# Ethnographic Research Perspective

**Ethnographic research** is a **qualitative method** where researchers observe and/or interact with a study's participants in their real-life environment. Ethnography was popularised by anthropology, but is used across a wide range of social sciences. **An ethnographic perspective** is when Ethnographers live alongside groups of people, watching, listening and asking questions, with the aim of revealing what people do and how they view their activities.

Ethnography is a type of **qualitative research** that gathers observations, interviews and documentary data to produce detailed and comprehensive accounts of different social phenomena. What sets **Sociology and Social Anthropology** apart from the natural sciences is the distinct subject matter of people, processes and cultures. Ethnography is a research method that was initially distinctive to Social Anthropology and later came into use in Sociology and which has emerged to address this specific subject matter. The ethnographic method involves the practice of “fieldwork” in which the researcher produces an account of a culture or society through close interaction, observation and engagement in the everyday life of people from a particular culture. The written account, which emerges from these observations, is also known as ethnography.

Of the various techniques and tools used to conduct ethnographic research, observation in general and participant observation in particular are among the most important. Ethnographers are trained to pay attention to everything

happening around them when in the field—from routine daily activities such as cooking dinner to major events such as an annual religious celebration. They observe how people interact with each other, how the environment affects people, and how people affect the environment. It is essential for anthropologists to rigorously document their observations, usually by writing field notes and recording their feelings and perceptions in a personal journal or diary.

Technique for gathering ethnographic data

## . Participant observation

As previously mentioned, **participant observation** involves ethnographers observing while they participate in activities with their informants. This technique is important because it allows the researcher to better understand why people do what they do from an emic perspective. Malinowski noted that participant observation is an important tool by which "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world."6

To conduct participant observation, ethnographers must live with or spend considerable time with their informants to establish a strong rapport with them. **Rapport** is a sense of trust and a comfortable working relationship in which the informant and the ethnographer are at ease with each other and agreeable to working together

## Conversations and Interviews

Another primary technique for gathering ethnographic data is simply talking with people—from casual, unstructured conversations about ordinary topics to formal scheduled interviews about a particular topic. An important element for successful conversations and interviews is establishing rapport with informants. Sometimes, engaging in conversation is part of establishing that rapport. Ethnographers frequently use multiple forms of conversation and interviewing for

a single research project based on their particular needs. They sometimes record the conversations and interviews with an audio recording device but more often they simply engage in the conversation and then later write down everything they recall about it. Conversations and interviews are an essential part of most ethnographic research designs because spoken communication is central to humans' experiences.

## Gathering Life Histories

Collecting a personal narrative of someone's life is a valuable ethnographic technique and is often combined with other techniques. Life histories provide the context in which culture is experienced and created by individuals and describe how individuals have reacted, responded, and contributed to changes that occurred during their lives. They also help anthropologists be more aware of what makes life meaningful to an individual and to focus on the particulars of individual lives, on the tenor of their experiences and the patterns that are important to them. Researchers often include life histories in their ethnographic texts as a way of intimately connecting the reader to the lives of the informants.

## The Genealogical Method

The genealogical (kinship) method has a long tradition in ethnography. Developed in the early years of anthropological research to document the family systems of tribal groups, it is still used today to discover connections of kinship, descent, marriage, and the overall social system. Because kinship and genealogy are so important in many nonindustrial societies, the technique is used to collect data on important relationships that form the foundation of the society and to trace social relationships more broadly in communities.

When used by anthropologists, the genealogical method involves using symbols and diagrams to document relationships. Circles represent women and girls, triangles represent men and boys, and squares represent ambiguous or unknown gender. Equal signs between individuals represent their union or marriage and vertical lines descending from a union represent parent-child relationships. The death of an individual and the termination of a marriage are denoted by diagonal lines drawn across the shapes and equal signs. Kinship charts are diagramed from the perspective of one person who is called the Ego, and all of the relationships in the chart are based on how the others are related to the Ego. Individuals in a chart are sometimes identified by numbers or names, and an accompanying list provides more-detailed information.

## Key Informants

Within any culture or subculture, there are always particular individuals who are more knowledgeable about the culture than others and who may have more-detailed or privileged knowledge. Anthropologists conducting ethnographic research in the field often seek out such cultural specialists to gain a greater understanding of certain issues and to answer questions they otherwise could not answer. When an anthropologist establishes a rapport with these individuals and begins to rely more on them for information than on others, the cultural specialists are referred to as key informants or key cultural consultants.

Key informants can be exceptional assets in the field, allowing the ethnographer to uncover the meanings of behaviors and practices the researcher cannot otherwise understand. Key informants can also help researchers by directly observing others and reporting those observations to the researchers, especially in situations in which the researcher is not allowed to be present or when the researcher's presence could alter the participants' behavior. In addition, ethnographers can check information they obtained from other informants, contextualize it, and review it for accuracy. Having a key informant in the field is like having a research ally. The relationship can grow and become enormously fruitful.

A famous example of the central role that key informants can play in an ethnographer's research is a man named Doc in William Foote Whyte's Street Corner Society (1943). In the late 1930s, Whyte studied social relations between street gangs and "corner boys" in a Boston urban slum inhabited by first- and second-generation Italian immigrants. A social worker introduced Whyte to Doc and the two hit it off. Doc proved instrumental to the success of Whyte's research. He introduced Whyte to his family and social group and vouched for him in the tight-knit community, providing access that Whyte could not have gained otherwise.

## Field Notes

Field notes are indispensable when conducting ethnographic research. Although making such notes is time-consuming, they form the primary record of one's observations. Generally speaking, ethnographers write two kinds of notes: field notes and personal reflections. Field notes are detailed descriptions of everything the ethnographer observes and experiences. They include specific details about what happened at the field site, the ethnographer's sensory impressions, and specific words and phrases used by the people observed. They also frequently include the content of conversations the ethnographer had and

things the ethnographer overheard others say. Ethnographers also sometimes include their personal reflections on the experience of writing field notes. Often, brief notes are jotted down in a notebook while the anthropologist is observing and participating in activities. Later, they expand on those quick notes to make more formal field notes, which may be organized and typed into a report. It is common for ethnographers to spend several hours a day writing and organizing field notes.

Ethnographers often also keep a personal journal or diary that may include information about their emotions and personal experiences while conducting research. These personal reflections can be as important as the field notes. Ethnography is not an objective science. Everything researchers do and experience in the field is filtered through their personal life experiences. Two ethnographers may experience a situation in the field in different ways and understand the experience differently. For this reason, it is important for researchers to be aware of their reactions to situations and be mindful of how their life experiences affect their perceptions. In fact, this sort of reflexive insight can turn out to be a useful data source and analytical tool that improves the researcher's understanding.

Only through the very personal and emotionally devastating experience of losing his wife was Rosaldo able to understand the emic perspective of the headhunters. The result was an influential and insightful ethnographic account.

## Advantages of Ethnographic Fieldwork

The knowledge produced by ethnographic fieldwork of different cultures is different from that of archival research or of armchair Anthropology. It allows the researcher to record firsthand observations about cultures instead of relying only on textual and other secondary material.

In the Indian context, the interest in ethnographies of villages in the mid twentieth century emerged in the context of the nationalist imagination. They provided accounts of local caste practices, social transformations etc., in the villages as opposed to earlier works of Indologists who primarily relied on textual

sources and on informants. The shift in perspectives arising from the use of different sources of data has been identified as the shift from the “book view” to the “field view” (Srinivas 1996: 200). The ‘locally contextualised’ perspective offered by informed, sensitive, observation of the systems of exchange and customs of the caste system was strikingly different from the textual understanding of the Varna system.

## Challenges of Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork

- Researchers have to be careful so as not to romanticise the culture being observed. Malinowski (1930) cautioned against a tendency of ethnographers to notice and write about sensational, and of treating customs and beliefs of a culture as a collector might treat savage “curios” (ibid: 217).
- Researchers following the classical ethnographic approach of long periods of fieldwork might feel bouts of “homesickness” and a yearning for one’s own way of life.
- Researchers must attain ‘communicative competence’ in the field and be familiar in the language spoken in the field. The linguistic requisite sometimes restricts ethnographer to English speaking sites in a transcultural multi-sited Ethnography.
- The concept of doing ethnography has been reworked with shifting concerns of Anthropology and Sociology and changing perspectives about culture in the contemporary world. The researcher must not just record observations made in the field, but also try and understand the meanings attached to the various actions and practices of the natives in the field.
- The researcher must conform to a code of ethics so as

not to harm or breach the confidence of anyone. Also, a researcher is situated between intersecting roles of an individual, a scientist, and a cultural translator (Robben & Sluka 2011). If a multi-sited approach is followed, a researcher must carefully constitute the sites of the field.

The aim of multi-sited ethnography is not just to compare different cultural contexts, but to explore the linkages and relationships between a set of sites.

- Where the distinction between the "home" and the "field" of the ethnographer is not valid, the researcher must be careful in problematising a culture that is familiar to her or him.
- Fieldwork and immersion in a field in a culture, which is different from the researcher's own, is challenging. But an ethnographer can face different kinds of challenges when the field is not too far away from "home", particularly in a discipline where the tradition of a faraway "other" culture has been a model for ethnography (Robben & Sluka 2011). Thick description or being self-reflexive can pose challenges for an ethnographer writing about a context s/he otherwise takes for granted.
- One of the principal challenges faced by ethnographers on "returning" from the "field", from the hiatus of their everyday life is how to order the diffuse and varied materials collected in the field and write it up.

## Limitations of the Ethnographic Approach

- The ethnographic approach of doing fieldwork relies on the observations made by the ethnographer in the present. Events or situations in the past that give meaning to occurrences in the observed present are, therefore, not

observed firsthand. Also, it is helpful for primarily those aspects of a culture that are observable.

- A researcher can be conflicted between ethical imperatives of being neutral in the field and her/his own moral standpoint. It can be challenging for a researcher, for example, to refrain from interfering in a fight, or to make decisions about abandoning “scientific objectivism” in the field when someone faces the threat of violence.
- The writing of ethnography can be challenging and relies to a great extent on the interpretations of the ethnographer. Works like that of Annette Weiner (1992) or that of Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (1996) that talk about a genre of feminist ethnography, are examples of how the same spaces could yield starkly different ethnographic accounts by different researchers when viewed from the lens of gender.
- Finally, the questions about what kind of distance is necessary for a context to be a ‘field’, the positioning of an ethnographer as a native or an outsider are not resolvable and researchers must evolve their own techniques of distancing or familiarising the alien and constitute a field according to their research interests.