

Ethnography

The aim of this literature review is to look at the strengths and limitations of ethnographical research and also look at the origins and applications of this type of research method. Ethnography is a method of research that looks at behaviour and culture of people by observation. It is used to understand and explain socio-cultural activities such as schools, prisons, laboratories and hospitals etc. One of the most popular observations has been done by a William Whyte called “street corner society“. Whyte lived for three and a half years in a rough district in Boston that was known for its danger and the amount of crime, where immigrants from Italy had settled. Whyte observed gangs and accounted for how they formed and organised their activities. He was able to differentiate between “corner boys” who hung around certain street corners and local shops and also “college boys” who were more interested in a good education. Whyte was also observing the relations of the social structure, politics, and racketeering of this small district of Boston (Wikipedia, 2006). According to Atkinson and Hammersley (1994), ethnography describes forms of social research that focus on (a) exploring the nature of particular social experience, (b) gathering and using unstructured data, (c) using a relatively small number of informants, and (d) interpreting the meanings of human behaviour. To do an ethnographical experiment the experimenter needs to select a project area of interest collect data with interviews and also make ethnographical observations after all the data has been collected an analysis must be done so results can be drawn and then the findings written up into a report or journal.

The first ethnographical research was adopted from an anthropologist called Bronislaw Malinowski, who published the book “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” in 1922. Before Malinowski did their research through structured interviews and did not mix with informants in their day to day life so he detailed the importance of participant observation and that if anthropologists wanted to obtain detailed results of understanding other people and different cultures then there must be an interaction in their everyday life. (Darnell, 1974). The methods of an anthropologist are still used today in ethnography as there is more than one way to find an understanding from within a group these include interviewing which is used as both formal and informal methods, can help obtain data and information of understanding in the field of work. Interviewing is not the most reliable data as participants can exaggerate or say what they think you want them to say. Observations and informal diaries can also be kept on the relevance of the research area so that what the participant thinks can be used as data. Data for the research can also be collected in a number of different ways but the most important one used for ethnography is the field notes taken from the researcher which is a written account of the social activities. This is normally written after the observations have been made. Also photos and videoed or taped research can be used so the researcher can make notes later (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003)

Before conducting an ethnography experiment a number of questions that all researcher must think about before starting to collect data.

Why “What are my personal motivations for studying this topic? Why this place?
this community? Why these people? How, if at all, will this study benefit me
personally? (e.g., Will the study of an “exotic” community enhance prospects
for tenure?) What cultural or personal perspectives and biases do I bring to this
process, and how might those shape the various phases of this work

(e.g., conceptualisation, attention to data, interpretation, relationships with community members)? Why am I doing this research at this historical, personal, or professional moment? In what concrete ways will the community be benefited or harmed by this work?"

(Suzuki *et al*, 2004)

Not seriously thinking about these questions can lead to classical problems like creating or recreating inaccurate, stereotypical, or eroticised views of communities. (Suzuki *et al*, 2004). The researcher also need to think about how they will do their research there are three ways a researcher can collect their data (1) total participating which is where the researcher is fully involved in the field rather than just observing the situation. (2) participant-researcher where the researcher switches between observing and involving themselves in the settings. So getting a hands on approach whilst also sitting back and observing from a distance. (3) And finally a total researcher where the researcher is only there to observe no hands on data is collected this keeps the researcher both emotionally and physically separate (Ethnographic research, 2004)

There are many difficulties that arise from using an ethnography study. Even though there are the advantages of this test being conducted in the informants natural settings and the research is being done in flexible time and is a good experiment to do on kids or mental patients etc from whom it is difficult to collect data from. There are also a number of problems of the researchers presence which may invertible affect the social situation as the informants being observed may feel judged or evaluated and act different if they know they are being watched. The problem of intervention may arise in the situation and there may be the sense of conflict for example if the researcher is trained in the field of the setting they are observing should the researcher respond if the incorrect practise is being observed (Hilton, 1987). Another problem that may occur is that the researcher may become too relaxed in the situation which will make the data collected limited and distorted due to the researcher becoming over-friendly and over-identifying, to solve this it is better if the researcher has previous experience of the settings so they have knowledge and feels more relaxed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995)

Using ethnography as a research project brings up a number of ethical issues. There are two types of observational data that can be collected for ethnographical research, covert data is when the informant does not actually know there is a researcher observing and that data is being collected whereas overt data collection is when the researcher fully informs the informant that they are being observed and analysed. But most ethnographers feel guilty about observing and exploiting a relationship for data that is confidential to the researcher (Hilton, 1987). There is a particular issue that researcher feels they are exploiting the informants, as they may feel betrayed as many researchers manipulate and deceive the situation. Many ethnographers pretend to be naive when they are not others may misrepresent them in order to gain their data. Also they may be gathering data from other peoples troubles like attending funerals etc. which could be seen by others as an invasion of privacy (Warin, 2000). Trying to obtain informed consent may be problematic to the research as it could affect the data as the participant may act different if they know they are being watched, but it would be most important when trying to avoid exploitation of informants and would also help the researcher if he/she was not treated as a colleague or a consultant and is just aloud to stand and watch (Pryer & Grossbart, 2005). Todahl did an experiment

on Collaborative Health Care in a Primary Care Setting were he invited participants to participate after the institutional review board approval, also all the patients that were used also gave there agreement, the researchers are fully licensed marriage and family therapists. The investigators were only directly connected with the site as researchers and treated in that way (Todahl *et al*, 2004). Another study done by (The, 2002) did a study on elderly patients with dementia, in this case it was not possible to get written permission from elderly patient so to work around this issue permission was granted by management teams of the care homes they lived in, the doctors of each patient, the nursing staff of the home , and representatives (mostly relatives) of the patients. This study was looking at the withholding artificial administration of fluids and food. Another study that was done was looked at how many errors were given in intravenous drug doses given out by nurses. Taxis and Barber (2003) looked at the preparation or the administration of almost half of intravenous drug doses in 10 wards in two UK hospitals. The observation of this ethnographic study was a disguised study and non of the nurses knew they were being observed and data written on them. Potentially moderate errors occurred in 29% of the intravenous drug doses, and potentially serious errors in 1%. The most common errors were giving bolus doses too fast and poor preparation of drugs that required several steps. But this was probably because nurses were only sent on a day course to administrate intravenous drugs.

Ethnography is a qualitative approach with origins in anthropology, and has been used in a variety of studies. The strength of this study is that it is done in the field of the research and first hand observation and data is collected which gives history and in depth data of first hand account information. But it does have its doubts that the researcher may not have enough experience and become to self involved in the project and not pick up key data or may not be able to build up trust with the participants/informants which can lead to lose of data from key roles within the researcher field. Many informants are vulnerable to exploitation of then researcher if consent is not gained from all involved and that no one is put in danger or affected from the research.

Even though there are some problems with using ethnography as a type of research it may be the best and many situations like hospitals as ethnography looks at data and research that other types of methods like interviews cannot look at. As it looks at what people really do rather than what they say or think they do. It helps look at the meaning of certain behaviours of people and how they act in certain situations.

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