under study to penetrate the local understanding of their world.

- *Insider-Outsider*: during fieldwork, the ethnographers generally feel an insider-outsider transition. They cannot reach at the 'same' level to the members of that culture are habituated to stand. The way to reach closer to the insider's view depends on repetitive questioning of the local cultural categories and constructs.

Coming to an overall mode of ethnographic research, Hancock et al. (2009) argued that ethnography involves the following steps-

- *Research Question(s)*: the research questions generally introduces an overall area of investigation and as the research proceeds, it is crucial to become more precise.
- *Selecting Suitable Approaches(s)*: the clear idea for selecting a methodological approach entails what sorts of information or knowledge is important for the research.
- *Sampling*: in qualitative research, sampling may used in several stages-both while collecting data and when interpreting or reporting on it. Conducting an ethnographic research, the ethnographer generally selects the qualitative sampling methods, such as- theoretical sampling, convenience sampling, typical case sampling, critical case sampling, maximum variation sampling, intensity sampling and snowball sampling.
- *Choosing the Data Collection Techniques*: this phase includes the selection of data collection techniques for a deeper understanding of the concerned issues. In ethnography the major data collection techniques are- interviews (preferably the semi-structured, unstructured interviews and focus groups), observation (more specifically-participant observation), collection of documented materials (like-letters, diaries and photographs), and collection of narratives (the stories from the respondents).
- *Data Analysis*: analysis of data in an ethnographic research aims to summarize the mass of data collected and presenting the output that directs the most significant dimensions of the data. This phase involves-
  - o Keeping records and organizing the data
  - o Transcribing the qualitative data to produce the written versions of interviews and conversations
  - o Doing constant comparison that allows the researcher to generate themes of concern. The phase of constant comparison involves open coding (summary of the collected text within a few words on a line-by-line basis), progressive focussing (the large number of open codes are progressively focussed to the wider categories of meaning), and summarizing and



interpreting the findings (to find out the interrelation of the themes together that indicates a pattern of the participants' thought of the concerned issue.

- *Presentation and Reporting*: the presentation of the research should be very clear and communicative to its audiences. The reporting involves a systematic arrangements of the findings with addressing properly the research questions, the ethnographer's outlook to the problems and issues of research, using direct quotations of the respondents as evidence, and using of separate chapters and/or subheadings of the major themes, generated from the data.

The authors following the discussion on designing an ethnographic research do not intend to present the 'repeats' of the categories of an ethnography discussed earlier. We are specifically interested to indicate the focal points that should be taken into account to design the research strategy in ethnographic mode. The very basics of writing ethnography further needs to sense the flavour of ethnography with having-

- a clear idea of the problem(s) taken as research topic,
- identifying the research objective(s) and/or research question(s) as generative categories from data,
- immersing the ethnographer's self within the field setting to develop a close view to the participant's understanding over the issue,
- Selection of suitable sampling method for contextual data collection,
- collection of (mainly descriptive) data from active participation and observation in the life of the group or culture under study,
- data analysis through the interpretation of meanings of behaviour to understand the 'local' categories of thinking and behaving,
- developing themes or significant and emerging issues of the research from data, and
- presenting a detailed and communicative (to the audiences) description of the observed reality, the context of research, the observer's theoretical, methodological and personal views to the problems/issues/domain of understanding, and the participants' views to the concerned aspects of research.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnography provides a first hand, descriptive and in-depth views to culture and human behaviour. Keeping in mind the essence of ethnography, it is not just a data collection technique or a method to apply in qualitative research, rather, it is a



theory that unfolds the ways of 'local' understandings of the issues concerned, and include the perception and reflection of the researcher as a process of knowing the things and events as 'it is' and as it 'appears to be' from specific theoretical and methodological frame (Dourish, 2013).

Ethnography faces two severe criticisms, coming from the positivistic notion of social research and postmodern views to social research (Brewer, 2010). The positivistic or 'naturalistic' views to social research criticize ethnography for being too 'subjective' in nature and, for incorporating the ethnographer as 'variables' in ethnographic research. On the contrary, the postmodern view attacks ethnography in terms of- (a) its representation on the field, (b) the value it places on 'thick description', (c) the reliability and validity of its data, and (d) the construction of ethnographic text.

Instead of these criticisms, the adoption of ethnography as a research strategy outside the discipline of ethnography and anthropology validates ethnographic research as one of the fundamental theoretical and methodological approaches to the social sciences (Whitehead, 2005). The strength of ethnography is that, it not only includes the participants' experiences and accounts to study cultures, rather it exemplifies those experiences form multiple disciplinary understandings (Mohanty *et al.*, 2008). The claim of understanding social issues through ethnographic research from multiple angles accelerates the pace of interdisciplinary understanding of contemporary ethnographic practices in anthropology and in other human-centric disciplines, like-sociology, education, psychology, and other fields of social sciences.

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