

RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL METHODOLOGIES FOR ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Ethnography is a qualitative research approach widely employed in the social and behavioral sciences to investigate human cultures, communities, and social interactions in their natural contexts. It relies primarily on data collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews, enabling researchers to develop interpretations of how individuals and societies function in everyday life. Unlike experimental methods that control or manipulate variables, ethnography emphasizes studying social phenomena as they naturally occur. A central aim of ethnographic inquiry is to achieve a deep and nuanced understanding of the group being studied. This goes beyond a simple description of behavior, focusing instead on the meanings, values, and social structures that shape how people think and act. Ethnographic data, therefore, represent not only field observations but also interpretive insights into cultural life. Achieving this level of understanding requires prolonged engagement in the field and strong reflexivity, where researchers continuously examine how their own perspectives influence data collection and interpretation. Ethnographers often immerse themselves in the language, customs, and everyday practices of the community to accurately interpret lived experiences. Overall, ethnography offers rich and contextualized insights into complex social phenomena such as identity, power, tradition, and social change. By prioritizing meaning, context, and lived experience, it provides a powerful methodological framework for understanding the diversity and complexity of human societies in ways that quantitative approaches alone cannot fully capture.

Keywords: Observation, data analysis, culture, data collecting, and cultural anthropology

Introduction

Known as a “**thick description**,” a concept introduced by Clifford Geertz. This involves not just describing what people do, but interpreting the meaning behind

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Ethnographic Research Process

Ethnographic research follows a systematic yet flexible process that is broadly comparable to other qualitative research traditions in the social sciences. It typically involves a series of interrelated stages, including problem formulation, literature review, clarification of research objectives, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of findings. These stages are iterative rather than strictly linear, allowing researchers to refine their focus as field engagement progresses.

1. Identification of the Research Problem

For instance, one significant research problem concerns the **gradual decline of nomadic pastoralism** among Mongolian herding communities. This transformation is influenced by urbanization, climate variability (including severe winter conditions known as *dzud*), and socio-economic restructuring, which

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Similarly, research on Indigenous groups such as the Tsaatan (Dukha reindeer herders) highlights issues of cultural sustainability under conditions of environmental vulnerability, economic marginalization, and tourism pressures. Ethnographic inquiry in this context may focus on how cultural identity is maintained, how external interventions influence livelihood systems, and how traditional ecological knowledge is transmitted across generations. Accordingly, an ethnographic study might explore:

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2. Literature Review.

3. Specification of Research Purpose.

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development of conceptual categories that explain how social life is organized and experienced within a given cultural context. The aim is not merely to describe behavior but to interpret its cultural significance within a coherent analytical framework (Emerson et al., 2011).

5. Reporting and Evaluation.

Ethnographic reporting must maintain fidelity to participants' lived experiences while ensuring transparency in analytical procedures. According to Creswell

Theoretical and Methodological Positioning

Hereby, we intend to elaborate our implications on the implications of the research work based on the examples I am familiar with. "Ethnographic research is a qualitative design for describing, analyzing and interpreting the patterns of culture sharing groups" (Wolcott 1999).

For ethnographic research work, the most relevant research methods include participant observation, interviews, and data analysis and representation. Ethnographers visit the "field" and collect extensive data through such procedures as observation and interviewing, and write up a cultural portrait of the group of people. Participant observations and interviews have become standard procedures for collecting data in the field.

Participant observation

"Observation is the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site. Observation is one of the forms of data collection". (Grbich 2009) The conduct of observation is the major ethnographic study method, which comprises three steps: description, interpretation, and explanation. As the research object is located within the social context and local community, the research will involve all the related people as part of the society. The major objective of ethnographic research is to explore the shared culture of a group of people.

The observation would not obviously be held only once; thus, grounded theory design will be utilized. Grounded theory designs are systematic and qualitative procedures that researchers use to generate a general explanation (grounded in the views of participants, called a grounded theory) that explains a process, action or interaction among people (Creswell 2011). The theory explanation is "grounded" in the data from participants. From this, the researcher makes predictive statements about the experiences of individuals.

Data collecting

Data collection is one of the main procedures of ethnography. Regarding the qualitative method, it is not limited to interviews and observations (Creswell 2011). The most revealing part is the data analysis, which takes place over a longer term. Ethnographers collect data by spending time at participants' sites where they live. To understand the patterns of a cultural group, an ethnographer spends considerable time with the group. During the field observation, the researcher needs to find out the special patterns of ethnic groups. Ethnographic patterns consist of behavior, belief, and language. Patterns cannot be easily discerned through questionnaires or brief encounters (Hamersley 1990). Therefore, an ethnographer goes "to the field," lives with or frequently visits the people being studied, and slowly learns the cultural ways in which the group behaves or thinks.

During fieldwork, the ethnographer uses a variety of research techniques to gather data, such as casual conversation, semi-structured interviews, life history, life-cycle interview, participant interview, household census, ethno-genealogy, and audio-visual material. Such data are unsystematic; therefore, the ethnographer needs to understand the importance of proper analysis, interpretation, and presentation of ethnographic data. "Analysis can be defined as the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns, categories and descriptive units, and looking for relationships between them. Interpretation involves attaching meaning and significance of the analysis, and explaining the patterns, categories and relationships, while presentation constitutes the act of writing up the data in textual form" (John. D 2000).

Data analysis

Data analysis is to be conducted with the following 7 steps and every single step is interpreted based on my own examples. Let me present a case regarding data analysis. My example is about the Reindeer people (Tsaatan), the smallest portion of an ethnic group who are the last reindeer herders. They have survived for thousands of years, inhabiting the remote places in Mongolia. The research problem could be the ultimate decrease in population growth. The name Tsaatan means "reindeer herders" in the Mongolian language. The examples provided are based on the data collected, and the most important facts and evidence are screened. The current data claims that reindeer people do exist, and what is most intriguing is that low population growth is observed. The initial stage begins with data management.

1. **Data management.** Data begins to be ordered into topics, which are labelled and classified under "index codes". In this stage, some issues may arise about having difficulty locating materials. For example, according to statistical information for 2010, only 282 people are living in this ethnic group. But as the reindeer populations shrink, only about 40 families continue the tradition today. In this example, locating the number of reindeer people is not sufficient for this specific ethnographic study, so the ethnographic researcher needs more detailed information. The ethnographer may face difficulty obtaining permission to use materials. In the Mongolia organizational services are not well-organized.
2. **Coding.** Coding is to determine what specific features are available. The main purpose of this stage is to find out shared settlement patterns. If any field trip is involved, it is feasible to discover the authenticity of their lifestyle, weather and living environment. For example: The Tsaatan live differently from most other people in the world. The reindeer and Tsaatan depend on one another.
3. **Content analysis.** According to humanistic ethnography, in this stage of the researcher's task, the following six areas act, activities, meanings, participation, relation and setting (John. D 2000). This analysis reveals analyzed what environment and specific circumstances exist. From the specific reindeer people research work, many cultural and personality features will be explored. For example: Tsaatan communities on the taiga are usually a group of tents of two or seven households that move camp to find optimum grazing for the reindeer. The girls and younger women do the milking and make yogurt, cheese and milk tea. A few of the men stay with the reindeer in the winter months, living in the open air with the herds to protect them from wolves and other predators.
4. **Qualitative description** thick description allows accurate and detailed data. With qualitative research the ethnographer can use portraits of the characters as part of a quantitative description. For example: one of the key activities the Tsaatan people practice is Shamanism, a religion based on nature worship. They believe the shaman rather than science and modern technology. Some of them have never seen a camera therefore the filming and lighting camera will make them scared.
5. **Establishing patterns in the data.** Patterns found among a set of participant researchers need to be compared, contrasted and sorted into categories. At this stage, the researcher needs to make some comparisons with other ethnic groups. For example, the Tsaatan people speak the Dukhan language. The language is also an endangered language. Tsaatan people are relatively less talkative. Since the character and personality of reindeer people are quite different unique from the central Khalh ethnic group, it is vital to take into account thorough research on specific features of personality in developing interview templates. The dress code is very different from the other ethnic groups that live in Mongolia. Most of the clothing is made of fur, it keeps them warm in the harsh weather. Tsaatan dress is characterized by hats like those of the Khalkh Mongol people.
6. **Developing a classification system**
To determine the most common features and elements of the people. Establishing linkages between categories. Such a classification system (typology) can be used to help explain and build theory. Within taxonomies, sub-groups are delineated within a general category (John. D 2000).
7. **Examining the negative case.** In this stage, our completed classification or coding might not align with the conditions of those people who are in this study. Post-modernist ethnographers argue that examining negative cases can guard against error and personal bias. If we made a classification such as living standard, monthly or yearly income, and sources of income for example, then for the Tsaatan people, their source of survival is only reindeer. If a natural disaster occurred, they would lose everything. Some of them say that: If the reindeer disappear, so too will their culture.

Ethical issues

One of the critical aspects of data collection is ethical considerations. Ethical issues in ethnography relate to fieldwork concerns (Wolcott 1999). These issues involve gaining access to the field, staying in the field, gathering data in the field, and the interactions that come with being in the field of research. Ethical considerations in field-based research encompass the processes of gaining initial access to a community, negotiating continued presence, collecting data, and managing researcher-participant interactions. These dimensions require careful attention to informed consent, trust-building, confidentiality, and the

minimization of harm. Such concerns are particularly significant when conducting research among small, culturally distinct, and potentially vulnerable populations, such as the Tsaatan of northern Mongolia. In this context, researchers must adopt culturally sensitive approaches that respect local norms and social structures, safeguard community knowledge, and avoid disrupting traditional livelihoods, including reindeer herding practices. Ethical issues in ethnography arise primarily during fieldwork, when data collection occurs. Ethnographers need to study people and places while causing them no harm and ensuring their privacy. The researcher may be a participant in the group or simply an observer, but should gather field notes, documents, and interviews with many people to establish a record of the ethnic group. An ethnographer needs to be aware of the potential negative influence their presentations and publications may have on the population they study.

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