Ethnography

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A paradigm shift in social sciences in the 1960s produced recognition among psychologists of the importance of culture in understanding and explaining human behavior and experiences. Ethnography has acquired an interesting place in psychological research in a variety of areas, including research with the goals of exploring cultural meanings of selfhood, wellbeing, identity and other experiences that may be culturally unique and rendered intelligible only within the specific sociocultural context.

Basic Nature of Ethnography

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) noted the variable and contested character of ethnography. However, ethnography across all paradigms involves a lengthy stay in the field by the researcher and an understanding of reality from the native's point of view. Tedlock (2003, p. 165) provided a comprehensive definition of ethnography, observing that it “involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into fuller, more meaningful context … As a result, it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives … it locates between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority of cultural analysis.” Ethnography is a methodology that includes such features as understanding natives' worldview, conducting fieldwork and is dialogical in nature.

Understanding Natives' Worldview

Geertz (1988) emphasized that ethnography is an account of an ethnographer's journeys through the nuances and matrices of a culture to understand the perspectives or meanings that members attach to their social world. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 3) pointed out, in ethnographic studies, “people's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher – such as in experimental setup or in highly structured interview situations. In other words, research takes place 'in the field.'” Conducting fieldwork assumes a place of pivotal importance in ethnography.

Conducting Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork involves researchers immersing themselves in the society to collect descriptive data. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 3) contended, conducting fieldwork “involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.”

Dialogic Nature of Research

As understood above, ethnographic fieldwork entails interactions between the ethnographer and native people. When an ethnographer becomes immersed in the culture, he or she establishes a relationship with the people. The dialogic nature of fieldwork means that understanding people's lives is not only shaped by the kind of mutual relationship developed but also by the ethnographer's own personal and philosophical or theoretical standpoint. Thus, ethnographic understanding can be seen as a co-constructed one in which the voice of research participants as well as the researcher finds a space through interactions during the fieldwork. It then also becomes important for the ethnographer to include in the research report how his or her standpoints influenced...
the research process and the understanding of the phenomena under study.

**Historical Overview**

The term ethnography came into use in Western anthropology in the nineteenth century to represent descriptions of a community or culture often located outside the West. In the early days, these descriptions were based on accounts provided by travellers and missionaries. But since the early twentieth century, anthropologists themselves started conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

In the early twentieth century ethnography in social and cultural anthropology in Britain played a role in supporting British colonialism. In the United States, the Chicago School provided the foundation for a sociological ethnographic tradition (Brewer, 2000; Bryman, 2001). Rather than conducting ethnographic studies in distant lands, sociologists conducted fieldwork among groups on the margins of urban industrial society (e.g., prostitutes, drug dealers, and street gangs) in the United States.

Another important dimension of the history of ethnography is the role of different paradigms (beliefs about scientific research practices) in shaping different styles of research (holistic, semiotic, and behavioristic; Sanday, 1979). The holistic style, as represented in the works of Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, A. R. Radcliff-Brown, and Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski, considered culture “personality writ large” (Mead, 1974), and studied how cultural traits fulfill biological needs and regulate social life to maintain social structures. The semiotic style endorsed by Clifford Geertz and Ward Goodenough focuses on analysis of culture through the search for the meaning a human being gives to experiences situated in the webs of relationships. Geertz (1973, cited in Sanday, 1979) pointed out that a study of a culture is “not an experimental science but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (p. 533). The behavioristic style, on the other hand, examines the deductive propositions formulated by the ethnographer. This style is represented by Whiting’s (1963) *Six Culture* study, which reported how variation in child-rearing practices led to subsequent differences in personality. Currently, the reflexive style of ethnography proposed by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) comes close to the semiotic style proposed particularly by Clifford Geertz.

**Key Elements of Fieldwork**

**Sampling for Fieldwork**

With the aim of developing interpretations of social actions that are generalizable within rather than across cultures, decisions about sample selection are not based on statistical principles. Therefore, rather than going for generalization from the sample to a larger population, ethnography as a qualitative methodology endorses in-depth understanding as its key criterion for sampling. However, as Luborsky and Rubinstein (2001) pointed out, for fieldwork qualitative clarity serves as a meaningful analog for the statistical power of quantitative research.

There are two important features of sampling process in ethnography. One is that purposive sampling is used, selecting information-rich cases, keeping in mind the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2001). Furthermore, as analytic categories emerge from data analysis, the ethnographer may decide to explore emerging questions or issues with the help of another sample in the field. Glaser and Strauss (1967) referred to this as theoretical sampling.

**Initiating Fieldwork**

Initiating fieldwork is easier said than done. While on the one hand it involves the ethnographer’s interest or passion for a particular question, on the other there is the challenge of initiating a dialog with members of the community. Gupta (2008), in order to initiate her study of development of religious identity among Hindu and Muslim children living in Daryagang, a multietnic locality of Delhi, taught at a center where these children got help
in doing their schoolwork. This helped her build a relationship based on trust with the children:

To familiarize myself with the children and interact with them for the study, I taught in a tuition centre for four months where children of both religious groups came. The familiarity with the children grew in less than a month. ... I developed my familiarity with children by playing with them after their tuition class or walking with them to their homes. These interactions led to a comfort zone between them and me. (Gupta, 2008, pp. 36–37)

Similarly, Priya (2010), in the initial phase of fieldwork among survivors of an earthquake in the Kachchh district in Gujarat, India, not only earned the trust and respect of affected children after teaching them at a village school, but also benefitted by having a teacher from the school agree to be the key informant and translator for his study.

Ethnographer’s Self as a Tool

Similar to other interpretive qualitative methodologies, there are important ways in which the ethnographer’s self is taken to be the tool or the instrument of study through: (a) empathic understanding of people’s experiences; and (b) learning about people through reflections on “culture shock” experienced during the fieldwork. For example, Ellingson’s (1998) study of health communication in a cancer research hospital was shaped by her own past experiences as a bone cancer survivor. She could empathize with the distress of the patients and understand the context of communication in the setting.

Vahali’s (2003) reflections on how she avoided analyzing the case of a participant during her study of reconstruction of Tibetan self in exile exemplified learning from culture shock during fieldwork (Sanday, 1979). Vahali had developed a mental block for the participant because she found him insensitive to his father’s death. However, her reflections on and a critical analysis of the mental block (in a discussion with her supervisor) made her realize that her projection of a “good” offspring on him had made her overlook his own sense of suffering due to emotional deprivation from his depressed father. Analysis of culture shock facilitated her understanding that his present career-oriented life pattern was an effort to overcome the lack of nurturance he had experienced during his childhood and adolescence.

Data Analysis

As noted above, ethnography entails a dialogic process in which research is shaped by the investigator’s personal as well as meta-theoretical standpoint. For example, if a researcher wants to understand how recovery from trauma is experienced in an earthquake-affected village in India, the investigator needs to know what motivates him or her to take up this work and must explore a suitable meta-theoretical perspective such as a bio-psycho-social model of health and illness that locates human experiences in the sociocultural context. This perspective then shapes not only the research questions but also the analysis of data (narrative and field notes). It is in this sense that Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) have emphasized that data analysis in ethnography begins in the pre-fieldwork phase and continues during fieldwork, formally though analytic notes and memoranda and informally through the ethnographer’s ideas and hunches. Analysis in ethnography thus is an iterative and evolving process.

Figure 1 provides an example of ethnographic analysis based on Priya’s (2005) research on culturally situated understanding of suffering and healing (employing a bio-psycho-social model of health as a meta-theoretical perspective) among survivors of the Kachchh earthquake. As a general guide to such an analysis, the constructionist grounded theory approach is a meaningful option marked not only by a set of rules about coding but also by its emphasis on contextualizing experiences or phenomena and openness to multiple meaningful meta-theoretical perspectives to facilitate movement between data and emerging codes.
In order to study how the research relationship in qualitative research may facilitate healing and self-growth among participants, Priya (2010) analyzed the field notes and narratives of participants who lost their family members in the Kachchh earthquake, using the guidelines of constructionist grounded theory analysis provided by Charmaz (2006). The

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<th>Semi-structured interviews (addressing major objectives of the study) of one key respondent (a village priest) and adult members of families where at least one death had occurred due to the earthquake</th>
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<td>A salient pattern was observed that belief in <em>karma</em> (internalized duty toward self, family, community, and nature) was followed by families where at least one death had occurred and generally not followed by families where no or only material destruction had taken place due to the earthquake.</td>
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<td>A focus group discussion among adult members of families where no death had occurred – (a) to study their experiences and conceptualization of suffering and healing, and (b) to get feedback about whether they followed their cultural belief of <em>karma</em>.</td>
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<td>Most of the participants believed the natural disasters that had been hitting Kachchh (cyclone, drought, and the recent earthquake) were a result of their becoming self-centered and not properly following the cultural belief of <em>karma</em>. There was also general agreement that they had taken more relief materials than they required and shared guilt that this could be the cause of some natural disaster in the future.</td>
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<td>Semi-structured interviews of “experienced” people of Kachchh (e.g., creative writers, journalists, social workers) who could understand the psyche of the people before and after the earthquake, were conducted to address the extent to which the suffering and healing among survivors were influenced by the belief of <em>karma</em>.</td>
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<td>A salient pattern emerged that generally the lives of rural people were guided by belief in <em>karma</em> and those of urban people were guided by materialistic goals in life.</td>
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<td>An attempt was made to understand the process of suffering and healing among survivors of an urban earthquake-affected area (Bhachau) where, presumably, lives of people were not guided by <em>karma</em> philosophy. To achieve this goal, a study was planned with the help of semi-structured interviews of about 20 families where deaths had occurred, and focus group discussions among local people actively engaged in the process of rehabilitation of their town.</td>
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**Figure 1** A sketch of the evolution of methodology based on feedback from earlier data collection and analysis in the field (Reproduced with permission from K. R. Priya & G. Misra, *Handbook of Psychology in India*, (c) 2011 Oxford University Press India)
meta-theoretical perspective used for data analysis was a combination of the healing or remoralization process that might be facilitated by an empathic listener (Kleinman, 1988) and concepts of emotional suffering and enduring (Morse & Penrod, 1999). Priya (2010) also reported the influence of his personal experiences and inclination toward existential philosophy throughout the process of analysis that is understood in qualitative or ethnographic research as a co-construction.

Evaluation Criteria for Scientific Rigor

Gergen (1990) clearly delineated the contextual embeddedness of ethnographic findings and questioned the universalistic and realist ontological assumptions behind frequently used evaluation criteria in social sciences, to which ethnographic findings are also at times subjected. According to Gergen (1990, p. 592),

None of these labels possesses ontological significance; all have indexical utility within circumscribed, sociohistorical contexts. And so it is with ethnographic reports. To the extent that the forms of practice to which they are wedded have practical utility for the newly arriving visitor, they may be said to have validity – not because they are accurate, but because the practices that they invoke are advantageous in the impending process of mutual accommodation.

Richardson (2000) put forward five criteria for evaluating an ethnographic work. The first is whether the work makes a substantive contribution to deeply grounded understanding of and perspective of social life under study. Second is whether the work has aesthetic merit or a creative element in it to invite interpretive responses. Third, an ethnographer’s reflexivity must illustrate how his or her subjectivity and perspective on the studied phenomena have been both a producer and a product of the findings. Fourth is whether the work has an emotional or intellectual impact that may generate new questions and move the reader toward writing or trying new research practices. Finally, the work should illustrate that it expresses a reality that embodies lived experience and is authentic from cultural, social, individual, and communal points of view.

SEE ALSO: Benedict, Ruth; Geertz, Clifford; Malinowski, Bronislaw; Mead, Margaret; Qualitative-Quantitative Research Approach Distinction

References


Further Reading