2.2B: Fieldwork and Observation

Ethnography is a research process that uses fieldwork and observation to learn about a particular community or culture.

Learning Objectives

• Explain the goals and methods of ethnography

Key Points

• Ethnographic work requires intensive and often immersive long-term participation in the community that is the subject of research, typically involving physical relocation (hence the term fieldwork).

• In participant observation, the researcher immerses himself in a cultural environment, usually over an extended period of time, in order to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals and their practices.

• Such research involves a range of well-defined, though variable methods: interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of the group, collective discussions, analyses of personal documents produced within the group, self-analysis, and life-histories, among others.

• The advantage of ethnography as a technique is that it maximizes the researcher’s understanding of the social and cultural context in which human behavior occurs.

• The advantage of ethnography as a technique is that it maximizes the researcher’s understanding of the social and cultural context in which human behavior occurs. The ethnographer seeks out and develops relationships with cultural insiders, or informants, who are willing to explain aspects of their community from a native viewpoint. A particularly knowledgeable informant who can connect the ethnographer with other such informants is known as a key informant.
Key Terms

- **ethnography**: The branch of anthropology that scientifically describes specific human cultures and societies.
- **qualitative**: Of descriptions or distinctions based on some quality rather than on some quantity.

Fieldwork and Observation

Ethnography is a qualitative research strategy, involving a combination of fieldwork and observation, which seeks to understand cultural phenomena that reflect the knowledge and system of meanings guiding the life of a cultural group. It was pioneered in the field of socio-cultural anthropology, but has also become a popular method in various other fields of social sciences, particularly in sociology.

Ethnographic work requires intensive and often immersive long-term participation in the community that is the subject of research, typically involving physical relocation (hence the term fieldwork). Although it often involves studying ethnic or cultural minority groups, this is not always the case. Ideally, the researcher should strive to have very little effect on the subjects of the study, being as invisible and enmeshed in the community as possible.

Participant Observation

One of the most common methods for collecting data in an ethnographic study is first-hand engagement, known as participant observation. In participant observation, the researcher immerses himself in a cultural environment, usually over an extended period of time, in order to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals (such as a religious, occupational, or sub-cultural group, or a particular community) and their practices.
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Methods

Such research involves a range of well-defined, though variable methods: interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of the group, collective discussions, analyses of personal documents produced within the group, self-analysis, and life-histories, among others.

Interviews can be either informal or formal and can range from brief conversations to extended sessions. One way of transcribing interview data is the genealogical method. This is a set of procedures by which ethnographers discover and record connections of kinship, descent, and marriage using diagrams and symbols. Questionnaires can also be used to aid the discovery of local beliefs and perceptions and, in the case of longitudinal research where there is continuous long-term study of an area or site, they can act as valid instruments for measuring changes in the individuals or groups studied.

Advantages

The advantage of ethnography as a technique is that it maximizes the researcher's understanding of the social and cultural context in which human behavior occurs. The ethnographer seeks out and develops relationships with cultural insiders, or informants, who are willing to explain aspects of their community from a native viewpoint. The process of seeking out new contacts through their personal relationships with current informants is often effective in revealing common cultural common denominators connected to the topic being studied.