

How to Conduct Ethnographic Research

Nisaratana Sangasubana

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of conducting ethnographic research. Methodology definition and key characteristics are given. The stages of the research process are described including preparation, data gathering and recording, and analysis. Important issues such as reliability and validity are also discussed. Key Words: Ethnography, Field Research, Qualitative Research, Participant Observation, and Methodological Issues

I recently had the pleasure of learning how to conduct ethnographic research for the first time. In this “How To” account I will describe the process by organizing my description around the following seven questions:

1. What is ethnography and what are its key characteristics?
2. Why do we conduct ethnography?
3. How do we collect data in ethnography?
4. What should we do before we get started?
5. What are the stages in conducting ethnography?
6. What should we do with all the data?
7. What pitfalls should we watch out for?

What Is Ethnography and What Are Its Key Characteristics?

How we define ethnography? Ethnography is the art and science used to describe a group or culture (Fetterman, 1998). According to Angrosino (2007), ethnographers search for predictable patterns in the lived human experiences by carefully observing and participating in the lives of those under study. Ethnography may also involve a full immersion of the researcher in the day-to-day lives or culture of those under study. Ethnography as a method has certain distinctive characteristics (Angrosino, 2007). First, it is conducted on-site or in a naturalistic setting in which real people live. Second, it is personalized since you as the researcher are both observer and participant in the lives of those people. Ethnography also collects data in multiple ways for triangulation over an extended period of time. The process is inductive, holistic and requires a long-term commitment from you. Finally, ethnography is dialogic since conclusions and interpretations formed through it can be given comments or feedback from those who are under study.

Why Do We Conduct Ethnography?

There are a number of methodologies that can be chosen for a research project. It is important for us to know the advantages of choosing ethnography over other types of methodologies or approaches. Below is a selective list of advantages of conducting ethnography, most culled from a list provided by Wolcott (1999):

- Ethnography can be conducted entirely by one individual.
- It is longitudinal in nature, allowing you as the researcher to observe and record changes over time.
- It can be carried out almost at any place.
- It focuses on working with others rather than treating them as objects.
- It provides you with a detailed and rich database for further investigation and writing.
- You can make the research not only interesting but adventurous.
- It requires no expensive or elaborate tools or equipment.
- It may present you with an opportunity to learn and use another language.
- It draws upon your personal skills and strengths to advantage.
- You often have exclusive domain or sole responsibility in the chosen setting or site.
- Your role is recognized.
- It offers you an opportunity to integrate professional and personal life.
- It allows you to get an insider's view of reality.
- It can provide deep insightful data.
- It can be used to study marginalized groups of people closed to other forms of research.
- It allows you to collect data in a realistic or naturalistic setting in which people act naturally, focusing on both verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

How Do We Collect Data In Ethnography?

There are three modes of data collection in ethnography: observation, interviewing and archival research (Angrosino, 2007):

- *Observation*: Participant observation is unique in that it combines the researcher's participation in the lives of the people under study while also maintaining a professional distance (Fetterman, 1998). According to Angrosino (2007), observation is the act of perceiving the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting.
- *Interviewing*: Interviewing is the process of directing a conversation to collect information (Angrosino, 2007).
- *Archival research*: This is the analysis of existing materials stored for research, service or other purposes officially and unofficially (Angrosino, 2007).

What Should We Do Before We Get Started?

There are general activities that need to be done before getting started (Roper & Shapira, 2000). First, you need to identify your research question. This can be done by asking the question that you want to ask and not that of someone else. Talking to others about your research project and consulting different sources for ideas can be helpful. Second, you need to assess how much you know about the subject area. Third, you need to meet with the gatekeepers or those who will allow or give access to you to the setting. This can be difficult if you are unknown to a setting that you would like to access. Lastly, you need to assess your time and resources. Do you have the time to conduct the study? What about your other obligations and commitments? What types of resources do you have? What types of equipment will you need? Who will fund the study? These are important questions to ask and find answers before beginning your study.

What Are the Stages in Conducting Ethnography?

Singleton and Straits (2005) identified the following stages in field research:

- *Problem formulation*: Defining the main focus of the study by formulating the problem about which you wish to learn more.
- *Selecting a research setting*: The first question is knowing and deciding where to begin. The setting should permit clear observation. It is also helpful to select a setting that you can readily fit in but this does not mean that you are intimately familiar with it.
- *Gaining access*: How do you get into a group that you wish to study? You may need to seek formal permission which can be facilitated if you have a friend who can vouch for you. You can also get your foot in the door if you first participate in the group as a volunteer and not as a researcher.
- *Presenting oneself*: You need to decide how you will present yourself to those in the field. Will you be conducting covert research? What roles will you need to adopt and relate to others? How active will you be participating in other people's lives? If you present yourself as a researcher, will others be able to accept you in their daily lives?
- *Gathering and recording information*: Sometimes it can be difficult to record and gather data at the same time. What are the types of information that should be recorded or taken as field notes? If you cannot fully record your observations while you are in the field, what should you do? Always carry a notepad for brief jottings. Sometimes there is no alternative but to wait and record observation after you leave the setting. You should record the observations as soon as possible to minimize recall problems. You may also rely on equipment such as audio-recorders, video cameras, etc. According to Singleton and Straits (2005), your field notes or detailed descriptive accounts of any observation made during a given period should include the following elements:
 - *Running description*: This is the record of the day's observations. The objective is to record accurately what you observe. You should also avoid analyzing persons or events while in the field because there is no time and

it will interfere with your observation of what is going on. What are things to watch for? The setting, the people, individual actions and activities, group behaviors, and perspectives.

- *Forgotten episodes:* These are accounts of previous episodes that you have forgotten but are remembering again while you are in the field.
- *Ideas and notes for further information use:* These refer to spur-of-the-moment ideas related to data analysis, data collection, speculations about relationships, etc. These are notes that you write to and for yourself, for example, plans for future observations, specific things or people to look for.
- *Personal impressions and feelings:* These refer to recordings regarding the subjective reactions you had while working the field. They may provide clues to biases which might be clouding your observations.
- *Methodological notes:* This refers to any ideas related to the techniques you used to conduct research, for example, any difficulties you have in collecting data, any biases that might be introduced by the data collection techniques or any changes in how you can make and record observations.

What Should We Do with All the Data?

Ethnographers can collect great quantities of material to describe what people believe and how they behave in everyday situations; therefore, data analysis and interpretation can be challenging (Roper & Shapira, 2000). First, you need to understand your materials. The process of understanding is inductive in which you begin by learning from the data rather than starting with preconceived notions about your subject matter (Roper & Shapira). The data analysis should also begin while the data are being collected so that the researcher can discover additional themes and decides whether to follow those leads for more intense investigation (Roper & Shapira). Roper and Shapira have suggested the following strategies for ethnographic analysis:

- *Coding for descriptive labels:* Since the materials collected are in the form of written words, those words must first be grouped into meaningful categories or descriptive labels, then organized to compare, contrast and identify patterns. First-level coding is done to reduce the data to a manageable size. Before one begins the coding process, it may be helpful to formulate basic domains that can categorize a broad range of phenomena, for example, setting, types of activities, events, relationships and social structure, general perspectives, strategies, process, meanings and repeated phrases.
- *Sorting for patterns:* The next step is to sort or group the descriptive labels into smaller sets. One begins to develop themes from those groupings and a sense of possible connections between the information.
- *Identifying outliers:* Cases, situations, events or settings that do not “fit” with the rest of the findings may be identified. These cases should be kept in mind as the different steps in the research process are developed, for example, should we collect more information about those cases?

- *Generalizing constructs and theories*: The patterns or connected findings are related to theories in order to make sense of the rich and complex data collected. Existing literature is also reviewed.
- *Memoing with reflective remarks*: Memos are insights or ideas that one has about the data. They are written so that the researcher can know if anything needs further clarification or testing. It also helps the researcher to keep track of their assumptions, biases and opinions throughout the whole research process.

What Pitfalls Should We Watch Out For?

In this section, two questions will be raised. First, how do we control for quality in ethnographic research, and second, when or why should we not conduct or use ethnography.

There are three issues that need to be considered when you control for quality in ethnographic and field research: reactivity, reliability and validity:

Reactivity is the degree to which your presence as the researcher influences the behaviors of others because they know they are in a study may cause those under study to act differently (Neuman, 2003). You being unobtrusive or disruptive, and familiarizing yourself with the lives of others may reduce the effect of reactivity.

Reliability in field research addresses the question of whether you are able to collect data that are internally and externally consistent, and credible (Neuman, 2003). Data are internally consistent when the researcher records behaviors that are consistent over time and in different social contexts. External consistency can be achieved by verifying or cross-checking data with other sources. Ethnographic researchers also depend on what others tell them; therefore, credibility of the source of information needs to be assessed. The information shared could be in the forms of misinformation, evasions, lies and omissions (Neuman, 2003). Reliability in field research will depend on your insight, awareness, questions and looking at behaviors and events from different angles and perspectives (Neuman, 2003).

Validity in field research is the confidence placed in your ability to collect and analyze data accurately, representing the lives or culture under study (Neuman, 2003). Validity can be checked in the following ways. Ecological validity is the degree to which the data collected and described by the researcher reflects the world of those under study (Neuman, 2003). Natural history is a full description and disclosure of the researcher's actions, assumptions, and procedures for others to evaluate. If the study is accepted by or credible to others inside and outside the field site, it is valid in terms of natural history (Neuman, 2003). You should also check for member validation by taking the field results back to those under study to judge for adequacy and accuracy from their perspectives (Neuman, 2003). Additionally, you should have competent insider performance which is the ability of the researcher as a nonmember of the group or culture under study to interact effectively as a member (Neuman, 2003). Finally, the study should have pragmatic validity and transferability which is the degree to which the study results and conclusions have relevance beyond the study itself (Angrosino, 2007).

There are several disadvantages to conducting ethnographic research. Since most ethnographic research requires fieldwork, it also faces the same limitations that field research has (Singleton & Straits, 2005). First, ethnography can be very labor intensive

and time consuming. Ethnographic researchers can spend years in the field. Because field research is rarely an entirely detached observation, field participation often becomes a question of “how much” (Singleton & Straits, 2005). Second, balancing the requirements of both participating and observing can be very difficult (Singleton & Straits, 2005). As you become more familiar with the setting and develops attachment and empathy for, and trust and rapport with those under study, you may be drawn into the lives of those people more as a participant than as an observer. When you become fully immersed in a culture or situation, you risk changing the events in which you observe and participate, perhaps even losing sight of your role as a researcher, thereby “going native” and over-identifying yourself with the group under study (Singleton & Straits, 2005).

Third, field work lacks the level of structure and control found in laboratory settings that may help ensure objectivity. If you are not careful, your personal values and attitudes may lead to bias. Due to the sheer volume of rich data collected, you may also experience difficulty in both data analysis and interpretation (Roper & Shapira, 2000). The ethnographic researcher also needs to know how to stay safe in unsafe settings, learn the ropes, and cope with personal stress and conflicts in the field (Neuman, 2003). These negotiations can be very difficult. Finally, due to the nature of field research that personally involves the researcher in the social lives of other people, there are ethical dilemmas that you need to be considering (Neuman, 2003). Issues of confidentiality and privacy; your unintentional revelation of identities; deception and misrepresentation of yourself; identification of your biases; your involvement with illegal behavior or activity; violation of your own basic personal moral standards in order to conform; your identification with those lacking power in society; your negotiations with the elite in power or authority; and your publishing field reports that may be truthful but unflattering are all ethical issues that may arise (Angrosino, 2007; Neuman, 2003).

References

- Angrosino, M. (2007). *Doing ethnographic and observational research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fetterman, D. M. (1998). *Ethnography: Step by step* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (5th ed.) Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Roper, J. M., & Shapira, J. (2000). *Ethnography in nursing research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Singleton, R. A., & Straits, B. C. (2005). *Approaches to social research* 4th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1999). *Ethnography: A way of seeing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.

Author Note

Dr. Nisarata Sangasubana received her Ph.D. and M.S. in Social and Administrative Sciences in Pharmacy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She joined Nova Southeastern University College of Pharmacy in 2007 as assistant professor in the Sociobehavioral and Administrative Pharmacy department. She teaches pharmacy

students and is the course coordinator for Social and Behavioral Pharmacy. Dr. Sangasubana's primary research interest is focused on examining perceptions and behaviors in Over-the-Counter (OTC) medication use among different patient populations (e.g., the elderly, college students, etc.). She is also interested in designing and implementing educational interventions to improve the provision of pharmaceutical care services to patients. She is currently testing the efficacy of a pharmacy-based educational intervention to enhance consumers' generic OTC knowledge, self-efficacy and use. Contact Information: Nisaratana Sangasubana, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Sociobehavioral & Administrative Pharmacy, Nova Southeastern University, College of Pharmacy, 3200 South University Drive, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33324 USA; Phone: (954) 262-1332; Email: sangasub@nova.edu

Copyright 2009: Nisaratana Sangasubana Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Sangasubana, N. (2009). How to conduct ethnographic research. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 567-573. Retrieved from <http://nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-2/sangasubana.pdf>
