

Ethnographic Research

Philippa Nugent

Ethnographic research, the study of groups or behaviours in their naturally occurring settings, has gained in popularity due to its humanistic, context-bound focus. Its goal is to provide descriptive and interpretive accounts of peoples' actions as they occur within their culture, sub-culture or organization.

Ethnographic research differs from the quantitative approach in the way that the environment or context is seen as integral to the understanding of the subjects' behaviour and interactions; "the actions of individuals are motivated by events within the larger whole and thus cannot be understood apart from it" (Burns 2000 : 397). This context-bound aspect of ethnographic research makes it holistic in nature; patterns of behaviour and observations are explained in terms of how they relate to the whole. The investigation of behaviours outside the context in which they naturally occur is considered by ethnographic researchers to be, as termed by Bracht and Glass, "ecologically invalid". This consideration of environment makes ethnological research particularly appropriate for studies involving closed communities or educational establishments: Schools, for example, operate within the greater community and also within society as a whole, "a classroom never stands in isolation from larger cultural and social landscapes" (Burns 2000 : 394). Studies with an emphasis on social organization are particularly suited to the ideas and methodologies of ethnographic research, where subtleties of interaction and cause may be overlooked or remain undetected by a quantitative approach.

Ethnographic research strives to gain an understanding of the complexities of actions and behaviours from the inside out. The researchers may put themselves into the position of being a member of the group. The methods employed by ethnographic research are more integrated than in other research approaches and revolve around the collection of data in the field, that is, in the pertinent environment or setting.

The starting point of ethnographic research is the identification of the research factor ; the phenomenon to be studied, the subjects, conditions and 'foreshadowed problems', which narrow down the focus of the study. A hypothesis may or may not be stated at this stage ; where it is, it remains open to reformulation and modification depending on the data collected ; often it is generated from the data itself as an ongoing process. In this way, ethnographic research is inductive rather than deductive, being more concerned with theory development than theory testing. Looking at how groups of people respond and interact in their settings ; the cultural behaviour and decisions within 'bounded systems' are examples of studies that interest ethnographic researchers.

Data is collected using a variety of techniques, and it is this that many consider to be one of the strong points of ethnographic research. The backbone of data is obtained in the field through the observation and recording of events and situations that make up the every day life of the subjects. The researcher chooses to take on a particular role as observer ; Gold (1958) defines four possibilities : a 'complete participant' where total involvement as a member of the group is required, often going as far as to conceal the fact that research is under way ; a 'participant as observer' where the researcher is again an active member of the community under study, but with a more open approach to the fact that research is being conducted ; the 'observer as participant', characterized by a more detached stance, with the researcher having contact with the subjects but not involved in trying to share experiences, and lastly, a 'complete observer'. Here, the emphasis

is on minimalising contact and 'contamination' of the setting, with observation sometimes taking place covertly. Ethnographers typically adopt the role of a 'complete participant' or 'participant as observer'. Immersion in the environment, albeit as unobtrusive as possible, is considered vital to the understanding of the contextual aspects of behaviours and interactions, "to understand behaviour the observer must understand the context in which individuals are thinking and reacting" (Wiersma 1991 : 229). Apart from direct observation, researchers may choose to make audio or visual recordings which can be reviewed and analyzed at a later date. Formal and informal interviewing techniques may also contribute to the data collection process and ethnographic researchers often use 'key informant interviews'. A key informant is a person within the group who is considered to be well-informed, approachable or available and who may be seen as a 'representative voice' or someone who may be able to shed light on the perspective of the group or situation. Other data may also be collected ; school records, tests, neighbourhood accounts and other such preexisting resources are made use of.

Ethnographic data are usually brought together and recorded in the form of field notes. This is a kind of ongoing diary where observations, feelings, thoughts and questions are noted by the researcher, ideally in the field. Following the periods of observation, the field notes are reviewed and summarized. The various data, the researcher's impressions, hunches and interpretations are synthesized into what is termed a 'grounded theory' ; theory based in and derived from the data collected. Thus, ideas take shape and are developed into hypotheses as the research process continues. Ethnographic researchers consider this method of hypothesis generation to be highly valuable due to its direct link to the reality of their subjects ; "grounded theory should be truer to life than those generated through deduction" (Burns 2000 : 434). In each situation, the researcher strives to come to an understanding of the data from the perspective of the participants.

Behaviours and interactions are interpreted holistically taking into account the

context of the environment of which they are a part. This is called the emic-etic principle of analysis and seeks to address the differences between the culturally specific reality of the subjects and that of the researcher. The researcher hopes to gain an understanding of the 'emic' perspective of the members of the group under study through close observation and participation in the group. It must be carefully defined and operationalized in order to provide a 'bridge' to the 'etic' framework of the researcher's own reality ; thus, making cross-cultural interpretations and analysis possible.

This very subjective approach is one of the main criticisms of the qualitative style of research that ethnographers embrace. The emic-etic principle of analysis is criticized from several viewpoints ; it is argued that it is not possible to gain a true understanding of a culture outside one's own, or to 'bracket out' one's beliefs and culturally biased ways of seeing or judging. The researcher is therefore engaged in an act of translation, which by nature of its subjectivity may yield false interpretations, "there is bound to be a gap between the activities (intentions, beliefs, etc.) that precede actions and the observer's ability to grasp them" (Scott 1996 : 149). Thus, issues of internal validity are brought into question ; are the interpretations accurate or merely reflections of the researcher's own cultural assumptions? Issues of external validity are also problematical from the point of view of a quantitative research tradition : The fact that there are no randomization techniques employed in the sampling makes the generalisability of results questionable. This subjectivity of the ethnological approach also challenges ideas of internal and external reliability ; would independent researchers draw consistent conclusions in the same context and to what extent could similar results be replicated? Other objections to the qualitative approach that may affect the validity of the study are that the presence of an observer may change or inhibit natural behaviour and that it is impossible to log and classify every interaction that takes place.

Ethnographic researchers attempt to address these problems through prolonged contact and persistent observation of their subjects, providing 'ecological validity'. Rigorous application of sound methodologies is also vital. These include providing comprehensive accounts of circumstances of data collection, representativeness of samples and settings and an awareness of the areas of possible bias in the study. Triangulation and multi-methodological data collection and analysis are also employed to increase validity and reliability. These may include multiple sources of the same information; multiple methods of data collection and different investigators collecting, comparing and critiquing data and interpretations. This may be executed in peer debriefing sessions or by an 'inquiry audit' where an external 'auditor' is employed to evaluate the methodologies and conclusions.

Though the ethnological approach may appear to be too subjective to be reliable when compared to the tight controls that are traditionally associated with research, qualitative techniques still employ scientific methodology. If patterns emerge, it remains the responsibility of the researcher to challenge assumptions, explore the possibilities of all explanations and to search for disconfirming evidence, the equivalent of testing a null hypothesis. The researcher must also be able to justify any conclusions reached with sound examples.

In conclusion, though the definitions of validity may differ between research traditions, they are generally accepted by all as being associated with the 'truth' of a situation. 'Truth' in quantitative terms is a single tangible reality that can be measured and accounted for, but to qualitative research, it is more a matter of multiple constructed realities that are inextricably tied to context. "The qualitative researcher must be able to show that their conclusions are credible interpretations of the evidence gathered and it is this credibility that becomes the benchmark of validity. The techniques of purposeful rather than random sampling that ethnographic research employs, may place limitations on direct comparison to other

situations, however, through the detailed descriptions of circumstances and observations, it is possible for hypotheses to be transferred to other similar contexts.

The humanistic and context-bound perspectives of ethnographic research mean that, despite its limitations, it can offer valuable insights that perhaps would be missed by a more quantitative approach, “the richness of unique qualities is preserved in qualitative analysis” (Burns 2000 : 432).

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