



USEFUL ETHNOGRAPHY: A REVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the debate among ethnographers over what ethnography should look like, how it should be done, how it should be presented, and what the goals should be. Through a review of literature, it finds that this does not necessarily change the methods ethnographers use for collecting data; those are relatively clear-cut and have remained relatively consistent over time. However, the methodological issues at the core of ethnographic research, the theories on what are and what are not good methods often appear messy and difficult to comprehend to the beginners. This paper is an attempt to make an understanding of ethnographic research as a useful practice to ascertain pragmatic knowledge.

Keywords: Classical ethnography, epistemology, reflexivity, postmodern turn

Introduction

Epistemological and methodological debates in ethnographic research have been a matter of debate since long. Many of the qualitative researchers find it meaningless to continue to validate the merits of in-depth, profoundly familiar, and often intimate relationships with those studied as a valid form of science, yet there are numerous other discussions that are being waged, which make the debate more confusing for the beginners who want to study the social world by ethnography. It is in fact apparent in the course of development of ethnographic research practice that ethnographers themselves are debating over what ethnography should look like, how it should be done, how it should be presented, and what the goals should be. However, this shifting ground does not necessarily change the methods ethnographers use for collecting data; those are relatively clear-cut and have remained relatively consistent over time. The methodological issues at the core of ethnographic research, the theories on what are and what are not good methods render beginners feeling like they are trying to grab smoke between their fingers. Through a review of relevant literature, we attempt to make an understanding of ethnographic research as a useful practice to ascertain pragmatic knowledge.

Development of ethnography as a scientific method

Malinowski (1922) invented the modern form of 'fieldwork' as a social science investigative technique and ethnography as its analytic complement. Before Malinowski, there are studies that

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can be regarded as ethnographic, such as E.B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) in which he studied the differences among the cultures and brought them to ethnographic facts. Morgan (1871) discussed social organization and family kinship terminologies at small scale among the Native American Indians. The establishment of participant observation as a professional norm differentiated the ethnographer from others- travelers, missionaries and such who also produced ethnographic descriptions about other cultures- by the following characteristics:

1. The ethnographers' expertise was validated by professional training on analytic techniques and modes of scientific explanation.
2. Their professional expertise could allow them for doing ethnography in relatively short-stay in the field, without mastering the 'native' language, and without getting involved in their life (Malinowski stressed on keeping distance, indeed.)
3. The power of observation enabled the ethnographer grasp 'the native's view', but refuses the hypotheses by native informants.
4. The training on certain powerful theoretical abstractions was believed to help ethnographers 'get to the heart' of a culture more rapidly than someone undertaking a thorough inventory of customs and beliefs (although Malinowski preferred to begin with no hypothesis at the beginning).
5. Since culture was too broad to study, the ethnographer needed to focus thematically on particular institution with an aim to get at the whole (culture) through one or more of its parts.
6. The wholes thus represented tended to be synchronic product of short-term research activities, (Clifford, 1988).

Malinowski studied the natives of several Pacific Islands across a wide area with a focus on a particular institution- the Melanesian trade pattern called the Kula voyage. Malinowski observed elaborate gifting networks of kula necklaces made out of shell among the Trobriand Islanders. He explained that kula necklaces symbolized cultural meanings regarding relationships, generosity, and a range of other emotions that the modern utilitarian museum collectors never saw. He also argued that gifting the necklaces acknowledged patronage relationships between previous and future owners, which could be activated in times of famine, drought, attack, or other catastrophes. What is noteworthy is that Malinowski deliberately avoided the realm of hypothesis and endeavored most faithfully to view matters through the eyes of his native informants. He asserted in his book that the goal of the ethnographer was "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world". He maintained the distinction between description and analysis and between the views of actors and analysts, which resulted in 'thick descriptions' of field notes without imposing any theory.

Evans-Pritchard is regarded as one of the accomplished professional ethnographers of the first generation. In his classic *The Nuer* (1940), we find him able to do successful ethnographic study about the Nuer in Africa in less than one year without mastering their language and even in the face of the natives' resistance and non-cooperation. In spite of his inimical reception among the Nuer as he was one of the White invaders, he could build rapport with the Nuer during the later couple of months only to find how skillful the Nuer was in evading questions. Yet his expertise enabled him get the knowledge he sought to acquire by means of a theory-guided approach. Evans-Pritchard observed that Nuer kinship was referenced by age-sets. Further, both space and time were structurally and linguistically differentiated by reference to these age-sets. So, he argued that an understanding of social structure was impossible without first having a grasp on Nuer constructions of time and space. He characterized the Nuer as an overwhelmingly proud

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people, who did not sell their labor. They were raised in an environment where hardship and hunger were frequent visitors, and they expressed contempt for both of these natural hardships. The Nuer was product of an egalitarian society that was both very democratic and violent. Evans-Pritchard discussed Nuer society and values at length, commenting, "Values are embodied in words through which they influence behavior".

As a field worker, Evans-Pritchard was not involved in the personal sphere of Nuer life, but only in the public sphere. He differed sharply with Malinowski who advocated going to the field without any hypothesis or theory, by arguing, "facts can only be selected and arranged in the light of theory". His work expresses an interest in social facts, an idea borrowed from Durkheim. Thus, he can be identified as a structural-functionalist due to his interest in analyzing the operation of social structures in the Nuer.

One of the central premises of structural-functionalism, as developed by Durkheim, is the task of explaining the apparent stability and internal cohesion of societies, which are necessary to ensure their continued existence over time. Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs, which function like organisms with their various parts (social institutions) working together to maintain and reproduce them. The various parts of society are assumed to work in an unconscious, quasi-automatic fashion towards the maintenance of the overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as being functional in the sense of working together to achieve this state and are effectively deemed to have a "life" of their own. They are then primarily analyzed in terms of this function they play. Individuals are significant not in and of themselves but in terms of their status, their position in patterns of social relations, and their roles the behavior(s) associated with their status. The social structure is then the network of statuses connected by associated roles.

Durkheim, in association with his Nephew Mauss, put forth a theory about the way society and the symbolic order is related in 'Primitive Classification' (1963). They argued that in societies the principal formal relations and logical associations informing the system of symbolic categories (gods, directions, left and right, high and low) are similar to and often identical with those informing the system of social categories of kinship (clans, generations, totemic grouping). They concluded that, the systems of classification were essentially systems of hierarchized notions. Their objective was not to facilitate action, but to advance understanding, to make intelligible the existing relations between things. The origin of such classification is social. Men classify things because clans divide them. They also argued that it is the whole (society) to which everything is related. However, in the introduction of this book, Needham identified some overriding flaws in their logical framework. He criticized them for not testing their theory by concomitant variations, and holding that a society employs only one mode of classification at a time which is objected by their own reference to societies, such as Chinese where they found multiple intermingling systems.

Another influential criticism on structural-functionalism was made by Leach who attempted to study whether a single type of social organization prevailed throughout the Kachin area in Highland Burma. Leach (1954) recognized that to accomplish his objective he must question the current criteria for classifying Shan and Kachin, the two major categories of peoples living in North-East Burma. Older accounts tended to accept the crude generalization that Shan differed from Kachin on the basis of Shan occupancy of the valleys while the Kachin lived on the adjacent hills, Shan utilizing irrigation for rice growing and Kachin utilizing the slash-and-burn technique to prepare their fields for dry-farming. The assumption of the existence of cultural uniformity within each group led even to theories of separate racial origin for the two groups. By reviewing

all facts relative to social organization on a higher level of abstraction than had been attempted previously with these materials, Leach found that what primarily differentiates Kachin from other peoples was their framework of political ideas.

Levi-Strauss (1962) argued that totemism as a central institution of the epoch of savagery never existed, and the several generations of scholars who have tried to decipher the secrets of its origin, evolution and significance were victims of a “totemic illusion.” Like Boas who sought to dispose of the riddle of totemism by denying that it was a social and historical reality, Levi-Strauss rejected any overall continuity of development in history. For him, a “total” history of mankind is impossible and would lead to “chaos”. From this standpoint, the totemic periods were not the most ancient stage in social history, nor were totemic classifications the earliest form of social relations. These represent, he argued, only one arbitrary mode of classification among others, “namely that constituted by reference to natural species.” It was part of the remarkable capacity of the savage mind that they could make precise and even subtle distinctions among natural species, naming up to 2,000 specimens of plants and animals. Thus, according to Levi-Strauss, totemism was simply an exercise in logic of the savage mind, not the mark of the colossal achievement of our savage ancestors in constituting the first form of social organization. It accord with his conception that “ethnology is first of all psychology.”

Boas (1955) also rejected the idea that primitive men had inferior ‘mental capability’ than modern men. He mentioned in the preface of the book, “I have never seen a person in primitive life to whom this theory would apply”. What is most important about Boas’s methodology is his emphasis on studying people ‘at home’ in America while the European ethnographers emphasized on studying people ‘out there’ generally in the (colonized) developing world. The best example of the American ethnographic tradition (inspired by Boas) is Chicago School that focused on “a very practical goal of going to where people are afflicted with social problems live to meticulously record the details of their lives and report the results to policy-makers and other concerned citizens” (Marvasti, 2004). The Chicago school influenced ethnography in three ways: first, it has been instrumental in presenting the urban environment as the quintessential setting for doing ethnographic study; secondly, it has helped establish ethnography as more descriptive than theoretical; and finally, it has set the practical agenda of ethnography in terms of moral concern for the plight of the underprivileged (Marvasti, 2004). One of the famous examples of Chicago School ethnography is Whyte’s ‘Street Corner Society (1943)’.

By mapping the intricate social worlds of street gangs and ‘corner boys,’ Whyte demonstrated that a poor community was not necessarily socially disorganized. His writing set a standard for vivid portrayals of real people in real situations. His participant observation of about three years with a small group of young boys in Cornerville, and success in gaining their friendship and confidence enabled him to identify that although to the outside world Cornerville was an area of social disorganization, the youngsters’ group on the street had a social structure of its own including numerous patterns of interaction between individuals and groups. He particularly focused on two groups he called ‘Corner Boys’ and ‘College Boys’ who showed differential patterns of upward of social mobility. The lives of the former boys revolved around particular street corners and the nearby shops. The college boys, on the other hand, were more interested in good education and moving up the social ladder. He also observed that each group had hierarchical status positions within the groups. He described how performance in games and sports demonstrated and maintained that status order within the group. He also discussed how racketeering was connected with politics and how Catholics and Protestants differed in viewing gambling.

Because Whyte strived to present an examination free of judgment, he included all

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information he observed and heard. His discussion of that fieldwork experience provides a wonderful commentary on the process of garnering knowledge as he did. In particular, he described the personal stakes he had in the project, his several false starts, the difficulty of gaining entree into the neighborhood, and the nature of his relationship with Doc, his main informant.

The critical turn

Researchers have been recognizing that interesting aspects of another culture can be rendered in text and can bring the reader to an appreciation of and familiarity with another social world through ethnography. However, Nugent and Abolafia (2007) argue that the 'natives' tend to be generalized and abstracted in the traditional form of ethnography, and thus, raise questions about the legitimacy of ethnographic practice as scientific. James Clifford (1988) made one of the most powerful criticisms against the classical tradition of ethnography. In an attempt to sketch the formation and breakup of ethnographic fieldwork, Clifford argued, "no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee the truth" of ethnographic images created in ethnographic writings that involve a form of power exercise by the writers. He identified the location of this authority historically in the development of 20th century science of participant observation. This authority is institutionalized with the 'hegemony of fieldwork' that developed a fusion of general theory and empirical research of cultural analysis with ethnographic description. In an analysis of different models of ethnographic writing- experimental, interpretative, dialogical and polyphonic- he stated that the textual embodiment of authority was a persistent problem for experiments in ethnography, and argued, "an old, realist mode can now be identified as the only possible paradigm for authority". He also commented that the ethnographer could no longer escape the political and epistemological assumptions, which were present in all forms of writing.

While influenced by the subaltern and/or postmodern turn, some scholars like Clifford reject the premise of positive ethnography that keeps distance between the researcher and the subjects and thus is able to produce objective knowledge, there are also scholars who intend to retain the positivist strand in ethnography with a an aim to produce pragmatic knowledge. From such a position, Lukes (1977) argued that we must be careful about rejecting the hope for producing 'objective knowledge' especially because universal truths do exist along with relative, contextualized truth. What we need to do is to distinguish between the universal and relative truths by careful analysis. Here Katz (1983) provides helpful suggestions for those intend to stick to the positivist mode of ethnography. He argues that ethnographers need to adhere to the search for objective knowledge by observing the principles of reactivity, reliability, replicability and representativeness.

Burawoy (1998) is one of the scholars who are in search of a middle way between the positivist and relativist camps. He offers extended case method on the basis of a reflexive model of science that takes as its premise the inter-subjectivity of the scientist and subjects of study. He identifies that positive science is limited by "context effects" (interview, respondent, field, and situational effects) while reflexive science is limited by "power effects" (domination, silencing, objectification, and normalization). His extended case method is dialogical in each of its four dimensions that produce context effects. It calls for intervention of the observer in the life of the participant; it demands an analysis of interaction within social situations; it uncovers local processes in a relation of mutual determination with external social forces; and it regards theory as emerging not only in dialogue between participant and observer, but also among observers now viewed as participants in a scientific community. He recognizes that intervention, process, structuration, and reconstruction are threatened by domination, silencing, objectification, and normalization. In order to minimize these power effects, Burawoy argues that the researchers

should make explicit the effects of power so that they can be better understood and contained.

In “Manifesto for Ethnography”, Willis and Todman (2000) propose ‘theoretically informed methodology for ethnography’ which prioritizes recording and presenting the “nitty gritty” of everyday life, and attempts to avoid either presenting raw data (data speaks for itself) or making abstract theoretical categories (lacking interest in empirical findings). Rather, it seeks to establish analytically productive relation between theory and data so that while sensitizing the experience, new or innovative conceptual tools can be developed in relation to ethnographic data. Abu-Lughod (2000) emphasizes on the location of ethnography as a crucial aspect and talks the ‘discourses of familiarity’- the ways we talk about ourselves and our friends and family in everyday life. She argues that these discourses will counter the objectifications that take place in social-scientific representation. She argues that emphasizing the location helps create new knowledge and advance theory, which in turn creates possibility of local intervention.

In doing ethnography, Katz (2001) warns that beginning with ‘why’ question is likely to distract ethnographic enquiry, especially if the researcher is interested in making causal inference. In this case, he proposes to start with ‘how’ question that invites “a personally historicized, temporally formatted response” while ‘why’ question authorizes “responses formatted in the atemporal and impersonal categories of moral reasoning”. Yet, he believes that causal inference can be drawn by deriving answers to ‘why’ questions out of field data generated through ethnography starting with ‘how’ questions (Katz, 2001, 2002). In order to appreciate the pragmatic value of ethnographic culture, he argues that we should take the commonsense terms more seriously, but we should not practice them too formally (2002). In this line of practice, Fine (2003) proposes a distinctive form of participant observation which she calls ‘peopled ethnography’ in which the text is neither descriptive narrative nor conceptual theory; rather, the understanding of the setting and its theoretical implications are grounded in a set of detailed vignettes, based on field notes, interview extracts, and the texts that group members produce. The detailed account, coupled with the ability of the reader to generalize from the setting, is at the heart of this ethnographic practice. She argues that this is most effectively based on the observation of an interacting group, a setting in which one can explore the organized routines of behavior.

Conclusion

Now let us look at a comparison between two ethnographic studies in order to reflect on how a ‘useful ethnography’ may look like and how to do that. With an aim to study the underlying causes of pervasive drug addiction problem in Bangladesh, the first ethnography focuses on a small group of regular substance users who do not conceal their drug use despite its negative connotation. However, with the influence of postmodernism and disillusionment in objective knowledge that led towards ‘reflexive science’- in Burawoy’s (1998) term, the study was directed to completely a different angle from the initial goal: instead of gathering field data and constructing description of their group life in order to identify the causes of continued drug use, the researcher ended up doing narrative analysis with a belief in withdrawing himself as the author from the text and allowing the subjects to speak for them. They talked about identity politics, which resulted in a detailed theoretical discussion. Although the results of the study got published in a journal (Mahmud, 2008), one could hardly see any immediate practical use of the knowledge that the study produced.

The persistent concern for pragmatic knowledge, however, led the same researcher to adopt a different strategy in the next ethnographic research where he tried to study the agency of the

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migrants regarding allocation and use of remittances (Mahmud, forthcoming). He employed an ethnographic inquiry to understand the remittance practices from the point of view of the migrants'. In order to grasp the 'discourses of familiarity' in Abu-Lughod's (2000) term, the study included observation, unstructured interviews, casual conversation analysis, focused group discussions, life-stories from secondary sources and archival analysis as methods of data collection. In this research, the author went to the field with theories from economic sociology about labor migrants' remittance behavior, which constantly informed about which information to collect. This tack finally guided to draw a conclusion about their remittance behavior with a 'surprise' that they possessed considerable agency and showed entrepreneurial patterns in allocating remittances money, a finding that contradicted established theories about remittances practices. Such a finding can be seen as complementing our knowledge about migrants' remittances and can help develop a more efficient development policy for Bangladesh, one of the highest migrants' remittances earning country.

The discussion above, thus, substantiates how useful it is to have some kind of theoretical proposition in mind while doing ethnographic fieldwork. However, emphasis should be put on collecting data from what people actually do in their everyday life and special attention should be given to anything that may pop up as surprise that would help in reformulating the existing knowledge.

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