
UNIT 16: ETHICS AND ETHNOGRAPHY*

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16.0 OBJECTIVE

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- explain ethics and ethnography
- identify the various ethical issues that guide ethnographic research. Few of these are:
 - informed consent
 - voluntary participation
 - no harm to participants
 - anonymity and confidentiality
 - not Deceiving the subjects

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Let us begin our discussion on relationship between ethics and ethnography with understanding of what ethnography and ethics mean. Ethnography is defined as: ‘the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant –observation and resulting in a written account of people, place or institution’ (Simpson and Coleman 2017).

The ethnographic method is called participant observation. The researcher goes to the field and interacts with the group of people in their natural habitat. The journey of the anthropologist starts as a non-participant researcher of people’s culture. Over a period of time he becomes a participant observer. He participates in the daily and ceremonial life of the locals. The researcher may also use a number of other methods such as formal and informal interviews, focus group discussion and use of audio-visual recordings for collecting data.

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Ethnography is a category of qualitative research that involves engaging yourself in a particular community or organisation to observe their behaviour and interactions as closely as possible. It is a flexible research method that allows you gain an in-depth understanding of a group's culture, their conventions and social dynamics. Ethnography is an excellent mode of inquiry to have a first-hand understanding about behaviour and interactions of people within a particular context. The end result of fieldwork is a written descriptive account of people and their ways of life. The aim of a written ethnography is to provide a rich, authoritative account of the social setting in which you were embedded. The purpose of such exhaustive and rich description of people's life is to transport the reader to the field. The term 'fieldwork' comprises of two words – 'field' and 'work'. 'Field' means the social world of study or the community of human beings who are being studied. So the work that is carried out to study something in the natural environment where it occurs (such as an event or a culture) or that it inhabits (such as community of human beings) is referred to as fieldwork. Fieldwork is one of the oldest forms of human inquiry or research practice. It essentially engages with "the worlds of others" with the aim of studying them at close quarters. It is concerned with research on some aspect of human behaviour in its everyday context

All sociological research requires informed consent. Participants are never compelled into participation. Informal consent in broader sense involves ensuring that prior to agreeing to participate, research subjects are aware of the particulars of the research. They are well aware of the risks and benefits of participation, if any. They are even told by the researcher the use the collected data will be put to. Participants have the freedom to opt out of the study at any point. Thus, research ethics involves the question of moral principles that guide and govern how the researcher should go about doing their work.

The question of ethics in any social inquiry is of great importance. The term research ethics refer to the norms, values and institutional arrangement that guide the researcher in the course of his research. The subject matter of any sociological study are the people. The sociologist must strictly adhere to the code of ethics at all point of sociological inquiry. Of utmost importance in any sociological research is the safety of the participants. It is the duty of the researcher to ensure that the participants are not harmed in any way. A researcher must remain mindful of his responsibilities towards his informants.

According to the Webster's New World Dictionary ethical is defined as 'conforming to the standards of conduct of a given profession or group'. In ethnographic study which requires the researcher to live in a particular society, it becomes imperative to understand and know what the society considers ethical and unethical. Also as a researcher it is important to be informed of the general agreements about what's correct and what's unsuitable while undertaking any scientific inquiry.

16.2 VARIOUS ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS THAT GUIDE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Research often involves a great deal of teamwork and synchronization among many different people in different disciplines and institutions. Ethical standards uphold the values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness. Many of the ethical norms help to guarantee that researchers can be held answerable to the public. People are more likely to fund a research project if they can trust the quality and integrity of research.

Ethical consideration

Ethical consideration is a collection of principles and values that should be followed while doing human affairs. The ethical considerations make sure that no-one act in such a way that is harmful to society or an individual. It refrains people and organizations from indulging in vicious conduct.

Here is a list of the more important ethical considerations that guide any social research

- 1.1 Informed consent
- 1.2 Voluntary Participation
- 1.3 No Harm to the Participants
- 1.4 Anonymity and Confidentiality
- 1.5 Not Deceiving Subjects

We will now be discussing each of the above listed points one by one.

16.2.1 Informed consent

Perhaps the most important instrument for securing confidentiality is the informed consent procedure. It is rooted in the idea that involvement in research should have no detrimental effects on the participants, honour the individual's fundamental rights, and respect relationships, bonds, and promises. Informed consent is a critical procedure for the fulfilment of the ethical dimension in scientific research in social sciences. Informed consent is the process of telling potential research participants about the key elements of a research study and what their participation will involve. The informed consent process is one of the central components of the ethical conduct of research with human subjects.

“Anthropological researchers should obtain in advance the informed consent of persons being studied, providing information, owning or controlling access to material being studied, or otherwise identified as having interests which might be impacted by the research. It is understood that the degree and breadth of informed consent required will depend on the nature of the project and may be affected by requirements of other codes, laws, and ethics of the country or community in which the research is pursued. Further, it is understood that the informed consent process is dynamic and continuous; the process should be initiated in the project design and continue through implementation by way of dialogue and negotiation with those studied. Researchers are responsible for identifyin

and complying with the various informed consent codes, laws and regulations affecting their projects. Informed consent, for the purposes of this code, does not necessarily imply or require a particular written or signed form. It is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant.” (American Anthropological Association, 2009, Art. 4)

16.2.2 Voluntary Participation

Voluntary participation refers to a human research subject’s exercise of free will in deciding whether to participate in a research activity. Putting it in simple terms, Voluntary Participation refers to the freedom and willingness on part of the informant to participate in any social inquiry. Social research in most cases involves an intrusion into the lives of the people. Participation in a social experiment costs the respondent both time and energy. The daily routine of the participant suffers and there is disruption in their regular activities.

A major tenet of social research is that no one should be forced to participate. Also the social research may require the participant to talk about their personal and private lives, give out information that may be unknown to even their friends. All sociological inquiries aim for generalization. This scientific aim of generalizability is risked if the respondents are not selected through random sampling. A researcher cannot generalise the sample survey findings to an entire population unless a substantial majority of the scientifically selected population actually participates. The norm of voluntary participation is the most significant and crucial ethical consideration. However, in field it is difficult to adhere to it. Many a times, the researcher may not disclose the nature of study being undertaken and give very little scope to respondent for refusal or opportunity to volunteer.

The Nuremberg Code

A well-known chapter in the history of research with human subjects opened on December 9, 1946, when an American military tribunal opened criminal proceedings against 23 leading German physicians and administrators for their willing participation in war crimes and crimes against humanity. Among the charges were that German physicians conducted medical experiments on thousands of concentration camp prisoners without their consent. Most of the subjects of these experiments died or were permanently crippled as a result.

As a direct result of the trial, the Nuremberg Code was established in 1948, stating that ‘The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential,’ making it clear that subjects should give consent and that the benefits of the research must outweigh the risks.

Although it did not carry the force of law, the Nuremberg Code was the first international document, which advocated voluntary participation and informed consent.[2]

16.2.3 No harm to the Participants

One of the utmost responsibility of the researcher is to ensure that the participant is not harmed in any ways. As mentioned above, the respondent may reveal private and personal details of his personal life. Very often, the

respondents are asked to reveal deviant behaviour or demeaning personal characteristics. Revealing such private information is quite likely to make them feel uncomfortable. Social research studies may require the participant to accept and discuss those aspects of their personality or personal lives that they do not talk about in everyday life. This can be a source of personal agony for the respondent. The subject may start to self-introspect and question his own morality which add to his woes.

The researcher may be well aware of the adverse impact of his research on the psyche of the people. The researcher also knows his incapacity to safeguard the informants against the unpleasant consequences of research inquires. If a particular study is likely to produce disagreeable effects for subjects, the researcher should have the firmest of scientific grounds for undertaking it.

It is not only in the stage of data collection that subject experience discomfort. The respondent can also be harmed at the stage of analysis and reporting of data. The respondents may often get to read reports or ethnographic accounts based on the studies they participated in. They may find themselves labelled or stereotyped. They may find themselves characterised as conservative, unpatriotic, less advanced or superstitious. These categorizations and labels are likely to have a negative impact on their self-image.

Much like voluntary participation, not harming people is easy said than done. However, in the recent past social researchers are getting support for abiding by this norm. Many universities and even funding agencies are clear to approve only those projects which promise some kind of commitment whereby they promise to safeguard the interests of the respondents.

16.2.4 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Taking forward the above stated point i.e. causing no harm to the respondent, it is important to protect the identity of respondents. During the interview or while responding to the questions in the questionnaire, the responses may injure and risk their reputation. To save the respondent from any kind of a discomfort or embarrassment and at the same time not compromising with the data and findings, the researcher may resort to anonymity and confidentiality. However, anonymity and confidentiality are not be treated as synonyms.

Anonymity: Anonymity is ensured when the researcher cannot identify a given response with a given respondent. So in many ways, the interview does not ensure respondent any anonymity, since the interviewer while conducting interview knows who the respondent is. Anonymity is ensured in the mailed survey where the respondents have the freedom not to disclose their identity. However, in such cases it is difficult for the researcher to keep track of who hasn't returned the questionnaire. Anonymity can be ensured by making use of pseudonyms for the respondents and place of study. Sometimes the researcher may transform their qualitative data into fictionalised account, a step towards ensuring anonymity of the subjects. Though anonymising research sites may allow for greater decontextualisation of the data, thereby making it easier to draw comparison. However, it may adversely create the risk of over-generalization

Confidentiality: In a confidential survey, the identity of the respondent is known to the researcher however he doesn't make it public. Confidentiality pertains to the understanding between the researcher and participant that guarantees sensitive or private information will be handled with the utmost care. Ultimately, confidentiality is rooted in trust. In case of anonymity, the respondent is not known to the researcher and public. In order to keep the data confidential, the researcher replaces all names, and addresses with identification numbers. A master identification file is created linking numbers to names to permit the later use, which may be used for correcting any missing or contradictory information.

Robert F. Boruch and Joe S. Cecil (1979) have discussed and engaged in the issue of confidentiality at great length and enlisted a number of techniques that can be used to safeguard the identity of the subject. The first step in this direction is the removal of identifying information as soon as it is no longer necessary. Once the researcher has ensured all quality control in data collection and is certain that he doesn't need any further information he can safely remove all identifying information from the interview booklet.

16.2.5 Not Deceiving Subjects

Research not only involves ethical consideration about the subject's identity but also pose concerns regarding researchers own identity as a researcher. Sometimes the researcher is very vocal and clear about his work and identity in the field and this facilitates the researcher to go about the exercise of doing research. Sometimes the researcher has no choice but to hide his identity and move ahead with research work discreetly. Now when the researcher hides his identity to take forward his research assignment, it raises ethical considerations. Deceiving people is unethical and within social research one needs to have a strong reason or logic to justify deception. Even then, the justification will be arguable.

Many a times, the researcher may reveal his own identity but chooses not to disclose about the aim or goal of research. Many a times the researcher may hide the exact use to what the data may be put to. The researcher fears that if he discloses the aim of his study or the purpose to which the data would be put to, people may not like to participate or the respondent may not report the correct information. Lying about research purpose is relatively common in laboratory experiments. It is quite tough to conceal the fact that you are undertaking a research. However, it is far simple and less complicated not to disclose the purpose of inquiry.

16.2.6 Analysis and Reporting

A social researcher has a number of ethical obligations to the subjects of his study. It is not only towards the respondents that the researcher has ethical obligations, but he has ethical obligations to his colleagues in the scientific community. The researcher also has some obligations towards the readers too. In most cases, the researcher skips reporting the negative findings. Researcher is more keen and inclined to report only the positive discoveries. This may totally mar the purpose of study and research. If his hypothesis is rejected or challenged in the field, the researcher must not shy from reporting it. The researcher is always trying to situate his findings as product of a carefully preplanned analytical strategy when that is not

the case. Many findings arrive unexpectedly, or are chance discoveries – even though they seem obvious in retrospect. The researcher must be honest in telling the truth about all the pitfalls and problems experienced by him in course of undertaking the research. These honest reporting of research activities may make the work easy for future researchers.

Check Your Progress I

1. The ethnographic method is also called as.....
2. refer to the freedom and willingness on part of the informant to participate in any social enquiry

Ethical principles	Definition
Honesty	It is a must to achieve honesty in all science-related communication. The scientist must honestly present information on the data, results, research methods and procedures, and publication status. It is prohibited to falsify and distort the data, to deceive colleagues, agencies aiding grants, or the public.
Objectivity	Partiality should be avoided in the formulation of the research stages plan, analyzing and interpreting data, as well as evaluating the work of colleagues, recruiting the staff, writing applications for the award of grants, giving expert testimony, and other aspects of the scientific research where objectivity is essential. It is recommended to try to avoid partiality and self-deception. The researcher must disclose any personal or financial interests that might influence the scientific research.
Morality	The researcher must comply with the promises and agreements, be honest and seek the sustainability of thoughts and actions.
Prudence	The researcher must avoid careless errors and omissions. It is important to evaluate carefully and critically both own and colleagues' work. It is proposed to collect/ systematize good, research-related activity (e.g., data collection, planning research stages and correspondence with agencies and journals), notes.
Openness	The researcher must share the data, ideas, tools, and resources, be open to criticism and new ideas.
Respect for intellectual property	The researcher must respect patents, copyright rights, and other forms of intellectual property, not to use unpublished research data, methods, or results without permission, quote where you must cite and thank properly for their help in the research. It is strictly forbidden for the researcher to plagiarize.
Confidentiality	The investigator must save confidential information, such as articles submitted for publication, records of employees, professional or military secrets and the records of patients' health stories.

Ethical principles	Definition
Responsible publication	The researcher should publicize the results of the research for the sake of science and scientific research and not for the benefit of his career. The scientist should avoid unnecessary publication or republication.
Responsible management	The researcher should help educate students, guide and advise them in order of their well-being, and allowing themselves to make decisions.
Respect for colleagues	The researcher must respect his/her colleagues and deal with them honestly.
Social responsibility	The researcher must promote social welfare and try to avoid harm or reduce it through research, public education, and advocacy activities.
Anti-discrimination	The researcher must avoid discrimination against students or colleagues of sex, race, nationality, or other factors unrelated to scientific excellence and honesty.
Competence	The researcher must maintain and improve own professional competence through lifelong learning, and take measures to promote competence in science.
Legitimacy	The researcher must have knowledge of relevant laws for his/her work as well as institutional and government policies and comply with them.
Security of people involved in scientific research	Conducting scientific research with human beings, one must strive to minimize the damage and the risks and maximize the benefit. The researcher must respect human dignity, privacy, and autonomy. The researcher must take special precautions, working with vulnerable populations, and seek a fair distribution of the research benefits and burdens.

Source: According to Shamoo and Resnik.

16.3 LET US SUM UP

Ethical considerations in social research are critical. Ethics are the norms or standards for conduct that distinguish between right and wrong. They help to determine the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Social researchers / scientists should respect the rights, dignity, and worth of all people and strive to eliminate bias in their social research-based activities; they must not tolerate any forms of discrimination based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, health conditions, or marital, domestic, or parental status. Social researchers must be sensitive to cultural, individual, and role differences in serving, teaching, and studying groups of people with distinctive characteristics. In all of their social research-related activities, social scientists should acknowledged

Thus, the above discussion highlights that all ethnographic inquires need to be sensitive to the ethical principles. Research studies must ensure that no

harm is caused to the participants. All research inquires must strive towards protecting the autonomy, safety, wellbeing and dignity of all its informants. All research studies should aim for objectivity and avoid ethnocentricity.

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16.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check your progress 1

1. Participant observation
2. Voluntary Participation.

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GLOSSARY

Ethnography: Descriptive study of a certain human society or or the process of making such a study.

Autoethnography: Autoethnography is a type of qualitative study in which an author explores anecdotal and personal experience through self-reflection and writing, and then connects this autobiographical account to broader cultural, political, and societal meanings and understandings.

Online Ethnography: Online ethnography (sometimes referred to as virtual ethnography or digital ethnography) is a type of online research that applies anthropological methodologies to the study of communities and cultures formed through computer-mediated social interaction.

Triangulation: Triangulation is a technique designed to compare and contrast different methods to provide a more comprehensive account of the phenomena under study.

Caste: An ascriptive grouping which is community based.

Great Tradition: Cultural trait or tradition, which is written and widely accepted by the elite of the society who are educated and learned.

Little Tradition: Cultural trait or tradition, which is oral and operates at the village level.

Race: Race is widely considered as a basis of categorization of human beings in various categories depending upon their physical features. However, since race is a social construct, this categorization of human being is socially based and categorized.

Authority: When power is legitimised it becomes authority.

Totem: A religion in which an animal, plant or some object is held as sacred and from which the group claims descent.

Social Structure: It is the organised pattern of the inter-related rights and obligations of persons and groups in a system of interaction as seen in terms of statuses, roles, institutions governed by social norms and values.

Culture: The system of behavior, customs, regulations etc. which is learnt by and socially acquired.

Suffrage: The legal right to vote.

Feminism: A social, economic, and political commitment directed at changing the existing power relations between women and men in society in order to fight against gender injustice and to promote equal rights and opportunities for all.

Stereotypes: It refers to a partial, prejudiced, biased, exaggerated view about a group, class of people, tribe, etc.

Power: One's capacity to impose his or her will on others.