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Ethnography

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Ethnography

Few topics simultaneously stir as much interest, bewilderment and criticism in research methods courses as ethnography. For students inclined to see the world from socio-cultural perspectives, ethnography not only makes immediate sense, it inspires them to get up, get out, and engage in the world of lived experience. For hardcore science types, ethnography is almost entirely unappealing as an academic venture. In basic terms, an ethnography provides a representational (usually written) account of a particular culture during a specified time period. The ethnographer learns the culture through immersion in it over a year or several years; the method is, on the surface, that simple. But how the ethnographic venture is conducted, how data are analysed, and the use of ethnographic methods in the academy are far more complex matters.

What Is This Concept?

The term ethnography is quite loosely, and most of the time erroneously, applied to *any* qualitative research project where the purpose is to provide a detailed, in-depth description of the everyday life and practice of a group of people. This is sometimes referred to as 'thick description' (a term attributed to the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz). Ethnographers generate understandings of culture through the 'insider's point of view'. An ethnographer believes that in order to understand, translate and explain how cultures work, one needs to become a functioning member of that culture. Therefore, the ethnographic method is quite straightforward; one becomes a part of the cultural group, does what they do, goes where they go, lives where they live, and exists how they exist. Ethnographers adopt this approach in order to develop a nuanced and complex theoretical understanding of culture from the ground up; emphasis is thus placed on allowing abstract concepts and meanings to *emerge* from the ethnographic encounter rather than imposing these from existing theoretical models.

An ethnographic understanding of a culture is developed, then, through close exploration of several sources of data. First and foremost, long-term engagement in the field setting or place where people in the culture meet and interact daily is called *participant observation*. This is perhaps the primary source of ethnographic data. The term represents the dual role of the ethnographer in that one is both a participant in the culture, and at the same time an academic observer. To develop an understanding of what it is like to be a member of a culture, the researcher becomes a *participant* in the life of the settings wherein the culture operates, while also maintaining the stance of an *observer*, someone who can describe the experience with a measure of what we might call professional detachment. Note that this does not prevent ethnographers from becoming advocates for the people they study. Typically, ethnographers spend many months or even years in the places where they conduct their research, often forming lasting bonds with people. To be sure, many undergraduate students, graduate students and faculty members conduct ethnographies in the communities where they themselves live and work. However, the nature of participation in ethnography is not so easy to define in a single way. Gold (1958) describes four principal ways in which people perform ethnography. These participatory roles range along a continuum of involvement, from complete participant (one who is fully immersed and participates in the culture), to

participant-as-observer (one who participates, but not in everything), to observer-as-participant (one who moderately participates, but principally watches the culture from the social periphery), to complete observer (one who observes the culture only, without ever participating in or interacting among its members).

At some point in time, most ethnographers will also interview members of the culture. Ethnographic interviews provide a context for 'targeted' data collection by asking specific but open-ended questions among key informants identified through the research process. There is a great variety of interview styles. Each ethnographer brings his or her own unique approach to the process. Regardless, the emphasis is on allowing the person or persons being interviewed to answer without being limited by pre-defined choices – something which clearly differentiates qualitative from more quantitative or demographic approaches. In most cases, an ethnographic interview looks and feels little different from an everyday conversation, and indeed in the course of long-term participant-observation most ethnographic conversations are in fact purely spontaneous and without any specific agenda. Researchers collect other sources of data that depend on the specific nature of the field setting. This may take the form of representative artefacts that embody characteristics of the topic of interest, government reports, and newspaper and magazine articles. Although often not tied to the site of study, secondary academic sources are utilised to locate the specific study within an existing body of literature.

Why Is This Relevant to Me?

A number of research questions are well suited for an ethnographic approach. By and large, though, research questions focusing on the ways in which specific cultures shape personal and collective sport, exercise and health behaviours are the most amenable to ethnography. For example, my first proper ethnographic venture homed in on the ticket scalping subculture in Toronto, Canada (Atkinson, 2000). I wanted to know how the subculture is produced, how members are brought in, how tickets were acquired and what this illegal subculture signifies with regard to the broader sports-entertainment complex in Canada. Such is a classic example of a *cultural ethnography*. The purpose of a cultural ethnography is to learn the inner workings of a culture and then explain how and why the culture operates as it does as a theoretical matter. Ethnographies that involve the study of two or more groups/cultures over time are often called *ethnologies*, while

historical accounts of a culture arising from a study of them are referred to as *ethnohistories*. Although not a prerequisite of a cultural ethnography, researchers will occasionally strive to connect what is learned in a local cultural setting with broader trends and processes in a society. In my ticket scalping study I argued that the very subculture itself is partially produced by diffuse market capitalist trends in sport and elsewhere. How scalpers think, organise, interact and structure their styles of living is inexorably linked with ongoing commercialisation processes in sport and neo-liberal trends and ideologies in the larger market economic system.

Institutional ethnography is an approach to empirical inquiry associated with the feminist scholar Dorothy Smith (1987). The approach emphasises connections among the sites and situations of everyday life, professional practice and policy-making. Smith developed the approach initially in a feminist context, calling it a method that could produce a sociology for women; but yet she describes it as an approach with much wider application. In essence, an institutional ethnography (sometimes called a standpoint ethnography) is one striving to understand how people's everyday lives are structured by social forces working through and within institutions like the family, media, workplaces, schools, and others. Those following Smith in the development of institutional ethnographic methods have taken up a variety of substantive topics, including the organisation of health care, education, and social work practice, the regulation of sexuality, the police and the judicial processing of violence against women, employment and job training, economic and social restructuring, international development regimes, planning and environmental policy, the organisation of home and community life, and various kinds of activism. The method is ethnographic, but more concerned with political-economic contexts than most qualitative approaches. To date, and quite surprisingly, very few have explored the potential of institutional/standpoint ethnography in sport studies (though many have engaged a version of institutional ethnography more loosely described as feminist ethnography).

More recently, *auto-ethnographic* methods have mushroomed in popularity within the study of sport, physical activity and health. Auto-ethnography is a method in which the investigator develops a research question pertaining to a particular social process, experience, or reality and then creates an ethnographic description and analysis of his/her own behaviour, attempting to develop an objective understanding of the behaviours and work context under consideration by casting the investigator as both the informant 'insider' and the analyst 'outsider'. For example, a spate of auto-ethnographies

about running has been published within the recent past (Hockey, 2006). These ethnographies, almost always written in a story or aesthetic narrative form rather than as a traditional academic/journal article, illustrate that by knowing one's own self and exploring how one's own life takes meaning (for instance, as a runner), we learn a great deal about the processes by which social life unfolds. Auto-ethnographies can be deeply personal, emotional and artistic in their written form, as part of the logic of the method is to 'open up' and personalise published research in order to help readers connect with academic arguments, theories and ideas.

Audience ethnography strives to understand how people actively receive, decode and use media texts. Audience ethnography might be designed as a one-shot case study, or be structured as a long-term panel study of how a group interprets media over the course of time. In the typical scenario, participants in an audience ethnographic project are asked to collectively or individually watch, read or listen to selected media and then respond to its content. A researcher acts as a facilitator in these scenarios, prompting questions among respondents about what the messages or symbols in the media might mean to them and how they actively decode them from a variety of cultural standpoints (age, race, sexuality, gender, class). The underpinning logic of doing audience ethnography is that by observing and questioning how people make sense of media data, 'live' and *in situ*, researchers compile a more valid understanding of the process of immediate reception and the cognitive processing of media content. Wilson and Sparks (1996), for example, illustrate how African-Canadian teenage boys fashion their own constructions of, and lived experiences with, Black masculinity to interpret mass mediations of 'Blackness' in basketball shoe advertisements. Wilson and Sparks discuss how the boys find humour, reality, and frequent inferential racism in the depictions of Black masculinity in the advertisements. They also attest to how the youth selectively take from the commercials what makes sense to them culturally, and how they negate or resist supposedly preferred images and constructions of 'Blackness' in the commercials.

Finally, with the rise of new online media the practice of *netnography* is gaining popularity as a technique of analysis. Netnography, or online ethnography, is an online ethnography of Internet sites wherein a researcher does not simply observe the content of websites, but often contributes to them as a registered or recognised member. Wilson and Atkinson (2005), for example, studied the online recruiting and social connecting mechanisms provided by Rave and Straightedge blogs and chat forums/rooms. In both subcultures,

young people use Internet sites as a performing community and a way of fostering bonds between members across great spaces. Both of the researchers participated and chatted with members online as a means of conducting quasi-interviews, but, more importantly, of gaining a first-hand understanding of how new media space is produced by groups in 'real time' as a vehicle for developing a sense of mutual identification and commitment.

Show Me How It's Used!

Ethnographies are not merely projects one participates in in a leisurely fashion, or in one's spare time. Proper ethnographies totally encompass one's life. Following the rhythms, activities and everyday goings-on in a culture is more of a style of life than a part of an exercise encapsulated neatly within the confines of one's office walls. Ethnographies require time, patience, energy, and the willingness to immerse. Any ethnographic instruction manual preaches a similar lesson. When one chooses to study the sport and exercise worlds ethnographically, one's modality of living shifts. For this reason alone, neophyte ethnographers must reflexively analyse their own enthusiasm for social interaction with strangers, their abilities to manage stage fright, their desire to spend copious amounts of time away from friends and family members, and their capability for sacrificing almost all of their free time.

Ethnographies, in any manifestation, thrive or fizzle out depending on the researcher's ability to gain access to the setting or culture of their choice. Consider the following example. About three years ago I decided I wanted to conduct an ethnographic field project on fell runners in the UK. There are hundreds, if not thousands of fell runners across the country and I wanted to explore the existential aspects of running off-road, and the cultural traditions associated with the practice. Easy one, right? Well, I have to find fell runners first. No problem there because I knew several from a local running club in which I participated in the English midlands. But knowing a few runners, then participating in a few races, is not an entrée into the culture of fell running. I needed to access and interact with people who lived, breathed and promoted the tradition. I needed to do what they do, see the sport how they see it, and understand how their culture makes sense to them as its core enthusiasts.



Access to the core networks of lifestyle participants in a sport culture is only the beginning. Several weeks or months may pass before one secures a role in the group. A basic sociological lesson instructs us that membership in a culture is framed by one's role, status and identity in the group. Why is this important in ethnography? Because one actually becomes what we call the 'instrument of data collection' (i.e. you are actually the recorder of data every day in the field), how you access the group, what roles you play therein and how other people position you as a person in the group substantially influences the volume and depth of the information you are able to gather over time. Who you are partially determines what you see, what you are told, and what you eventually know. I am fully convinced, for instance, that unless one fully immerses oneself in a culture, for example, fell running its members will maintain an arm's length cultural distance from you. The greater the depth and breadth of your role in fell running culture, the more its culture becomes real and your intersubjective connection with other enthusiasts sharpens. But still, not all ethnographic projects lend themselves to full immersion, for both practical and professional reasons.

The next 'stage' of data collection is the long haul in ethnographic projects. This involves the day-to-day collection of empirical data. Empirical data to an ethnographer could be everything and anything one hears, feels, sees and reads in the field. Most of the time, a researcher will only have a vague understanding of what is important at first (i.e. for answering one's initial research question) and so everything is noted, recorded and reflected upon until a dominant theoretical idea or set of main conceptual foci emerge in the study. Conversations with others, descriptions of interaction, artefacts gathered in the field and places visited need to be recorded with meticulous detail. Interviews with key informants provide the ethnographer with focused data on conceptual and substantive curiosities coming to the fore, and the research focus is narrowed further. What generally starts as a broad and overwhelming venture into the cultural dark transforms into a tightly defined research venture. There are no magic templates, tricks, tips or steps one might employ in order to develop conceptual clarity in a project. For example, whereas I started my project on fell running as an exploration of existentialism in outdoor sports, it turned into one on the rise of biomimicry in post-sport physical cultures.

The arduous part of ethnography commences with the processes of data interpretation and representation. Because anything and everything in an ethnographic project is data (at least at first), the process of whittling down one's study into a paper or even book-

length report can be daunting. One commences the data analysis process from day one; reviewing and making interpretive/analytic notes about sociological 'things' one has heard, witnessed or discovered in the field with others. As time progresses, one learns to connect discoveries to conceptual ideas, and perhaps even to a new theoretical framework. Field notes, observations, interview data and artefacts gathered serve as partial indicators of broader sociological processes and structures. Thus, the lion's share of ethnographic research is interpretive and qualitative in orientation; that is to say, researchers are not so concerned with testing formal hypotheses derived from theory against data, in most cases. So, it is fair to suggest that ethnographic analysis is based more on the use of field data to generate, explore, probe and extend the empirical applicability of particular concepts, axioms or ideas.

Problems, Pitfalls and Controversies

Fervent advocates of more scientific methods question the reliability (repeatability) of ethnographic findings. Could another person have studied Ashtanga in Toronto and compiled the very same (or at least a similar) story of the setting? Probably not, because so much of ethnography relies upon, and is produced through, the intermixing of roles, relationships and personalities in the field. As a related concern, then, can an ethnographer ever represent the reality of everyday life in a valid manner? Can months or years in the field be reduced to an 8,000-word journal article or 200-page manuscript? The belief that ethnographic accounts can be 'realist' (i.e. textually represent the complexities of social life in an accurate manner) has come under considerable challenge over the past 40 years.

Finally, the social scientific point, value or outcome of ethnographies is questioned on a regular basis. Ethnographic accounts generally evolve in their written form as socio-cultural stories or narratives; their 'drivers' are theoretical concepts and their audiences are often very small groups of people within universities. But social science for the sake of esoteric storytelling now receives substantial scrutiny, and growing numbers of critiques are asking ethnographers to underline or tease out the social benefits or institutional policy implications of their research.

 **also:** [Grounded Theory](#); [Interpretivism](#); [Media Analysis](#); [Visual Methods](#).



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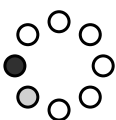
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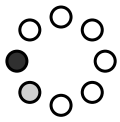
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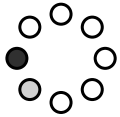
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