

Ethnographic analysis and interpretation

Ethnography has its origins in anthropology and is concerned with the exploration of culture and the ways in which groups create and sustain a common identity and shared experiences. It differs from phenomenology in so far as the focus is on shared and communicated experience and the ways in which people make collective sense of their situation. Ethnographic research may, for example, set out to explore the culture of a hedge fund based in the City of London, or how staff working with an aid agency in a disaster zone cope with the pressures of their work. What studies such as these have in common is a focus on shared meanings and the mechanisms by which groups define their common interests and respond to the challenges associated with living and working.

Although ethnographic studies can be large scale, the type of ethnographic research undertaken within the confines of T847 will necessarily be modest in scope and scale. Nevertheless, it's still likely to encompass all the usual ethnographic issues, including those associated with access to the research field, and data gathering and data analysis. Ethnography therefore provides an excellent opportunity to develop research fieldwork skills.

It should be clear that the design of an ethnographic study and the way(s) in which data are gathered have important implications for the data analysis process. Sheppard (2004) points out that an ethnographer typically starts with specific intentions that shape the way data are gathered and analysed. A researcher might wish to:

- Represent social interaction and culture in as natural a way as possible. The aim would therefore be to produce an authentic record of how a specified group is living and interacting, so the researcher would try to minimise the impact of their presence in the field and of the methods of data gathering used. Data analysis would include a review of the extent to which this goal was achieved.

or

- Understand the ways in which a group attributes meaning to what it does. To achieve this goal it's necessary for the researcher to engage closely with group members. A rich, in-depth understanding can only be obtained if we understand how members of the group make sense of what's happening. It's important therefore to capture their emotions, aspirations, concerns and strategies as they relate with one another. In this context, data analysis is more concerned with the psychology of social interaction.

or

- Discover something new, startling or important surrounding group behaviour or culture that could have implications for what we do next. This is an understandable emphasis for a

researcher trying to assess what might happen if, for example, an aid agency is planning to despatch workers to the site of a potential or impending disaster. Data analysis now includes an interest in ‘So what?’ messages. What is significant here and what might we tentatively deduce from it?

Challenges associated with data analysis

First, and as previously noted, a researcher must acknowledge the effect that their presence might have had on the nature and/or content of the data that were gathered. Data are analysed with regard to the aim of the research. If the researcher wants to prepare a naturalistic account of social interaction and culture in the group, then analysis will focus on the extent to which their presence may have caused others to interact in an artificial way, perhaps in a way designed to ‘please’ the researcher (e.g. act in a way that is expected or assumed to be the norm). The researcher is likely to discuss the risk of an ‘observer effect’ and examine the data for any patterns of interaction that suggest they were fully accepted and even ignored as a participant observer in the midst of the group.

Data analysis proceeds differently if the goal of the research is to understand or discover something practical through fieldwork. When this is the case it becomes necessary for the researcher to be more intrusive and inquisitive. If they don’t ask certain key questions at the right time, the understanding of what happens may remain partial or piecemeal. As well as considering the impact of observation, the researcher may reflect on the level of engagement achieved, especially with key informants who appear to define the group and what it strives to do.

A common practice with many ethnographic researchers is to gather more than one type of data. This raises a familiar challenge: when data are of different types, how are they combined in analysis so that a rich description of social interaction and culture becomes possible?

When preparing the data, the researcher needs to consider what sorts of information specific sets of data provide. For example, participant observation, when combined with asking a few questions, might tell us a lot about the process of group interaction (i.e. ‘What?’, ‘When?’ and, to an extent, ‘How?’) but cannot answer questions about ‘Why?’. To answer the ‘Why?’ questions, a researcher would need other forms of data gathered during interviews or group discussion.

It’s precisely because each set of data can only provide a part of the story that research of this type has to be iterative. As different sorts of data are collected, questions need to be asked about what the data mean and also about what is not yet fully understood about the group and its processes. It is common therefore for periods of observation to be followed by interviews, because the researcher wishes to follow up on some leads and fill in the gaps left by other data that have been collected. If a researcher has been told during interviews why the group behaves as it does, they might then want to observe the group to find out when and how this happens. In this instance, data analysis is comparative. The

researcher constantly asks, ‘What does this tell me?’ and ‘What else do I need to know and how can I find that out?’. Do the interview data shed any new light on the data gathered through observation?

Since enquiry is iterative and insights based on the data occur incrementally, data analysis has to be a fairly fluid process. This would mean mix and match data-gathering and data-analysis work.

However, moving back and forth between observation, interviewing and data analysis is only feasible if the researcher takes detailed field notes. Note taking in the field can capture what has been observed, but is also a means of recording reflections and speculations about what has been encountered. It is also a way of giving voice to the ‘ethnographic self’ (Coffey, 1999). It’s important, therefore, to develop an effective system of making notes and keeping records. For example, if the entries are not dated it may be more difficult to follow lines of reasoning (about what’s being studied) when it comes to writing up findings. The aim should therefore be to create a clear audit trail of data collection, which makes it possible to track back to see how research findings were produced.

Preparing data

Preparing the data in ethnographic research highlights a point made in Block 3, where it was noted that the preparatory phase of data analysis may seem mundane or administrative but, in fact, it’s very important. In an ethnographic study it’s therefore essential to do the following:

- Transcribe interviews and write up field notes promptly after each episode of data gathering, otherwise it is easy to lose track of what data were collected when and in the light of which reflections.
- Devise an effective system for recording field notes. Traditionally this was a *paper* notebook of some sort but nowadays this is likely to involve some form of portable electronic device, such as a laptop or iPad (remember to regularly back up your work). Different entries will almost certainly need to be coded in different ways. For example, the abbreviation PO might be used to indicate ‘participant observation’ notes, while DAR could mean ‘data analysis reflection’ (i.e. what you think the data are beginning to tell you). You might also wish to record LOE (lines of enquiry) whenever you pose questions about what is not yet fully understood or where you think particular observations or questions might be helpful.

Information will also need to be catalogued in such a way that it can be retrieved easily. This might mean setting up folders for different sorts of data and, later on, for the themes that you think explain what you have discovered. One useful way to help analyse a lot of data is to use a wallchart or large sheet of paper to map the study. On the far left-hand side of the paper write ‘Start of study’ and draw a horizontal line to the end of the paper to indicate when the study will end. This data-analysis line can then be used to capture developing ideas about the subject of the study. It may, for instance, be used to note several tentative themes that have been identified and now warrant exploration. Some of

these may be fruitful and become a focus of interest, while others may have to be abandoned because they do not explain very much. Reminders about what needs to be observed could also be included or perhaps questions that need to be asked when the opportunity next arises.

Analysing the data

There's no single prescriptive way to analyse ethnographic data, although most researchers agree that the work needs to focus on identifying themes and explanations that enable a 'story' to be told of the group being studied and its social interactions and culture. Analysis will depend once again on the purpose of the research and whether the aim is to:

- represent naturally occurring events authentically
- understand the reasoning of the group
- focus on particular group matters because they are germane to how it's planned to use the data later.

A powerful way to analyse data is to work cyclically through a series of questions that can later describe the ways in which the group deals with their experiences. These questions are:

- What does the group do?
- How does the group do it?
- Why does the group do it?
- What episode or event illustrates the 'What?', 'How?' and 'Why?' (a case in point)?
- How might all this support the culture, identity or coherence of the group?

The fundamental point to remember is that an ethnographic researcher needs to remain reflexive during the process of collecting and analysing data. It is important not to foreclose on possible explanations of what's been encountered, thereby restricting the opportunity for other themes to emerge or lines of enquiry to be followed. Reflexivity means that the researcher should regularly consider whether or not they are reasoning in a coherent and appropriate manner. During such periods it's almost certainly a good idea to rehearse what you think you've understood, seen demonstrated, or think may have been missed completely, with a third party, perhaps with other students in your tutor group, and/or your tutor.

Interpreting data

Once an ethnographic researcher has gathered, sifted and sorted a mass of data, the data then have to be incorporated into a coherent account of the research findings. The early analytic activity will give the ethnographic study its characteristic 'funnel' structure, as the study will become progressively

focused during its course. It may only be when the researcher is well into the study that they discover what the research is really about. In some cases the eventual focus may even turn out to be rather different from the original intention.

To summarise, ethnographic research varies in how far it develops theories to explain the subject that is being investigated. However, even a descriptive study may provide insights into the interaction(s) and culture(s) of groups that were previously little understood. The research findings may even challenge widely held assumptions and stereotyped beliefs about particular groups and their activities, actions and cultures.

References

Coffey, A. (1999) *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*, London, Sage.

Sheppard, M. (2004) 'Ethnography and practice' in *Naturalism: Understanding Discovery*, London, Jessica Kingsley, pp. 159–77.

Acknowledgment

This material is reproduced with revisions for T847 from the Open University module K825, *Conducting healthcare research*.