

# Ethnography: A Research Paradigm in Cultural Studies

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## Abstract

*Ethnography is a new discipline in humanities and social sciences mainly in cultural studies that befits with the politics of identity. Generally people are stereotyped while they become the subjects of etic perspective. But on the other hand emic perspective of ethnography helps to establish the independent identity of the people that valorizes social recognition also. Positivism is a method in thick description under cultural studies that anchors the logical deduction in research that has affinity with quantitative reading of ethnography. While doing so this article has deployed Clifford Geertz's notion of thick description because it ensures the accuracy in research findings when the researcher is engaged to study ethnicity and identity.*

**Keywords:** ethnography, positivism, thick description, politics of identity and Rajput

## Introduction

Different studies and analyst have different ideas; ethnography is holistic analysis of societies and it is descriptive in nature or some say it is story telling. It is a research method. It is also said to be the most basic form of social research. It produces subjective analysis. Also, its close resemblance with everyday life is commented to be both: its basic strength and fundamental weakness. Positivism focuses on the quantitative experimental form of analysis where large surveys and quantitative data is analyzed and the deductive method of logic is used. It focuses on the publicly observable data. It believes that if data is not testable under certain circumstance it should be eliminated. So it is said that the research that use positivistic approach is useful in finding out casual relation.

Naturalism as an approach was developed by ethnographers over time in reaction to positivism. Naturalism believes social world should be studied in natural state as far as possible. Not in artificial setting. Research should be carried out in ways that are sensitive to the nature of setting. It demands that the social researcher adopt an attitude of respect and appreciation toward the social world. Naturalism believes in studying people's behavior with an approach that gives access to meaning that guide it. Naturalism focuses that a researcher should treat either known and unknown setting or group in way that it is anthropologically strange to him or her.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson ethnography is a method developed over time where "discussions are made on positivism and naturalism" It discusses how in the academia of social science the positivistic approach focuses on the quantitative analysis whereas naturalism puts emphasis on ethnography. The paper

further discusses that if we look at the research done in the social science both naturalism and positivism were used. Only later when large scale researchers and rapid development of survey research started the idea that positivism itself as a methodology is self-sufficient the debate started on if positivism or naturalism is a better approach. Earlier scientist has explained qualitative and quantitative techniques as a single method.

### **Ethnography and the Active Participation**

The Argonauts of the western pacific is example of an ethnographer who engaged in a dangerous but rewarding quest. Malinowski lived a native among the natives. His method of collecting empirical data, said that anthropologist should go to field and collect data. He himself collected data in personal tongues. He described Trobrianders through his personal observation and described about Kula. Discussing about the magical utterances he says the belief in magic is the main psychological forces which allows for its organization and systematization of economic effort in the island. The book focuses on intra tribal tracing relation with the native of New Guinea. It is ethnographic work that deals with social, cultural and psychological forces of the community and they are so inter-woven that no one can be understood by understanding others. A detail description of methods in collecting data is presented. According to him the principles of method can be grouped under three main headings. First of all, the student must possess scientific aims and known values and criteria of modern ethnography. Second, an ethnographer ought to put himself in the good condition of work i.e. s/he should not live without other white man. And third an ethnographer has to apply a number of special methods in collecting manipulating and fixing his evidences. Ethnographer must be an active huntsman. Good training in theory and acquaintance with its latest result. He suggests not bother with preconceived ideas. Only open minded ethnographer should go to do field work. An ethnographer who sets out only to study religion his inquiry is artificial. He would be seriously handicapped. Ethnography gives autonomy of culture and how a given case would be treated. He suggests on making the genealogical ankus that helps to understand history. It helps to reconstruct history. Further he says make extensive map, see customs, rituals. And an ethnographer must: be able to be full body and blood of native's life.

Ethnographer has to understand everything. Our main aim as an ethnographer is to bring out the facts only as the facts speak for themselves. He discusses three avenues for good ethnographic fieldwork first the organization of the tribe. Second, the anatomy of culture must be recorded in form, clear outline of the method of coverage. Make diary of everything, micro detail of observation and collection of ethnographic statement, characteristics narrations. Although, the book was published in 1922 it is still valid. Participant observation as far as of social

interaction: always involves impression management. And his way of participant observation is still a classic example of how ethnography should be done.

### **The Interpretative Approach the Geertzian Style: The Thick Description**

Geertz have tried to explain the importance of interpretation in ethnography and research in total. He has critiqued grand theories and their insufficiency to describe the details, the meaning that is deeply embedded in and cannot be seen the manifestation. He points out that there has been a trend of looking towards every problem from positivistic approach. And natural science method has been very popular but it is not sufficient. Referring E.B Tylor he says culture is a complex whole and it has reached a point where it is more than what it reveals. Also he says as Max Weber states that “man is an animal is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” I take culture to be those webs and analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but interpretative one in search of meaning which demands explanation. So, in this chapter he is basically trying to convince the readers that understand any culture we should look in to the practice and not in the theory.

Discussing Ethnography, he gives a beautiful example of difference between wink and twitch, where he explains how deeper the meanings are embedded in any culture and mere description of its manifestation is not enough to make meaning. Time, context, personality of the actor, presence of others and motivation guides that action. So, he says ethnography should be a “thick description” because meaning are superimposed and knotted in the behavioral practice of the culture. He focuses on the embodiment of the meaning in culture. He says, culture is in minds and hearts of men and to understand the meaning one has to look deep and inquire elaborately.

He further says that, an ethnographer might know the country’s language and think that he can understand what people are saying but that is also not enough, because culture is publically manifested but the logic and concept of the behavior is not manifested. So, our formulation of other people’s culture should be actor oriented. And to have deeper knowledge the ethnographer should see from actor’s perspective. He says: “Culture is most effectively treated, the argument goes, purely as a symbolic system, by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationship among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way-according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is based.”. So, we learn that there are deeper meaning in the social action which is manifested in cultural articulation. These draw meaning from role play and ongoing pattern of the life and not from perceived behavior.

## **Ethnography and Need of Theory**

Reilly proposes that ethnography is practice. And it should be theoretically informed that understands social life as an outcome of interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life. According to the author ethnography is the methodology informed by theory of practice. Social life as practice. The Paper presents ideas of different social scientist on ethnography. Where, for Taylor ethnography is observation done for a long period of time. Similarly, Hammersley and Atkinson discuss it as Ethnographer's active participation in data collection. And David fetterman says that ethnography involves telling credible, rigorous and authentic stories from the perspective of local people and interpreting these stories in context of daily lives and cultures. Similarly, Jan savage says ethnography is applied small scale research that focuses on the meaning of individual action rather than quantification. The writer says that as in Structuration theory Giddens presents that social life is a historical process where both agency and structure shape each other and are inter dependent. Similarly, the paper discusses that ethnography should not only focus on the study of people's opinion and feelings rather look at it from wider structure that frame her choices. Similarly, Bordieu's idea is discussed where he says practices are outcome of interaction of habitus with external conditions, where habitus is action, habits, ways of doing things, ways of thinking, ways of seeing world that individuals acquire, single and in groups as they travel through life. So, then it is said ethnography should pay attention to wider structures and to thoughts and feelings of agents within the context of everyday life and individual action. So ethnography should be micro level observation taking in notice of individuals' action and critically examining it applying macro approach.

## **Ethnography as both method and Methodology**

John D Brewer discusses that ethnography serves both as a method and methodology, a tool to collect data as well as an approach to research. The writer says that how the data is presented shows the utility of ethnography as an approach. This paper focuses on three kinds of usages of ethnography; generating knowledge, role in generating theory and application in formation of policy. According to the writer there are two types of ethnographers: academician who examines ethnographic data critically and have challenging attitude toward the knowledge produced by other practitioners of ethnography. These practitioners according to writer are people who work in the commercial research agencies, government and public body. As they are commissioned consultants and are working in close relation to policy makers they can sometimes fail to present the real picture and tell what the agency wants hear. Whereas, the academic ethnographers, because of their close relation to the people and their everyday life suggest a different interpretation from which problem, policy and strategy can be seen.

Both kind of ethnographers might be doing ethnography to produce knowledge. But what is usually seen is the ethnographers working academia look for alternate voices, for them personal experiences and perspective of people themselves in construction of meaning is equally important and they prefer the qualitative approach. However, the practitioner ethnographer might miss this part. So, ethnographer's critical observation social life and willingness to get behind the disguise to critique official position and statements tries to ensure that academic ethnography is challenging and provocative. So, we can say that ethnography as a science generates knowledge, policy related evidence to put forward the voice from actors' perspective challenging the accepted views.

### **Ethnography as Interpretation not Description**

Jacobson examines the relationship between the claims anthropologists make about human behavior and the data they use to warrant them. The textual organization of the ethnography focusing on the ways in which problems interpretation and data are part together. It contributes to current debates on the rhetoric and reflexivity of anthropology. Stating Greetz he says ethnography is what the practitioners do. Geertz described ethnography as the description of behavior in a particular culture, typically resulted from fieldwork. Every ethnography involves interpretation and includes selection of data made more or less explicitly within a theoretical framework. Selecting data does not mean biased categorization. For example: Marx was never read in anthropology before 1960 why?? What was understood "Society is cohered nature", what is ideological model? " In society there is always conflict. According to the writer, ethnography must be understood from the perspective of: question or problem that it addresses, the answer explanation interpretation it provides, the data it includes as evidence of the problem, the organization of these elements, problems, interpretation and evidence.

Discussing about, interpretation and analysis he says, understanding of an ethnography begins with recognition that it involves interpretation. Interpretation of the reality of human action and not nearly a description. He gives example of differences of description and interpretation from Clifford Greetz's thin and thick description. Similarly, Forte's discussed it as layered like onion. Distinction between description and analysis, in a description observation are grouped together as they actually happened, whereas, analysis is to break the empirical evidence and concomitance of costume and social relations and group (then)... in categories of general import. Example: Bride Wealth in in Africa is the amount that the bridegroom gives to the bride's family. So, anthropologist not only break up or analyze the mode of reality and also attempt to provide coherent representation of it. It is the interpretation of the culture. Whatever data he collected is the foundation of argument what observations he makes becomes conclusion. Reading

ethnography under which evidence cited to support your claim.

Discussing about the levels of analysis he says, reading ethnography is analyzing the kinds of claim and kinds of data. Kinds of claims and kinds of data plays important role in reading ethnography in different domains of social reality. There are also different claims that are made through data. You can make three kinds of argument to claim data. First, comparison of data with data generated from the same site. Second, making comparison with materials outside beyond the limits of the specific ethnographic accounts. Third is, question approach that is looking particular ethnographic account with reports about some society generated by other research and making interpretation internally. Discussing about what kind of evidence can be presented to claim your analysis he says there are two board category of data, one verbal statement and two their observed behavior. So, statistical data and case studies can be evidence for modes of action and behavioral pattern.

### **The role of Ethnographer in Ethnography**

EE Prichard starts his paper remembering about what his students often ask him in Oxford. According to him he is often asked questions like: How one should go to the field what to do in the field, about the field work by students before going to the field. As they want to know about the circumstantial process. He quotes Paul Radin and says that according to Radin No one knows how to go to the field. Similarly, Westmarck suggested him not to spend more than twenty minutes with anyone, Haddon said him to be gentlemen, his teacher suggested him to stay far from women. He was also suggested not to drink dirty water. And finally when he asked the same question to Malinowski he said don't be a bloody fool

He says, people can make observation and write book but it may to be a contribution to anthropology. So he suggests, ethnographer must have a rigorous training so that he may know how and what to observe. A good ethnography is knowing local knowledge and interest. Giving example from his own field he says, I was not interested in witch craft of Azande people but I was interested in Azande and it was impossible to understand Azande without understanding their interest in witch craft. So, I had to study the witchcraft. Similarly, Malinowski doing his field work in Nuer said that he started to raise cow because the Nuer had interest in cow raising. This was according to him the price of the acceptance to be accepted by people. According to him one learns from his own fieldwork mistakes. He says that you don't repeat mistake of first study the second time you go to the field. So according to Pritchard, what is the goal of field work is that from fieldwork anyone can be bring a new fact, the importance to produce new idea.

So, according to Pritchard there is need of rigorous training in theory before going to the fieldwork. And to be careful about local interest. Pritchard suggest,

not to carry field notes /or not to wrote any information before the informant. Similarly, he says accepting some the informants as “Key informant” is equally a misfortunate. Anyone can be key informant. You do not know who will turn out to be more knowledgeable. If you have opportunity to select people you do. But do not set time interview go freely and talk. He says, many local people do not trust anthropologist because anthropologist give tags like, African are savage and primitive. That kind of interpretation is not good. The attitude is that the white man studies the inferior one. So his suggestion is not to disclose oneself an anthropologist. Because the people distrust the missionary and the anthropologist are also considered as them. And he also suggests anthropologists not to trust missionaries on the information they provide. Finally, he suggests that one should record in one's notebooks as much as possible.

### **Impression Management in Ethnographic Practice**

Gerald D. Berreman shares his experience during his fieldwork in the Northern Hills of India in 1960s. Based on the fieldwork he published his famous work, *Hindus of Himalayas* in 1962. In this article he shares how ethnographer has to be aware of impression management done by the people in the local setting. It might not only be the respondents but also the field assistant. He brings out facts how impression management of a particular research assistant might have resulted in distortion of data and then have depicted a different picture of the whole study vary the results. This article is about how field work was done. A number of stratified ranked delusion, there are Brahmins, Rajputs and Dalit.

He says people judge you in fieldwork and field work and rapport are interrelated. Anthropologist many time do not provide information how they collected the data. But the impression he makes to the respondents plays a vital role in how his rapport was built with the local people. He says impression management is derived a complex of observation and information drawn from the people. How people react to you in any situation depends on what they say in both public and private and what they think how you are being watched by them.

During the field work he hired a field assistant who was a Pahari Brahmin and much of the information was depended on how the Brahmin interpreted and the provided information. Later the Brahmin got sick and the second assistant he hired happened to be a Muslim. So, change in the research assistant proved to change the modality of rapport, impression of people and in overall the data and information that they provided. After sometimes people started to serve local wine to the researcher. For, Pahari Muslim was said to be inferior because they eat beef.

Here writer discusses, Goffman's idea of “Presentation of self in everyday life. "In this book he wrote a description and analysis of social interaction of people is derived through impressions others receive them. He analyses social interaction

of ethnographer and subject with the theory of front and backstage impression management. Later, the researcher found that Brahmin assistant refused to discuss matter which contradicted high caste Hindu values. He colored the data with his own ideas. But when he had Muslim assistant low caste people became more open with him. They felt telling too much is opening own secrets.

Discussing about his own role as an ethnographer in the field he says he did not go to village funeral, never took photo without consent, took up smoking, started to take millet chapatti and very hot chili. He also started to take pumpkin, potato that is normal diet of Pahari. Not only that he said that he did not like the taste of low wine. To manage the impression as a high caste. This was his aim to build rapport. He draws conclusion that, rapport is built depending the character of the ethnographer and this is reflected in his/her writing.

### **The Historical development of Ethnography and Lack of Reflexivity**

According to (Dourish) In the 1910s, Malinowski started ethnography as long term immersion. Native point of view. Since then participant observation because one of the most important technique in anthropology. Also Franz Boas and his students said same. Whereas, in 1920's gradually, ethnographic practice diffused and practiced in Austria, S.A., Africa, Asia, Melanesia. Ethnographers gradually added new techniques in ethnography like studying groups as independent and individual and social wholes. He focused on three things focused: explaining and interpreting, looking underlying meaning and Both the ethnographer and participant, interpret the setting (if the ethnographer and the participants are both interpreters of the setting in which they find themselves the what kind of relationship is postulated amongst them). So, the goal of thick description is to open up, not to close down, the play of meaning resituate ethnographic reports within the interpretive frame. Writer critique to these styles is that it is taxonomic i.e the problem is how the cultural boundary is understood and there are no cultural specifics of spatially bounded groups. His second critique is that culture is produced and reproduced and it is ongoing process.

From the 1980s Ethnographers started to talk about reflexivity that questioned on what is your role as an ethnographer in the field setting. It focused on how ethnography is done, and what is the role of ethnographer? Classical text missed to note the impression of the writer's ideology and background in the ethnographic work and this style focused on self-reflection. In 1990s along with globalization ethnographers started to take in account the idea of multisitedness. Earlier there was focus in one place but now people choose/focus in multiple sites. It is big issue. There is still discussion if multisitedness is feasible and authentic to do.

### **Conclusion: The way Forward**

Discussing about ethnography and contemporary HCI (Dourish) writer says



ethnography is the production of ethnographic data through participation and engagement. And the concern of subjective and objectivity and reflexivity are components of research method. This brings lots of problem in Anthropology. Similarly, the sceptics toward the boundaries of site and Interpretive stance of both researcher and participant is also ethnography. It tells ethnography is asking oneself questions like, how to do ethnography is not important rather what ethnography tries to do? What are the works of empirical claims? What are the conceptual frames? And ethnography talking about what is happening with people and place is a partial view rather it should also focus on what was the context of production of data? In what way the data is produced? And what is the foundation of the kind of participation? Where generally ethnographer's participation is over looked. The article discusses ethnographer him/herself as a data. How does this contribute to the corpus? And tries to show how should particular text be read against alongside or in response to others? The question like: Is this a representative sample? is also equally important. Ethnography does not work with the idea of average whose position in a phenomenon is unusual. How can ethnographer tell if what people told you is right? There is nothing as true or false. The statements made in all accounts or actions are produced to meet the immediate circumstances. Did not you affect things by being there?

Looking historically, Mallinowski in his study did observation which was in depth done in a long period of time. His methodology taught anthropologist about the importance of being field researcher collecting the first hand data rather than armchair researcher relying on the data brought by others because it gives the researcher insights about native's views in their context. Similarly the longer period of time is spent in the field, thick descriptions are produced as the researcher grows changes of crossing lines from being "outsider" to an "insider" . Similarly, it was learnt that inductive method of study allows data collection, writing and analyzing go hand on hand which helps in reforming the ideas and changing the methodology study on sight. Also in ethnography language plays a vital role and learning language helps to pick detail of daily life and this possible only by spending time and joining in everyday life.

John.D.Brewer questions on the future of ethnographic studies in the context of globalization. As ethnography study is suited to study small communities in a small scale manner in order to investigate their particular dynamics, the globalization and homogenization might make it challenging to see the specificity of the local. However, globalization and process of change is manifested locally. So for ethnographers their space for practice can still be in relation to locale.

From my position my disagreement with the writer is that, should community and culture seen only with its relation to the geographical boundaries. And is not life history method a way of doing ethnography where study of a single subject

provides deep knowledge in understanding the whole social phenomenon. So, do we still need to think that globalization will leave no space for ethnography to flourish. Also I believe along with globalization another discourse that is flourishing today is the discourse of nationality where people are looking back at their history and culture and efforts are made for revival. What we come to understand going through ideas of different scholars is that earlier ethnography missed reflexivity.

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