**What is ethnography?**

Ethnography is a broad term, used to describe a form of research which originally emerged from the anthropological tradition. In essence it is a way of examining groups or cultures, or more simply, it is a way of making sense of everyday events (Hammersley and Atkinson 1998). In order to achieve this form of understanding, ethnographers are expected to keep an open mind about what they are researching. However, this does not imply a lack of rigor as the researcher is not empty headed but open minded. Thus the ethnographic researcher first needs to define the problem, select an appropriate model or theory to help frame the study, design the study, select specific data collection methods and tools for analysis and then adopt a specific writing style (Fetterman, 1998).

**Ethnography is:**

1. A research method designed to produce empirical work. This distinguishes ethnographic writing from other texts (such as journalistic work) which may also produce in depth texts about social relationships.
2. A study of social contexts, which requires sustained social contact with people in their own environments.
3. Characterised by the researcher drawing on different data collection methods, although observation and interview are key methods of data collection.

**The history of ethnography**

The term ethnography was first identified in nineteenth century Western anthropology (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Ethnography referred to an account of a community or culture, usually one located outside the researchers own culture, and more commonly one outside the West. It referred to the way that first hand empirical investigation was integrated with an interpretation of the social organisation and culture of the peoples under study. It was associated with complete immersion in the (often tribal) society under study, participating in and observing everyday life.

During the twentieth century, ethnography as a method started to be used by Western sociologists, often in the study of Western society and communities. Whilst some studies were of communities or cultures to which the researcher was an ‘outsider’, over time ethnography has also come to be associated with research in settings and contexts familiar to the researcher. From the 1960’s onwards, sociological and anthropological work has been influenced by multiple developments, not only in the understanding of what fields of study are appropriate for ethnographic studies, but also the spread of ethnographic research techniques into different areas such as geography, psychology and health services research. Indeed, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that ethnographic methods have tended to be ‘swallowed up in a general, multidisciplinary, movement promoting qualitative approaches’.

# Roles in ethnographic fieldwork

Observation is the key or dominant data collection method in ethnography, and central to the arguments about what makes ethnography distinctive. Observer roles were first described in the 1950s based on a continuum from complete participant to complete observer (Gold, 1958).

* **Complete participant:** The complete participant interacts with people in situations in which it is possible to take a day to day role, but where their true identity and purpose are not known to those observed (Gold, 1958).
* **Participant as observer:** The participant as observer role has similarities, but differs in that both researcher and informant are aware that there is a research relationship.
* **Observer as participant**: The observer as participant role involves more formal observation
* **Complete observer:** the complete observer role removes the researcher from social interaction with those observed (which can include complete removal, such as through one way mirrors) (Gold, 1958).

A researcher’s role may not be static in this continuum, but may move as the research progresses and develops (Pope, 2005).

**Insider and outsider perspectives**: Researchers can also place themselves on a continuum of roles from insider to outsider (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002). From an anthropological tradition of ‘outsiders’ studying unfamiliar social groups, ethnographers are increasingly turning their gaze on the familiar, as ‘insiders’ (Allen, 2004). An outsider may move towards an insider perspective as their participation in the setting develops.

**Strengths and weaknesses of different ethnographic fieldwork roles**

These roles have strengths and weaknesses, interpreted as such depending on the perspective of the researcher and their epistemological assumptions.

These strengths and weaknesses can be broadly categorised:

1. About being part of someone’s world
2. Maintaining role
3. Bias
4. Privacy and consent.

*Being part of someone’s world:* Traditionally, anthropologists immersed themselves in the world of those studied, often for prolonged periods (Hannerz, 2003). This participant role reflects a belief that ‘deep familiarity’ is required to obtain the best data, achieved by getting emotionally, physically and socially close to the people being studied (Lofland, 1995). Such closeness and rapport with those studied is said to ensure an ‘authentic account’ (Allen, 2004). Proponents of insider ethnographies argue that they have a privileged understanding of the situation, are less likely to misinterpret behaviours, can uncover valuable meanings, and easily gain trust and cooperation (Allen, 2004; Borbasi *et al.*, 2005; Cudmore and Sondermeyer, 2007). However, fatigue, physical, mental and analytical may also be a consequence of prolonged participation. Over-familiarity can also be a weakness as critical data may be missed. ‘Going native’ may mean that it is impossible to get information or report findings (Gold, 1958), and may rely on certain participants (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002).

Participation may not always be possible or valued. When studying large or complex organisations participation is only possible in a small segment of the organisation. It may be necessary to mix participant and observer roles (Hannerz, 2003). It is also not possible to fully participate in some worlds, for example those of lone or elite workers (Pope, 2005), and here a more appropriate observational role may move towards participation as the researcher becomes trusted and accepted (Briggs *et al.*, 2003). We are always part of the world we study, and so can possibly never be a complete observer, always having an effect on the phenomena being studied, or being drawn into participation.

*Maintaining role:* Participatory roles may create difficulties maintaining a researcher role. There is effort required in maintaining both the ‘pretence’ of a participatory role (Gold, 1958), and the dual role of researcher and participant (Mulhall, 2003). Indeed, it is argued that it is not possible to be a complete participant by virtue of the research role (Cudmore and Sondermeyer, 2007), and that the insider participant role is compromised by the researcher role (Mulhall, 2003). Researchers also need clear boundaries, otherwise it is difficult to determine what is and is not data, as interactions with the world under study may be both professional and personal (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

*Subjectivity and bias*: are also potential weaknesses. Some argue that the position of complete observer is free from most of the potential bias that can arise from too close an affiliation with research subjects (Allen, 2004). Increasing participation in a situation can increase risk of subjectivity and bias, along with the drawback of being familiar with much of what is seen. However, subjectivity, or the use of self is integral to the process of field work and the construction of ethnographic accounts (Borbasi *et al.*, 2005). The contribution of the researcher is subjective, based on the researchers socially determined position within the observed social world. It is critical that an appropriate balance is found between an appropriate use of self, and subjectivity, using a reflexive approach to make processes visible. There may be threats to validity when people in covert studies become aware that they are being observed (Mulhall, 2003).

*Privacy and consent:* It can be argued that people have a right to privacy, and to give their informed consent when being observed. Achieving these rights makes complete observation or complete participation difficult which presents challenges for those looking at the ethic of such studies.

**This text has been taken and adapted from Fetterman DM (1998) Ethnography Step by Step 2nd Ed Sage Thousand Oakes London and Hammersley M. & Atkinson P. (2007) *Ethnography. Principles in practice.*, Third Edition edn. London, Routeledge.**

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