An Introduction to Ethnography

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Background and History

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What is ethnography?

- It is "the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution". (**Simpson & Coleman 2017**)

- It's "a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, and representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience." (**Willis & Trondman 2002**)

- Centrality of the method to anthropology

- Centrality of field-work to the method

- The two-pronged nature of the method: acquiring and interpreting data

- Centrality of capturing the natives' view / worldview

- The method may be employed in all domains of the social sciences

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History of the Method

Bases on *The Changing Story of Ethnography (2003)* by Robin Patrick Clair

- The First Wave of Colonialism

- The Second Wave of Colonialism

- The Third Wave of Colonialism

- The Fourth Wave of Colonialism

- The Linguistic Turn

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History of the Method (continued)

- **First wave:** The ancient world; Herodotus (3rd century BC)

- **Second wave:** The "classical" phase; 1800s; European colonial expansion; Ethnographers attempt to "save" native cultures; The "Other"; Henry Lewis Morgan, Edward Tyler, and Franz Boas

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History of the Method (continued)

- **Third wave:** The two World Wars & the response to them; colonial powers tightening grip on the colonies; anthropologists carrying out the classical trend into new territories (such as sociological ethnography); Marcel Mauss (Émil Durkheim's nephew) and Antonio Gramsci in sociological ethnography, and Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, and E. Evans Pritchard in the anthropological scene.

- **Fourth wave:** Postwar globalisation; moving on from the "Third World" to studying globalisation of capitalist engagement; Americanisation…

History of the Method (continued)

- **The linguistic Turn:** the presumption that language shapes culture and reality

- The linguistic interpretive turn

- Critical and radical feminists' linguistic turn

- The postmodern linguistic turn

- The post-colonial turn

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Elements — Main Features

Ethnography is a research method which provides **an _alternative_ to traditional quantitative research** and it is a **qualitative research** method where researchers study the research subjects in their own environment.

Ethnographers study people, social groups, religious groups and ethnic population, etc. by using _**qualitative**_ **research tools**, such as ① **observation** ② **interview** ③ **survey** ④ **archival research** and ⑤ **data analysis**;

This methodology is commonly used in the field of **humanities** and **social science** (e.g., psychology/sociology) and **research ethics** has to be considered.

Elements — Main Features

Key Characteristics of Ethnography

· **Contextual**: The research is carried out in the context in which the subjects normally live and work.

· **Collaborative**: The research involves the participation of stakeholders other than just researchers.

· **Unobtrusive**: The research avoids manipulating the phenomena under investigation.

· **Interpretative**: The researcher carries out interpretative analyses of the data (collected).

· **Longitudinal**: The research has a relatively long time-span.

· **Organic**: There is interaction between questions/hypotheses and data collection/interpretation.

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Elements — What do they mean?

① Observation

Two types: Participant observation & Non-participant observation (*Naturalism*)

Participant observation — study of a particular individual/groups of participants through direct interaction (immersion); permission to follow, observe and document the daily activities of subjects is required.

Non-participant observation (a.k.a. *Naturalism/Live and Work*) — study of groups of people in public places by watching a variety of people interacting (not focus on a specific individual); eavesdroppers

Elements — What do they mean?

② Interview — *Converse with research subjects as they engage in activities related to the research contexts*

Three types: Structured / Semi-structured / Unstructured. Interview allows the researcher to gather the most relevant and authentic information from the research group.

Structured interview — a specific set of questions with limitations placed on subject responses; interested in learning about specific parts/themes.

Semi-structured interview — begin with a general framework but are free to evolve around the subjects' narratives (the subject is able to get sidetracked)

Unstructured interview — subjects can speak freely in the interview while the researcher may begin with a general prompt to gain trust and support the free expression of the subject.

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Elements — What do they mean?

③ Survey/Ethnography Survey

Survey in ethnography is an <u>inductive research method</u> (a.k.a. analytic induction) (Question types can be open-ended questions/MCQs and close-ended questions)

Researchers outline hypotheses in survey questions and administer them.

It gathers relevant data for analysis and the aim is to discover the <u>causative factors of certain habits/behavior</u> of the research group and come up with explanations.

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Elements —— What do they mean?

④ Archival Research

A qualitative approach to ethnographic research — <u>analyze existing research, documents and other sources of information</u> about the research group.

The focus on collecting related documents from the past substitutes the actual physical presence in the research environment.

It could reduce the chances of experimental biases and increases accuracy in findings due to access to large repository of research data. However, there may be biases when the data is recorded and this could also affect the research outcome.

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Elements — What do they mean?

⑤ Data Analysis (**Qualitatively**)

Data analysis is usually done **qualitatively** based on a variety of **qualitative data sources** (E.g., observations / interviews / images). Some examples are:

Analytic induction: Essentially positivistic (hypothesis testing) for qualitative research and has gradually fallen into disuse.

*Grounded theory approach/Coding: Theory develops out of data through an iterative relationship.

Analyze (photographic) images: Internal narrative (content) and external narrative (object)

Glaser and Strauss 1967

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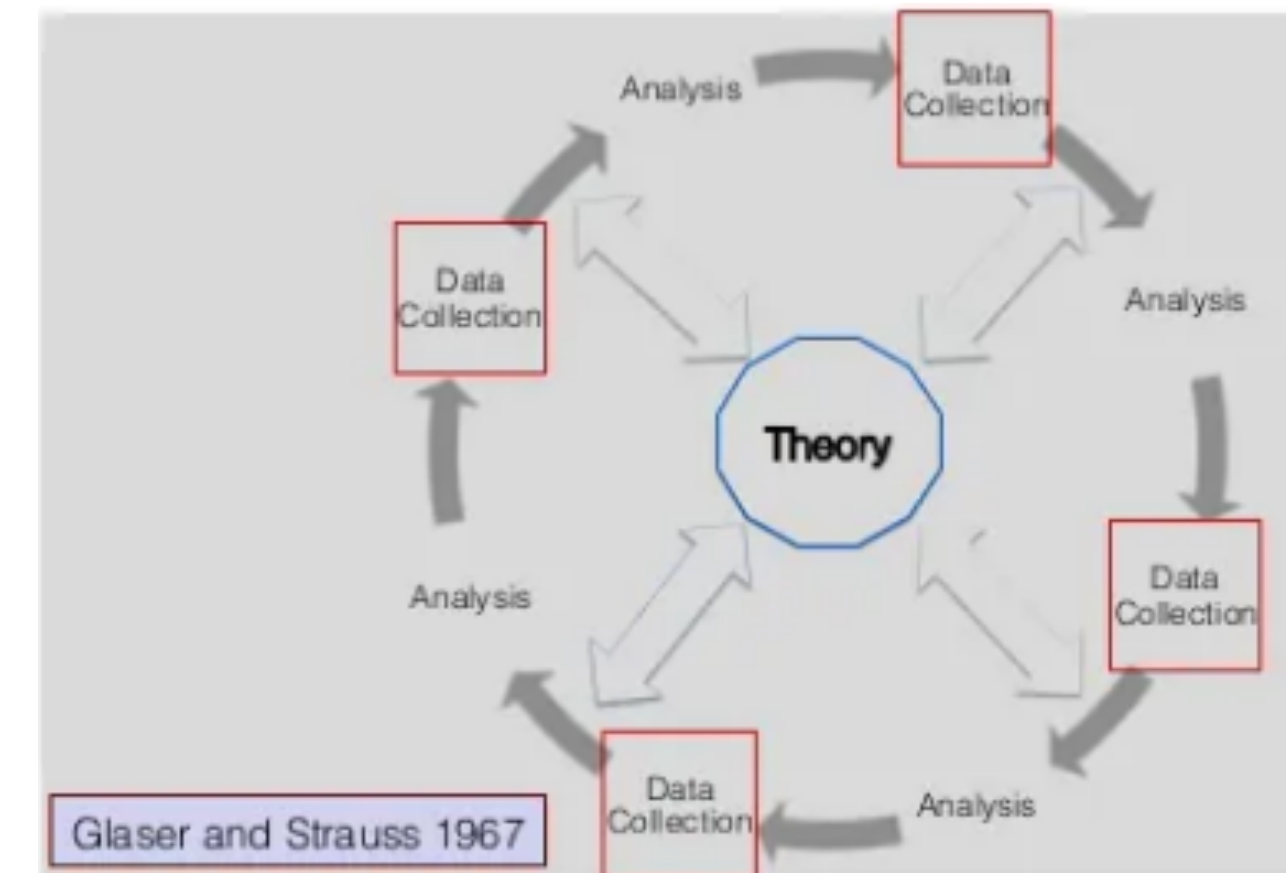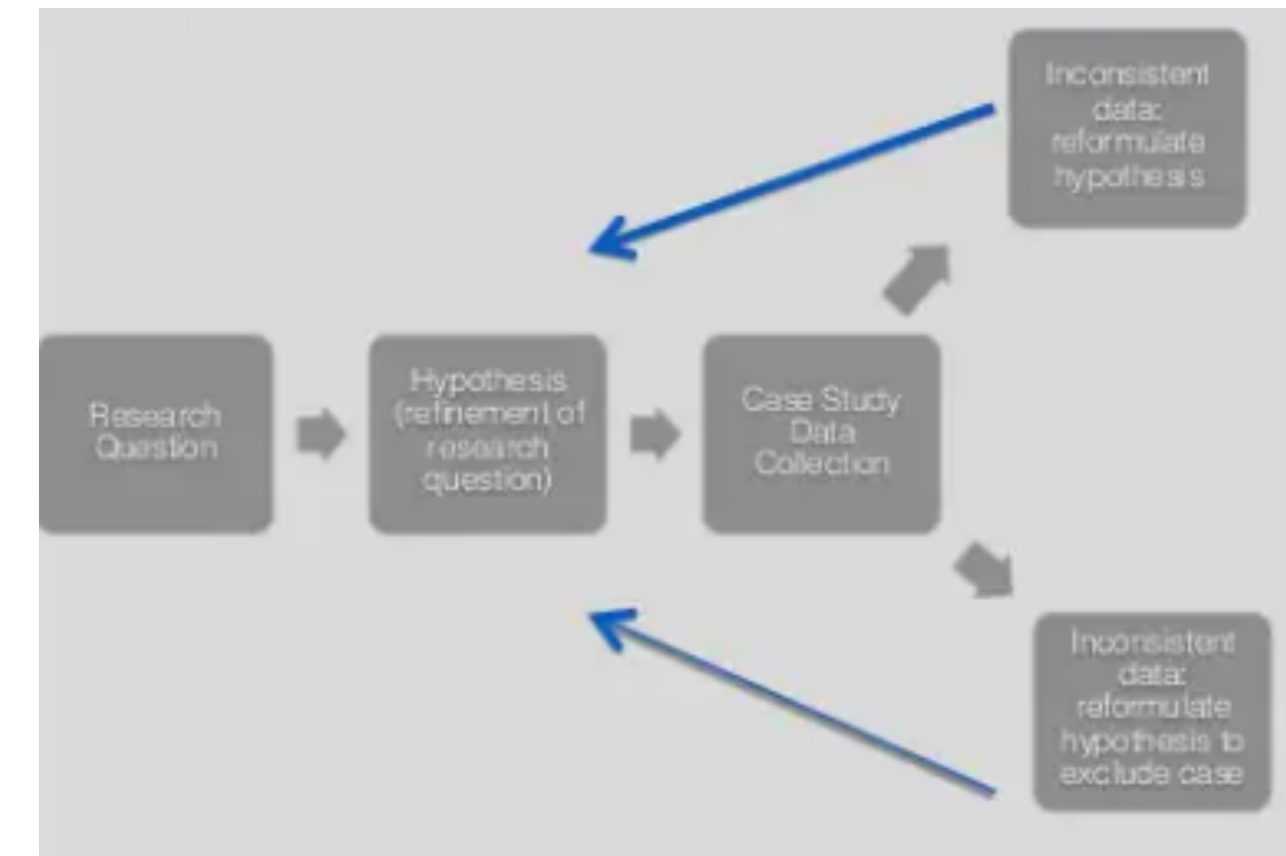
Elements — What do they mean?

Ethical Considerations in Ethnography

Ethnographic research involves **human beings**. In order to avoid harm/invasion of privacy/deception to the research subjects, it is important to consider the **ethical and moral implications** of the research project on people involved.

Before conducting research, ethnographers must obtain **approval** from the University /Organization Research Ethics Committee to appropriately engage with human subjects.

Ethnographers must also obtain informed **consent** from the research subjects, with documentation showing the understanding of what their cooperation entails and that they are voluntarily taking part.

Approaches to Ethnographic research

Ethnography may appear in numerous forms, but each has its own place and its purpose

1. Holistic School

2. The Semiotic School

3. Critical Ethnography

4. Auto-Ethnography

5. Netnography

6. Multispecies ethnography

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Approaches to Ethnographic research

- **The Holistic School**
- The antropologist should "go native" and live just like the local people
- The purpose is to make yourself a blank slate, then absorb and soak the culture around you

- **Critical Ethnography (+feminist ethnography)**
- Sees social life as constructed in contexts of power
- Explicitly sets out to critique hegemony, oppression, and asymmetrical power relations in order to foster social change

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Approaches to Ethnographic research

The Semiotic School

- **No empathy with the subject of research**

- **Main focus on symbolic forms, such as words, images, institutions, behaviours**

- **Rooted in linguistic science and the theory of codes**
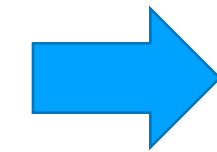
Thick description

(Clifford Geertz)

Providing enough contextual information so that a person outside the setting can make meaning of the behavior

Approaches to Ethnographic research

Netnography

(Online ethnography, Virtual Ethnograsphy)

- **Studies communities on the Internet**

- **Fieldwork in the virtual world through computer-mediated ways of communication**

Auto-ethnography

- **Autobiography (writing) + Ethnography (observation)**

- **Focus on researcher's own subjective personal experiences**

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Approaches to Ethnographic research

Multispecies ethnography

- Studies the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social world

- Centers on how a multitude of organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces

- Goes in line with biological and ecological research, wildlife management

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Criticism

Ethnography has been criticized for the same reasons that qualitative research in general is criticized:

- Too subjective
- Too value laden
- Not replicable
- Not generalizable
- Trivial conclusions

- No validity
- Doesn't prove anything
- Not empirical
- Neither rigorous nor systematic, hence unscientific

(Borman et al., 1986)

"Because of the success of science, there is a kind of a pseudo-science. Social science is an example of a science which is not a science. They follow the forms. You gather data, you do so and so and so forth, but they don't get any laws, they haven't found out anything. They haven't got anywhere – yet. Maybe someday they will, but it's not very well developed."

-Richard Feynman

Criticism

- **The debate between quantitative vs qualitative research was especially heated in the 1980s**

- **Today more peaceful coexistence between ethnographic and quantitative sociological and management research traditions**

- **Issues still rise when quantitative researchers are made to review research done by ethnographers**

(Borman et al., 1986; Brewer, 1994; Small, 2009)

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Criticism

- **Ethnographers themselves have also criticized ethnography**

    - Reliability of ethnographic descriptions questioned

    - Ethnographers attacked as unreflexive, uncritical, and naïve

- **Postmodernism poses two crises to ethnography:**

    - Crisis of representation – all accounts of social life are equally valid

    - Crisis of legitimation – all criteria for evaluating ethnography are just language games

(Brewer, 1994, 2000; Small, 2009)

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Group discussion

How applicable or relevant is ethnography to your:

- Own research

- The phenomenon you study

- Broader field of inquiry

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The Aim of Ethnography

The central aim of ethnography is to provide rich, holistic insights into peoples' world views and actions, as well as the nature of the location they inhabit (Hughes, 1992).

"The task [of ethnographers] is to document the culture, the perspectives and practices of the people in these settings. The aim is to 'get inside' the way each group of people sees the world" (Hammersley, 1985, p. 152).

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The Success of Ethnography towards Its Aim

- **Knowledge Generation**

  - "Close in contact with far-out lives" (Geertz, 1988, p.6).

    Researcher takes the role as an insider of a social group to some degree to observe and experience life as an insider would.

  - Benefits

    - Data collection is direct rather than being reported at a later time point and is unmediated through participant interpretation or the passage of time.
    - The role of the ethnographer as an insider reduces the Hawthorne effects of observation as they are less visible as an outsider.
    - It can be valuable to approach hard-to-reach situations in research.
      Examples: male youth drinking and drug abuse in town (Pavis and Cunningham-Burley, 1999) and grassroots movements of worker cooperatives in accounting practices (Bryer, 2014)

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The Success of Ethnography towards Its Aim

- **Knowledge Generation**

  - 'Thick Description' and 'Thin Description' (Geertz, 1973)

    - 'Thick Description' states that ethnographers must present a report which is composed not only of facts but also of commentary, interpretation, and meta-interpretations.
    - 'Thin Description' relates to a superficial, descriptive, and factual account lacking interpretation and failing to explore the underlying meanings, intentions, or circumstances of actions.

Thick description is not simply a matter of amassing and presenting relevant details. It is the interpretative characteristic, rather than the detail, that makes the description of the social settings and activities thick.

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The Success of Ethnography towards Its Aim

- **Theoretical Building**

  - 'Emic' and 'etic' perspectives

    - The emic perspective is the explanation of the social world provided by those within the cultural group.

    - The etic perspective is a theoretical description which attempts broader and more abstract conclusions about the social world. It enables ethnographers to maximise the anthropological position of strangeness and not to take for granted what a member of the community would consider unremarkable.

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The Success of Ethnography towards Its Aim

- **Theoretical Building**

  - Triangulation

    - Researchers tend to use different methods iteratively rather than formal data collection.

      Example: Bunce et al. (2014) adopted observation, diaries, interviews, document review, surveys, and group discussions in their ethnographic process evaluation of a technology-based diabetes intervention in health clinics.

    - Emerging topics and themes can be uncovered using appropriate methods, in order to build concepts and theories.

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The Success of Ethnography towards Its Aim

- **Applied Ethnographical Research**

  Ethnography can be used to supplement quantitative information and add flesh to some of the statistical correlations and factual data used to inform decision making (Brewer, 2000).

  - Ethnography can be the primary source of data (Brewer, 2000)
    - when actors' social meanings are required in order to move beyond the casual explanations derived from statistical explanations;
    - when a longitudinal element is required in order to study social processes over time;
    - when the subjects of the research or the topic are not amenable to study by quantitative means.

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Question

What is the study of people in naturally occurring settings by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher's direct participation in the setting to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally?

Answer: Ethnography

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