

Ethnographic Methods (3462 words)

Ethnography is a methodology with more than one hundred years of history. It arose in the Western world as a particular form of knowledge about distant cultures (typically non-Western ones) which were impenetrable to analysis consisting only of fleeting contact or brief conversations. After having entered several disciplines of social sciences (anthropology, sociology and psychology), in recent times ethnography has become an important tool also in political science (assuming the name of *political ethnography*) as part of interpretive methodologies and research.

Competing definitions of ethnography

Defining a term is always difficult because there are as many definitions as there are different points of view. Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley observe that the definition of the term *ethnography* has been subject to controversy. For some it refers to a philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others it designates a method that one uses as and when appropriate.

But the controversy extends further. Since the 1980s the meaning of ethnography has been expanded to such an extent that it encompasses forms of research extremely diverse from a methodological point of view. Everything is now ethnography: from life stories to analysis of letters and questionnaires, from autobiography to narrative analysis, from action research to performance, to field research lasting a few days to several years (Gobo 2008a). For example leading scholars as James Lull and David Morley pointed out that what is passing as ethnography in cultural studies fails to achieve the fundamental requirements for data collection and reporting typical of most anthropological and sociological ethnographic research.

Ethnography has become an abused buzz-word and has been diluted into a multitude of

sometimes contrasting and contradictory meanings, become synonymous with qualitative studies.

In this increasingly polysemous in meaning, there are at least three terms that merge with 'ethnography': 'participant observation', 'fieldwork' and 'case study' (Gobo 2008a). However they should not mix up. The expression 'case study' denotes research on a system bounded in space and time and embedded in a particular physical and socio-cultural context. Research is conducted using diverse methodologies, methods and data sources, like participant observation, interviews, audiovisual materials, documents, and so on. The term 'fieldwork' stresses the continuous presence of the researcher in the field, as opposed to 'grab-it-and-run' methodologies like the survey, in-depth interview, or analysis of documents and recordings. In this case, too, diverse methodologies and methods may be used. Finally, 'participant observation' is a distinctive research strategy. Probably, participant observation and fieldwork treat observation as a mere technique, while the term 'ethnography' underlines the theoretical basis of such work stemming from a particular history and tradition.

An update definition

The stretch of the term 'ethnography' has emptied its original meaning. Ethnography was born as a technique based upon direct observation. On the contrary interview and survey are mainly based upon listening and asking questions. Of course, in ethnography is also essential to listen to the conversations of the actors 'on stage', read the documents produced by the organization under study, ask people questions, and so on. Yet what most distinguishes ethnography from other methodologies is the role of 'protagonist' assigned to observation.

Ethnographic methodology comprises two research strategies: *non-participant* observation and *participant* observation. In the former case the researcher observes the subjects 'from a distance' without interacting with them. Those who use this strategy are uninterested in investigating the

symbolic sphere, and they make sure not to interfere with the subjects' actions so as not to influence their behavior. Of course there are several intermediate situations between the two extremes of participant and non-participant observation.

Participant observation has the following characteristics:

1. the researcher establishes a direct relationship with the social actors
2. staying in their natural environment
3. with the purpose of observing and describing their behavior
4. by interacting with them and participating in their everyday ceremonials and rituals, and
5. learning their code (or at least parts of it) in order to understand the meaning of their actions.

A historical sketch

The birth of ethnographic methodology is commonly dated to the period between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It developed internally to ethnology, a discipline which in the first half of the 1800s split away from traditional anthropology, which was then dominated by the physical and biological paradigm. Ethnology was more concerned to study peoples (through comparison of their material artifacts) and their cultures, and to classify their salient features. Before the advent of ethnographic methodology, ethnologists did not collect information by means of direct observation; instead, they examined statistics, the archives of government offices and missions, documentation centers, accounts of journeys, archaeological finds, native manufactures or objects furnished by collectors of exotic art, or they conversed with travelers, missionaries and explorers. These anthropologists considered the members of native peoples to be 'primitives': they were savages to be educated, and they could not be used as direct informants because they could not be trusted to furnish objective information.

Ethnographic methodology did not suddenly erupt in anthropology; rather it arose gradually through the work of various authors, among them the English anthropologist of Polish origin, Bronislaw K. Malinowski (1884-1942), and the English anthropologist Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955). British social anthropology of ethnographic stamp assimilated the positivist intellectual climate of its time and put itself forward, according to Radcliffe-Brown (1948), as a “natural science of society” which was better able to furnish an objective description of a culture than the other methods used by anthropologists at the time. Radcliffe-Brown’s polemic was directed against then dominant speculative or ‘desk’ anthropology, which preferred to rely on secondary sources rather than undertake direct observation of social facts (customs, rituals, ceremonies) in order to uncover the ‘laws’ that govern a society.

Malinowski is commonly regarded as being the first to systematize ethnographic methodology. In his famous *Introduction to Argonauts of the Western Pacific* – the book which sets out his research conducted in the Trobriand Islands of the Melanesian archipelago off eastern New Guinea – Malinowski described the methodological principles underpinning the main goal of ethnography, which is to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world. To this end, Malinowski lived for two years (between 1914 and 1918) among the Kula of the Trobriand Islands. He learned their language (Kiriwinian), used natives as informants, and directly observed the social life of a village, participating in its everyday activities. Malinowski inaugurated a view ‘from within’ that American anthropologists of the 1950s would call the ‘emic’ perspective – as opposed to the ‘etic’ or comparative perspective, which instead sought to establish categories useful for the analyst but not necessarily important for the members of the culture studied.

From the 1920s onwards, ethnographic methodology was incorporated into sociology – where it was adopted by researchers who mostly belonged to Chicago School – and then into psychology and (recently) political science. Although it was imported from anthropology, however, fully seventy years previously the French mining engineer and later sociologist Pierre Le Play (1806-1892) had used primitive forms of participant observation, when he had stayed with the working-

class families that he was studying. The English philanthropist Seebohm B. Rowntree (1871-1954) also used primordial forms participant observation (after 1886) for their inquiries into poverty and living conditions in the London slums.

Ethnography and political science

Ethnographic methods have recently reached also political science, long ruled mainly by official statistics, survey and comparative methods. The entry of ethnography has been favored by two cultural and theoretical changes in this discipline: the interest for “micro” dimensions of political phenomena, and the openness towards the insights of qualitative research. These two changes have been pushed by important scholars as Sidney Tarrow (1995) and Charles Tilly (2001), who proposed to bridge qualitative and quantitative approaches through “triangulation”, to explore the micro-macro link, considering that a purely quantitative approach lacks in discovering causal mechanisms of political processes.

As said for other disciplines, the term ‘ethnography’ in political science has assumed a variety of meanings and it has become synonymous of ‘fieldwork’. Within this frame of meaning can be located the work of Weinstein (2007), about political violence and civil wars, and Wood (2000) on democratic transitions in South Africa and El Salvador. Basing mainly upon narrative interviews (with the addition of some observations, official statistics and governmental documents) the authors aim to reach the experience, the subjective perspective, the point of view of people involved in violent actions (Weinstein) and democratic transitions (Wood).

Weinstein (2007) tries to discover specific causal mechanisms (why some rebel groups decide to use indiscriminate violence against civilians) going beyond traditional quantitative studies which explain this phenomenon of violence through macro-variables as income and so on. The author analyzes the inner dynamics (the recruitment of members and the inner hierarchical structure) of some rebel groups in Peru, Mozambique and Uganda. He finds that indiscriminate violence against

civilians is acted mainly by rebel groups with external financial resources, as those coming from drug trafficking, foreign monetary supports and so on. Consequently they do not search and need civilians' involvement and consensus on their political actions.

Wood (2000), analyzing the democratic transitions in South Africa and El Salvador, discovers that these two countries are very different looking at the structural variables (economic development, race composition and so on) but quite similar in the link between political élite and economic élite. She focuses also the bottom-up violent mobilization of workers, pointing out that it produces an increase of costs affecting the whole production system (and consequently the economic élite): strikes, damages, economic uncertainty, a decrease of foreign capitals flow and so on. In order to solve the situation the economic élites push for the reform of authoritative regime, and the economic and productive system which support this form of government. Wood pinpoints the everyday life political processes, the impact of social actors' local actions on national politics, the effects of micro-events on macro-phenomena.

Beyond inquires based on a general fieldwork, in political science are now appearing real ethnographies as the work of Ashforth (2005) about violence and democracy in South Africa. He, a white American man, spent 3 years as host in a family of Soweto, the well-known black township on the outskirts of Johannesburg. During his permanence Ashforth realizes how it would be extremely difficult to understand the local politics (macro) without considering the witchcraft phenomenon (micro) and its role in the interactional relations (micro). Through the participation to the everyday life of the community, he acquires the conceptual categories, the constellation of meanings and the culture of the Soweto's residents. He learns that witchcraft believes are a remedy to the everyday life uncertainty and insecurity, how envy and jealousy produce the social conditions of the witchcraft success and how the latter shapes the relations between individuals, social groups and political institutions on issue as the diffusion of Aids, its social consequences and the health policies. In addition he discovers the effects of on the making of the concept of democracy among community members, their acceptance of violence, the shape of the concept of social justice, the

affirmation of a modern democratic and liberal State.

The adding value of ethnography

As said, ethnographic methodology gives priority to observation as its primary source of information. This purpose is also served, in secondary and ancillary manner, by other sources of information used by the ethnographer in the field: informal conversations, individual or group interviews, and documentary materials (diaries, letters, class essays, organizational documents, newspapers, photographs, and audiovisual aids). However, the overriding concern is always to observe actions as they are performed in concrete settings. As John Heritage stresses, if one is interested in action, the statements made by social actors during interviews cannot be treated as an appropriate substitute for the observation of actual behavior. In fact, there is an oft-documented gap between attitudes and behaviors, between what people say and what they do. Ethnography is therefore the privileged methodology to analyze and understand social and political actions in their making.

The presence of the researcher in the field helps to better capture the conceptual categories of social actors, their point of view (emic), the meanings of their actions and behavior, the social and political processes. As Auyero (2006) and Aronoff (2006) maintain, political ethnography highlights the neglected aspects by the quantitative analysis such as the impact of micro-politics on macro-phenomena, the complexity of everyday life, the network of participants' meanings, their motivations, the making of political action, the practices of politics.

Ethnographic methods are useful to analyze political phenomena consisting not in macro-structures and fixed roles, but in interactions among participants, families and small groups (Tilly 2006), emancipating from the ethnocentrism (etic) which still characterizes scientific explanations of political science.

The ethnography and its enemies

Notwithstanding the acknowledged usefulness of ethnography, however there still several well-known commonplaces and prejudices about it.

Is ethnography a highly subjective method?

It is often argued that ethnography is a *highly* subjective method, in the sense that is very sensitive to the researcher's attitudes and perceptions. In other words, if different researchers visit the same setting, they will see different things, and their ethnographic notes will record different aspects. Instead, a questionnaire or a discursive interview, if conducted correctly, are more likely to obtain similar replies (reliability) regardless of who the interviewer is. And yet experience shows that this idea has scant empirical grounding (Gobo 2008b).

A while ago, some students of mine conducted an ethnography in a pub. Two groups (formed of three students each) visited the same pub at a distance of a few days from each other. The fact that they had chosen the same pub was absolutely coincidental, in the sense that they had not agreed on it beforehand. Nevertheless, the two groups had a specific research design: to study the rituals, ceremonials and behaviors of consumption in pubs. They then produced a report. And I discovered, to my great surprise, that they had observed and discovered practically the same things.

Hence the research design makes a greater contribution to discovery (or construction of data) than does the researcher him/herself. Ethnography, therefore, is anything but a *highly* subjective methodology (even if subjectivity is ever-present, as in all methodologies).

Behaviors are more consistent than attitudes and opinions

What does the experience just described tell us theoretically? In other words, why did six different observers in the same pub notice practically the same things? Because what an

ethnography mainly observes are behaviors (rituals, routines, ceremonials), and these are much more stable over time than are attitudes and opinions (the privileged fields of inquiry for discursive interviews and surveys), as proven in the well-known Richard La Piere's experiments in the early 1930s. Those who deal with organizations know very well that altering a behavior requires more time than altering an attitude, not to mention opinions, which are sometimes so volatile that they change from one day to the next.

Can ethnographic research be replicated, reproduced?

From this it follows that, because behaviors are temporally rather stable, the results of ethnographic research can be repeated and reproduced. With two requirements:

- the presence of a precise research design which has guided the research;
- that no significant changes have taken place in between one research and the next.

Ethnography and generalization

A recurrent criticism towards ethnographic methods is the impossibility to generalize their results because based on few cases, sometimes one only. However there are numerous disciplines which work on a limited number of cases: for instance palaeontology, archaeology, geology, ethology, biology, astrophysics, history, genetics, anthropology, linguistics, cognitive science, psychology (whose theories are largely based on experiments, and therefore on research conducted on non-probabilistic samples and on few cases). According to Howard Becker, these disciplines are unconcerned about their use of only a handful of cases to draw inferences and generalizations about thousands of people, animals, plants and other objects. Moreover, science studies the individual object/phenomenon not in itself but as a member of a broader class of objects/phenomena with particular characteristics/properties.

For these reasons it is anything but odd to think that the results of an ethnographic research can be generalized. As Randall Collins stated much of the best work in sociology has been carried

out using qualitative methods without statistical tests. This has been true of research areas ranging from organizational and community studies to micro studies of face-to-face interaction and macro studies of the world system.

In addition if the focus of ethnography is on behaviors, and given that these are stable in time, then it is likely that generalizations are possible. Obviously, precise criteria must be followed in the choice of samples (Gobo 2008b). Nevertheless ethnography is not precluded from making generalizations.

Sampling cases or instances?

It will be by now clear that the term ‘case’ is used ambiguously in ethnographic research. In surveys and discursive interviews, the cases correspond to the number of persons to interview (the sample), who are usually interviewed only once. Indeed, it is rather rare for several interviews to be conducted with the same person (during a single piece of research). Hence statistic calculations and analyses of the interview texts are performed on cases.

Ethnographic research is very different. What is usually referred to as the ‘case’ (the organization or the group studied) is in fact the setting. The cases are instead the hundreds of instances (pertaining to rituals, ceremonials and routines) that the researcher observes, or the dozens of individuals that s/he meets *dozens of times* during his/her presence in the field. The researcher is not interested in the organization (or the group) *per se* but rather in the behaviors which take place within it. Consequently, in order not to create confusion with the other methodologies, it would be better in ethnographic research to abandon the term ‘case’ and replace it with that of ‘instance’.

The future of ethnography

Even if ethnography is a methodology with more than one hundred years of history, it is

perceived (especially in political science) as a new method. The reason why ethnography is becoming in these times so fashionable is probably due not to its inner features but the socio-historical period we live by. If the relationship between science and society (on how social beliefs have influenced knowledge and scientific theories, and vice versa) has been widely proven; and also the relationship between technology and society (on how the birth of certain artifacts like the bicycle or the personal computer are related the type of society that has produced them) has been tested, it therefore seems necessary to enlarge these perspectives by acknowledging the relationship between society and research methods, the interdependence among social beliefs and methodologies. The ethnography and society are mutually constitutive: on the one hand, ethnography (as survey and in-depth interviewing in a previous age) requires a particular type of society for it to come into being and develop; on the other, these research methods strengthen the society which has produced them.

Probably we are entering the ‘observation society’ (Gobo 2008b), a social formation in which watching and scrutinizing are becoming the dominant cognitive modes alongside the others, like listening, feeling, hearing and eavesdropping, typical of the ‘interview society’, where survey methodology comes from. This phenomenon also accounts for the increasing demand in various sectors of society – from marketing to security, television to the fashion industry – for observation and ethnography. Ours are becoming observation societies.

Within the increasing popularity of interpretive methods, sponsored by epistemological approaches as constructivism, postmodernism, feminism and relativism, political ethnography is in position to play a major role. The need of an emic perspective, which aims to capture the social actors’ point of views, perspectives, meanings, motivations and emotions, has an important chance in the ethnographic methods.

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See also Emic, Fieldwork, Interpretive Methodologies, Micro-Macro Link, Political Ethnography, Research Methods

Further Readings

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