Chapter 10
Ethnographic Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers some of the essential features of ethnography as a qualitative method. The main theoretical foundations of ethnographic approach are explained; however, the emphasis is mainly on how ethnography is done. Thus, the techniques for collecting data used by ethnographers take the central part of this chapter with some special attention to the methodology of observation. Through many examples, the authors describe the various forms of observation as a social research method. It is useful to illustrate the approach of the ethnographer through the metaphor of the "stranger" because "reflexivity" is an important part of the qualitative approach of ethnography. The practicalities of recording the field research and writing memos are fully considered in conjunction with practical suggestions and conceptual discussion, including the writing up of the final text which should be the conclusion of a consequential process, rather than a separate entity.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is perhaps a strange term, it is the combination of two ancient Greek words: *ethnos*, meaning "people" and *graph*, meaning "writing" or even "describing"; so, ethnography is writing about (or describing) a people. Within the context of research methods, it then means describing a particular social group or social setting. Ethnographic methods are part of the qualitative methodologies and enable researchers to become immersed in social worlds. They watch, listen, talk and participate. The data gathered comes from what the researcher sees and experiences. The ethnographic impulse is to be moved with curiosity about a social puzzle. The ethnographer feels compelled to go and look for herself/himself, to

see "what's going on". It is all about the agendas of the people she or he want to find about, it is about their stories, their uses of objects and artefacts (Daynes & Williams, 2018; Willis, 2000).

In brief, ethnographic research is a qualitative approach where the researcher is immersed in a social setting for an extended period, makes regular observations of the behaviour of members of that setting, listens to and engages in conversations. The ethnographer also: interviews participants on issues not directly amenable to observation or that researcher is not clear about; collects documents about the groups observed; develops a deep understanding of the culture of the group and people's behaviour within the context of that culture and finally writes up a detailed account of that setting (Bryman, 2016). Thus, ethnography is said to study people in their "natural setting", that is, the researcher should be immersed in the daily lives of people and be able to observe "normal" social life as it happens in daily events and familiar (for the people observed) places. From that, it follows that the theory is often generated "in the field", as well as tested in the field during the research period. Ethnography is a research approach that does not usually follow deductive theory testing: the logical and methodological links between hypothesis construction, data gathering, and hypothesis testing *does not* belong to the theoretical foundations of doing ethnography (Jerolmack & Khan, 2017).

So, ethnography is a very open-ended qualitative method, which comprises a series of techniques, can be used in a vast variety of contexts to explore a vast range of issues. It is particularly suited for in-depth exploration of small settings and it mainly relies on the researcher to collect data.

This chapter will consider some of the essential features of ethnography: first, the main theoretical foundations of the ethnographic approach are discussed, then a list of the main techniques for collecting data is outlined. The following section describes at some length the methodology of observation, which used to be considered a method, but recently is very much associated with ethnography in general. Many examples of the various forms of observation is supplied. In the section "The stranger: ethnography and reflexivity", the metaphor of the "stranger" is used, and "reflexivity" is illustrated as an important part of the qualitative approach of ethnography. In the section "Recording field research and writing memos and analytic notes", the practicalities of recording the field research and writing memos are described in conjunction with the relevance of this part for the overall research project: writing "analytic notes" is essential for developing an explanation of the research issue. In the last section, the practicalities of writing up the final text are mixed with conceptual issues about the very act of writing itself, as writing ethnography is a reflective exercise.

Ethnography has a very long, well-established tradition and recognised validity in the social sciences and its alleged lack of objectivity is simply a common misconception. By the end of this chapter the reader should be able to identify the foundations of ethnography and what are its main characteristics as well as understand in what cases researchers use ethnography and describe how. Furthermore, the reader should be able to distinguish and use different types of observations as a research method with some appreciation of the differences and similarities between insider and outsider knowledge. It is expected that the reader will develop knowledge on accurately recording field research notes, analytic explanations and understand the role of analytic memos in ethnographic research.

BACKGROUND

Ethnography, as a research method used in the social sciences, has a long and respected tradition. It began in the 19th century and was used by early social anthropologists to understand other "exotic"

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