SAGE reference

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods

Ethnography

Contributors: Michael W. Kramer & Tony E. Adams
Edited by: Mike Allen
Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods
Chapter Title: "Ethnography"
Pub. Date: 2017
Access Date: April 12, 2017
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781483381435
Online ISBN: 9781483381411
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n169
Print pages: 458-461

Ethnography is a qualitative research method in which a researcher—an ethnographer—studies a particular social/cultural group with the aim to better understand it. Ethnography is both a process (e.g., one does ethnography) and a product (e.g., one writes an ethnography). In doing ethnography, an ethnographer actively participates in the group in order to gain an insider's perspective of the group and to have experiences similar to the group members. In writing ethnography, an ethnographer creates an account of the group based on this participation, interviews with group members, and an analysis of group documents and artifacts. This entry offers an overview of ethnography and the ethnographic research process, including negotiating access, data collection, analysis, and writing.

Overview

Ethnography first became a popular research method in the fields of cultural anthropology and sociology. Anthropologists primarily used ethnography to study social or cultural groups away from home—"exotic" groups that were often outside of the researcher's home country. Sociologists primarily used ethnography to study social/cultural groups close to home, groups within local, regional, and national borders. Anthropologists and sociologists used ethnography to make the unfamiliar aspects of their respective groups familiar for others. Some researchers also used ethnography to record the values, practices, and artifacts of groups threatened by assimilation and annihilation; the ethnographic products record ways of life that might soon disappear.

Ethnographers of or in communication primarily use ethnography to document, interpret, understand, and possibly even critique a group's speaking patterns and practices, nonverbal behaviors, and messages about relationships within and outside of the group, as well as how these patterns, practices, behaviors, and messages are created and reinforced through social interaction. The ethnographic study of these communicative phenomena often includes examining the implicit and explicit assumptions present in group members' talk, group rituals and ceremonies, and symbols and artifacts affiliated with the group.

For example, during a retirement ceremony, a speaker may explicitly state that an organization values the importance of personal relationships. The number of people who attend the ceremony or the gift to the retiree of a lifetime membership to the company gym may also implicitly communicate the organization's value of relationships. The ethnographer is able to make these observations by participating in the organization, talking with organizational members, and attending events such as the retirement ceremony.

Research Decisions

The primary purpose of ethnography is to gain a holistic understanding of a social or cultural group. This is accomplished by engaging in *participant observation*, a practice in which the ethnographer aims to become an active and attentive member of the group and a practice often referred to as "going into the [research] field." The ethnographer should also aim to participate in and observe *natural settings*—contexts in which group life would happen regardless of the ethnographer's presence.

Before going into the field, the ethnographer must make a number of important preliminary decisions. The most important decision is deciding on the social or cultural group to study. Although a seemingly easy decision, two factors should be considered. Because most groups consist of smaller subgroups and are part of larger groups or organizations, determining the

boundaries of the ethnographic field can be challenging. For example, if an ethnographer was interested in studying volunteers at a local hospital, the ethnographer may come to realize that volunteers are divided into subgroups (e.g., gift shop volunteers, patient service volunteers, volunteers at the auxiliary thrift store). The ethnographer may choose to focus on one set of volunteers, or all the volunteers within the hospital setting. Although the ethnographer may determine this focus at the start, the ethnographer may choose to change the boundaries during the course of the study, especially if such boundaries are less important than initially expected. Another important consideration is whether the ethnographer will be able to unobtrusively become a participating group member. For example, if all the volunteers are retired women and the researcher is a college-age male, the age and gender difference may hinder the researcher's ability to participate as a natural member of the group and/or develop trust with other volunteers.

A second important decision is deciding whether to focus on a particular aspect of the group's culture or whether to allow the focus to emerge during the study. Ethnographers should approach the study of a group inductively. That is, they should let their participation in, and observations of, the group guide what they write rather than use preformed ideas and categories to understand the group. Although the ethnographer may have a research question about or purpose for studying a group, the ethnographer should also be open to changing this question or purpose during the course of the research. Continuing with the previous example, the researcher could decide to focus on a particular aspect of the volunteers, such as the leadership principles that develop out of the group's culture or how spirituality influences volunteer activities. Alternatively, the researcher could simply look for the interesting stories that emerge during fieldwork. Because it is nearly impossible for an ethnographer to approach a group without some preconceived interest in conducting the study, it is often best to admit this interest while being open to examine other aspects of the group that become prevalent during the research.

Another important decision is determining how long to participate in the group before being able to draw valid conclusions about its culture. Because a group and its norms often appear as unspoken assumptions, members may not be consciously aware of important values or may not explicitly discuss them regularly. As such, it may take long-term immersion in the group to notice key assumptions and values. Given this, most ethnographers spend at least 1 year conducting fieldwork. To continue the volunteer example, it may only be at the annual banquet for the volunteers that a particular value is explicitly mentioned even though this value implicitly and frequently informs decisions about the tasks and purposes of the volunteers. It may take participating for an entire year to understand and appreciate the role of the volunteers in the hospital. For other groups, a much shorter time frame may be all that is possible, such as in studying volunteers involved in temporary disaster relief.

Ethnography Research Process

Once a researcher has decided to conduct an ethnography of a group, there are important steps to follow. These include gaining access, documenting the group, analyzing the data, representing the group, and verification.

Gaining Access

Because of the need to protect participants involved in research, an ethnographer cannot simply join a group and begin studying its members and activities. The ethnographer may

have to gain permission to conduct the study from key group members, as well as gain permission from any relevant research review committees, such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs).

The researcher may have to gain permission to participate and conduct research from group members. Depending on the group's size and structure, this may involve gaining permission from key leaders and, if possible, all members. Once this access has been secured, the researcher may then have to submit a proposal to relevant research review committees. These committees will review the proposal to make sure that the participants are not at risk, have consented to be included, and will voluntary participate in the project.

For example, if an ethnographer wanted to study the culture of a semi-professional sports team, the ethnographer might first gain permission from team members, the coach, and maybe even the team owners or sponsors. Once permission is obtained, the ethnographer may then seek IRB approval. It is important that the researcher let the members know about the project in order to make sure that they consented to be part of the study.

However, participating in and observing the team's natural settings can be messy and unpredictable in terms of consent. Permission may be easy to secure from team members, the coach, and team owners or sponsors, but may be more difficult to secure in public settings that include fans of the sports team or other teams against which the primary team competes. Although an ethnographer should try to secure permission from key members, permission may be more difficult, and even impossible, from other constituencies who are connected to, and part of, the group's culture. When this happens, the ethnographer must take care in disguising and representing others who are not aware of the project.

Data Collection or Research Trail

An ethnographer typically collects more than one type of data. Common types of data include field notes from participant observation, transcripts from formal interviews, and documents and artifacts.

Field Notes

From her or his participant observation, the ethnographer's goal is to produce field notes that document the communication and activities of the group. Field notes are a narrative description of the events that occurred but may also include the ethnographer's personal experiences with and evaluations of the group's activities. The ethnographer may also make "head notes" and "scratch notes" if appropriate. Head notes are simply mental records about member or group conversations and activities. Scratch notes involve jotting down words, phrases, or other brief observations. Scratch notes are appropriate in settings such as meetings where other people (nonresearchers) are also taking notes; they are inappropriate if they draw attention to the ethnographer, such as during a physical activity, as the note-taking may disrupt the natural happenings of the setting. Later, the ethnographer can use the head notes and scratch notes to create field notes.

For the sports team example, the researcher would participate as much as possible at team practices, games, meetings, and perhaps social events involving team members. The ethnographer may be able to create scratch notes during the team meetings if the coaches have handouts, charts, and diagrams, but for many other activities, the researcher would rely on head notes of the team's conversations and activities. After participating, the researcher

would then produce field notes of the observed activities. It is important to write the field notes as soon as possible after the activities to minimize inaccuracies or omissions.

Interviews

Often an ethnographer conducts informal interviews with group members. When this occurs, these informal interviews become part of the field notes. Ethnographers may also supplement their observations and informal interviews with formal interviews. Depending on the group's size, the ethnographer may try to interview everyone or only key individuals as determined through participant observation. Ideally, the ethnographer creates a set of interview questions based on the observations already completed in order to ask probing and clarifying questions about particular topics. If the members allow recording of the interviews, then verbatim transcripts are often created; if members prefer not to be recorded, the ethnographer takes scratch notes during the interviews and then produces field notes of the interviews.

In the sports team example, the ethnographer might interview the coaching staff, some or all of the players, managers and owners, and fans of the team. If the ethnographer observed that family members and partners were an important part of the team's culture, the ethnographer may even try to interview them as well. The ethnographer would then create pages of transcripts or field notes from these interviews.

Documents and Artifacts

Many groups produce a number of documents or other artifacts as part of their activities. Documents could include minutes from meetings, photos of activities, or other texts such as e-mail messages, websites, or blogs created and valued by group members. The ethnographer may attempt to gather as many of these artifacts as possible as they can provide additional insight into the group or reinforce other observations. For the sports team example, artifacts might include scorecards, the team symbol, advertisements about the team, stories reported in the local media, and announcements posted on the locker room bulletin board.

Data Analysis

There is no singular or correct way to analyze the data gathered for an ethnography and the process is more organic and cyclical than predictable and linear. However, a number of techniques are a common part of ethnographic analysis.

Data Reduction

After reading the field notes, interview transcripts, and documents repeatedly, the ethnographer will likely discover that some of the data are not particularly relevant to understanding the group's culture. These data are separated from the relevant data, a process called data reduction. Continuing the team example, a player may have discussed an unrelated tangent during an interview that in retrospect does not provide any insight into the team's culture. This tangent may be removed from the analysis.

Coding

Ethnographers use various terms to describe the process of determining important ideas out

of the data. This process is usually described as some form of coding in which the data are separated into sections that represent different ideas or themes. This step might be called unitizing (dividing into units), thematizing, or establishing patterns in the culture. An individual unit, theme, or pattern might consist of a single word or phrase representing an important idea, a response to a question, or an extended observation of group activity.

Once the data are divided into separate units, another step usually involves comparing the units to discern similarities and differences. This process is often called a constant comparison method. The essence of this analytical process is to systematically group together examples of similar events, themes, or ideas that are distinct from other examples. This is done by using the first unit as the first category and then comparing the second unit to the first. If the units seem to be similar, the two are put into the same category; if they are different, then the second unit becomes a second category. The process continues until all units have been categorized. The goal is not to be able to count how many times a particular theme occurred but to develop a set of distinct categories that represent the group's culture.

Once a fairly concise set of categories has been developed, the ethnographer creates labels for each category and begins to look at how the categories relate to each other with the aim of creating a holistic understanding of the group. Some ethnographers will describe this process as similar to a grounded theory approach. Other ethnographers will describe these steps as initial or open coding, focused coding, and axial coding. Most ethnographers emphasize that this is not a linear process but rather an organic, cyclical process of going back and forth through developing categories and making adjustments by combining or separating categories as additional insights are developed.

Representing the Group

John Van Maanen suggests that ethnographies (the written products) often appear in three forms: realist tales, confessional tales, and impressionistic tales. In realist tales, the ethnographer offers a more omniscient and objective account of a social or cultural group. The ethnographer's personal fieldwork experiences typically remain absent or separate from these tales, and the ethnographer tends to use third-person voice to create a distanced account of group life. Confessional tales use first-person voice, foreground the ethnographer's experience with the group, and emphasize the ways in which the ethnographer changed through the fieldwork process. Impressionistic tales merge realist and confessional tales. First-person voice is still used in order to cultivate an evocative and immediate account of the ethnographer's presence in the group as well as in the production of the text while not losing focus of the group's culture. These tales—and not necessarily the ethnographic fieldwork itself—influence how the ethnographer will analyze the data and represent the group.

For a sports team, the data analysis would likely produce a number of important themes about the group's culture. These themes could include the importance of winning, camaraderie among team members, and the team's appreciation of fans and family members. It is then the ethnographer's duty to write up findings that represent a holistic understanding of the group. This write-up may be more of a realistic tale, if the ethnographer takes a more distanced approach to describing the group, a confessional tale if the ethnographer foregrounds her or his personal experience with participating and observing the team, or a more impressionistic tale if the ethnographer wants to create an evocative account of the group's culture.

Verification

Because the ethnographer typically works alone, it is important for the ethnographer to demonstrate that the analysis and findings are not baseless, idiosyncratic observations. Similar to how reliability or validity indicate rigor in quantitative research, verification provides evidence that other researchers would likely arrive at similar conclusions.

There are three common types of verification for ethnography. The first type of verification involves prolonged engagement in the field. The ethnographer explains why the amount of time spent participating and observing a group was sufficient for the study. The second type of verification involves the use of thick description of the group. Thick description is accomplished through the use of extended quotes from interviews and concrete information from field notes, and it contributes to the believability and credibility of the ethnographer as readers can determine if the ethnographer's conclusions are supported by the data. The third type of verification is member checking. To accomplish this, the ethnographer provides a copy of the study to group members and asks them to read and respond to it. If they believe it accurately represents the group, the researcher and the readers can have confidence that conclusions in the study are appropriate. However, member checking can be risky, as the ethnographer might make claims about the group that members may not understand or support.

In the sports team example, the ethnographer would likely spend most of a season with the team. The (written) ethnography would include quotes from the interviews, field notes, or documents to illustrate the observations and support the conclusions. The ethnographers could then conduct member checks with the coach, team members, and/or devoted fans of the team.

Versatility

Ethnography is a versatile research method for studying social or cultural groups. Ethnography has been applied to a wide range of groups, from small teams to larger organizations, multi-organizational collaborations, neighborhoods, and entire communities. When the data collection and analyses are conducted in a rigorous way, ethnographic research can provide valuable insight into how members of a group create and maintain culture through communication and social interaction.

Michael W. Kramer and Tony E. Adams

See alsoAutoethnography; Critical Ethnography; Field Notes; Grounded Theory; Participant Observer

Further Readings

Fetterman, D. M. (1989). *Ethnography: Step by step*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Goodall, H. L. (2000). *Writing the new ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Madison, D. S. (2012). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, performance* (2nd ed.). Thousand

Oaks, CA: Sage.

Van Maanen, J. (2011). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Michael W. KramerTony E. Adams
http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n169
10.4135/9781483381411.n169