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Definition: Ethnographic research (also called ethnography) is the study of the cultural patterns and perspectives of participants in their natural settings.

Goal: to describe, analyze, and interpret the culture of a group, over time, in terms of the group's shared beliefs, behaviors, and language (Gay, Mills, Airasian, 2012).

Main questions

What's going on in a particular setting?

Cultural orientation (i.e., **Where** the people under study are situated in terms of physical space and activities?),

Cultural know-how (i.e., **How** a group goes about its daily activities?),

Cultural beliefs (i.e., **Why** a group does what it does?).

Who, what, where, when or how it is happening?

Steps in the process

1. Identify the **purpose** of the research study and frame it as a larger theoretical, policy, or practical problem.
2. Determine the research **site and the sample** for the study.
3. Secure permissions and **negotiate entry** to the research site.
4. **Collect data** including the use of participant observation, field notes, interviews, and the examination of artifacts such as school policy documents and attendance records.
5. **Analyze data.**
6. **Write an ethnographic account** that is usually a narrative capturing the social, cultural, and economic themes that emerge from the study (Gay et al., 2012).

Key characteristics of ethnographic research

Key characteristics of ethnographic research:

1. It is carried out in a **natural setting**, not a laboratory.
2. It involves intimate, **face-to-face interaction** with participants.
3. It presents an accurate reflection of **participants' perspectives** and behaviors.
4. It uses inductive, interactive, and repetitious collection of **unstructured data** and **analytic strategies** to build local cultural theories.
5. Data are primarily collected through **fieldwork experiences**.
6. It typically uses **multiple methods for data collection**, including conducting interviews and observations and reviewing documents, artifacts, and visual materials.
7. It frames all human behavior and belief within a **sociopolitical and historical context**.

Key characteristics of ethnographic research

8. It uses the concept of **culture as a lens** through which to interpret results.
9. It places an emphasis on exploring the nature of **particular social phenomena**, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them.
10. It investigates a **small number of cases**, perhaps just one case, in detail.
11. It uses **data analysis** procedures that involve the **explicit interpretation** of the meanings and functions of human actions. Interpretations occur within the **context** or group setting and are presented through the **description of themes**.
12. It requires that **researchers** be reflective about **their impact on the research site** and the cultural group.
13. It offers **interpretations** of people's actions and behaviors that must be uncovered through an investigation of **what people do and their reasons for doing it**.
14. It offers a representation of a person's life and behavior that is neither the researcher's nor the person's. Instead, it is built on points of understanding and misunderstanding that **occur between researcher and participant**.
15. It **cannot provide an exhaustive, absolute description of anything**. Rather, ethnographic descriptions are necessarily partial, bound by what can be handled within a certain time, under specific circumstances, and from a particular perspective.

Types of ethnographic research

1. **Realist ethnography**—an objective, scientifically written ethnography; it is commonly used by educational anthropologists who study the culture of schools. It is written with an objective style and uses common categories for cultural description, analysis, and interpretation; such categories include “family life, work life, social networks, and status systems”
2. **Case studies** are less likely to focus on cultural themes, but on describing the activities of a specific group and the shared patterns of behavior the group develops over time; is an analysis of a person, event, activity, or process set within a cultural perspective
3. **Confessional ethnography**—a report of the ethnographer's fieldwork experiences
4. **Life history**—a study of one individual situated within the cultural context of his or her life
5. **Auto-ethnography**—a reflective self-examination by an individual set within his or her cultural context

Types of ethnographic research

6. **Micro-ethnography**—a study focused on a specific aspect of a cultural group and setting
7. **Critical ethnography**—a study of the shared patterns of a marginalized group with the aim of advocacy. Is highly politicized, is written by researcher which advocate against inequalities and domination of particular groups existing in the society including in schools. These studies typically address issues such as power, authority, emancipation, oppression, and inequity etc.
8. **Feminist ethnography**—a study of women and the cultural practices that serve to disempower and oppress them
9. **Postmodern ethnography**—an ethnography written to challenge the problems in our society that have emerged from a modern emphasis on progress and marginalizing individuals
10. **Ethnographic novels**—a fictional work focused on cultural aspects of a group (Gay et al., 2012)

Types of ethnographic research

Accidental ethnography (AccE) is the systematic study of **past practitioner experience** that includes the collection and analysis of extant data from the practitioner's organization (school, non-profit, or business) to serve an ethnographic purpose in reporting on an educational experience, culture, or innovation of significant merit and contribution to the field (Levitan et al, 2020).

Focuses on past information and experience that was not collected as part of a pre-designed study and includes reflexivity and memory-work.

Poulos (2009) - *Accidental Ethnography* - a way of being, rather than a particular method for writing and research.

Fuji (2015) "paying systematic attention to the unplanned moments that take place outside an interview, survey, or other structured methods". Accidental ethnography utilizes the accidental and happenstance findings of past researcher experiences to contribute to theory and practice, instead of a compliment to a more traditional research intention and method.

Conditions of qualitative research quality based on Tracy's (2010) work: "(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence." (p. 839).

Levitan J., Carr-Chellman D., Carr-Chellman, A. 2020. **Accidental ethnography: A method for practitioner-based education research**, *Action Research*, Vol. 18(3), 336–352. DOI: 10.1177/1476750317709078

Examples - confessional ethnography

Gato, L.G. Matyska, A. (2021) Gendered encounters in mobility: Women researching migrant construction workers, *Ethnography*, DOI 10.1177/14661381211038290.

Goal: exploring sexism and sexual harassment in the field of ethnographic research. This is mostly due to certain established **norms and expectations about ethnographic work that tend to ignore how these issues contribute to women's fieldwork experiences** and subsequent ethnographic accounts.

Authors explore their **gendered experiences as female ethnographers conducting research on labor mobility in the male-dominated construction industry among Brazilian internal migrants in Rio de Janeiro and among Polish migrant workers in Europe**. Gato and Matyska. (2021) explored how **gendered dynamics affected their fieldwork experience** and how they **generated a degree of self-doubt and self-blame about the methodological choices**.

Their assumed goal was that writing about their experiences will help female ethnographers to better prepare for and consider the different kinds of sexism that will inevitably shape their knowledge production.

Examples – auto-ethnography

McAllister, Á. Brown, N. 2023. Competition and Collaboration in Higher Education: An (Auto)Ethnographic Poetic Inquiry, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1-7 <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004231176278>.

The authors take a **proactive approach** to counteract the narrative of dismissal and silencing by exploring the opportunities of collaboration. **Collaboration** is an antidote to silencing, as silencing often occurs together with marginalization and othering, thus isolation.

Drawing on **personal experiences**, professional knowledge, and separate and shared research, they engaged in a collaborative form of **poetic inquiry** (Faulkner, 2019) that would effectively combine **(auto)ethnography** (Chang, 2016) with **writing as a method** (Richardson, 2000, 2003) and a **translanguaging stance**.

Example – critical ethnography

Eseta Tualaulelei (2020): Professional development for intercultural education: learning on the run, Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, DOI: 10.1080/1359866X.2020.1753168

Goal: explores the **preparedness of teachers for responding to cultural diversity**.

Methodology: **ethnographic study** in Samoan primary school. Through **semi-structured interviews**, teachers of a south-east Queensland described initial **challenges they encountered**, as well as their **opinions about the professional development** they had received for intercultural education. In **talanoa** (Pacific Island-style discussions), **parents in the school community** shared their concerns about the **cultural and linguistic responsiveness of the teachers compared to their previous experiences**.

Analysis of the findings revealed that **teachers experienced “culture shock” in highly multicultural classrooms** related to **the lack of opportunities for professional learning about teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students (why + how)**.

Example - critical ethnography

[Heyer, K](#) 2022. Keeping migrants at the margins. Governing through ambiguity and the politics of discretion in the post-2015 EUropean migration and border regime, Political geography, 97, DOI: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102643

Roles of **ambiguity and discretion** in the governing of migration and how they contribute to the **marginalisation of migrants at the borders of EUrope**.

Building on **ethnographic research and interviews** conducted in **Sicily**, it connects **legal-institutional ambiguities** of two recent policy interventions in the field of migration governance in Italy - **the Security Decree-Law** and the **Hotspot Approach** - to the **discretionary practices** by public officials tasked with their implementation.

By theoretically and empirically tracing the co **constitutive relationship of ambiguity and discretion**, the article draws on and contributes to recent inquiries into **grey areas of governance**, particularly in the **field of (critical) border regime studies**.

Based on two distinct cases, it analyses how ambiguity and discretionary local practices are related both to each other and to the contemporary fragmentary reconfiguration processes of the EUropean Migration and Border Regime, and shows how they intersect to form spatio-juridical grey areas that foster the spatial and social marginalisation of migrants in EUrope.

Example – critical ethnography

Milani Marin LE and Jacomuzzi AC (2022) Interactions and social identity of support teachers: An ethnographic study of the marginalisation in the inclusive school. *Front. Educ.* 7, doi: 10.3389/feduc.2022.948202

Authors examined the daily-based interactions through which inclusion is experienced by **support teachers (ST)** and how their social identity is constructed within a secondary school in a northern Italy province.

The theoretical basis of this research is social identity approach and symbolic interactionism to understand self-categorization and identification processes, through the narratives of actors.

An **ethnographic design** was implemented, with **4-month participant observation** and **20 semi-structured interviews** of long duration as the main data collection techniques. **Fieldnotes and interviews transcriptions** were inductively analyzed through a **thematic approach to grounded theorizing**.

Results show a school community in which there is a **strong hierarchical relationship** among **main** and **support teachers**, where support teachers experience strong feelings of **inferiority and marginalization**. These school interactions are also shaped by the **school culture and management**.

Example – feminist ethnography

Ledman, K., Nylund, M., Rönnlund M., & Rosvall P. (2021) Being and becoming a female student and worker in gendered processes of vocational education and training, *Gender and Education*, 33:5, 514-530, DOI:10.1080/09540253.2020.1815659

This is an **ethnographic study** of how girls are positioned, and position themselves, in relation to gender regimes in three vocational programs in Swedish upper secondary education: Restaurant Management & Food, Health & Social Care, and Vehicle & Transport.

The comparison shows that **there are different possible feminine positions** where the girls **resist** and **comply** to varying degrees both within and between the programs, with expectations interrelated with **discourses of consumption, caring and production**.

However, generally the position of emphasized femininity is most prominent and becoming a female worker in the programs' settings involves complying with feminine ideals of a caring discourse, regardless of whether the VET is oriented towards education for masculine production work, or feminine consumption work.

Triangulation

Is the use of **multiple methods, instruments, data collection strategies**, and **data sources** to get a more complete picture of the topic under study and to cross-check information.

A primary way to ensure the trustworthiness (i.e., validity) of qualitative research data.

In ethnographic research, the researcher is the research instrument who, in collecting data, utilizes a variety of techniques over an extended period of time, “ferreting out varying perspectives on complex issues and events”.

Ethnographic methods – participant observation

A researcher who is a genuine participant in the activity under study is called a **participant observer**.

Participant observation is undertaken with at least two purposes in mind:

- to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of a situation
- to engage in activities that are appropriate to a given situation and that provide useful information.

A participant observer can be:

- active participant observer;
- privileged, active observer;
- passive observer.

Active / privileged / passive observer

Active - Teacher researchers who plan to observe their own teaching practices, however, may become so fully immersed in teaching that they don't record their observations in a systematic way during the school day. Such recording is a necessary part of being an active participant observer.

Privileged, active observer - a researcher may observe children in classrooms during a time when he or she is not participating in the instructional setting as the teacher. During these times, the researcher can work as a teacher's aide and at the same time can withdraw, stand back, and watch what is happening during a teaching episode. As a privileged, active observer, the ethnographer can move in and out of the role of teacher's aide and observer.

Passive observer - When a researcher takes on the role of passive observer, he or she assumes no responsibilities in the classroom setting but rather focuses on data collection, and make explicit to the students and teaching colleagues that the "visitor" is present only to "see what's going on around here."

Requirements for observer:

Gaining entry and maintaining rapport - describe clearly to educators what you are planning to do, what kinds of time constraints will be placed on them, how the research will add value to the educational pro.

Reciprocity - to assist with classroom tasks; to provide some kind of curriculum resource or access to teaching material; to pay for informants' time for interviews.

A tolerance for ambiguity - most episodes you observe are likely to be ambiguous in meaning. You must learn patience. You may experience **culture shock** (an unexpected set of events that challenge everything you assumed about your research setting and participants).

Letting go of control - relinquish control of the research timeline and agenda to take advantage of the emergent nature of the ethnographic research process. Unanticipated events will occur, and you need to be willing to go with the flow; wonderful things can happen when you let go of control.

Field notes

Provide a **record** of the researcher's understandings of the lives, people, and events that are the focus of the research. Are a way to capture your experiences in a way that will enable you eventually to craft a narrative of what is going on.

Describe as accurately as possible and as comprehensively as possible all relevant aspects of the situation observed, the social and interactional processes that make up people's everyday lives and activities (examples: What was the physical setting like? What did it look like? Who was present? What did they look like? How did they act? What about the teacher? How did he or she look and act? What was said? What interactions took place?).

What is observed and ultimately treated as "data" or "findings" is inseparable from the observational process.

In writing field notes, the field researcher should give special attention to **the indigenous meanings** and **concerns** of the people.

Contemporaneously written field notes are an essential grounding and resource for writing broader, more coherent accounts of others' lives and concerns.

Field notes

Goal: to **describe**, not analyze or interpret.

Quotation marks - only when the words were taken down at the time of the observation; anything else should be **paraphrased**.

Examples: Overgeneralized and vague note: The next student who came in to take the test was very poorly dressed.

Detailed and concrete notes: The next student who came into the room was wearing clothes quite different from the three students who'd been in previously. The three previous students looked like they'd been groomed before they came to the test. Their hair was combed, their clothes were clean and pressed, the colors of their clothes matched, and their clothes were in good condition. This new student had on pants that were soiled with a hole or tear in one knee and a threadbare seat. The flannel shirt was wrinkled with one tail tucked into the pants and the other tail hanging out. Hair was disheveled and the boy's hands looked like he'd been playing in the engine of a car.

Field notes

Observer also records personal reactions, interpretations and other subjective thoughts and feelings in reflective field notes.

They are clearly differentiated from the more objective, descriptive field notes;

Typically they are identified with a special code (e.G., PC for personal comment or OC for observer's comments).

Guidelines for researcher in taking field notes

Observing and recording everything you possibly can – recording **observations video and audio, write notes**

Looking for nothing in particular; looking for bumps and paradoxes - try to see routines in new ways

Teacher researchers using ethnographic techniques **often comment on the unintended consequences** of a particular teaching strategy or a curriculum change that has become evident only when they have had an opportunity to observe the results of their actions. **"I thought that** the use of manipulatives in teaching mathematics would also lead to increased cooperation in group work. **Instead, what I saw were** my kids fighting over who got to use what and not wanting to share."

Guidelines for researcher in taking field notes

1. Be **descriptive** in taking field notes.
2. Gather a variety of information from **different perspectives**. Cross-validate and **triangulate** by gathering different kinds of data (e.g., observations, documents, interviews) and by using multiple methods.
3. **Use quotations**; represent people in their own terms. Capture their experiences in their own words.
4. Select "**key informants**" wisely and use them carefully. Draw on the wisdom of their informed perspectives, but keep in mind that their perspectives are limited.

Guidelines for researcher in taking field notes

6. Be aware of and sensitive to different stages of fieldwork.
 - a. **Build trust** and rapport at the beginning. Remember that the observer is also being observed.
 - b. **Stay alert** and disciplined during the more routine, middle phase of fieldwork.
 - c. Focus on pulling together a useful **synthesis** as fieldwork draws to a close.
7. Be **disciplined and conscientious** in taking field notes at all stages of fieldwork.
8. Be as **involved** as possible in experiencing the situation as fully as possible while maintaining an **analytical** perspective grounded in the purpose of the fieldwork.
9. Clearly **separate description** from **interpretation and judgment**.
10. Include in your field notes and report your **own experiences, thoughts, and feelings**. (Patton, 1990).

Potential challenges

1. Developing and maintaining an **intimate face-to-face interaction** with participants
2. Sustaining lengthy fieldwork for a **“full cycle”** of the phenomenon under investigation
3. Using the concept of **culture** as an **interpretive lens**

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