

---

## UNIT 12 : DEBATES ON DOING ETHNOGRAPHY\*

---

### Structure

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 The Ethnographic Tradition
- 12.3 Principles of Methodology in Ethnography
  - 12.3.1 Naturalism
  - 12.3.2 Understanding
  - 12.3.3 Induction
  - 12.3.4 Ethics
- 12.4 New Approaches in Ethnography
  - 12.4.1 Reception Ethnography
  - 12.4.2 Feminist Ethnography
  - 12.4.3 Post-modern Ethnography
- 12.5 Twin Perspectives in Ethnography
  - 12.5.1 Emic Perspective
  - 12.5.2 Etic Perspective
- 12.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.7 References
- 12.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

---

### 12.0 OBJECTIVES

---

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- about the ethnographic tradition in social sciences;
- about various methodological principles of ethnography;
- about the new approaches in ethnography;
- about the various stages of feminist ethnography; and
- about two important analytical aspects of ethnography.

---

### 12.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In this unit, an attempt will be made to understand the meaning of the term ethnography as well as ethnography as a method. We will also discuss how ethnography came into being through tracing its origin and how ethnography grew over a period of time. Subsequently, an attempt will be made to discuss the issues in doing ethnography. This unit will offer an insight into ways ethnography has been understood by both anthropologists as well as sociologists. It will simultaneously focus on various principles in ethnography and the emergence of new approaches in doing ethnography.

---

\* Written by Dr. Ajaz A. Gilani, Kashmir University, Kashmir

Towards the end, this unit will offer an understanding of the two important analytical perspectives that enables a researcher to distinguish between two forms of data collected during the fieldwork.

---

## 12.2 THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TRADITION

---

One quite often comes across of the remarkable ethnographic contributions made by early social anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe Brown. Both these anthropologists belong to the British School of thought. In fact, if we intend to know the history of anthropology, we can refer directly to the works of Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist, who conducted a study on Trobriand Islands in West Pacific during 1920's. Malinowski's approach was later adopted by A.R Radcliffe Brown in his anthropological study of the Andaman Islanders. There are different terms used by two allied disciplines anthropology and sociology, former belonging to British School of thought and later belonging to Chicago School. British School of anthropologists called it 'ethnography' while as Chicago School of Sociologists call it 'participant observation'.

The term ethnography is derived from two Greek words: 'ethno' which means a tribe, or a community, or a race or even a nation and 'graphos' which means to write down. Thus, the term ethnography means to write down about a tribe, a community, a race, a nation and so on. Now the question that comes to mind given its etymological meaning is that what is it that is to be written about a tribe, a community, a race or a nation. Since the time of its emergence, those concerned with it have engaged themselves in analysing culture of various tribes or communities (*See: Clifford and Marcus, 1986*). As Hammersley and Atkinson have rightly said, "ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry" (2007:3). Now considering this definition to simplify the understanding of the term ethnography, we can say that ethnography is an approach which ensures observation and exploration of certain social phenomena. This approach does not allow the researcher to isolate from participating in the daily lives of people under study. Interaction between researcher and participants occurs through conversations and interviews to shared ritual and emotional experiences (Murchison, 2010). So we can say that in ethnography, the researcher is immersed into the daily practices of people under study such as rituals, beliefs, and other activities also.

In the contemporary times, researchers from other disciplines also use ethnography as an approach in their research, for example, in education, psychology, media, and other natural science disciplines also. This indicates that the scope of ethnography has widened, and it has widened in studies in which an ethnographer attempts to increase his knowledge of social and cultural dynamics (Murchison, 2010). Two perspectives have emerged in ethnography not so far in the past and these perspectives are related to the objectives of research and the representation of culture. The first perspective is *turn-in ethnography*, in which researcher is restricted to make

assumptions but at the same time it allows the researcher to not immerse into the world of subjects under study. The second perspective is *turn-towards ethnography*, in which gives an opportunity to the ethnographer to represent immerse himself into the world of subjects as an outsider. These two perspectives result in the idea of ethics in ethnography, which we will discuss in the later sections of this unit. Now there are certain conditions for doing ethnographic research. Murchison (2010) has pointed out a few important ones which can be employed in ethnography in the present times also because these conditions are universal in ethnography. They are:

- Considering ethnography of Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski (1922), in this work generally acknowledged that ethnography required a lengthy stay in the field — usually a year or longer. This is true for almost all ethnographic studies.
- Secondly, an ethnographer is required to learn and communicate with the subjects in their own language (the language of subjects). This is one of the important conditions of doing ethnography.
- Thirdly, since the primary source of the creation of culture is the kinship itself, therefore an ethnographer while doing ethnography with the subjects has to completely focus on kinship system.
- There is a general agreement among the ethnographers about the idea of completely being a part of the group under study. This enables the ethnographer to obtain an insider's point of view about the group being studied.

Other than these conditions for doing ethnography, there are certain methodological principles in ethnography which will be discussed in the following section.

---

## 12.3 PRINCIPLES OF METHODOLOGY IN ETHNOGRAPHY

---

Ethnographers have identified three features of ethnography which are significant methodologically and have different theoretical background than the other. These three methodological features include *naturalism*, *understanding*, and *induction*. Let us discuss them each.

### 12.3.1 Naturalism

Naturalism is the first methodological feature of ethnography in which the aim of doing ethnographic research is to portray the objective nature of human action which takes place naturally (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Having such a methodology ensures that this can be accomplished through first-hand contact with the subjects (or actors). It cannot be accomplished through the use of experiments or through interviews conducted in natural settings. It is for this reason that ethnographers conduct their research in natural settings, which is unknown to the researcher. Natural settings indicate places inhabited by those people who are being studied. Ethnographers simultaneously attempt to explain social processes and social events in terms of their natural environment in which they take place. Naturalism minimises ethnographers' influence over the activities of people under study.

### **12.3.2 Understanding**

Now while we have discussed above that ethnography involves explaining the activities of human beings in their natural settings, this explanation is possible only when an ethnographer has an understanding of the environment or culture in which the human perform these activities. So understanding as a methodological principle of ethnography is in a way an offset of naturalism (Rosen, 1991). A common example of this sort is the fact that you cannot explain an activity which is unfamiliar to you, without having a prior knowledge and understanding of this activity. But this is not applicable to only events or actions which are alien to the ethnographer, because some ethnographers claim that having a proper and clear understanding of an event or activity is important even if an ethnographer has a prior knowledge about them. However, what happens in the later case, that is when an ethnographer has a prior knowledge of the setting in which action takes places, is that there are high chances of misunderstanding them which can be a major flaw in ethnography. In order to avoid such flaws in ethnography, ethnographers need not presuppose that he has an understanding of people's perceptions about certain action, because there are possibilities and in fact people can have differing views about the world in which they live. This is indeed a case in modern complex societies, in which there is a diversity of people, and each having its own perception and understanding of the world. So the point here is that it becomes a pre-requisite for an ethnographer to immerse into the culture of people under study through methods like participant observation, so as to have an understanding of their culture which will enable him to give explanations about it.

### **12.3.3 Induction**

Ethnographers always encourage and support inductive based research as well as research which is based on new discovery. They place much emphasis on how respondents (or subjects) attach meaning to their actions and to their lives broadly. They rely much on how people interpret their living patterns. When ethnographers, who have certain predefined concepts, theories and propositions, attempt to study a community, they generally do not succeed in discovering the distinctive nature of what is being studied. It is for this reason only that ethnographers generally begin their study, not with preconceived concepts and theories but because of their interest to understand a particular community, a particular section of population, any type of activity or problem. Many a times, ethnographers refine their problems and modify it as they advance in the research study. In the same manner, they come up with the theoretical ideas throughout the research process. These theoretical ideas which are developed during the course of research study are considered as important and constructive outcome of the research study.

### **12.3.4 Ethics**

Ethics in any research are the guiding principles that regulate ethnographer's relationship with the subjects, for example, norms, customs, values, etc. These ethical issues are an act of command about the way ethnographers should act with the people under study in order not to cause any kind of harm to them (LeCompte and Schensul, 2015). Doing ethnography means

that ethnographers get to know about the people living in groups, as well as understanding their culture. Ethnographers do so by establishing a relationship with the people under study and gaining the trust of people. This is considered as one of the vital strengths of ethnography. But many consider it a challenge in the sense that establishing relationship with unknown people and gaining their trust are not easy processes. And once relationships are established and trust of people is gained, ethnographers are bound to follow certain ethical considerations such as protecting the people under study. Ethnographers, in the first instance, are supposed to keep their subjects well informed about maintaining confidentiality through protecting their identities and using specific suitable pseudonyms against their actual names. People under study are to be informed about the objectives of doing ethnography. Other than gaining their trust, receiving their consent to participate in the research process, taking care of their privacy and not causing any kind of harm to them, are some of the preconditions in ethnographic research, which are important considerations for an ethnographer before immersing himself into the world of people under study.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you understand by the term ethnography?  
.....  
.....
- 2) What is *turn-in ethnography*?  
.....  
.....
- 3) What is naturalism in ethnography?  
.....  
.....
- 4) Why do ethnographers establish relationships with the people under study?  
.....  
.....
- 5) Define ethics? Point out three ethical issues in ethnographic research?  
.....  
.....

---

## 12.4 NEW APPROACHES IN ETHNOGRAPHY

---

New approaches in ethnography started emerging since 1970's. Until that time, the traditional ethnographic approaches were highly practices and there was hardly any modification of the approaches used by the ethnographers until this time. But from 1970's new approaches came into being such as post-modernist ethnography, reception ethnography, feminist ethnography and so on. These new approaches significantly varied from those of traditional ethnographic approaches. Traditional ethnographic approaches did not cease to exist because of the coming of new approaches.

They simultaneously continued to exist. This resulted in the diversification of ethnographic landscape. This new turn in the approaches of ethnography broadened its horizons to the extent that the term ethnography has diverse meanings, which are sometimes contradictory as well as contrasting. In fact, ethnography is now understood as similar to qualitative studies. Earlier when Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe Brown used ethnography in their respective studies, the term would refer to participant observation, a process in which researchers would immerse themselves into the world of participants so as to observe how social actions take place. They would observe them directly at the scene. So it would entail the firsthand account of social actions from the participants' point of view. Ethnography took yet another term from 1980s onwards. During this period, ethnography was characterised as being highly diverse in terms of its methods of data collection such as informal everyday interviews. It also included an analysis of different kinds of documents such as visual documents, textual documents and so on.

Let us now understand these newly emerged approaches of ethnography as mentioned earlier such as reception ethnography, feminist ethnography, and post-modern ethnography.

#### **12.4.1 Reception ethnography**

Reception ethnography is also called as critical ethnography or audience ethnography. This approach is mostly common among media scholars. By the end of 1970's, qualitative media scholars shifted their focus towards the consumption of media contents by the audiences. This was considered to be a major shift in media research or what is now understood as an ethnographic turn. However towards the end of 1980's, scholars who were associated with reception ethnography started focussing on their methodologies so as to critically investigate the authenticity of the outcome of their research. They started examining the power relations between the ethnographer and the participants and how this sort of relationship changes and influences the behaviour and responses of participants. Such types of issues in the later periods became the focal points of investigation for feminist and post-modern ethnographers.

#### **12.4.2 Feminist ethnography**

Feminist ethnography is qualitative methodology which investigates the lived experiences of people in their natural surroundings. Although some scholars (such as Ghosh, 2016) claim that feminist ethnography took its birth in late 1980s, however others trace its origin long before 1980s (Davis and Craven, 2020). This approach is used in anthropology as a data collection method; but it is also used in many other disciplines such as cultural studies, gender studies, education, sociology, ethnic studies, psychology, and so on. In terms of defining the term feminist ethnography, there is no general agreement among the scholars and thus there is no consistent definition to it (Schrock, 2013). While some feminist ethnographers consider gender as a focus of enquiry, there are simultaneously others who consider it as a theory which guides the feminist research process. In spite of such disagreements among scholars in defining feminist ethnography, there is an agreement among them on the goals of feminist ethnography. Generally, feminist

ethnography is understood as an intersection of various feminist theories and ethnographic traditions, which attempts to investigate lived experiences and role associated with females in a society.

Three conceptual stages can be mentioned here if one intends to trace the history of feminist ethnography. The first stage corresponds to the period from 1850 to 1920. The chief feature of this stage was the inclusion of the voices of women in ethnographic research. Such ethnographic studies were conducted majorly by males with male respondents. This brought about a major shift in ethnographic research in terms of women doing ethnography on the issues of women. In other words, new perspectives emerged where women would conduct ethnographic research on women to generalise the issues and concerns of their female informants unlike men who could conduct feminist ethnographic research from the viewpoint of male informants only.

The second stage corresponds to the period from 1920 to 1980 and characterised by the developments in feminist theory. New shades of understanding distinction between males and females took place and there were discourses among feminists over the distinctions between biological sex and cultural construction of gender which forced feminist ethnographers like Margaret Mead and Betty Friedan towards rethinking about the power relations surrounded around this type of distinction. While acknowledging that gender was a social construction, they therefore claimed that all women share similar lived experiences and their problems are also identical, thus universalizing woman.

The third stage of feminist ethnography started from 1980s onwards. This contemporary stage is characterised by the widening of feminist ethnographic approaches in terms of a shift from woman being the centre of attention to diverse analytical concerns. Feminist ethnographers of this period such as Kamala Visweswaran, Judith Stacey and Radhika Parameswaran did not accept the concept of 'universalising woman'. They instead stressed much on the differences among women along class, race, religion, identity politics, and so on. They explore the operation of power relations in the way gender identities are constructed. The production and re-production of gender based identities along with the issues of representation have emerged as the crucial concerns for feminist ethnographers in contemporary times.

### **12.4.3 Post-modern ethnography**

The post-modern stage is an expression that started by the end of 1970s in the works of French philosophers like Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, however it is more closely associated with anthropologists such as Stephen Tyler, George Marcus and Michael Fischer. Postmodern ethnography erupted out of the methodological considerations within the cultural theory of post-modernism by way of changing over its assumptions into ethnographic tradition. It is a blend of various approaches such as interpretative ethnography, critical ethnography, auto-ethnography, and so on. The focal consideration in postmodern ethnography involves probing the authorial status of ethnographer's writing in order to see how it fails to capture the reality which it intends to express and analyse. Post-modern ethnography has given rise to many doubts concerning the significance of a single method in understanding social world. Post-modern ethnographers

claim that subjectivity (ethnographer's interpretations) is converted into objectivity (data) through the practice of ethnographic writing. In this way, an ethnographer composes and constructs pretended cultures which are based on narratives. What originates out of pretended cultures is an expression which is commonly called as 'paper culture', which means that the representation of culture are constructed artificially through writing and these representations of culture are far from the how respondents live in it.

## **12.5 TWIN PERSPECTIVES IN ETHNOGRAPHY**

Ethnographers as a rule conduct fieldwork for longer periods of time so as to collect data through the method of ethnography involving documenting the everyday living of people or community. They produce a deep description of the people under study, which is called as 'thick description'. They collect different types of data through two perspectives, that is, ethnographers' own perspectives and the informants' perspective. These two perspectives are different from each other and they are called as emic perspective (informants' perspective) and etic perspective (ethnographers' perspective). Let us understand these two perspectives in detail.

### **12.5.1 Emic Perspective**

Emic perspective, also called as the insider's perspective about reality, is at the heart of ethnography. This perspective is instrumental to ethnography as it helps understand and explain situations and lives of people as they occur in their natural environment. It includes the perceptions of people under study. These perceptions of people may although differ from the objective reality however they aid an ethnographer in understanding why people do what they do. It does not include prior assumptions about the functioning of social system; rather it relies on a phenomenological approach in order to understand how social system works. Emic perspective recognizes and accepts diverse realities about people and their social world. This sort of recognition and acceptance of more than one reality is vital to understand why people act in the way they act and why people think in a certain specific way. The differences in the perceptions about realities offer an in-depth insight into their religious, socio-economic and political positions. In order to explore emic perspective, ethnographers immerse themselves into the community of people under study. They communicate with people in their natural settings. They observe people and their actions and behaviours, the way they do and perform their roles and most importantly ethnographers participate in the daily activities of people under study. This perspective is crucial for ethnographers in terms of acquiring a deep understanding of the culture of people which is different from the perceptions of an ethnographer.

### **12.5.2 Etic Perspective**

Etic perspective refers to an external perception of social reality. It is a social scientific perception of the behaviour of people which is made by an observer without any emic influence. These perceptions are meaningful for an ethnographer. Etic perspectives are generated when an ethnographer talks and holds discussions with the people in their own communities. Etic explanations have its basis in science as well as ethnographer's prior knowledge about the historical, economic and political studies. This

perspective does not consider views of members as noteworthy because the members of a community under study cannot observe their own behaviour from a different perspective. For instance, we may never have thought of why we oil our hair the way we do. The culture of oiling our hair is normal for us that we never question this aspect of our culture. So this perspective involves an outsider's viewpoint about a certain culture or activity and this outsider is an ethnographer who relies on his own perceptions and ideas in order to explain the culture.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Reception ethnography is also called as  
.....
- 2) One of the chief features of first period of feminist ethnography was  
.....
- 3) Postmodern ethnography is a blend of various approaches. Mention at least two such approaches.  
.....
- 4) Jacques Derrida is a feminist ethnographer. (True/False)  
.....
- 5) What is etic perspective in ethnography?  
.....  
.....

---

## 12.6 LET US SUM UP

---

In this unit, we discussed about the basic concept of ethnography through discussing how ethnography came into being and its subsequent development over a period of time. We also discussed about various methodological principles such as naturalism, ethics, the idea of understanding and induction. In the course of its development, new approaches emerged in ethnographic research as discussed and these include reception ethnography, feminist ethnography and postmodern ethnography. Participant observation is the chief feature of ethnography and a method of data collection. It involving two broad perspectives which we discussed such as etic perspective and emic perspective; these perspectives refer to the perception of insiders (informants) and perception of outsiders (observers) respectively.

---

## 12.7 REFERENCES

---

1. Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. E. (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
2. Davis, D., & Craven, C. (2020). *Feminist Ethnography. Companion to Feminist Studies*, 281–299.
3. Ellen, R. F. (1984). *Ethnographic research: A guide to general conduct*. New York: Academic Press.
4. Hammersley, M & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. (Third edition), London, NY: Routledge.

5. LeCompte, Margaret D. and Schensul, Jean J. (2015) *Ethics in ethnography: A mixed methods approach*. AltaMira Press.
6. Murchison, J. (2010). *Ethnography Essentials: Designing, conducting and presenting your research*. Jossey-Bass, Wiley.
7. Rosen, M. (1991). Coming to terms with the field: Understanding and doing organizational ethnography. *Journal of Management Studies*, 28.

---

## **12.8 ANSWERS TO “CHECK YOUR PROGRESS” 1 AND 2**

---

### **Answers to check your progress – 1**

- i. Ethnography means writing down about the culture of a community by the ethnographer who participates in the daily lives of people under study.
- ii. A type of ethnography in which researcher is restricted to make assumptions but is allowed to not immerse into the world of subjects under study.
- iii. Naturalism means portraying objective social reality as they occur in their natural setting.
- iv. Ethnographers establish relationship with the people under study so as to obtain a clear understanding of how people live in groups as well as their culture.
- v. Ethics are the guiding principles that regulate ethnographer's relationship with the subjects. Three common examples of ethics are confidentiality, conformity to the norms of community under study and protecting the identities of people under study.

### **Answers to check your progress – 2**

- i. Critical ethnography.
- ii. Inclusion of the voices of women in ethnographic research.
- iii. Interpretative ethnography, auto-ethnography.
- iv. False
- v. Etic perspective refers to the perceptions of an ethnographer about the culture of a community under study.