

SA1003

INTRODUCTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY:  
THEMES

FORMATIVE ESSAY

Define 'ethnography' and discuss its advantages and pitfalls as a research method.

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## INTRODUCTION

The following essay aims to define ‘ethnography’, a concept which has a variation of definitions which will be discussed as no single definition can represent entirely all the required important attributes that define this concept. There is much to consider with regards to ethnography, and thus this essay will be divided so as to clearly explain the definition and subsequently both the advantages and pitfalls that surround this type of research method.

Ethnography “combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives” (Tedlock, 2000). It is considered a ‘continuation of fieldwork’ rather than an account of the experiences throughout the time spent in the field. It has been said by some that ethnography is any research method “that involves *in situ* participant observation” (Ball and Ormerod, 2000). However for the past two centuries anthropologists have used numerous ethnographic methods to gather, analyse and present information. It was not until Malinowski suggested that to truly understand a culture you must see “the natives point of view” and that ‘*in situ* participant observation’ was exchanged for the researcher actually entering the society he or she is to study so as to “learn to see, think, feel and sometimes even behave as an insider or ‘native’” (Tedlock, 2000), thus having a deeper understanding of the social settings they study.

## Defining Ethnography

Ethnography has been adopted more recently as a useful methodology in many areas of study, not solely anthropology, but also “cultural studies, literary theory, folklore, women’s studies, nursing, law planning, and even industrial engineering”. It uses the method of “entering into firsthand interaction with people in their everyday lives” and by doing so ethnographers can “reach a better understanding of the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of their subjects than they can by using any other method” (Tedlock, 2000). “Ethnography is to the cultural or social anthropologist what lab research is to the biologist, what archival research is to the historian, or what survey is to the sociologist” (Monaghan & Just, 2000). It is the simple idea that to truly understand a society, cult, religion, ritual, culture – or any gathering of people, it is best to understand them by “interacting with them intimately and over an extended period” (Monaghan & Just, 2000). It is an ongoing attempt to “place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (Tedlock, 2000). This is achieved by transferring the observed information and researched data into a written and visual form that allows other scholars to compare, and those who have an interest - an insight into a society that of which is foreign to them.

The essential fieldwork required for ethnography “usually means living with and living like those who are studied” (Van Maanen, 1988: 2). Clifford and Marcus (1986: 13) noted that “since Malinowski’s time, the ‘method’ of participant-observation has enacted a delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity. The ethnographer’s personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognised as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and ‘objective’ distance.”

Hastrup notes (1992: 117) that fieldwork “is situated between autobiography and anthropology. It connects an important personal experience with a general field of knowledge.” In Birckheads ‘*Reading “Snake Handling”: Critical reflections*’, he touches upon the questions that are commonly asked before beginning fieldwork and throughout the duration of time spent in the field, although his questions refer to ‘snake handling’ they can be assigned to every ethnographic study, and so for the sake of this essay are slightly altered to fit a more general scope. He questions “What sense are ‘we’ to make of these ‘strange’ and ‘bizarre’ behaviours of popular depiction?... How should a society be classified, thought about, and hence interpreted, explained and represented?... What do we read it as? What do we read it against? What ethnographic and ethnological spaces do these practices fit?... What are the dominant themes, issues and questions? How are the beliefs, commitments, structures, and meanings over time maintained?” These questions may eventually lead to higher understanding of the study at hand and when answered alongside any other outstanding query, should give a detailed ethnographic study of a particular field of research.

## The Advantages and Pitfalls of Ethnography

Similar to any method of research, ethnography is faced with both advantages and disadvantages. The obvious advantages being that by allowing yourself to be totally immersed into a society you will have a fuller understanding of your type of research and the humans that surround you. By becoming a member of a society you will have access to information unobtainable by simple observation and questioning, Malinowski said that by entering into the lives of those on the Triobriand Islands he was given an insight into the society that was not available to him from a distance, he could ask 'natives' questions and his feedback would not be an assumption as to reasoning behind particular actions but the official motive of their acts.

However, Birkhead noticed in a reading by Edgerton and Langness (1974) "writing cannot adequately capture the full meaning and intensity of the behaviours of such groups". He also highlights that "the disparate written and visual texts do not add up to a comprehensive and clear picture of the meaning of the movements or of the existential colours of these peoples lives." From this we can understand that once the research is written on paper, those who read it will not appreciate as the researcher has. The writing cannot do the people justice.

Another issue raised is that when studying groups of people who perform rituals where pain is endured and the rituals are rarely but possibly illegal, one is confronted with many problems. The ethical issues that surround both witnessing and condoning illegal or maybe life threatening behaviours are consequences an anthropologist faces as they spend every day with such a group.

Ethnography can be a very biased form of research as those whom conduct this method of research differ widely and their beliefs and life

experiences may change the manner in which they interpret the situations they observe, and by proxy, the way they write about it. Birkhead wondered “how personality, formative influences, specific experiences and chance occurrences determine in a way the type of research one does and the way one conducts it... How these experiences inevitably set the tone, style and preoccupations of studies... Work is in retrospect, a direct outgrowth of a multiplicity of background factors and influences.” This could be considered both an advantage and pitfall as it would allow readers of two different ethnographers with the same field of study to see two points of view and methods of understanding, alternatively one could be distorted whereas another biased.

Anthropologists face many issues when entering a field, trying to ‘break into’ a secretive society that does not like to discuss the private practices of their lives and beliefs, and gaining the trust of the people you wish to study so as to attain as much knowledge as possible from the questions you wish to ask. Alternatively a society that simply does not wish to be studied, for no particular reason, will leave the researcher with difficulty to access of information.

Living amongst a society that is not your own is a problem faced by all Anthropologists – they must adjust to their surroundings whether they be plagued by heat, ice cold temperatures, loneliness and alienation. This is most likely when immersing yourself into a society which speaks a different language from your own and far away from home.

Alongside these issues an Anthropologist may immerse themselves so much into a society for a prolonged period of time that they may lose the vision of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and one becomes unable to distance themselves from “interaction and immediate experiences sufficiently to analyse and interpret the people of study anthropologically... No doubt intense

involvement in one group and with selected people in that group limits one's overall perspective to some degree." (Birckhead, 1999)

An ethnographer must be aware that time is constantly changing and the work one has done and the final result of their study is soon to be outdated, and the only way to maintain an updated ethnographic study is to revisit the group of people studied and re evaluate regularly. People die, move away, traditions phased out and new ones brought in.

By always re evaluating the study, one may always be fully informed on a society and although ethnography has many pitfalls, the experiences and learning curve will stay with the anthropologist forever and as Birckhead said "it was truly inspiring... I felt a strong sense of identity with the congregation... the thrill is gone without the serpents".



## Conclusion

To conclude, ethnography is a method of research used by all types of researchers, aiming to immerse them self fully into a specific group of people so as to answer unknown questions and give truth to possible bizarre scenarios or to make clear the unclear to those who do not understand. Despite being the most informative method of doing so, ethnography has many disadvantages that can affect both ethnographer and reader. Time can leave information outdated quickly and the researcher may find them self to be in awkward and lonely situations where information may be difficult to obtain due to unattained trust or secrecy. It may become difficult to distinguish what is normal to ones own society and normal in the society they study as one begins to understand and appreciate certain aspects that are not clear to outsiders which will effect the final result of research. However it is still universally and historically known as the best method of research to understand the unknown of humans and remains to be so today.

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