

# The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Management Research

## ETHNOGRAPHY

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## Definition

Ethnography, as a research methodology, had its origins in social anthropology, with particular reference to the study of the culture of social groups and societies. The great social anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973), who has been very influential in the development of ethnographic approaches in organizations, suggests that human beings live in complex networks in which we give the natural and human world meaning and significance [*cross-cultural research*]. The culture of a social group is made up of these complex networks of meaning and the key task of [p. 90 ↓ ] ethnography is to develop an interpretation and understanding of culture. When Geertz reflected in 2000 on the purpose of ethnography, he suggested that one of its jobs is to provide us, alongside the arts and the study of history, with an understanding of ourselves (and others) as members of societies or groups or organizations that are by their very nature 'strange' and diverse and that it is this very 'strangeness' that we should celebrate. To do this requires what Geertz called 'thick descriptions' of culture [*field research*]. This means that as a first step the ethnographer undertakes close observation (q.v.) of the group by such means as establishing a rapport with people, carefully selecting the people with whom the ethnographer talks, keeping diaries, exploring documents and so on. Then as a second step the ethnographer undertakes processes of *interpretation* and *analysis* [*inductive analysis*]. The aim of this process is to reveal the underlying structures by which behaviour or ways of communicating with each other are produced, perceived and interpreted by members of the social group and indeed the ways in which these same behaviours and communications can be misunderstood by other social groups (or even within the same social group) [*dialogics; hermeneutics*]. Geertz suggests that doing ethnography is like trying to interpret a document that is in a 'strange' language, which is faded, with many aspects which seem like contradictions, and in which other authors have made mysterious notes and additions.

## Discussion

When ethnography is undertaken in organizations it involves a number of choices: the extent to which it is participant (q.v.) or non-participant (q.v.), covert or non-covert, unstructured or structured [*ethics*]. In the study of organizations there has been a tradition of participant observation where the researcher is a member of the organization. This can give particular richness in that the researcher can penetrate into areas and meanings that are not open to the outsider. For the participant observer it means that the researcher needs to be able to be an 'insider' at one moment and an 'outsider' at another as the researcher explores the significance of the events in which he/she has just participated. Alternatively, the researcher can adopt a non-participant stance so that he/she takes a more explicitly 'distant' view of events, behaviours and communications in the organization. A second area of choice in methods is to take a covert or non-covert approach to the ethnography. In the former the ethnographer deliberately avoids announcing his/her research intent and in this way can penetrate into highly informal - and even discrediting - aspects of the organization; in the latter the ethnographer is clear about his/her intent in undertaking the research and although this approach may not reach the deeper areas of the organizational life, its ethical implications are often considered to be less onerous than covert research. The third key choice made by ethnographers is around the issue of unstructured or structured processes of observation (q.v.). In the former the ethnographer follows the action and will often use his/her intuition in order to develop an understanding of behaviours, processes and actions. In the latter the researcher establishes a clear schedule of observation and interview and will follow that process rigorously so that his/her research is more amenable to triangulation (q.v.) and replication. The ways in which the ethnographer makes choices among these three key areas - participant or non-participant, covert or overt, unstructured or structure - indicates a preference for subjectivist, hermeneutic (q.v.) approaches to the social sciences or approaches that are more akin to a 'natural sciences' model.

In the study of organizations, perhaps one of the most enduring ethnographies that was participant, covert and unstructured was that of Melvin Dalton, whose study of the relationships between 'line' and 'staff' managers in a chemical factory developed a new

understanding - rich description - of relationships in organizations. In an article written in 1964 he discusses the processes that led him to his study (by the way, he does not use the [p. 91 ↓ ] expression 'ethnography' to describe his research approach) and he gives useful insight into the ethnographic process. He begins his account with a number of 'confusions and irritations' and the ways in which there was 'name calling' and 'insults' exchanged between members. As he witnessed and participated in the weft and warp of daily life, he began to develop what he called 'hunches' about what was going on. He began to develop these hunches through his research. His core subjects for the research were a group of what he called his intimates - a group of people who trusted him and who gave him really useful information that could have endangered their careers. These intimates knew that he was undertaking research of some sort but not in detail. Beyond this he also undertook a few formal interviews, maintained detailed 'work diaries' and undertook participant observation. Although he was aware of the limitations of all these approaches, he saw the merits as flexibility in research design, he was able to avoid asking 'pointless questions', he was able to get closer to the motives of people, and the development of the feelings of rapport and empathy enabled him to get to more difficult issues.

By way of contrast, in an article written in 2004, Brewer discusses ethnographic research that he (and a colleague) undertook in the late 1980s that was non-participant, overt and structured with the Royal Ulster Constabulary - research that was closer in spirit to the traditions of social anthropology. He suggests that key issues of having to undertake the research in a covert manner raised some interesting issues. The researchers had to obtain 'permission' from the Chief Constable and in this process had to make some difficult compromises in the research and, when they started the research with people lower down in the organization, they found that some regarded the researchers with suspicion - the researchers were seen as 'agents' of the Chief Constable. They found, however, that a key to the success of the research was the development of trust and that reassurances had constantly to be given. One of the issues they encountered was in their constant inquisitiveness and sometimes the presence of tape or video recorders caused a degree of irritation [*interviews -electronic; video*].

# Prospects

Perhaps the most persistent problem of ethnography is that of closeness. This can manifest itself both as being too proximate to those being understood and too introspective with oneself. Dalton and Brewer's research uses trust as a conduit for gaining access to data that otherwise remain hidden, but with trust comes obligations surrounding issues of disclosure, anonymity and legal compliance. Moreover, both cases also show the dangers to researchers themselves. One interesting issue from Brewer's research was that they were not able to retain their sense of detached researcher; in particular the female Catholic researcher was met by a number of quite difficult situations that had quite profound effects on her own identity as an ethnographer working in that situation [*reflexivity*]. In this sense, as with Dalton, there was the need for constant self-reflection and self-awareness in undertaking not only the research itself, but in the processes of interpretation and understanding.

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