
The Advantages And Disadvantages Of Ethnographic Research

Anthropology is the scientific study of the origin and the physical, social, and cultural development of humans and their evolutionary history, how they behave, adapt to different environments, communicate and socialize. Anthropologists try to comprehend what makes us human by studying our ancestors through archaeological excavation and by observing living cultures and societies all through the world. (Thomas Hylland Eriksen)

The general methodological structure most connected with anthropology is ethnography, a methodology that can be characterized as the systematic documentation and interpretation of human societies in real life. Ethnography is the in-depth investigation of a culture or an aspect of a culture. Interviewing abilities, direct or participant perception, learning the local language, information recording and coding, and different parts of qualitative research are the establishments of all ethnographic work. (John Van Willigen) Ethnography can be seen as probably the only truly influential 'invention' of anthropological linguistics, having triggered important developments in social-scientific fields and having caused a degree of attention to small details in human interaction previously unaddressed in many fields of the social sciences. (Blommaert and Dong Jie)

Problems of interpretation have always figured in debates on and in ethnography, as did matters of method versus interpretation and issues of aligning ethnography with one discipline or another.

Ethnographic research is a method in which a researcher observes the study participants, and also engages in the activities of the research group in either a participatory or passive manner. The researcher's role may be known or unknown to the other study participants. Participant observation is developed from motivation on the part of sociologists to describe and understand the patterns of life in different parts of society using nonobtrusive methods (Tesch, 1990).

In terms of method, the word 'ethnography' refers to social research in which people's behavior is studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher. Data are gathered from a range of sources, but observation and relatively informal conversations are usually the main ones, the data are collected in as raw form. The focus is usually a single setting or group, of relatively small scale. The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most. As a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the sort of approach that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings. It is less specialized and less technically sophisticated than approaches like the experiment or the social survey. (M. Hammersley, 1990).

Participant observation can be critical at times. Whereas in most other approaches, the target of scientific method is simplification and reduction of complexity, the target in ethnography is precisely the opposite. Reality is kaleidoscopic, complex and complicated. Fieldwork itself is humanly demanding, as a fieldworker will need to give proof of all the good qualities in life:

patience, endurance, stamina, perseverance, flexibility, adaptability, empathy, tolerance, creativity, humour, and being happy about very small achievements. Ethnographic fieldwork has 3 main stages: preparation and documentation; fieldwork procedures and post-fieldwork analysis and writing. (Blommaert and Dong Jie)

The techniques of participant observation have been widely discussed in the literature across a range of settings and topics. It is the assertion by Punch (1993) that as a participant observer 'all you have to do is watch and listen'; Geertz (2004) characterises this as the researcher 'being there'. This watchful attention in the field, it is claimed, connects researcher and participants and helps to build rapport (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002; Watts, 2008). This activity, however, is not an effortless undertaking. A feature of non-obtrusiveness is familiarity that Punch (1993) suggests. 'Not being noticed' in the role of participant researcher may dissolve an onlooker status with significant benefits for data collection.

On the positive side, observations may enable the researcher to access those aspects of a social setting that may not be visible to the general public – those backstage activities that the public does not generally see. They give you the opportunity to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the social setting in your field notes and to view unscheduled events, improve interpretation, and develop new questions to be asked of informants (DeMunck & Sobo, 1998). Ethnographic research has a strength of level of understanding.

On the other hand there is a question mark surrounding the extent to which individuals consciously modify their behaviour in the presence of the observer. This raises the issue of the Hawthorne-effect, also referred to as the observer effect: it is a type of reactivity in which individuals modify an aspect of their behavior in response to their awareness of being observed. Becker(1970) believes that the 'newness' of the researcher the participants may deliberately alter their behaviour. Furthermore, from an ethical perspective, the gradual invisibility of the researcher in the field may be an issue of concern.