
UNIT 13: SCIENTIFIC ETHNOGRAPHY*

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13.0 OBJECTIVES

Through this unit, you will learn the following:

- 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.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will discuss the history of scientific ethnography as well as how the approach has changed in the present times. We will also attempt to understand scientific ethnography and at the same time, the unit will offer an insight into various issues concerning scientific ethnography. In the latter part of the unit, we will try to know what it means to do scientific ethnography. We will also discuss how scientific ethnography is conducted through unfolding its various steps right from the formulation of research problem until an ethnographer reaches to the final stage of writing.

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13.2 SCIENTIFIC ETHNOGRAPHY – PAST AND PRESENT

Generally, as discussed in previous units, ethnography is both a method and methodology which is used in anthropology and other social science disciplines to explain culture and what it means to live in groups sharing similar culture. While ethnography is mostly related to anthropology, however it has a deep usage in sociology also. British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was the first to develop scientific approach for ethnographic fieldwork which was based on intensive participation of ethnographers in the groups under study. Malinowski insisted that social practices of these groups can best be understood through emic perspective involving informant's point of view.

During its infancy stage, researchers were devoted towards making ethnography a scientific approach. They therefore produced a manual for researchers in anthropology. This manual consisted of a series of instructions informing about the process of doing ethnography. It was considered correct and precise than the descriptions of those who travelled longer distances for fieldwork. However the preciseness of this approach was not considered accurate for a scientific experiment. Scientific approach is basically a feature of positivism which can be tested independent of the researcher. At the same time, there was a naturalist aspect involved in ethnography. This naturalist aspect is more interpretive. It cannot either be verified by tests however what distinguishes it from positivism is the fact that etic perspective is an important consideration in it. The main aim of ethnography during those times was to provide an analytical explanation of other cultures than testing any hypothesis (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994).

The error in doing ethnography based on participant observation is shocking because ethnography being a professional field of inquiry, still continues to rely on the testimony that "I was in the field" which is in actuality a manifesto of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) who established participant observation as an important scientific method of gaining familiarity about various aspects of social life of people under study. At the same time, structural functionalists employed ethnography as an empirical exercise by considering people's beliefs as real social facts. They collected this objective data with no or little interpretation. This type of data though has a qualitative orientation and there is no use of numerical data in this type of research however they encouraged and maintained the scientific spirit in doing ethnography by giving due importance to facts rather than interpretation. Structural functionalists in fact used interview schedule as a means of data collection rather than distributing questionnaires among the respondents. There is a clear cut difference between an interview schedule and a questionnaire in the sense that in interview schedule, questions are orally asked to the respondents and the researcher upon receiving the responses to questions fills in the interview schedule on its own rather than respondents filling it.

On the other hand, questionnaires are distributed among the respondents and they are asked to fill the questionnaires and there is no intervention of researcher in the process. Another difference between the two is that

interviewing in ethnography occurs in natural settings and in the native language unlike in questionnaires where a different language can be used. This demands establishing a personal relationship between the researcher and the respondents. The information/data collected through this process is considered factual objectively however there is no way to replicate the entire process of data collection because of the change in circumstances. This indicates that structural-functionalist tradition of ethnographic research stresses much upon the validity of data rather than reliability. Reliability is an important aspect of scientific method to replicate experiments. This means that ethnographic research cannot be considered scientific.

Since ethnographic tradition demands immersion of researcher in particular social setting for a longer period of time, but it does not encompass cross-cultural research. One of the reasons for the impossibility of conducting cross-cultural research is the fact that ethnography lays much emphasis to the perceived uniqueness of each society, which is one of the unintended consequences of the process. Ethnography for structural functionalists is an inductive logic for scientific investigation. This means that an ethnographer starts research process with a particular community, social group, village or even a tribe. They do so because they are interested in doing so, and in doing so, themes suitable for their research emerge out from what they observed. They do not desire to test a hypothesis or to start with a theory.

13.3 UNDERSTANDING SCIENTIFIC ETHNOGRAPHY

There is a difference in the methods of investigation between ethnography as a science and other social and behavioural sciences. The difference lies in the fact that unlike other disciplines, ethnography presumes that ethnographers need to explore, in the first place, the activities of people under study and the way these people justify their actions with reason. This is important in ethnography prior to ethnographer's attempt to interpret their actions and relate them with his/her own understanding of them or with theories. It is for this reason also that the tools of gathering data are polished according to the objectives of research. Because ethnography involves participant observation, therefore the basic tools for an ethnographer to collect data include ethnographer's eyes and ears, which are primarily important in participant observation. Ethnographers study culture and people's actions through systematically participating and observing how people do what they do. They also use interview schedules and make notes about what they observe and hear and also record the conversations with people. More importantly, ethnographers learn the way people attach meanings to their actions.

Many scholars do not agree with the fact that ethnographer in itself constitutes one of the primary tools of gathering information. They are not comfortable with this fact. Instead, they believe in the objectivity of science and claim that the presence of ethnographer in the community and his/her relationship with people under study may yield biased results. To overcome this biasness in ethnographic results, there are codified methods for ethnography. These codified methods ensure that the data is collected by ethnographers carefully and thoroughly through methods which can be

imitated and reproduced by others also irrespective of the transformation in social circumstances such as demographic changes or differences in the features. This will help to scientifically produce reliable results which can be valid also.

Another difference in scientific ethnography with other scientific disciplines is that there is no control of ethnographers over what happens in the field unlike other social and behavioural sciences. Scientific ethnography takes place in a social setting in which ethnographer appears as a participant or a guest who studies what is happening in it. In contrast to this, other social and behavioural sciences use clinical or experimental approach in which there is a complete control of the researchers who tend to arrive at similar conclusion upon replication. Ethnographers also sometimes use the same techniques and tools, however, the changing situations are beyond the control of ethnographers and thus they are likely to draw differing results. In addition to this, while ethnographers may use same tools which they used previously in studying any social setting, however such tools may be inappropriate in studying the same social setting again because of the transformations in it with the passage of time. An example of such change in the society could be a shift in language from previously Hindi speaking to English speaking in the latter periods of time.

What is critical to producing an ethnographic account is the process involved in it or the way research is carried out. The first crucial component of scientific ethnography is its dedication to produce a report about the events as they take place in the natural world. Sites of natural world are the places in which people interact each other such as meetings, classrooms, clinic waiting rooms, shopping sites, clubs, workplaces, and so on. The idea in mentioning these natural settings is to say that ethnographers doing field work at these and other sites simply portray a picture of what is happening. However ethnographers also sometimes call upon the respondents at a particular location for the purpose of conducting research with them. While this sort of fieldwork activity is by no means natural, however, the data gathered from the respondents comprises those activities that have occurred in their natural settings.

Check your progress 1:

- i. Who was the first anthropologist to have developed scientific approach to ethnographic fieldwork?
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- ii. What is scientific approach?
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- iii. What is an interview schedule?
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- iv In scientific ethnography, ethnographer acts as a
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- v. What is meant by ‘sites of natural world’? Mention few examples in support of your answer.
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13.4 REPRESENTING SCIENTIFIC ETHNOGRAPHY

Every type of research whether qualitative or quantitative comprises various key elements in order to represent and carry out the entire research process. Scientific ethnography too comprises many key components which are arranged in a conventional order. Scholars (such as Creswell, 1994; Berg, 2004) have offered a rather more precise explanation of the steps involved in scientific ethnography. We will now discuss various steps of conducting scientific ethnographic research.

13.4.1 Formulation of research problem

Formulation of research problem is the first step in doing scientific ethnographic research. Research problem refers to the main focus of study which an ethnographer intends to learn about and explore. A research problem or a title which is well established attracts the researcher because the researcher has, prior to formulating a title, read and analysed the literature related to the problem. This pre-existing literature enables an ethnographer to formulate such a title that can be explored through various ethnographic tools of data collection. These problems are studied in the field as they take place. An ethnographer uses his prior knowledge of the problem to formulate a new problem for exploration.

13.4.2 Selecting a research site

The first question in the minds of ethnographers prior to starting their research is about knowing and deciding the field site. As a general ethnographic rule, ethnographic research is conducted at places where people interact with one another naturally. This makes ethnography different from experimental research where we have control over the people but in ethnography there is no control over the actions and interactions of people under study. Ethnographers do a thorough review of the research site they want to select for their study. They do this by applying objective criteria in their decisions of selecting the research site. They generally select such a research site which is free from any gate-keeping and which can be compared to other sites where research is already conducted by other ethnographers.

13.4.3 Gaining access

Gaining access implies formal entry into the group that an ethnographer intends to study and explore. But the point to think about is how an ethnographer immerses into that group. In situations where there is

maximum of gate-keeping, an ethnographer is required to seek permission. In doing ethnographic fieldwork, permission is sought through initially participating in the group as a volunteer and afterwards immersing as a researcher. The other method of gaining access is through a known person who can advocate for an ethnographer's access to the group under study. Ethnographic fieldwork is not possible without having access to people and their territory. This is one of the most difficult phases in the doing ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographic fieldwork requires a high level of cooperation from the people under study. What is of importance is that once access is gained, an ethnographer requires to devote too much of time in order to win the trust of people and to maintain that trust throughout the process of research.

13.4.4 Presenting self to the group

Presenting self to the group means the kind of behaviour an ethnographer tends to show towards his participants and deciding how to appear before them. It also indicates the kind of role that an ethnographer plays so as to adapt to the environment of people under study and also how to establish relationships with others. Generally, an ethnographer has to be polite while interacting with participants. He/she needs to respect the time and space of participants, follow ethics. But at the same time, these aspects of ethnography adds to the challenges of doing ethnographic fieldwork in the sense that an ethnographer has to be conscious about the motives and agenda of conducting research while becoming completely a part of the group under study. Complete immersion in the group as well as complete participation in the activities of people under study is important to obtain an inside view and to avoid the difficulties while negotiating for access.

13.4.5 Data collection, information recording and field notes

Data collection process involves making field notes. Field notes are the traditional way of data collection in ethnography. During early times, field notes were mostly handwritten but in the modern technological era, field notes are drafted in a laptop. However, most of the times, an ethnographer finds it difficult to record and gather data. To overcome this, an ethnographer must have prior information about the kind of data required for research which can be written in the form of field notes or recorded through using a recording device. Also what happens most of the times is that the research cannot recall the responses of the participants. To come out of this hurdle, an ethnographer needs to immediately make notes of the observation after leaving the research site. Noting down the observations from the field immediately reduces the chances of missing any important information of the participants.

Singleton and Straits (2005) have offered certain important aspects what is to be included in field notes, which includes:

13.4.5.1 Running description

Running description means recording accurately what has been observed in a day. It does not include any kind of interpretation or analysis of what is observed because such descriptions are written while an ethnographer is in the field and notes down what is observed. Analysing information while doing field work may hinder the process of observation.

13.4.5.2 Forgotten events

Field notes must also include what has previously been missed by an ethnographer but recalls it while continuing fieldwork. These forgotten occurrences are noted because ethnographer finds them important for the kind of research that has been undertaken. This information becomes an important source for analysis and it can include any kind of speculation about the actions and relationships of people under study. These notes about the forgotten occurrences are sometimes important because they help an ethnographer to plan for future course of observations, or about specific issues which are important for exploration.

13.4.5.3 Personal thoughts

An ethnographer is supposed to record and note down his own personal thoughts about the subjective reactions of the informants while doing fieldwork. Personal thoughts reduce the chances of missing or hiding any of the observations in the later stages of research.

13.4.5.4 Methodological notes

Writing about methodological issues during fieldwork involves writing about the techniques employed in doing ethnographic research. It may also include the difficulties that an ethnographer faces in the process of data collection or the risks associated with data collection techniques that may likely yield biased results as well as the way field notes are written and observations recorded.

13.4.6 Analysing ethnographic data

Analysis of ethnographic data starts with arranging data into units based on the themes. Otherwise this data may look like an unstructured amount of information. The process of arranging data into various units is called coding, which is arrived at by reading and re-reading the data so that they can thematically be differentiated. There are two forms of coding in ethnographic research. The first is the index coding which does not attach any meaning to the data read. The second form of coding is open coding which is done during the latter stages of data analysis and in which it becomes important to attach a meaning to the data. Ethnographers collect large amount of information for their ethnographic studies so as to describe everyday lives of people who have been studied. Given this large amount of data collected, the process of analysing data becomes very challenging for an ethnographer. Therefore, an ethnographer initially understands the data inductively without any pre-conceived ideas about what has been studied. It begins right from the moment data collection process starts, which enables an ethnographer to identify various themes guaranteeing intense analysis.

13.4.7 Writing ethnography

Writing ethnography constitutes one of the key components of entire ethnographic research process. Ethnography in contemporary times is widely recognised by how it is produced in writing as much as how ethnographic data is collected. It has certainly become a textual activity. Writing ethnography cannot be reduced to set of methodological considerations as was understood during early times. In present times, an ethnographer must borrow ideas

from literary theory and contribute to ethnographic writing through rhetoric and other related fields. By doing so, an ethnographer informs about his writing skills in producing ethnographies. There is reflexivity in the way ethnographers write their ethnographies. Reflexivity is not limited to the realities grasped during the fieldwork and in the course of data collection. It applies to the process of writing also in which ethnographers transform their personal views of social phenomena into scientific text. There are many ways of writing ethnographies in the sense that there can be different styles of writing and different theories which guides an ethnographer about how to represent the data collected. Because of differences in writing styles and different theories employed in the writing, different ethnographers can produce both complementary as well as contrasting analytical ethnography.

Check your progress 2:

- i. What do you understand by research problem?
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- ii. What makes ethnographic research different from experimental research?
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- iii. What is meant by field notes?
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.....
- iv. Point out at least two aspects of field notes?
1)
2)
- v. What is index coding?
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13.5 LET US SUM UP

Scientific ethnography, as is understood through this unit, is a feature of positivism and it was Bronislaw Malinowski who first conducted scientific ethnography in 1922 in Trobriand Islands in west pacific. Later on there was debates and discussions over the ethnography as a scientific method. Through this unit, we have learn what were issues concerning the scientific nature of ethnography by going deep into its past and present of scientific ethnography. In an attempt to know and understand various steps involved in conducting scientific ethnography, we discussed how an ethnographer formulates the research problem, the kind of field site that ethnographers chose to conduct

their fieldwork, how they gain access and what it means to having access to a particular group or field site, how an ethnographer presents self to the group in which he participates and collects data from as well as other steps until an ethnographer finally writes ethnography which is the last stage. This unit is believed to help students gain an understanding of scientific ethnography as a method and will guide them in carrying out scientific ethnographic research.

13.6 REFERENCES

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13.7 ANSWERS TO “CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1 & 2”

Answers to ‘check in progress – 1’

- i. Bronislaw Malinowski
- ii. Scientific approach is a feature of positivism which can be tested independent of the researcher.
- iii. An interview schedule comprises a set of questions orally asked to the respondents and the researcher upon receiving the responses fills in the interview schedule on its own rather than respondents filling it.
- iv. Participant observer
- v. Sites of natural world are the sites or places where people meet and interact with each other. Some common examples of sites of natural world include classrooms, play field, shopping complexes, sports club, workplaces, and so on.

Answers to “Check your Progress-2”

- i. Research problem refers to the main focus of study which an ethnographer intends to learn about and explore.
- ii. The difference between ethnographic research and experimental research is that ethnographic research is conducted at places where people interact with one another naturally without any control of the researcher while as experimental research is conducted in a laboratory in a controlled situation.

**Ethnographic Practices
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- iii. Field notes are the traditional way of data collection in ethnography. They are the notes which an ethnographer notes down during the course of fieldwork in order not to lose any information which may be important for research.
- iv. 1). Running description which means recording accurately what has been observed in a day. 2). Forgotten occurrences are the events that an ethnographer though has missed at one point in time during fieldwork but recollects it in the later stages of fieldwork.
- v. Index coding is a form of coding in which no meaning is attached to the data that has been read by an ethnographer.



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