

Key Concepts in Social Research

Ethnography

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Ethnography is the production of highly detailed accounts of how people in a social setting lead their lives, based on systematic and long-term observation of, and conversations with, informants.

Section Outline: Anthropological origins of ethnography. The Chicago School: direct experience versus book learning. British documentaries. From description to interpretation. Detailed accounts of prolonged, systematic, first-hand encounters. Reflexivity. Natural occurrences, seen in context. Learning participant observation. Gaining access to different groups.

[p. 72 ↓] Ethnography began in the early twentieth century when social anthropology first directly studied societies other than their own. Given the dominance of evolutionary thinking in that period, tribal societies were seen as surviving examples of how humans had lived before advanced technology. Anthropologists documented already disappearing lifestyles, as systems of cultural beliefs, detailed daily practices and artefacts. Every aspect of the lives of peoples living in small-scale, agricultural, largely non-literate, 'simple' societies were fascinating in their own right. However, research could not rely on 'travellers' tales', which treated 'primitive' peoples like exotic plants or animal. It entailed *living among*, and *directly observing over a period of time*, the people in question.

Anthropology was an alternative to archaeology and history, and infinitely better than speculative armchair theorising. Simple societies' small size made them easier to study than vast nations: they could be studied as a whole by one person. They were treated as miniature versions of societies through which debates about basic sociological processes – for example, how is social order maintained – could be investigated. Additionally, these societies presented difficulties for colonial rule because they operated by principles alien to their conquerors. Even racist colonial administrators, and land speculators who despised 'the natives', initially tolerated the anthropologists as possible sources of assistance. Later, anthropologists who 'crossed the colour bar' were less welcome, but this did not subsequently endear them to emerging post-colonial regimes, who saw them as spies.

Although ethnography's 'anthropological heritage' is conventionally traced to Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Boas, there were other sources of inspiration (Payne

et al. 1981: 87–115). In America, the world's first Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago was founded in 1892 by Albion Small. His influence created the 'Chicago School', dedicated to the principle that 'the first thing that students of sociology should learn is to observe and record their own observations' (Park and Burgess 1921: v), and which produced ground-breaking studies of slum life: immigrants, gangs, opium-addicts and hoboes. In Britain, early social reformers like Beatrice Webb called for 'deliberate and sustained personal observation' of social institutions (quoted in Payne et al. 1981: 87). The national network of volunteer observers, Mass-Observation, was founded in 1937 by two social scientists, Madge and Harrison (and the film-maker, Jennings). In the post-war period, the ethnographic tradition was taken up by researchers of local communities (**Community Studies**), factories, and later, deviancy and the position of women (**Feminist Research**). Today, in its various guises within qualitative research, it is [p. 73 ↓] strongly represented in the social sciences and is even possibly the dominant method in British sociology.

With such a history, it is not surprising that different traditions have emerged within ethnography. Both the methods of the simpler, highly *descriptive* approach of the early anthropologists, and the name for an account produced by these methods, are referred to as 'ethnography': the scientific study of peoples (i.e. their culture and behaviour). Later work has placed more emphasis on *interpretations* of such descriptive accounts, which is sometimes called *ethnology*. 'Critical ethnology' addresses the unmasking of power structures, seeking to empower and emancipate. Whereas traditionally ethnography recorded life in great detail as a **Case Study** in its own right, contemporary researchers use ethnographic data as evidence in developing theoretical ideas (e.g. Punch 2003).

Despite these orientations, there are strong common threads to ethnographic practice. Unlike the brief encounters of social surveys, it involves a *prolonged, systematic, first hand and direct encounter* with the people concerned, as they act out their lives in a range of interactional contexts (**Qualitative Methods; Quantitative Methods**). Because this involves close personal contact and intense experiences, ethnographers must take account of their own reactions, which become part of the research itself. A premium is placed on the researcher's **Reflexivity**. Understanding what is happening across the range of contexts means seeing each specific element of social action as part of a greater unity: i.e. taking a *holistic view*.

The ethnographer accepts the legitimacy of what is encountered, and tries first to understand it on its own terms. This means looking at what happens as it *naturally occurs* in its own setting, and trying to see it through the eyes of the participants. The ethnographer is therefore a learner among the more knowledgeable, and should tackle the research project with the humility appropriate to being in an inferior position to those being researched. The researcher must also convey that new learning in their accounts (Hammersley 1998).

The method of choice for ethnography is **Participant Observation**. Entry into, and involvement in, the chosen social setting is eased by the researcher adopting a role that is naturally part of that setting, facilitating observation. (How open researchers are about their real intentions is an ethical issue; **Ethical Practice**). Ethnographical 'observation' and 'participation' are normally used alongside other methods: asking questions, long interviews and background documentary methods (**Documentary Methods**).

Ethnography's emphasis on taking part, and taking it as it comes, [p. 74 ↓] makes it sound fairly easy. It was conventional in the 1980s to claim that ethnography could not be taught: expertise could only be acquired by *doing* it. Certainly many untrained postgraduates had to learn the hard way, a tradition that may be attributed to social anthropology. Evans-Pritchard, recalling the time before he was a leading anthropologist, when the discipline was very male-oriented, reported how he tried 'to get a few tips from experienced fieldworkers':

I first sought advice from Westermarck. All I got from him was 'don't converse with an informant for more than twenty minutes because if you aren't bored by that time he will be'... [Haddon] told me that it was all quite simple: one should always behave like a gentleman. Also very good advice. My teacher Seligman told me to take ten grains of quinine every night and to keep off the women. The famous Egyptologist, Sir Flinders Petrie, just told me not to bother about drinking dirty water as one soon became immune to it. Finally I asked Malinowski and was told not to be a bloody fool (Evans-Pritchard 1973: 1).

However straightforward ethnography may sound, it does present several problems. Gaining initial access is rarely easy (**Fieldwork; Key Informants**), while recording what

takes place is a constant problem (**Observation; Participant Observation; Coding Qualitative Data**). It also entails, as we have seen, committing at least implicitly to a fairly sophisticated theoretical orientation about what should be studied, and how (e.g. **Grounded Theory**). Earlier contributors have sometimes played this down: Howard Becker, when asked about theoretical frameworks, replied 'What do you want to worry about that for – You just go out there and do it'. (Payne et al. 1981: 114).

Despite Becker's disparagement, 'doing it' is not that easy. Because the enterprise rides on the quality of interaction between researcher and informants, the personality and social skills of the ethnographer are at a premium. Not all sociologists are naturally suited to this method, although one seldom finds sociologists who seriously ask themselves about their own suitability. Even conversational facility, let alone expertise in slang phraseology, dialect or the local language, are rarely discussed in research reports.

There is also often an over-confidence about the extent to which the researcher has actually been accepted, gained entry to social groups, and understood their cultural meanings (**Community Studies**). The single-handed researcher cannot cover all relevant physical settings at once, at all hours of the day and night. Even if this were possible, some sub-settings will remain closed. Young males are unwelcome among mothers and toddlers (**Feminist Research**); women are 'bad luck on boats'; whites [p. 75 ↓] are not in the best position to investigate ethnic minority groups; and middle-class sociologists are not best able to empathise with the lives of either elites or the socially excluded.