

# 10. ETHNOGRAPHY

*By Mark Carnero*

**A**n ethnography is a form of scientific study that focuses on people, culture, and the societies from which they both emerge. At the core of every ethnography is a story. A narrative told through the eyes of the researcher detailing a significant experience. The tale is told objectively and is exhaustive in detail. The account is captured through the first-person lens of the investigator, sharing their important vantage point. Researchers who choose the ethnographic style essentially embody the role of the academic storyteller.

When choosing the route of ethnographic study, researchers are making the active decision to forgo the quantitative methodological approach. Ethnographic studies are formally associated with qualitative scientific studies. Qualitative studies measure forms of data that are better suited to an analysis outside of numbers, computation, and statistical analysis and focus more on process, mechanisms, and meaning-making (Maxwell 2013). Ethnographies engage a researchers skills in observation, reflection, and critical analysis (Merriam 2013).

The steps to engaging in an ethnographic study are laid out below. Underneath each step is a set of questions that might help you in the completion of that step. It is imperative that each of these steps be accompanied by an

exhaustive set of notes. These notes will be used as reference during your writing process. The following steps are a mixed adaptation of the work of Singleton and Straits (2005).

## **1. Decide what social phenomena you want to focus on**

- a. What are your interests? What does society care about? What social phenomena is happening around you? Are there social phenomena occurring that haven't been studied? Is there a study that someone conducted that you want to retell from a different vantage point?
  - i. For example: Black Lives Matter protests after the police murder of George Floyd

## **2. Select a question or set of questions about that social phenomena that could be answered with your research.**

- a. What questions need to be answered about the phenomena you selected? Is there a lack of understanding about the phenomena from a specific perspective? Can you produce a question or set of questions that help society better understand what is happening? What are the details that are shrouded in mystery or perhaps misunderstood by mainstream society?

- i. For example: What are the motivations of non-Black protestors to act in solidarity with BLM?

### **3. Research the topic**

- a. Who has investigated your topic before? What leading research exists on your topic? What information is available on academic databases on your topic? What public datasets are available on your topic?
  - i. For example: Who are the leading scholars studying protest movements, BLM, organized uprisings, and inter-racial solidarity organizing etc.

### **4. Determine a research setting for your study.**

- a. Where will your research occur? What location is necessary for you to give an authentic account of the phenomena?
  - i. For example: Protests that start in Cesar Chavez Park in Sacramento, CA

### **5. Analyzing your methodological approach**

- a. What style of ethnography are you going to employ? What tactics and techniques are you going use to gather your data? What do you think you'll face obstacles during data gathering?
  - i. For example: Will you be conducting an autoethnography, or be a participant observant, or be more of a participant, or more of an observant

### **6. Develop a plan for access to the location and the population**

- a. Are you researching a special population that has specific protections under the IRB? Do you have a contact within the group you are studying? Is your contact willing to be your liaison

inside of the location? Do you need special licenses, badges, documentation, or paperwork to access your population? Are you putting yourself or other at risk accessing this population?

- i. For example: How will you gain entry to the BLM protests to begin your observations?

### **7. Presentation of self to population**

- a. How are you showing up to your research project? How will you embed yourself within the community you are studying? What permissions are needed for sustained involvement in with the community?
  - i. For example: How much will you tell the protestor organizations on the ground about your project?

### **8. Gathering Data**

- a. What was the central focus of the research and what questions are necessary to be answered during your observation? Have you completed your IRB? What information needs to be answered directly by the voice of the community you're studying? What details need to be focused on for the time that you have? What information needs to be deduced by your own observation? How are you recording the data from your observations? Where are you storing your field notes?
  - i. For example: What and how much data are you collecting?

### **9. Analyzing self during observation**

- a. What stood out to you? What created an emotional pull? What did you overlook? What did you forget? What relationships did you cultivate? What biases were challenged? What stereotypes were challenged?

- i. For example: What was the most surprising element of what you observed?

### **10. Coding your data**

- a. What labels and descriptions need to be developed in relationship with your research questions? What words or descriptions in your data require labels? IF you conducted interviews, what words within the transcripts require labels? How can you group your data that is labeled?
  - i. For example: Are you finding patterns on your observations of how and when people get involved in protests?

### **11. Finding themes and patterns**

- a. How can the groupings you created be organized by theme? What patterns can you find within the themes that are emerging? What will you do with the data that are outliers?
  - i. For example: Do you find that people's social ties shape how and when they get involved in protesting?

### **12. Relating themes back to theory**

- a. Which foundational theories guided your research? How do your themes and patterns support/challenge these foundational theories?
  - i. For example: Are you finding that current mobilizations are theoretically similar to previous mobilizations around racial oppression or do you find that current mobilizations are breaking the mold with previous mobilizations? How can theory inform these similarities or differences?

### **13. Relating themes back to original research questions?**

- a. How do these themes and patterns answer your central research questions?
  - i. For example: Going back to our initial question, What motivates people to go and protests police violence?, are you able to answer this question based on the your observations and analysis?

### **14. Recommendations for future research**

- a. What recommendations can you make to the field? How does your research inform future studies? How could studies like yours be improved?
  - i. For example: What is next?

Now that you've completed your research, it's time to write. One of the most useful ways to organize your writing is to create sections in accordance with a traditional academic journal article. Regardless if you are submitting your research in the classroom to a professor or to a panel for publication in a journal, structuring your writing like a journal article is always good practice. The sections within a traditional journal article are as follows: introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion/data analysis, and recommendations (UCSD 2020). There may be some slight variation on these categories depending on the journal you publish in.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Imagine a road trip where you are the driver. You are headed to place no one knows about and you are the only one with the directions to get there. On this road trip, you decide to take a friend. Your friend is a talkative person, who loves details, background stories, and like most millennials, takes pictures of everything with goal of posting directly to social media. Knowing all of this ahead of time, you are

prepared, you've mapped out the route to get to the destination, arranged some conversational gems to share, and have all of the Instagram worthy pitstops plotted from beginning to end. You make it a point to tell your friend what you have planned, lay out all the details, build the excitement, and tell them what to expect. This road trip is metaphor for how you should treat your introduction.

A strong introduction for an ethnography should place your reader directly in the passenger seat of the car. You are offering the reader the privilege of the front seat; offering them a clear overview of where they are headed. It is the goal of the researcher to build enough excitement in the initial paragraphs of the introduction that the reader feels compelled to continue. The researcher could utilize direct quotes from interviewees, reflect on important personal thoughts, or describe a point of conflict from the very beginning. Hook the reader first, then explain to them where "the car" is going (see also Sarabia's chapter in this manual).

The introductory section should include a thorough overview of responses for "Step 1" and "Step 2" from the previous section. In addition, it should offer very short, succinct, and clear glimpses of the roadmap for Steps 3- 13. The reader should develop an understanding of what your research questions are, why this research is important, what your personal motivations were in approaching the research, and how you are helping to inform the field of study.

## THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Constructing a literature review is akin to the development of a pyramid. Start with strong foundational material at the bottom and build upwards. The middle steps of the pyramid represent the seminal works of past researchers. The final piece at the top represents the most

current research, the peak that you are now poised to add onto. Remember though, the pyramids were not built in a day and neither are literature reviews (see also Shigihara and Sarabia's chapter in this manual).

Writing a literature review for ethnographic research is no different than writing a literature review for any other type of research. The same central goals are required: create a strong structure and organize your research articles into an argument (Sac State, 2020). Your goal, after collecting all of the relevant research on your topic (Step 3) is to weave together a clear thesis by citing the work of other social scientists in your field. A good way to arrange these articles is:

- 1) start with the theories that provide a foundation for your research (e.g. Critical race theory, structural functionalism, social structure personality perspective, etc.)
- 2) state what older researchers have declared on your topic and what their data showed
- 3) cite the most current research that may challenge or support what previous researchers have said. This arrangement of articles should provide you a strong foundation to build your own research on.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology section requires a meticulous attention to detail. The section mimics every crime scene investigation show ever aired on cable television. It starts with you (the investigator) retracing the steps of the crime scene (your research) and re-telling the story in a way sheds light on the why, or the motive (rationale for choosing the methodology), who was involved (participants), where it happened (research setting), and how the crime (your research) happened in step by step detail.

A strong methodology section should have details that are thorough enough so that any other social scientist could try and replicate your work (USC, 2020). Importantly though, ethnographies lean heavily on the experiences, relationships, and presence of the individual who conducted the research, so they are more difficult to replicate in comparison to other methodologies. However, there should still be a strong focus to provide accurate details. Because the methodology should also tell the audience from what perspective is the ethnography written from.

To complete this section, you will need to refer to your notes from "Step 4-7" After you have compiled your notes, start to detail with why you chose your specific form of ethnographic research. Provide any research articles or citations that offer any insight or supportive argument to the necessity of this style of research. Essentially, you are explaining why this was the best way to conduct the research.

Now that you've explained "the why," about your methodology, next you will provide thorough explanation of the remainder of w's (who, what, when, where). These descriptions should draw from both your notes and any memories that flood your consciousness as you retell your story. Your descriptions should be animated, vibrant, and rich in texture. The descriptors of the characters and setting should provide an illustrative example so clear that when you provide quotes in the upcoming data section, they can imagine the person saying it, the idiosyncrasies in their mannerisms, and the subtle peculiarities of how they interact with their lived environment. Your audience should feel like they are beginning to build a relationship with the people and places in your research.

## DISCUSSION AND DATA ANALYSIS

The discussion and data analysis sections are the heartbeat of the story you are attempting to tell. In this section, you are giving voice to your experience, the people you interacted with, the community you were in, and the location you traveled through. Here, you will relive moments, retell stories, but also importantly, make sense of the journey you embarked on.

In the discussion section, you will arrange the multiple excerpts, quotes, and observations from "Steps 8-13." There are multiple goals to be achieved in this section:

- 1) answer the research questions(s) you laid out
- 2) discuss the themes that emerged from your data
- 3) pay respect to your experience, the people, and places that you studied by telling the story.

There are multiple ways to arrange what could potentially become a pretty cumbersome data section. What might be the easiest writing tip is to start with the research questions and create sub-sections underneath each question with the themes that emerged from your data (Urol, 2013). For example, if you are studying "how do students experience racism in the college classroom" and the first question you have is "how do students experience micro-aggressions in the college classroom?" If your data supports it, you might be able to put themes like "covert name calling," "racialized suggestive language," "subtle insults, etc." Remember though, you're not going to prescribe the themes for each question, the data you collect should organically produce each sub-section.

After arranging all of your themes underneath each sub-section and question, use your quotes and observations as the data that supports your findings to fill the writing space. Think of each sub-section and theme as categorized containers for all of the dialogue excerpts you have collected. Remember to not just copy and paste the quotes into the sections; you need a sentence to introduce the quote and build it up and you'll need a sentence to analyze what you're showing the reader. Sentences like "This was evidenced by..." or "As highlighted here in this quote..." are generic but good transition sentences to highlighting your interview excerpts or observations. Sentences like "This quote highlights..." or "The observations details a..." are again generic but useful transitions to help with analysis of data piece you offer.

There will be data that does not quite fit into a theme or a subsection. You might want to create a stand-alone section for this as well, a place for data that are outliers but still significant enough to be discussed. The beauty of qualitative data is that it is subjective, so you will rarely find "junk data" in an ethnography; you have the opportunity problematize every minuscule facet of your experience.

After this data section concludes, you should have answered all of the research questions that you mapped out at the beginning of the study by providing significant details to each question through expansive narrative and observation notes. Additionally, the reader should feel as though they have "met" each of the characters you discussed in your methodology section. Moreover, your audience should feel like they are beginning to understand the perspectives of the community you studied. Last, your reader should feel like your interpretation of what you experienced was academically significant.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations section is where you wrap up the extensive story you just told. In the initial paragraphs, you are tasked with paraphrasing and reiterating essential points of the introduction, methodology, and data analysis sections. In later paragraphs you will discuss how your study adds onto the important research you discussed in your literature review section.

This section is also a place for honesty with yourself and your reader. This is a good section for the data from "Step 9" to be placed. You should share with the reader any parts of your study that you feel could be improved, any glaring gaps in your methodological approach, and all of the small missing details that could have enhanced your research.

As you finish this section, you can close with your suggestions for future research or suggestions to other researchers about what still needs to be studied on the topic. Share with your audience what you wish you could have included in your research and how that could have added onto the significance of the study - if you were to do it again, how would you do it differently? After you have finished all of these steps, your ethnographic study is complete!

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