

Ethnographic Methods

Humanities Postgraduate Research Skills Training

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Objectives and overview

Provide an introduction to ethnographic methods; help you reflect on how doing ethnography can open up new avenues of research within your topic. Discuss sources and settings, methods, and ethnographic writing as well as practical steps and tips on how to get started.

As a result of attending this session you will be able to:

- Identify the key elements of ethnographic research and writing;
- Reflect on how ethnographic methods can contribute to your own research project;
- Plan the main steps in an ethnographic project, considering practical and ethical issues.

What is ethnography?

- Qualitative
- Descriptive
- ?
- ?
- ?

What is ethnography?

Origins of ethnography

- Development of social anthropology early 20th century
- Long-term fieldwork in ‘other’ cultures (Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1922)
- Now used ‘at home’ and in variety of disciplines (sociology, education studies, cultural studies)
- Focus on *people’s lives* and experiences *from the inside*

What is ethnography?

Ethnographic principles

- Qualitative data, mainly collected through *participant-observation*
- Based on research in ‘natural’ settings
- Small-scale groups/settings/events
- Extended period of research
- Sense of discovery and reaching understanding of the setting ‘from the inside’ - what people do vs. what they say they do

What is ethnography?

Ethnographic writing

- Ethnographic texts are highly descriptive: see Clifford Geertz on *thick description*
- Explores people's lives and experiences
- Looks at symbolic meanings, social and cultural structures and practices
- To learn more:
 - Look for an ethnography in your topic area
 - Browse the GN shelfmark at Hartley

Ethnographic research methods

- Multiple methods and sources
- **Participant-Observation**
 - Researcher is active participant and first-hand observer
 - Asking questions where possible
- Ethnographic conversations
 - Exploring questions or issues you don't understand
 - May be recorded but not based on set questions

Ethnographic research methods

- Further methods to explore specific issues/questions:
 - semi-structured interviews
 - focus groups
 - mapping (physical space, kinship or other relationships)
- Other sources:
 - documents
 - photographs
 - objects of importance in the setting/to the people
 - previous writing on the topic

An example of an ethnographic project

- My PhD research on North African material culture in Paris (2003-2006)
- Archival research
- Multi-sited ethnographic research (museums, cultural associations, shops, events)



Women's Day celebrations, Association Tamazgha



Association Taferka, Montreuil



Kabyle landscape and traditional arts
Association Taferka, Montreuil



North Africa display case
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris

Key points from the example

- Go in with research question/topic but remain open to change
- Contingent nature of ethnographic research – much depends on who you meet/where you go
- Identify key place(s) or group(s) where you can observe and interact over a period of time
- ‘Being there’ gives you opportunities to observe and make connections

Your research

Paired discussion:

- What aspects of your research topic could be developed using ethnographic methods?

Steps and tips for doing an ethnography

1. Developing a research problem
2. Choosing a group or event(s) to study
3. Getting access
4. Making relationships
5. Collecting data
6. Recording and organising data
7. Analysing data
8. Using different data sources
9. Writing up

(Steps adapted from Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: principles in practice*. London, UK : Routledge, 2007. Available as e-book)

Steps in doing an ethnography

1. Developing a research problem
 - ‘Foreshadowed problems’ (Malinowski)
 - Go in with general problem or question to explore rather than a specific hypothesis or preconceived idea
 - Be open to change
2. Choosing a group or event(s) to study
 - Small-scale groups
 - Events or practices – with research about context

Steps in doing an ethnography

3. Getting access

- Ethics: research must be done openly and with informed consent
- ‘Key informants’ or gatekeepers

4. Making relationships

- Takes time
- Consider your position in relation to group (insider/outsider) and your social identity (gender, nationality, class...)

Steps in doing an ethnography

5. Collecting data

Types of data you might gather:

- Notes from participant observations and informal conversations
- Interview recordings and transcripts
- Video recordings and accompanying notes
- Photographs, maps, ephemera
- Maps or drawings by research participants
- Media or online sources
- Other documents related to the setting

Further notes to keep:

- ‘Analytical notes’ with rough drafts of analysis
- Field diaries with personal reflections and reactions

Steps in doing an ethnography

5. Collecting data (2)

Things to think about in making observations:

- Context/history of setting
- Actors/groups/social relationships
- Space and physical environment
- Organisational structures and relationships
- Language used (registers, specific vocabularies, idiomatic expressions)
- Non-verbal communication
- Common activities and routines
- Objects/material world
- Aims – what do people try to accomplish
- Feelings expressed by participants

Steps in doing an ethnography

6. Recording and organising data

- Devote time to writing notes and organising data
- Think about chronological accounts as well as thematic accounts
- Keep careful records of everything you are collecting – develop a system and be consistent and disciplined
- Make back-up copies
- Notes and transcripts should be anonymised to protect the research participants' identities

Steps in doing an ethnography

7. Analysing data

- Part of ongoing data collection – how you organise data, making ‘analytical notes’
- Try to describe before you interpret/explain
- Think about emerging patterns, important themes and ‘folk concepts’, analytical categories (gender, kinship, class)
- Interrogate your data for further evidence of your analysis (and contrasting evidence)

Steps in doing an ethnography

8. Using different data sources
 - Observing at different times
 - Speaking to different people
 - Collecting information in different ways
 - Other information about the setting
 - Triangulating data

Steps in doing an ethnography

9. Writing up

- Takes time and numerous drafts
- Part of ongoing process of analysis
- Relation to themes and concepts in the literature

Plus one step: sharing results with research participants

Ethics

- Research with ‘human participants’ must go through ethical approval process (ERGO www.ergo.soton.ac.uk)
- See Faculty procedures and documents in ERGO
- Principles of ethical ethnographic research:
 - Do no harm
 - Overt research
 - Informed consent
 - Anonymity of participants
- Health and Safety: think about yourself as well!

Reflection

- Taking one aspect of your research topic that could be developed using ethnographic methods, write down then share with a partner:
 1. A broad research question to explore.
 2. What setting/group you would use to explore this question.
 3. How you would gain access to this setting/group. Do you foresee any difficulties doing this?
 4. Any ethical issues raised by this research. Would you be able to obtain informed consent and protect your participants' identities?

Further resources/references

- Geertz, C. (1973) 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. HarperCollins. pp. 3–30.
- Hammersley, M. (1992) Introducing Ethnography. *Sociology Review*. 2 (2), 18–20.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: principles in practice*. London, UK : Routledge, 2007. (available as e-book)
- Graham Gibbs: Ethnography. Part 1 of 2 on Ethnography and Participant Observation:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8doV3Pous4>
- Graham Gibbs: What to observe in Participant Observation. Part 2 of 2 on Ethnography and Participant Observation:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JADIR-J9Ht4>