



Ethnography

What is ethnography? Bowling (1997) refers to ethnography as “the study of people in their natural settings; a descriptive account of social life and culture in a defined social system, based on qualitative methods (e.g. detailed observations, unstructured interviews, analysis of documents).” Basically, ethnography is a qualitative methodology whereby the researcher seeks to understand a culture from the standpoint of a cultural insider, or what it is truly like to live and exist within a particular framework of ideas, customs, taboos, religion, thoughts, and all of the cultural institutions that come together to make culture, and how the interaction of the individual with this social framework shapes, or culturally constructs, their world view. Ethnography is also known as participant observation, because the researcher seeks to gain their knowledge of cultural construction by participating in the lives of those they study.

In conducting ethnographic research, it is my opinion that one should proceed in a logical framework which allows you to first gather general information regarding individuals and their lives, and from their one is able to develop theme lists, or particular types of data which resurface frequently in the general data, and which therefore deserve further inquiry. Developing the theme list from this general information gathering can come about in several different ways, but the most useful are life narrative and focus groups. Life narrative is perhaps my favorite because it allows the subject to tell their story in their own words. This is a powerful tool—this is a person’s story, their life, told in the manner they want it presented, or the way they have culturally constructed their very existence within a culture, and even the world! This is so important because the way in which we tell our life story, or a particular piece of our life story, shows the way in which we define and construct ourselves within the framework of our own culture. In essence, narrative when analyzed correctly can say, “this is who I am, and this is the reason I am this way.” Narratives of a large group of individuals say the same things, only on a broader scale allowing us to draw conclusions about a particular group within a culture, or in other words, “this is who we are, and this is the reason we are this way.”

Focus groups can do the same thing, only they do not provide the same opportunity for individual collaboration up front that narrative does, and it can often times lead to a phenomenon called “group think” in which an individual in the group who may have a particularly strong personality leads the others into presenting the same general type of information that this one individual wants presented to the ethnographer. Narrative avoids this, as it can be conducted one-on-one, and allows even the most timid or shy person to tell their story without fear of retribution or mockery from the group. However, there are advantages to focus groups, as they allow the collection of theme lists from a large group (usually 8-9 is best) much quicker, and hence allows you to conduct more in-depth ethnographic methods sooner. Still, it has been my experience that starting with individual life narratives is a better way to collect the “thick description” of an individual life. This is known as the hermeneutical approach, which states that there does exist objective truth in the world (e.g. laws of physics, etc.), but that a good portion of the truth is subjective and depends upon a vast array of personal and cultural experiences which may alter our perceptions of what is true, and hence how we construct our own world. For instance, if I live in the ghettos of Lima, Peru, and I contract multiple-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDRTB), it is of little comfort to me knowing that there are drugs available to treat this disease, but because of where and how I live (e.g. socioeconomic and political circumstances), they are not available and I will probably die. Therefore, the truth is constructed differently depending upon individual life and cultural circumstances. This is also known as cultural relativity, or the premise that

cultures and cultural norms must be evaluated from within the framework of that particular culture, and that therefore all cultural phenomenon must be evaluated from within the cultural framework of that society, and not another.

However, returning to life narrative and focus groups, I would recommend the use of narrative if at all possible for collecting the initial information. This involves spending time with an individual both “on the go” in their life as they move about in their cultural circumstances (this by the way makes one more amenable to working in another culture, as you are able to develop a better understanding of the cultural subtleties that can play an enormous role in peoples lives), as well as sitting with them, listening to their stories, and collecting this information verbatim. The “on the go” part is important, but getting stories and experiences, thoughts and emotions, down verbatim is where you really collect the good stuff: stories that will break your heart, sicken you, make you laugh, make you cry and elicit the whole range of human emotions. And after all, this is the focus of ethnography, to gain a true understanding as a cultural insider, and this comes through letting them tell their own culturally constructed stories. Tools one might use for this include pad and pencil (the old standby), as well as tape recorders, but possibly also video recorders. Video recorders are an amazing tool, particularly if you are able to allow research subjects access to them privately; this can in some ways serve as a limited lens into their world. I am a big fan of video in ethnography, but I also recognize its limitations, including cost and intrusion factors in some cultures.

Perhaps the best is the micro-cassette recorder, as it can be less-intrusive, but also allows you to collect verbatim data. A word of advice though, plenty of batteries, and long-play tapes, as you do not want to miss anything while fumbling to turn over or change a tape, let alone a dead battery. Some people are intimidated by the tape recorder, but when they learn it is a tool for ensuring that you accurately portray them and their lives, they are generally flattered and easily forget it is there. Also, I would recommend the use of an external microphone as the sound quality is better, and remember you have to transcribe these narratives for later data coding and analysis. If one uses pad and pencil, and this is generally the way you will collect data in the “on the go” portion of the ethnography, remember to transcribe your notes as soon as possible, generally that night when the days work is over. This is important! I have more than once put off transcription and when I later returned to do it, could not read my own handwriting, or remember what a particular note meant the way I would have if I had done it the night I wrote it. There are many hints and tips for this type of stuff, which I can discuss in more detail at a later time, but this gives you an idea.

So, once you have collected these histories, as they are sometimes known, you can begin the process of data coding. Data coding is a method whereby the thick description taken in the narratives is pulled apart to look for themes, or recurring ideas that are presented by a wide variety of individuals in a culture. These themes could be called cultural phenomenon, and because the narrative is constructed by individuals, should represent themes that are important to a large number of individuals in the culture, and therefore deserve greater study and analysis.

So then, what do we do with our theme list? This is where we are able to use another of the tools of cultural anthropology, or that of the in-depth interview. The in-depth interview is more structured than the collecting of the life narrative. From the theme list, we are able to generate a list of specific questions to address those issues (themes) which we feel are most important to our understanding of a cultural phenomenon, and in which we seek to elicit specific information, and greater details than that which was provided in the narrative. One can use the same individuals who you generated the theme list from, which is good because it allows for elaboration on their part, but it is also good to conduct in-depth interviews with individuals that you did not collect narratives from. This is where much of the real detail is generated for publication, which can then be backed up by general quotes from the narratives, however, it is important to remember that is based upon the narratives and to not forget the wealth of information that was generated therein.

Following the in-depth interviews, comes the analysis and application of a theoretical framework in order to truly understand what these experiences are really saying about being a member of a particular culture or cultural sub-group (e.g. orphans). This is also the point at which we are able to make inferences about the true causes of cultural phenomenon. For instance, in asking why there are so many orphans in Africa, it is easy to point to wars, famine, and epidemics, particularly HIV/AIDS and the associated opportunistic infections. However, this does not answer the real question of why these events occur, what are the sociopolitical realities that have resulted in an environment in which millions of children are left without parents, and yet the world (both individuals and governments) do not care. What are the underlying causes, and how can these be addressed to result in a better world tomorrow? This, I believe, is the power of anthropology and organizations such as Village Volunteers, to move from a qualitatively grounded study of the lived experiences of orphans in Africa, to a critical critique of power structures in the world today. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, a medical anthropologist at UC Berkeley, who has worked with the orphans in the slums of Brazil, calls it “speaking truth to power.”

This is just a brief introduction in how to proceed with collecting data—there really is much more to be said. I know it would be nice to go to the field with a list of interview questions in hand, but this is generally not the best way to get the detailed descriptions and true cultural information that we are seeking. However, once you have collected the narratives it is possible to go on and create theme lists, or questionnaires from which to proceed.

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After receiving his MS in Medical Anthropology from Idaho State University, Brian became an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Anthropology, where he focused his teaching and research on international healthcare and sustainable development.

During this time, Brian developed a post-baccalaureate certificate program in medical anthropology that includes a significant international healthcare experience in the Caribbean Basin, where Brian currently resides as the core international faculty for this program, while also conducting fieldwork for his joint MPH/PhD in Public Health Epidemiology. In addition to this, Brian is also pursuing his MD from the Medical University of the Americas, with plans to pursue post-graduate training in family and preventive medicine.

Using his varied background in medical anthropology, public health, and medicine, Brian hopes to develop integrated healthcare systems in the developing world, and currently works with Village Volunteers as an ethnography consultant to preserve and record the cultures of Village Volunteers Consortium members. Some of the projects include documenting the lives of parents who are HIV+, working with traditional healers, and helping to capture language that is being lost. Brian is married to Tami Mangum, who is also pursuing her PhD in Public Health, and has two young boys.

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