Introducing Long-term Ethnography: Positioning Long-term Ethnography as a valuable tool for long-term Ethnographic research

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Abstract

Trends in Ethnography have changed over the years, and just as in the initial years, fieldwork and the Participant Observation method replaced armchair ethnography, shorter-duration in locales close to the Ethnographer's residence have come into vogue. Ethnographic studies have traditionally been long, stretching for durations of twenty-four months or more, and in exotic faraway locations driven by a desire to study exotic cultures. Bronislaw Malinowski's study of Trobriand Islands spanned several years and the ethnographer stayed with his subject for extended durations. Radcliffe Brown likewise spent a considerable amount of time in the Andaman Islands studying his subjects in great detail, just like Margaret Mead did in Samoa, studying adolescence and puberty. Of late, shorter ethnographic studies have become commonplace and in urban settings closer to the Ethnographer's residence. In some cases, the same subject has been studied more than once by different Ethnographers. Of late, the research dimension of ethnography is being emphasized along with its use in problem solving. In a previous paper we recommended that ethnography be used in Economics and economic theory formulation, complementing its use in Developmental studies. However, long-term ethnography which is a planned long-term study using the same or different teams (often combined with Critical ethnography and other techniques) can up the ante a little more, and take it towards the fulfilment of its objectives.

Introduction

To put it in simple terms, ethnography a branch of Anthropology, is the systematic description of a culture through the medium of intensive and extensive fieldwork. In a loose and in a broad sense, the goal of ethnography is to provide a detailed, in-depth account of the day-to-day living, habits and customs of a group of people in a natural setting. It is a chiefly qualitative study, (only sometimes using quantitative techniques) combining both descriptive and analytical methods. Sometimes, interviews, questionnaires and visual recording may be incorporated as a part of the study, along with the use of multiple methods in an approach known as 'Data triangulation'. (Powdermaker (1961), (Lewis (1961) It is one of the most important branches of social research. It typically examines the behaviour of the participants in a given social situation and understands the group members' own interpretation of such behaviour. The term 'Ethnography' is a combination of two Greek words, namely 'ethnos' which means 'folk' or 'peoples' and 'grapho' which means 'to write'. However, the Greek term 'ethnographia' was first introduced by Johann Friedrich Schopperlin and the German variant was introduced by A F Thilo the year 1767. August Ludwig von Schlozer then introduced this term into academia, albeit in a historical context. Thus, Ethnography is a detailed narrative of communities and their way of life in order to generate useful knowledge, and may also be described as a 'portrait of a people'. Ethnography also involves an interaction with the communities being researched, and is carried out in a wholly natural and not in an experimental or an artificial context or setting. [1] [2]

Ethnography as a distinct discipline is traceable to the Ethnologist Gerhard Friedrich Muller during the Second Kamchatka expedition that took place between the years 1733 and 1743. However, the next century and a half would see expeditions being made to different parts of the world, a trend riding piggy-back on colonialism. A common definition of the term Ethnography is "The term Ethnography commonly refers to a systematic study of different peoples and cultures. It may be defined as the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' using methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, with a view to collecting data in a systematic manner but without being imposed on them externally." According to another definition given by researchers Hammersley and Atkinson in 2007, "Ethnography usually involves the Ethnographer participating covertly or overtly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is being said, and asking questions by means of formal and informal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts, and whatever other data is available, to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of enquiry." [3]

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[1] Presenting the 'Structured and Annotated Participantdriven Appraisal' technique in Ethnography: Towards the universal realization of Multivocality in Ethnographic studies Sujay Rao Mandavilli ELK's International Journal of Social Science Vol 4, Number 4, 2018

[2] Ethnography John D. Brewer, Oxford University Press, 2000

[3] What is Ethnography? Methodological, Ontological, and Epistemological Attributes, Tony L. Whitehead, Department of Anthropology University of Maryland

Among the most distinguished ethnographers was Malinowski. His methodologies set the tone for a century to come. He is widely credited with having developed the 'Participant observation technique'. The term was first coined in the year 1924 by E C Lindeman and was identified as a fieldwork technique by Clyde Kluckhohn in 1940) which involved the Ethnographer spending lengthy periods of time with subjects either in a central or a peripheral role, and maintaining fieldnotes. He rightly argued that the various aspects in the life of people were all intertwined. Malinowski also stressed on fieldwork as the primary way of data gathering in Anthropology, and effectively relegated EB Tylor's Armchair Anthropology to the background. According to Malinowski (1922:6), a cultural anthropologist "must possess real scientific aims and know the values and criteria of modern ethnography … he must apply a number of special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence". Malinowski established participant observation as an important technique of fieldwork. Apart from Malinowski, we can also mention A.R. Radcliffe–Brown who did exemplary fieldwork in the Andaman Islands in British India, Father Joseph Lafitau who studied the Mohawks, and Edmund Leach who worked in Burma. The Participant Observation method dominated Ethnography for three-quarters of a century, though sometimes other methods such as fieldwork from a distance were less commonly used by ethnographers such as Ruth Benedict. [4]

Ethnography is a holistic study and may include in some cases, a history (There was a school of thought led by Franz Boas which emphasized Historical Particularism), and an analysis of the habitat, the terrain, and the climate of the subjects being studied. Different groups have been studied through ethnography, including communities, gangs, cults, and organizations of various kinds, though ethnic groups have traditionally been studied in most cases. Ethnography is an integral part of the social sciences, and the field is to the social scientist what the laboratory is to the physicist, chemist or biologist. [5] [6]

Another key feature of Ethnography is that emphasizes not only on Participant Observation but also on relationship building with subjects. (Gupta and Ferguson (1997)). According to Bernard and Spencer (1996), the word Ethnography has two distinct meanings namely, Ethnography as product (Ethnographic writings, which forms the end product) and Ethnography as process (Participant observation or fieldwork which is the process towards the end). Thus, according to Agar (1980:2): "Ethnography is an ambiguous term, representing both a process and a product." Thus, the product depends on the process, though this can by no means be represented in a simple linear relationship. According to the Macmillan's dictionary of Anthropology (1986), "Ethnographic studies combine descriptive and analytical elements but are centered on a specific culture or society and consider theoretical or comparative generalization from the standpoint of the ethnographic example." Thus, generation of the final report and its use in knowledge building (and nomothetic rule building) has always formed an

[4] What Makes School Ethnography 'Ethnographic'? Frederick Erickson Michigan State University, Erickson, Frederick (1984). Anthropology and Education Quarterly, Vol. 15, 51-66
[5] Ethnography: A way of seeing, Harry F. Woclott, University of Oregon, Altmira Press 2008
[6] Handbook of Ethnography Edited by Paul Atkinson, Amand Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Lofland 2001, Sage Publications Limited

important part of Ethnography. Ethnography is moulded by Ethnographic theory, and can also be used to create new ethnographic theory and frameworks.[7891011]

Ethnography can give a much-needed voice to suppressed people. Seeing issues from the participant's point of view is called an emic view, while seeing things from a researcher's point of view is called an etic perspective. The Doctrine of Positivism states that all information can be obtained from sensory experience. Ethnography must be rigorous and systematic but the Ethnographer must avoid dogma. Ethnography begins before the fieldwork commences as the ethnographer does a preliminary study, but it continues after the fieldwork ends as the ethnographer analyses the data and writes the ethnography, and sometimes theorizing about the people. Ethnography can either be holistic covering as many facets of the culture as possible, or it can analyse only one aspect in detail. It is often multi-sited, covering more than one site. Ethics are also a much-debated topic, and form an integral part of ethnography and research considerations. Researchers are expected to be bias-free, keeping their ideologies aside, but this may sometimes not happen.

Even though many studies claim to be objective, they are seldom bias free, and formulating systemic bias-free approaches may become one of the priorities of Twenty-first century Ethnography, as the world becomes rapidly globalized, and there is less and less tolerance for Eurocentrism. Cultural Relativism is the idea that a person's beliefs and values should be understood in the context of that person's culture, and should not be clouded by a third party's perceptions. Another emerging field is Critical Ethnography which focuses on biases that can arise from Ethnography, and this field applies reflexive inquiry and critical theory too. Critical Ethnography also provides a subversive worldview and seeks to critique culture and cultural research. It seeks to expose hidden agendas and upturn deep-rooted biases and long-held assumptions. Subaltern studies which evolved in various other contexts such as historiography are used in Ethnography as well. This field of study interfaces subaltern studies and post-colonial studies, including a post-colonial critique of Anthropology along with a study of oppressive power structures. Examples of this have included feminist Ethnography. (Thomas 1993) However, the Author's perspective is that a strong Eurocentric bias remains well into the twenty-first century. The focus must also change from intellectual curiosity of alien cultures to a genuine desire to help cultures attain progress through self-effort and self-defined direction. This has only been partly realized through the medium of Applied Anthropology and Developmental Anthropology, as participation from developing countries is often lacking. Though Indian and other Ethnographers such as Sarat Chandra Roy, G S Ghurye and M N Srinivas have often done brilliant research, it still largely confirms to the Western mould, and global systems of domination. However, there are Ethnographies highlighting cultural differences by highlighting interactions with people from varied cultures and these have included Vincent Crapanzano's, Tuhami: Portrait of Moroccan (published in 1980) and Marjorie Shostak's, Nisa: The Life and Words of a Kung Woman (published in 1981) Post-modernist thought which

[7] Ethnography: Step by step Third Edition David M. Fettermann Sage Publications, 2010
[8] Ethnographic Methods, Second Edition, Karl O'Reilly, Routledge, 2012
[9] Ethnography: Principles in practice 3rd Edition, Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley Routledge, 2007
[10] 9 Being Ethnographic: A guide to the theory and practice of Ethnography Raymond Madden Second Edition
[11] 10 Cultural Anthropology: Appreciating Cultural Diversity Fifteenth Edition Conrad Phillip Kottak McGraw Hill, 2013

evolved from the thoughts of Clifford Geertz and other thinkers from the 1960's likewise argues that is one truth, and that the perception of truth varies widely from observer to observer. Practicing Anthropology and Action Anthropology have likewise aimed to make the lives of people better, but we have only scratched the tip of the iceberg yet.

There is however no well spelt out guide for long-term ethnography; hence this work. Although some commendable works have been done including Raymond Firth's method of dual synchronic study to document the changes that took place in Tikopia society over a period of twenty years, this kind of an approach remains the exception rather than the rule. Some Ethnographers have tried to study a similar topic across diverse societies. Margaret Mead a student of Franz Boas, studied adolescence and puberty in her monograph Coming of Age in Samoa which was published in 1949. After studying Samoan society, Mead studied the personality formation of the children of New Guinea particularly the Manus tribe, which was published as-"Growing up in New Guinea" in 1930. The third important book of Mead is titled "Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies" published in 1935. In this study Mead deals with the impact of culture on personality formation in three different cultures, i.e., Arapesh, Mundugumor and Tschambuli, to study different cultural patterns. In some cases, a similar topic has been studied by multiple Ethnographers across diverse societies. For example, the kinship among the Tallensi has been studied by Meyer Fortes, and among the Americans by David Schneider. Often, studies on similar subjects have been carried out by Ethnographers among related peoples. The extensive study carried out among the Gonds by Fürer- Haimendorf, came on the heels of an earlier study by Grigson and Verrier Elwin. Although Grigson's and Elwin's monographs dealt with the Gonds of Bastar, no accounts existed on the Raj Gonds, and this led to Fürer-Haimendorf investigating them. In some cases, the same subject has been studied more than once by different ethnographers. Bronislaw Malinowski, a British Social Anthropologist, studied the Trobriand Islanders or Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea and his results were published in the important path-breaking work "Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea", and his study was published in the year 1922. These islanders were studied again by Annette B. Weiner and the results were published in 1988. Weiner's work too followed the Participant Observation method but focused on areas neglected by Malinowski and studied the topic more from a feminist perspective. [12]

Objectives of long-term ethnography

The following are the objectives of long-term Ethnography.

1. To study changes over time: One of the core objectives of long-term Ethnography is to study and document changes that have taken place in a culture or society over a period in time, and quantify the impact these changes have on other aspects of study. This may also be combined with econoethnography in Anthropological Economics, and can be a valuable tool in policy-making. It can also be an aid in developmental ethnography.

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[12] Introducing Anthropological Economics: The quest for an Anthropological basis for Economic theory, growth models and policy development for wealth and human welfare maximization Sujay Rao Mandavilli ELK Asia Pacific Journal of Social Sciences Volume 6, Issue 3 (April –June 2020)

2. To study changes under different circumstances: If the changes that have taken place can be attributed to an internal or external cause, these are identified and suitably highlighted. Thus, a proper causal analysis is accomplished.

3. To obtain a second opinion: In some cases, the research group may wish to obtain a second opinion on a particular facet of study. A second or a third study may be carried out only for this reason.

4. To obtain a different cultural perspective: In some cases, the research group may wish to obtain a different cultural perspective by engaging ethnographers of a different cultural orientation, so as to set right anomalies in an earlier study, along with suspected cultural biases.

5. To obtain a second opinion in general: A second opinion may be sought for some reason in general, to set right anomalies detected, or cover areas neglected in the previous study.

6. To change perspective from emic to etic or vice versa, in case one of the two approaches was exclusively or predominantly adopted in the previous study.

7. To remediate earlier study by re-examining neglected areas: Neglected areas of study can be studied in the new study to accomplish a holistic perspective.

8. To continue study with a different objective or from a different perspective: The study can be continued with a different objective or from a different perspective.

9. To continue study which was aborted due to some reason: In this case, the study which was aborted due to some reason such as time considerations, cost considerations, or other ground realities can be continued.

10. If any cultural stereotypes were propagated in the earlier study (and variations not captured) rendering it limited or flawed, they can be negated in the new study.

Weaknesses of current approaches

The following are the weaknesses of current approaches.

1. No long-term orientation in current ethnographic methods: Thus, there are no formal methods or methodologies for long-term study in Ethnography, including multiple visits by the same or different team, even though such studies may be warranted for different purposes.

2. No handholding methods or best practices: Similarly, there are no handholding methods or best practices for a long-term even though these may need to be developed over a period in time by ethnographers.

Additional notes

1. Handholding must be done and hand over notes prepared. A formal handholding mechanism must be put in place wherever feasible, and hand over notes prepared to effect a smooth transition.

2. Summary of changes since last study was done can be prepared: This can be prepared by the new team prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

3. Similar but different sites can be chosen based on an analysis of the cultural taxonomy: For this, one or more elements of the cultural taxonomy can be considered, and the defined range of values taken as the basis.

Possible weaknesses of long-term ethnography and possible approaches for remediation

1. There may be changes in culture over time from the time the previous study was concluded, some of them major, a few others minor. Remediation: To record and capture changes and the implication of those changes in a formal way. Affected area may be re-studied, if required.
2. No proper handholding. Remediation: to prepare handover notes and a summary of unresolved issues. This must be formally communicated to the new term, if that team is known, or to whomsoever it may concern
3. Differing perspectives of different teams Remediation: To list out possible biases and prejudices in studies (and the root cause of such biases and prejudices) and ulterior motives of ethnographers involved in such studies. For example, Colonial Anthropologists may have been unknowingly swayed by the zeitgeist of the times, and modern Anthropologists may have blindly followed suit.
4. Absence of a long-term commitment Solution: May be tied to an institution: For example, colonial governments and Western universities along with government or private funded administrative initiatives have played a major role in sponsoring ethnography, and ethnographers in turn provided valuable information or data to these governments or institutions, often for policy-making in colonial contexts. Northcote Thomas who worked in Nigeria in 1908, was for example, a government-appointed Anthropologist, and in countries like India native Anthropologists were often appointed. (Forster 1969)
5. Time consuming: Such studies may be time consuming in nature. In order to remediate this, closures may be planned and initiated where the study doesn't require to be continued, or is deemed irrelevant.

Conclusion

Long-term Ethnography can be of great value in research in Developmental Anthropology, Anthropological Economics and allied fields and can yield rich dividends in the formulation of its objectives. For this, teething problem, if any, may need to be overcome, to make endeavours smooth and hassle-free. We therefore, look forward to theoretical contributions from other researchers in this vital field in the days and years to come.