

Ethnography and Participant Observation

Chapter Summary

Introduction

Some sociological research methods are similar to investigative work. This is because obtaining in-depth evidence about the life of a community requires immersion into the social setting for a long period of time. Methods for gathering evidence include collecting interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts that provide detailed descriptions and understanding of the way of life, actions, and beliefs of participants. This kind of in-depth investigation is usually accomplished in *ethnography* or *participant observation*.

This chapter considers the main issues in conducting an ethnography and participant observation: access to the field, the role of ethnographers, keeping field notes, and finishing fieldwork. These issues have to do with negotiating access, choosing an overt or covert ethnography, different ways to access open and closed settings, treatment of participants, and maintaining rapport. The chapter also discusses different types of ethnographies, such as the *institutional ethnography*, which studies the manifestations of power in daily functioning of institutions, or the *feminist ethnography*, which argues for studying women's lives and experiences from feminist vantage point. Finally, the chapter points out *visual* and *virtual (on-line)* ethnographies as types of qualitative research.

Ethnography and participant observation are the most recognized methods of qualitative research, and both refer to studying communities or the groups of people for a long period of time by conducting interviews and observations. **Ethnography** is a broader term encompassing observing behaviour in an unstructured way, and following up with in-depth, unstructured discussions and interviews with the people studied. Ethnographies historically emerged as the ways to study culture and life in particular communities, and therefore they are broader descriptions of the community, its traditions, and events. These accounts usually aim to represent the community from inside, through the eyes of its participants. **Participant observation** refers to the observational component of ethnographic work, but the two terms generally describe the same process of an in-depth qualitative study. With both, the researcher is immersed in a particular social setting for a long period of time, often years.

Access

One of the difficulties in ethnography is gaining access to the social setting. The settings can be seen as *open* or *closed*, and the sociologist working in them may assume *overt* or *covert* role. These two dimensions—the type of the studied spaces and the role the researcher will play—determine how the researcher should seek access to the setting.

Overt versus Covert Ethnography

The role the researcher assumes during the ethnography—overt or covert—will have significant influence both on access to a setting, on the process of research, and its outcomes.

Overt ethnography is a study where the people being studied know they are being observed by a researcher. In overt ethnography, access to the field will differ by the type of setting. In an *open* setting the researchers may only have to gain admittance to the group by being present in a particular location and explaining that presence (e.g., Toronto raves). In a **closed** setting the observer must gain the approval of someone who will allow access to the “back region” activity that is not open to the public (e.g., scientists’ expedition to the Arctic).

Covert ethnography is when the participants do not know they are being observed by a researcher. Covert ethnography makes the access to a setting easier. In an **open** setting the researcher gains access *by adopting a role* that will make presence in a particular social space acceptable to those in a group, either as an actual member of the group or just a role that makes sense (e.g., cleaner in the public washroom study). In a **closed** setting the observer must gain acceptance of the group, again as an actual member or in a social role that makes access possible. This is akin to the infiltration activities of undercover police operatives.

Several points are worth remembering while considering the type of ethnography and the type of settings to study:

1. *Open* and *closed* settings are not absolute categories and may change their designation depending on the research questions and who or what is being studied. There are closed groups that have members or group activities that cross over into the public domain. Conversely, a great deal of information on closed groups is often available through public access points (e.g., meetings, websites, etc.)
2. The distinction between *overt* and *covert* ethnography is equally not absolute. Although a researcher may gain overt approval for access to group activities, some of the group members may not be aware that the person is a researcher. Even within a single research project, the ethnographer’s activities may actually be shifting between overt and covert. Finally, the decision about the research might not have been taken during the actual participation and observation, and this results in a *retrospective ethnography* rather than in a *covert* or *overt* one. Retrospective ethnography occurs when a person decides to make a study of some activity in which they have previously been engaged.
3. *Overt* methods are preferred to covert methods. Although covert methods give researchers easier access to the field and reduce reactivity, significant logistical issues remain, such as maintaining the covert role and taking notes. More importantly, covert research involves deception. Furthermore, researchers might feel anxiety on a daily basis for fear of being disclosed. Hence numerous ethical considerations must be addressed if a researcher intends to deceive research subjects, which makes the method undesirable.

Access to Closed Settings

Closed settings have some sort of demarcated boundary for social access (e.g., groups, organizations). They are usually private or restricted settings like clubs, gangs, and organizations. By contrast, *open* settings are social spaces with public access, such as parks, washrooms, theatres. Although open spaces may have open access to the location, access to the people in them is not necessarily open, and requires different techniques for engaging participants.

Access to a closed setting is more difficult to obtain, and after identifying the group to study and a target setting, the researcher can gain the *initial access* by asking a *gatekeeper* for permission to observe. The **gatekeeper** is a person who controls the access to the setting and knows most participants. The gatekeeper plays a crucial role in introducing the researcher to the field and respondents. The researcher should identify the gatekeeper and contact him or her either directly or through an intermediary.

If the closed setting is an organization, there are several possible strategies for gaining access:

- Use friends, contacts, or colleagues to introduce the researcher to the organization.
- Get a person in an organization (“a sponsor”) to vouch for the researcher’s skills.
- Offer to provide a final report (this facilitates access but turns a researcher into an unpaid consultant or brings him or her into uneasy dependence from the “sponsor”).

Once access is granted, you should do the following as the researcher:

- Meet with the participants to tell them what you are doing and why. This makes them collaborators on your project rather than simply resources to be used.
- Negotiate to determine what limits will be placed on your access to activity within the group/organization.
- Be clear about how much time you expect to use.

Access to Open Settings

Gatekeepers may also provide access to the group in open settings. “Hanging around” a particular location of interest is another option, although getting access in this way may be more complicated because the researcher should gain trust of the strangers, and imposing oneself on others may not work.

Two other points have to be considered before gaining access to a setting. Wearing clothes and presenting oneself in a way that is consistent with the location and the people the researcher wishes to study is a key component of gaining access in closed or open settings, with or without gatekeepers. Another issue is the nature of the activities in which the group is involved and the possible danger that may exist if the researcher gains access (e.g., observing criminal activity and being able to identify a perpetrator).

Ongoing Access

We must remember that the access to the field should not simply be gained once, but it has to be maintained, because ethnography or participant observation implies long-term immersion into the setting. Hence significant effort may be required to maintain access to a group, particularly if the study is conducted in a closed setting. This occurs for the following reasons:

- Individuals may be suspicious of researchers as a person in authority (e.g., management representative, government official).
- There is often a concern by members of a group that their actions and words will be reported to others. The researcher must be careful not to disclose who said or did what, intentionally or by accident.
- Participants may intentionally mislead a researcher if they are not comfortable with the researcher or the researcher’s role.

There are several strategies that the researcher may adopt to maintain an access in a closed setting:

- Get more acceptance by talking about your experience and your knowledge, and express your understanding of the group’s issues.
- Don’t judge or talk about what you see or hear.
- Adopt and maintain a *role* that will be accepted by the participants.

There are also strategies for keeping access in public settings:

- Give a reason for being present in the location that is acceptable to the participants.
- Be prepared to be tested for confidentiality and credibility of the story you give about your past and knowledge.

- Don't become complacent, assuming that your cover story is still accepted; be prepared for a change of circumstances that require adjustments or change in your social role and the underlying narrative.

Key Informants

Key informants are people who understand the research and can identify other participants, places, and situations that will be helpful to the research project. Key informants play a very important role in a study. First, as people who know the setting well, they can send the researcher to the important people or events in the community and point out which activities of the researcher are or are not acceptable. Secondly, they may provide support and help with the stress of long fieldwork. Third, they may understand what information the researcher is looking for and help the researcher collect this solicited information. The importance of the key informants is well demonstrated in a classical sociological ethnography by W.F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1955), where his key informant Doc acted as a gatekeeper to the study, provider of information, and interpreter of findings.

However, several cautions must be made about the key respondents. Researchers must be careful not to be directed by the key informant, or the data may be skewed to the informant's perception. This applies to the people whom the key informant is recommending or to additional evidence he or she offers. These connections or evidence should preferably be corroborated by independent evidence.

Some informants may provide the researcher with interesting information about the field even without being asked, when they understand what the purpose of the research is. Researchers usually take this information favourably, being interested in data that emerge naturally in the course of research and following the principle of *naturalism*, or minimizing researcher's disturbance of the setting. However, the researcher must be cautious that the assistance is not staged or simply provided to please the researcher.

In ethnography, the boundaries between interviews and "natural conversations" may be blurred: the process of getting information from an informant may occur through interviews or through questions that "come up" during conversation.

Roles for Ethnographers

The role that the researchers play within a single project should vary, so that they do not become too detached or too connected with participants. Participant observations come in several forms and are applied along a continuum:

- *Complete participation*: covert operations where the researchers adopt a secret role in the group. This method gets the closest to participants and their activities but there is a risk of over-identification ("going native") or developing a strong dislike of the participants. Either may skew the data.
- *Participant-as-observer*: the researcher adopts a role in the group but the participants are aware who the researcher really is.
- *Observer-as-participant*: the researcher observes and interviews from the edge of the group. This method risks incorrect interpretation of activity.
- *Complete observer*: the researcher does not engage the participants at all. There is no risk of reactivity but the researcher has limited information for understanding the actions of the participants.

Active or Passive?

How active or passive should an ethnographer be? In ethnography, the researcher will most likely become involved in the group's activities to some degree because of their long stay in the field and because being present in a situation and not engaging may be interpreted as a lack of commitment to the group. This is of particular concern with criminal activity: one reason why researchers are cautioned against a covert ethnography is because they may suddenly find themselves engaged in crime or dangerous situations.

Field Notes

Field notes are detailed notes that summarize what the researcher saw, heard, and thought about the activity. Maintaining detailed notes on everything that was observed every day can become cumbersome, so the ethnographer may choose to narrow the focus of the research to particular themes that emerge during the process. It is certainly much easier to decide what observations are important when the research question is clear, and make notes accordingly. However, the researcher must not forget to remain open to adjusted or new themes that may occur during the research. This flexibility is specifically why a researcher engages in qualitative research.

The following lists some recommendations about the field notes:

- Notes must be made in a timely manner.
- Jotted notes are made during the observation to capture who, what, where, and when; then detailed notes are made at the end of the observation period (e.g., end of interview, end of day). Writing notes during an observation may raise anxiety of the researcher or suspicion on the part of the participants.
- Tape recording may be helpful, but a tape recorder may be seen as obtrusive by the participants and a lot of time is required later for the transcribing the interview.
- Photographs may help a researcher remember details, but they are not advisable in some situations (e.g., criminal behaviour).

Types of Field Notes

- *Mental notes*: Notes kept in your memory. Used when it would be unacceptable to take written notes. They must be written or recorded at the earliest opportunity.
- *Jotted notes*: Brief notes made during the event without attracting the attention of the participants. Jotted notes are used later to refresh the researcher's memory when writing detailed notes.
- *Full field notes*: Full detailed notes of what was observed, heard, and the researcher's reflections on the setting, the people, research difficulties, etc. These must be written as soon as possible. Producing the full field notes is really the substance of ethnographic research. Full field notes also include comments on the researcher's state, perceptions, thoughts, and activities. By contrast, the final written findings, or the reports on ethnography, will often limit references to the ethnographer in order to emphasize the setting and on the participants rather than the researcher.
- *Analytic memos*: Notes on the relationship between the observations and the concepts, interpretations, and theories. They help to start data analysis during the data collection. Analytic memos must be separated from other notes on data so they don't get confused with the actual data gathered.

The Rise of Visual and Virtual Ethnography

Two emerging forms of ethnography are linked to the increasing use of visual materials and Internet: **visual ethnography** and **virtual ethnography**. However, recently researchers increasingly gather visual media as evidence in the process of on-going social research.

The term **visual ethnography** is often used to describe these activities, but it does not necessarily mean that the visual ethnographer is immersed in a social setting in the same way as qualitative ethnography implies. Rather, ethnographers have typically used visual data as illustrative material in their research: as memory aids, as a source of data, and as prompts for discussion with participants. Here, visual materials are involved in essentially two types of representation (Pink, 2001):

1. *Realist representation*: the visual simply represents an event, a “fact” that needs to be presented and discussed in the project. The visual in this case is used as a simple reflection of the existing reality, “a window to the world.”
2. *Reflexive representation*: visual is used as a reflexive tool by the researcher to comment on their age, gender, education, and other social characteristics. The visual here is not so much a “window to the world,” as “a window to the researcher.” Looking at the visual chosen by the researcher helps us to understand this researcher, his or her biases, and methodology. The reflexive way of using the visuals might also mean that the participants help the researcher to decide which visuals to represent in research and how they should be interpreted.

When using visual data, researchers are supposed to “read” the images and interpret them. Here the researcher must remember that visual data are open to much interpretation because of the following:

- The context in which the visual material was gathered (when, where, how, by whom);
- Different meanings ascribed by researchers and different participants; and
- Researchers’ influence on the image itself and the way in which it is presented, which in turn will influence participants’ perceptions.

Sometimes the participants themselves are asked not only to collect the visuals about the experience important to them, but also to comment on these experiences to the researchers. This technique is called *photo-voice* or *photo-elucidation*. Researchers found that participants usually collect very mundane photos of their significant experiences, but these photos completely change the meaning and come to life when participants are commenting on them. Researchers claim that such engagement with visuals makes participants think about their lives in new critical ways.

Another form of ethnography related to the advance of technology is **virtual ethnography**. As Internet becomes a “social habitat” for many people, it becomes increasingly important to study relationships, representations, and views online. Social networks, webpages, logs, and other IT platforms represent the new places where people acquire knowledge about and interpretations of the world and all these sites become the sites of the new ethnographies.

There are several ways to conduct virtual ethnographies. First, sociologists turn to analysis of social connections on Facebook, study communities by looking at their webpages, and examine Internet discussions, blogs, and chats as expressions of public opinion or places for mobilization of social movements. Alternatively, researchers can become a part of an online community and study it through participation. Finally, researchers can compare the opinion and behaviour of participants online with their behaviour and views offline.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography is represented in the work of the Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith. Institutional ethnography calls for studying people’s ordinary everyday activities in institutions and explores how institutional discourses relate to people’s everyday experiences with these institutions. Studying daily activities is important, institutional ethnography argues, because institutional representations, and in particular written texts, systematically exclude the localized everyday relations, and instead promote and popularize “ruling” relations which are delocalized and unconnected to daily practices. Hence the institutional discourses shape the realities of participants in a particular way, deeming some experiences unimportant and insignificant. The task of

institutional ethnography is to look at people's experiences more directly, because only looking at daily experiences of people in organizations can explain which groups are not represented in formal accounts. The ultimate goal of institutional ethnography is to investigate how institutional relationships intersect with larger systems of social control and power in society.

One example of institutional ethnography is Campbell's (2000) study of how people with disabilities reacted to the cut in home support services in Victoria, BC. The researcher coordinated the interaction between the health care providers and people with disabilities as they discussed the consequences of the financial cuts from the perspective of the health care system and from the perspective of people affected. The disabled participants demonstrated how their daily lives and ability to function were strongly compromised by the policy of cuts and how their provisions were in many cases equated to the provisions given to able-bodied citizens. In turn, Campbell's analysis of governmental texts showed how the governmental documents legitimized the cuts as the new generic rules about the healthcare, and thus established the new "ruling relationships" of the able-bodied over the disabled citizens needing care. Campbell argued that understanding the actual experiences of people with disabilities was essential to creating a more inclusive system of care.

Sampling

Informants in ethnographic research are usually selected through a version of purposive sampling that involves searching for people who are likely to be a rich source of information on the group or setting under study. One way to get access to such people is through snowball sampling

The End

It is often difficult to know when to stop ethnographic research. The research may end because of research design (the desired volume of evidence is collected, the time allocated for fieldwork is over) or because of personal reasons of the researcher (life events, change of job, residence place, family). Sometimes there is a natural end to the activity, which in turn ends the research. Other times, external issues in the researcher, such as the end in funding or an established deadline may bring a research to a close. The stress related to conducting the research on sensitive topics or dangerous activities (e.g., crime) or behaviour in the field (e.g., the need to maintain the role) may also lead to a stop in the study.

After a long period of field work, there will come a point where the answers to the original research questions might emerge naturally from the wealth of existing data. The researcher may come to realization that the new data are simply confirming the data collected earlier.

The end of a research project requires certain activities. It may be necessary to say goodbye to the participants. This may also require a reasonable excuse for leaving, promises must be kept (e.g., providing a report), and ethical considerations must be taken into account (e.g., confidentiality).

Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?

Feminist ethnography is a form of critical ethnography where the researchers produce knowledge about the lives and experiences of women in different cultural contexts, exposing their marginalized position in society. Feminist ethnography studies the daily activities of women from their own perspective, without trivializing these activities or omitting them as unimportant, as the male-centred accounts typically do. A key goal of feminist ethnography is to provide the female participants with a social place of significance they were deprived of in the dominant accounts produced by men.

Feminist scholars argue that ethnography as a method is ideally suited for producing knowledge for and about women, because ethnography privileges experiential accounts, and similar experiential, relationship-informed, and empathetic knowledge is favoured by feminism as a way of knowledge production (Stacey, 1988). Some feminist researchers also argue that ethnography is an important tool for feminism because of a potential for non-exploitative relationship

with research subjects that it offers (Skegg, 1997, 2001). Others rebut that ethnography is an intrusion into the natural life of community and as such puts the judgements and interpretations of the ethnographer in the superior and dominating position in relation to the voices of studied women, thus replicating the processes that have subjugated and marginalized women throughout history. Yet other female ethnographers maintain that assuming exploitation is an over-generalization, since oftentimes the relationship between the researcher and her subjects are reciprocal rather than hierarchical. Although the female researchers indeed often come from more privileged social backgrounds than the women studied, the asymmetry in the relationship may be overcome by a researcher's willingness to

- give public voice to marginalized groups;
- establish the environment where participants feel as equal contributors to research about their lives;
- give participants a choice to engage the researcher only as much as they feel comfortable, to state their limits of providing the data, or to disengage from the research project at any time.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you should learn to do the following:

- Identify *ethnography* as a qualitative method of research, and understand that ethnography is a holistic and in-depth study of a community and culture from the point of view of participants, and involves participant observation, as well as interviewing people and collecting documents, visuals, or objects that describe the life of a community
- Understand the advantages and disadvantages of *covert ethnography* compared to *overt ethnography*
- Appreciate the difficulties of access to an ethnographic setting, where access involves adopting an acceptable social role, the use of gatekeeper and key informants to get access, and the need to maintain the access overtime. Identify the challenges of getting access depending on the setting of the research, *open* or *closed*
- Comment on the possible role of a researcher in ethnography, from the *complete participant* to *complete observer*, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each role and be able to decide which role the students themselves can adopt in a potential study, depending on the research questions, setting, and goals of the study
- Learn to use the field notes as the main tool of ethnographic research. Understand that field notes are the main sources of evidence in ethnography, and that they have to be produced systematically and in detailed fashion for the ethnography to be successful
- Differentiate among the different types of ethnography: *classical*, *feminist*, and *institutional*
- Understand the role of *visual material* in ethnography as supporting material, a tool of elucidating a story from the participants, or as a reflexive document revealing the position of the researcher; comment on the possibilities that *virtual ethnography* offers with the increasing significance of Internet as an ethnographic site, a tool, and a source of data to study views and behaviour of a community

Media Resources

Cross, M. (2013). Pierogies to hamburgers: An immigration story. *Outstanding Ethnographic Research Projects*. Paper 12.

http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/anth_ethno/12/

- What is the significance of engaging your participants in producing visual ethnography?
- How should the content of visual material be interpreted (i.e., are the pictures capturing life as it exists or is there staging)?
- What issues exist that require interpretation regarding the decisions about what was captured on film?
- What is the difference between collecting the photographic evidence as the substance of the research data in and of itself versus collecting the photographic data as a way to look at the decision making that underlies what is captured on film?
- See also for similar issues with painted artwork:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KC3WeXZ5_ro&feature=related

Ethnographic Research

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fM_CJ5vDK4&feature=related

- What is the difference between using ethnographic research for academic purposes and for consumer market purposes?
- What issues arise from the use of technology in gathering ethnographic research?
- Can academic researchers justify using the same methodology described by the market researcher?