
ETHNOGRAPHY

The roots of ethnography lie in anthropology and sociology. The origins of the term ‘ethnology’ are to be found in the descriptive accounts of non-Western communities and cultures provided by travelers and missionaries during the mid-nineteenth century. Building on this early tradition, social anthropologists in the early twentieth century began to do their own fieldwork, usually by living with people in small, isolated tribes for an extended period of time (Malinowski 1922; Mead 1943). This is when the term ‘ethnography’ began to be used when referring to an ‘*integration of both first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretical comparative interpretation of social organisation and culture*’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:1). At the same time, an ethnographic approach was widely used in case studies conducted by sociologists at the University of Chicago when investigating the impact of urbanisation and industrialisation in the United States and Western Europe (Lynd and Lynd, 1929, 1937). Studies focusing on ‘deviant’ groups, such as hobos, drug users, religious sects, and street gangs were also popular at this time (e.g. Whyte, [1943] 1981).

In more recent times, there has been a noticeable expansion of interest in ethnographic research into more mainstream aspects of social life; for example, when investigating aspects of the lived experience of culture sharing groups, such as teachers, teaching assistants, social and health workers (Woods, 1979). Furthermore, interest in the ethnographic approach has expanded to include “schools” or sub-types of ethnography with different theoretical orientations and aims; for example, structural functionalism, feminism, critical theory, cultural studies and post-modernism (Creswell, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

WHAT ETHNOGRAPHERS DO

Ethnographers are interested in exploring, describing and interpreting the meanings of aspects of the day-to-day lives of members of a culture-sharing group. This approach ‘*emphasises the importance of understanding things from the point of view of those involved*’ (Denscombe 2010) The group (*unit of analysis*) may be large, or, it may be small in number, but the key thing is that members of the group are seen to interact with one another over time. Often, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:3), using this approach involves:

.. the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artifacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of enquiry

The key characteristics of ethnographic studies are as follows.

1. They are usually small-scale and in-depth studies, involving a group or groups of people in a single setting.

2. Investigations are carried out ‘in the field’ among the people whose lives and culture are being studied, and not in artificial conditions determined by the researcher.
3. The earliest and often subsequent stages of data gathering are unstructured by the researcher, and determined by the situation and context.
4. Data is obtained from a range of sources, although, participant observations and informal conversations and interviews are the primary sources of data.
5. The categories used when interpreting what people do and say are generated during the process of data analysis and are not predetermined by the researcher.
6. The analysis involves the interpretation of meanings, functions and consequences of peoples’ behaviour and institutional practices, and how these are played out in local and wider contexts.
7. The final account of the culture or group being studied is more than a description; it is a ‘crafted construction’ which owes something to the ethnographer’s own experiences.
(Denscombe, M. 2010; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

TYPES OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Examples of types of ethnography are:

1. *Realist ethnography* is when the researcher narrates the study in a third-person dispassionate voice and reports on what is observed or heard from participants (Creswell 2012).
2. *Critical ethnography* is when the author advocates for the emancipation of groups marginalised in society (Creswell, 2007:69).
3. A *life biographies or life history* approach involving the in-depth study of individuals, social groups or communities is another form of ethnographic research.
4. *Auto-ethnography* is when a researcher provides an account of his, or her, own life and its context.
5. A *virtual ethnography* is when the researcher gathers his, or her, data while participating or observing’ peoples’ behaviour in an on-line learning community, and when investigating the culture of cyberspace (see Wakkee *et al* (2007:331-358).
6. *Ethnodrama* is when the output of the ethnographic investigation is scripted and performed on stage (Saldana, 2010: 61-69).
7. *Visual ethnography* which is found in photography and video (see Finn, 1998:143-178).

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Denscombe (2007:72-73) lists the following advantages and disadvantages when using an ethnographic approach:

ADVANTAGES

- *'In the field' data collection.* Investigations involve direct contact with relevant people and places, and, therefore, the researcher is not reliant on second-hand data.
- *Rich data.* It supports the collection of very rich 'thick' data.
- *Theory building and testing.* It can be used to aid theory development and testing.
- *Holistic explanations.* An ethnographic approach potentially supports the creation of holistic explanations that focus on the context laden, live experiences of members of culture sharing groups.
- *Comparisons.* Cultures are unique, using this approach, the researcher can compare and contrast their findings when developing explanations.
- *Lived experiences.* This approach is consistent with the idea of obtaining and commenting on the experiences of members of groups and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences. *It describes and explores the 'actors' perceptions, p.73?*
- *The social construction of knowledge.* The creative role of the researcher when planning and carrying out qualitative investigations, and the reflective nature of social knowledge, are acknowledged.
- *Ecologically valid.* This approach is ecological in that the emphasis is on having as little external impact as possible on the setting. Investigations are 'naturalistic'.

DISADVANTAGES

- *Tensions within the approach.* The source of these tensions lies within the twin concerns with gathering uncontaminated naturalistic data in the field and acknowledging the influence of the researcher's biography and perspectives when interpreting the meanings containing in the data, and developing explanations.
- *Working with naturalistic, rich data.* The difficulties experienced when working with lots of isolated stories contained in rich data, and when looking for a coherent theoretical framework within which meaningful comparisons can be drawn between these stories. The absence of a robust framework when analysing the data can lead researchers to develop a-theoretical and non-critical descriptive accounts of observations.
- *Reliability.* Using this approach and related methods of gathering data will deliver different results on different occasions. Consequently, it is not possible to make generalised statements based on an ethnographic account of a culture, or event.
- *Ethics.* Using this approach the researcher should always consider the possibility that they could be intruding on people's privacy, and, therefore, ensure they have the informed consent of the research subjects to carry out the investigation.
- *Access.* Gaining access to culture-sharing groups is notoriously difficult, particularly when the intention is not to disrupt the naturalness of the setting.

- *Insider knowledge*. Having insider knowledge can be a disadvantage. The researcher may be ‘blind’ to matters of importance, and his, or her, pre-knowledge can cause them to overlook key issues and concerns.

REPORTING APPROACHES: GENERAL STRUCTURE OF STUDY

- Purpose – describing how a culture-sharing group works
- Introduction (problem, questions)
- Research procedures (ethnography, data collection, analysis, outcomes)
- Description of culture
- Analysis of cultural themes
- Interpretation, lessons learned, questions raised

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