

Chapter 13

Ethnography From Physical to Digital Contexts: Principles and Practices

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ABSTRACT

*The term ethnography comes from the Greek *ethnos* (folk, the people, cultures) and *gráphein* (to write, to describe), and therefore, its literal meaning refers to the description of cultures. The current perspectives of ethnographic research are widening to digital contexts for several interrelated motivations: decolonization, globalization, information and communication technologies (ICTs). The classical loci of digital ethnography is represented by online communities, delimited digital spaces of social aggregation around a given domain of interest. However, in the last years, these privileged sites are complemented or sometimes substituted by social media sites and metadata in digital ethnographic research. As a result, new sites for ethnographic fieldwork are emerging fostering new types of ethnographic practice. The difference in digital ethnographic fields imply an internally diverse array of approaches. The chapter starts from the origins of ethnographic research to investigate its digital developments, methodological challenges, and variety of approach.*

THE ORIGINS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

The term ethnography comes from the Greek *ēthnos* (= folk, the people, cultures) and *gráphein* (= to write, to describe) and therefore its literal meaning refers to the writing/description of cultures. The object of ethnography is therefore peoples, societies, communities, groups and the purpose is the written description and narration of their world experience and their motivated actions after observing their daily life. It involves intimate familiarity with day-to-day practice and the meanings of social action.

Classical ethnographic research is rooted within anthropology and interested in studying other cultures, non-European, far from those of origin and generally considered inferior or less developed. The illuminist

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interest is based on the dichotomy “primitive” societies (exotic cultures) versus “civilized” (European cultures). It is therefore the expression of a Eurocentric attitude which subtends supposed intellectual superiority of Europeans forced to fight against the ignorance and superstition of inferior cultures.

The scientific justification for the analysis of exotic cultures is based on social evolutionism with its assumption of cultural developments as a linear, progressive, ascending, deterministic and immutable process. Therefore, the ethnographic investigation of primitive societies found justification in the supposed primacy of European civilization and is presented as the analysis of the primordial stages of the evolutionary process, of the gaps in human progress (Casella 2000; Rapport, Overing 2000). In short, it is interested in formulating a theory of the development of human societies, institutions, social and religious organizations universally based on general laws and cause-effect relationships. In doing so, it applies the comparative method on a large number of cases with the aim of identifying the common features of cultures considered at the same level of development. We can say that evolutionary ethnography assumes a positivist and nomothetic perspective by attempting to generalize observed data and derive universal laws on the development of human civilizations and social changes (Casella 2000). This is a positivist ethnography which hierarchically frames Western civilization as the evolutionary destiny of society so legitimizing a deterministic racism which relegates exotic cultures to the lowest stage of social development in scientific, social, philosophical, and religious terms. In this way, it legitimates the expansion of colonialism, seen as the bearer of civilization, progress, and science (Brewer 2000).

However, evolutionary ethnographic research is only theoretical, has no empirical basis other than those derived from travelers’ or folklorists’ accounts, and is mostly based on secondary historical and statistical sources (Dei 2012).

The birth of empirical ethnography can be traced back to the twentieth century and to the British colonialism and its need to understand dominated cultures in order to complete assimilation. Within this tradition a major impetus to ethnographic field research came from Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski, a scholar of Polish origin who moved to England at the beginning of the 1900s, can be considered the forerunner of important methodological advances in ethnographic research and is commonly regarded as being the first to systematize ethnographic methodology. First, because he recognizes everyday life as the objective of ethnographic inquiry anticipating a focus that will be proper to phenomenology. Furthermore, he is considered the father of participant observation: it is not possible to study a culture at a distance but it is necessary to be present in the place. Therefore, ethnography involves data gathering by means of participation in the daily life of informants in their natural setting: watching, observing and talking to them in order to discover their interpretations, social meanings and activities. Therefore, the success of an ethnographic research depends on the researcher’s direct and personal experience of cultures, of the same everyday life as those under study.

Malinowski moves from a functionalist theory of culture seen as a social organization that allows individuals to satisfy their needs. Each cultural trait should be associated with the need it satisfies which can be material, moral or psychological. For example, the magic and the religion would respond to the psychological need for reassurance (Dei 2012).

Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922) - the book which sets out his research conducted in the Trobriand Islands of the Melanesian archipelago off eastern New Guinea –describes reciprocity and exchange relationships between the different Trobriand islands and in particular the *kula*, a type of gift-exchange system that holds an important place in the social life of the indigenous people. The *kula* is a large-scale trade network in shell bracelets and necklaces. The exchange involves necklaces of red shells that must circulate clockwise along the islands of the archipelago and bracelets of white shells,

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