
UNIT 9 ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD*

Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 What is Ethnography?
- 9.3 Use of Ethnographic Method in Fieldwork
- 9.4 Emerging Trends in Use of Ethnographic Method
- 9.5 Merits and Demerits of Ethnographic Method
- 9.6 Let us Sum Up
- 9.7 References
- 9.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

9.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- explain what ethnography is,
- discuss how ethnography developed as a method of social research,
- explain Malinowski's use of ethnographic method, and
- discuss emerging trends in use of ethnographic method.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we are concerned with ethnography. Interestingly, ethnography is both a method of research and product of research. Let us understand this aspect of ethnography more closely. Ethnography as a method of research or let us say the ethnographic method of research, refers to a composite range of techniques of data connection that are used in combinations to develop a holistic understanding of the way of life of a group. Ethnography as a product of research refers to the descriptive account presented by the researcher as an outcome of research.

We begin this Unit with developing an understanding of what ethnography is. Thereafter, we will outline how ethnography developed as a method over a period of time, how ethnographic method is employed in research. Finally, we will discuss the new trends in use of ethnographic method.

* Written by Nita Mathur, School of Social Sciences, IGNOU, New Delhi

9.2 WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

There is no standard or simple definition of ethnography which is accepted by all social science researchers. Broadly, however, ethnography is understood as an in-depth, detailed account of a social or cultural group. Typically, ethnography ‘involves the ethnographer participating in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions- in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of research’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:1). In a conventional sense, ethnography comprises holistic description of a group or community.

Box 9.1 Ethnography as Method and Product (Berreman 2004)

‘An ethnography’ is a written report summarizing the behaviours, and the beliefs, understandings, attitudes, and values they imply, of a group of interacting people. Thus, an ethnography is a description of the way of life, or culture, of a society. Everyone who does empirical research in cultural or social anthropology engages in ethnography as a process, though by no means does everyone report his research in the form of an ethnography. An ethnographic study is generally expected to give an overall view of the culture of the people about whom it is written, within the limits inherent in ethnographic research in prose exposition. As such, it attempts, to cover all aspects of the culture of a given society. In practice, it covers those aspects which the ethnographer considers relevant to an understanding of the main features of the culture he studied (p.157).....

Whatever the method of presentation and analysis, the aim of ethnography is to report the culture studied in sufficient depth and breadth to enable one who has not experienced it to understand it. Understanding may be assumed to have been achieved if the reader learns how participants in the culture see themselves, others, and their environment, and how they deal with each. Ideally, this requires that the ethnographer convey information sufficient in quantity, variety, and quality, and so organized and analysed that it would enable the reader to understand events of the culture if he were to experience them, to anticipate the reactions of members of the society to the events they experience, and, ultimately, to behave appropriately in that society in a manner similar to that of a person who has lived the culture. In this respect, the ethnography is analogous to a linguist’s description of a language. It may not enable the reader to speak the language easily, but it enables him to understand how it works. An ethnographic study comprises, essentially, a statement of a set of rules which describe how people act in their culture. Given time, the reader of an adequate ethnographic (or linguistic) description can understand what is done (or said), can act (or speak) correctly and meaningfully in the culture (or language), can anticipate the responses he will evoke in others, and can respond to them in ways they deem appropriate (p. 159).

During the colonial period, description of natives was often used as a tool of the colonial agenda of administration. Many of the earliest ethnographies such as *The Angami Nagas*, *The Sema Nagas*; have been written by administrators like J.H.Hutton. They were impersonal, detailed accounts of people, prepared largely for benefit of administrators. Such records providing exhaustive information including minute details about natives were used by administrators to govern them. Such descriptions presented the people being studied as ‘interesting specimens’. Many anthropologists such as Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard were sent to the field as employees of the state to collect data for the benefit of the administrators. They, however, were compassionate to the people and no longer felt that they had to support their respective governments. In fact in the post colonial period, many anthropologists have given up the responsibility of providing information to the state which could be used to administer the people they study. Interestingly, rather than fostering the ambition of the state, many of them have emerged as spokespersons for the people they study and take up their case before the state.

It is important to note that in the post-colonial era, natives are no longer treated impersonally as ‘interesting specimen’. This has brought about a change in the way ethnography is understood. While earlier ethnography was treated as a product in the form of a physical document containing detailed description, it is now treated as a method. From external and uninvolved ‘scientific’ description, ethnography is a more engaging endeavour in which the researcher gets involved in the life and activities of the people. In the course of close engagement with the life of people, she/he comes to appreciate and develop an understanding of the other’s point of view. The process has enabled a more humanizing approach to the understanding of other cultures.

Some of the distinguishing features of studies employing the ethnographic method are the following. First, they are based on data collected by researcher by spending as much time as possible with the people. Ideally, this duration should be at least one year. Researcher uses participant observation technique to collect data. She/he participates in the daily life of people (establishes continuous interaction with them and participant observation and interview. These are combined with other techniques of data collection such as survey. The ethnographic account usually provides a rich description of how fieldwork was carried out and how data was collected. Second, ethnographic accounts are based on people’s point of view. The interpretation of data is situated in the local context of the people under study. The researcher refrains from making judgments.

The credit of fieldwork, more specifically use of ethnographic method, is ascribed to Bronislaw Malinowski. Let us find out how Malinowski used the ethnographic method in research. Before we do that, however, let us complete check your progress exercise below.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What do you understand by ‘ethnography as method’ and ‘ethnography as product’?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2) Outline three distinguishing features of ethnographic research.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

9.3 USE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD IN FIELDWORK

As we have learnt earlier, prior to the early part of 1900s, information about different cultures was collected by missionaries, travellers and others who were not trained to carry out fieldwork systematically. The purpose for which information was collected was mostly for facilitation of governance by administrators rather than understanding culture and society in totality. It was Bronislaw Malinowski who is credited with carrying out fieldwork using ethnographic method for the first time. Let us discuss the social and academic background of Malinowski from Box 9.2.

Box 9.2 Social and Academic Background of Bronislaw Malinowski

A Polish man, born in 1884 if aristocratic parents, who studied maths, physics and philosophy at the Jagiellonian University, in Cracow, he was inspired to take up anthropology after reading Fraser’s at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He gained the financial support to undertake field research in New Guinea, but war broke out while he was in Australia. However, though legally an ‘enemy’ in Australia, he was able to move freely about the Pacific islands for the duration of the war as long as he reported his movements to the Australian government. His most famous research was carried out in the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia, off the north-east coast of Australia. (O’ Reilly 2005:7).

When Malinowski was stranded in Trobriand Islands with no connection with the outside world, the only option before him was to learn the language and interact closely with the natives. He developed an understanding of their behavior, beliefs, values, customs and everyday life. Here, certain important points emerge in the use of ethnographic method. The first is learning the language. In order

that the researcher interacts with the people under studies, she/he should acquire at least working knowledge of the language. This facilitates communication and equips the researcher to make sense of documents (such as letters, diaries, personal records) written in people's own language.

Second, living with people for a prolonged period of time is quite difficult. Traditionally, researchers were advised to be in the field for at least one period in the course of which they would live with the people and participate in their activities. While participating intensively in the activities of the people, the researcher has to remember to maintain a mental distance, i.e., not get so involved that become oblivious to their research work. They are required to adopt the 'marginal native' status in fieldwork. One has to learn the language, live with the people, participate in their activities, and yet maintain a mental distance. The mind of the researcher is aware of the affairs of the people and the same time not totally involved so as to lose sight of his/her own identity.

Third, being non-judgmental and holding respect for the culture of people under study. Researchers are expected to shed ethnocentrism i.e. their own biases and sense of superiority of themselves and their own culture over people they study. Researcher, should control their surprise, sometimes even shock on seeing certain behavior and practices of the people that contradict those of her/his own. Explicit exhibition of disgust, anger, shock have to be shielded from the people. At any cost, one has to adopt an attitude of cultural reactivism i.e., acceptance of and respect for local culture and way of life. In fact, such practices enable a researcher to establish rapport with the people more easily and quickly. On many occasions, it has been found that the researcher is treated by the people under study as a part of a particular family. Some of them have also adopted local names and acquired local skills (e.g. that of making baskets.)

Fourth, collecting data in context. Malinowski insists that data should be collected from people in their natural setting. It is only by being in context that a researcher can gain an insight into how the people deal with and experience things in their everyday life. Also, what people say they do or the norms they adhere to are not always followed in the same way. It is only when a researcher collects data in the natural setting of the people is it possible to see if there is any discrepancy in the way people say they behave and the way they actually do.

Fifth, the context and the way in which ethnographic method is used should be described clearly and in detail. Malinowski states that the researcher should describe his/her method in the same way as a scientist would explain the conditions of an experiment. Description of how the ethnographic method is used in a particular research enables subsequent researchers to understand what were the difficulties and challenges that were encountered and how these were overcome, reasons for collecting certain data and how it was done.

Malinowski devoted himself to studying the "imponderabilia of everyday life" so well explained in his book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. This book is now a classic of anthropological literature. Many anthropologists have adopted the

ethnographic method of Malinowski and presented their ethnographies on the lines of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. In essence the fieldwork tradition established by Malinowski and which is essential to produce the rounded of description of a culture that we call an ethnography, requires a long term immersion of the researcher in the local culture. It is different from mere observation, for a casual observer can be mentally isolated from the situation under observation.

9.4 EMERGING TRENDS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD

The beginnings of ethnographic method are situated in functionalism. The basis of functionalism was the organic analogy which presented a synchronic picture of society. The focus was on what is happening in the present rather than what happened in the past. The other point of focus was on harmony as a normal state of being. Each culture was treated as unique and functional in its own way and amenable to study in its entirety. It is worthwhile to note that functionalism is a theoretical and methodological perspective which views society as a system of inter-related parts. These inter-related parts contribute to the stability of society. Functionalism seeks to understand and explain a custom or a culture feature in terms of its functions or the role it performs in society. In the book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski explained the role of magical and religious rites in stability and maintenance of social structure. Through use of ethnographic method, he found that magic arises and function in situations of uncertainty and emotional anxiety. It performs the function of relieving anxiety in situations of crisis and instils hope and faith among the people. Malinowski was inspired to analyze the ethnographic data in the perspective of functionalism.

In more recent times with wider philosophical transformations regarding the reality of the world, the ethnographic method too has undergone change from being an objective method to far more subjective method in which the researcher interprets data in light of her/his own subjectivity. It is however important for researchers to reveal their subjective position and also to concentrate more on 'narratives' (i.e., personal account of people) to allow the voices of the informants to come through.

Thus one does not presume any more that people within a culture would have the same experiences and similar life. In contemporary times ethnographic method incorporates the view that different people have their own version of reality. Each person's account is treated as authentic. Care is taken to make the data representative of all segments of society and not of a few privileged, 'key informants'. The choice of key informants should in itself take care of different segments of the social reality that is being observed.

Earlier, community was loosely referred to as a group of people living in a common territory and practices the same culture. In contemporary time, however, people of a community migrate to different parts of a country and even different

parts of the world. Hence, when a researcher sets out to make an ethnographic study of, for example, Santhals. The researcher might have to visit different parts of India and even abroad to present an ethnography. This enterprise of carrying out ethnographic study at many locales is referred as 'multi-sited ethnography'. Now, sometimes, it may not be possible to visit all the places where Santhals have migrated. In such a situation the researcher might have to use digital means (e.g., computer, smart phones etc.) to collect data. The use of digital means in ethnographic method results in what is commonly understood is 'digital ethnography'.

Data for digital ethnography is chiefly collected through online questionnaires, digital videos, social networking websites, and blogs. Let us examine each one of these in detail.

(i) Online Questionnaire: For long, researchers have used the technique of questionnaire for data collection. Questionnaires were often printed and sent to respondents through post. With the coming of computers and acquired efficiency of communication through email, questionnaires came to be sent by email. In recent times, however, questionnaire hosting services (such as survey monkey) are readily available. They make it easy to design, deploy, and analyze web-based questionnaires. Online questionnaires can be easily stored and retrieved quickly (even when the number is very large). Further, they can be conveniently subjected to quantitative analysis as it is possible to export data to SPSS or some other package for analysis. Additionally, online questionnaires have a global reach. Consider the case of an online questionnaire on the use of mobile phone by youth. Now, depending on the scope of the study, the online questionnaire could be sent to youth in different parts of the country as also different parts of the world. It has been found that respondents frequently mail the questionnaire to their friends and acquaintances with a personal request to respond. This widens the data-base of the study. Of course, it is possible to apply filters and make use of restricted data from the sample. Let us go back to the example of study on use of mobile phone by the youth. If a researcher wants to restrict analysis to women respondents from south Asia, she/he could apply filters and, from the large data set, selects data pertaining to women in south Asia.

(ii) Digital Videos: Many times, people upload their videos on different sites. These videos could present a social situation or an event as it occurs in a natural setting or it could be performed for the camera. In both cases, digital videos provide a rich source of data for researchers. If they depict a social situation in natural setting, researcher develops an understanding of how it happens; if the situation is performed for the camera, researcher develops an understanding of what is important for the people, what is it that they want to show. The researcher has to, however, be watchful and place what is shown in the digital video in its proper context or else, the data would be misleading.

(iii) Social Networking Websites: Research can be enriched with use of social networking websites. The sites generate a large data-base of people who closely or remotely share common interests. Social networking websites such as Facebook show how people put up their personal details that are available to a large number of people to discuss, comment, ridicule or even troll. These details are used by researchers. Let us find out how social networking websites can be useful to ethnographers and what difficulties they hold in Box 9.3.

Box 9.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Networking Websites for Researchers

Specifically, social networking sites can be useful to ethnographers in the following ways:

- 1) they are virtual 'gatekeepers' with chains of 'friends' who are potential research respondents;
- 2) they contain vast stores of multimedia material regarding even the most marginal social movements of groups;
- 3) ethnographers can invisibly observe the social interactions of page members, gleaning a previously unavailable type of ethnographic data;
- 4) pages can be created by social researchers with the explicit purpose of conducting research online (e.g. focus groups watch an embedded video and comment on it);
- 5) the structure of relationships on the sites is a useful research method itself with, as Garton et al. (1999:78) argue, the content, direction, and strength of the relationship 'strands' fruitful approach;
- 6) pages can be created by social researchers to disseminate useful information to the public, an approach taken by the creators of the 'Cure Diabetes' MySpace page (Barsky and Purdon, 2006).

Though very alluring, the drawback of these research options is that membership of these communities is inherently restricted to the digital 'have nots', and ethnic/gender digital divides strongly persist, an issue I discuss here. While allowing for these gaps or omissions, research done through social networking sites is suited to projects whose respondents are either familiar with or can be trained on the requisite technologies. That being said, the use of social networking sites for focus groups, for example, can result in increased inclusion for those with disabilities (mobility and otherwise) as well as groups that are vulnerable or otherwise difficult to access (Murthy 2008:844-845).

(iv) Blogs: Many people write blogs on a regular basis. These are read and commented upon by others. Blogs present a person's perspective and other people's response to it. Use of blogs in research could serve as one of the means of data collection and interpretation. It would be worthwhile, to use it along with other sources rather than singularly.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What is multi-sited ethnography?

.....
.....
.....
.....

- 2) List the main sources of data collection used in for digital ethnography.

.....
.....
.....
.....

9.5 MERITS AND DEMERITS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD

As we have understood, the ethnographic method involves close interaction with people under study over a prolonged period of time. This has both advantages and disadvantages. Let us examine the merits of ethnographic method first followed by its demerits.

Merits of Ethnographic Method: The value of ethnographic method has gained rather than lost its importance over a period of time. The depth and authenticity of information that can be gained by being with the people and participating in their daily life activities as much as possible cannot be replaced by any other method.

Also, use of ethnographic method enables the researcher to understand the culture and behaviour of a people in its context. The researcher develops empathy for comes to respect other cultures. This empathy leads not only to precise understanding and appreciation of the people and culture under study but also to a more humane way of dealing with other issues in life.

Further, as pointed out by the famous anthropologist, Lev'i-Strauss use of ethnographic method enables us to look below the surface, at deeper levels of interconnections of social phenomenon. Let us consider the example of a group dance by people under study to attract rain. Now, for anyone who watches it, the main issue will be to find out whether the dance led to rainfall or not.

For the researcher using the ethnographic method, this issue is not of much concern. More important than finding out whether rain was caused by the dance or not, is what function the group dance performed and how the people related with it. The group dance could have fostered solidarity and cohesiveness in society, it could have brought enemies together as performers or audience; it could reflect the social organization of the people. The more time one spends with a people, the more insights one gains on their way of doing things and how they relate to the world. It is by this process that ethnographers have gained insights into different cosmologies, and philosophies. They have discovered that

gender can be constructed in many different ways, that man and woman can be constructed differently in different cultures, that death can be understood in a variety of forms.

Demerits of Ethnographic Method: At one time it was believed that societies were like as organisms constituted of different parts and that the main objective of an ethnographer was to show the interconnections between different aspects of society. If this was true, then any one ethnographer's account would be same as another ethnographer's account. There would essentially have to be only one explanation of social functioning, and that would be essentially the 'true' one. But soon such a proposition was demonstrated to be imprecise. The famous example is that of Margaret Mead-Derek Freeman controversy. The findings of Margaret Mead based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Samoa were contradicted by Derek Freeman who conducted ethnographic study in the same area. He argued that what Mead had reported was not an unbiased picture of the Samoans but coloured by her own position as a young female student. There was soon an overall agreement that ethnographic research could never be unbiased and could never yield complete knowledge that was free from the subject position of the observer.

Additionally, ethnographic method is time-consuming. There is also a likelihood that the ethnographer is not accepted by the people or not allowed to carry out in-depth fieldwork in the area. There could be many reasons for this e.g., ideological difference between researcher and people under study, overall sense of dislike for the researcher.

9.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed the ethnographic method. We began with understanding what ethnography is. We discussed how ethnographic study is carried out. Thereafter, we focused attention on the ethnographic method. We discussed key consideration in use of ethnographic method. Key considerations in use of ethnographic method were discussed. Finally, we dwelt upon the emerging trends in ethnographic research.

9.7 REFERENCES

- Berreman, Gerald D. 2004. 'Ethnography: Method and Product', *Methodology and Fieldwork*, edited by Vinay Kumar Srivastava. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Hammersley, M. and P. Atkinson. 1995. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Murthy, Dhiraj. 2008. Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research. *Sociology* 42(5): 837–855.
- O' Reilly, Karen. 2005. *Ethnographic Methods*. London: Routledge.

9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Ethnography as a method of research refers to a composite range of techniques of data collection that are used in combinations to develop a holistic understanding of the way of life of a group. Ethnography as a product of research refers to the descriptive account presented by the researcher as an outcome of research.
- 2) Two distinguishing features of ethnographic research are: first, it is based on data collected by researcher over a prolonged period of time in the course of which they live with the people and participate in their daily activities; and second, it presents people's point of view and interpretation of data is situated in the local context of the people under study.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The enterprise of carrying out ethnographic study at many locales is referred as 'multi-sited ethnography'.
- 2) Data for digital ethnography is collected through online questionnaire; digital video; social networking websites; and blogs.