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Thinking Like an Ethnographer

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Thinking Like an Ethnographer

Kristina Baines

Background and History

Learning to conduct ethnographic research means more than simply learning about the different ethnographic methods and putting them into action. To gather data ethnographically, we say we need to use ourselves--our bodies and our minds--as the tool of data collection. Ethnographers use their five senses to observe human behavior and write about what they observe, however, they need to develop those senses to help them collect accurate data. Part of this process is developing what is called the "ethnographic mindset." As mentioned in the previous chapter, anthropologists have been instrumental in history in developing what we think of when we talk about an ethnographic mindset.

Franz Boas is an important historic figure in our consideration of how an ethnographer should think. Boas is credited with developing the concept of cultural relativity, which forms the core of the ethnographic mindset. Cultural relativity, or cultural relativism, is the understanding that certain cultures and societies are not superior to others, but rather they are just different. Before his research studies, it was common for scholars to assume that Western societies were superior to non-Western societies, for example, small, indigenous communities living in remote locations. Making observations without assuming that one culture, society or group is better or worse than another is the key to being a cultural relativist and critical to thinking like an ethnographer.

In 1899, Boas became the first ever Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University in New York City, where he worked for 41 years. During that time, he mentored many ethnographers, including Zora Neale Hurston and Margaret Mead. Hurston was the first black woman to graduate from Barnard College and used her ethnographic research about folklore to write famous novels and essays about African American culture from a detailed, rich and positive perspective. Mead also became well known both inside and outside of academic circles for her work

with the youth in Samoa. She used ethnographic research to challenge ideas held in the United States and Europe that all teenagers experienced a period of "storm and stress" and that this was something that was universal and not limited to one culture or society. She found that the "teen angst" that her culture assumed was present everywhere was not present in Samoa. Without an ethnographic mindset, Mead would have likely assumed that the teenagers in Samoa would be behaving in similar ways to those she grew up around in the US. Her work helped researchers and the general public understand the value of ethnography and the importance of cultural relativism.

Operationalizing the Ethnographic Mindset

The ethnographic mindset is grounded in the concept of cultural relativism, however, it takes many steps and training to truly "step out" of your own culture and be an impartial observer of behavior that might be very different from your Below,. we outline several key qualities and steps that will help in working to develop the ethnographic mindset.

1. No Judgment

Most people if asked if they were judgmental would probably say "no." , however, we make small judgments every day as part of our daily lives. Have you ever been riding the bus or the train and thought someone was strangely dressed? How about thinking someone at a restaurant was speaking too loudly? Or eating in an impolite way? These are simply everyday judgments based on what your culture has taught you is normal to do. These cultural norms are learned from family, friends, school, the media, etc. from a very early age and we rarely question them or consider them as judgments. However, in order to really develop an ethnographic way of thinking, we need to focus on not passing judgment about what we observe and instead simply observe and describe it. For example, if you observe a person in a restaurant eating with her hands, you might write, "there was a disgusting mess on her fingers." This observation passes judgment. Instead, a developed ethnographic mind might write, "there was food extending down each finger and onto the palms of her hands. A napkin was visible on the table but not used." A good rule of thumb is to consider what happened and not what you think of it (not yet anyway- the analysis comes later).

2. Act like an Alien

It can be a helpful exercise to try and think about what it would be like to be from another planet on Earth to observe humans. Pretend that you know nothing about human behavior- nothing about what humans are supposed to do or how they are supposed to act. This way, you can attempt to really step out of all you have assumed or been taught throughout your life and really just see things for what they are. Of course, it is almost impossible to completely forget everything you know but you can practice by focusing on everyday, mundane activities and try seeing details you have never noticed before because you take them for granted.

Example activity: Take a ride in an elevator. As you climb the floors, watch the people who get in and out. Pretend you are an alien and have never ridden in an elevator before. What do you notice? What are people doing? Do they do similar or different things from each other? Do they notice you? Try this activity with and without a notebook to write down your observations. Is there any difference in how people behave toward you? This activity will help you notice ordinary actions in a different way.

3. Be an Insider and an Outsider

It is important to really step outside of your culture and develop the perspective of an alien looking in without judgment. It also important, however, to develop an insider perspective at the same time. To really understand a community or a culture, it is important to understand what motivates and drives that community. It is difficult to be an outsider and an insider at the same time- to look in and observe but to also be a part of the action. Good ethnographers will develop the ability to understand when each

perspective is valuable. For example, if you are researching the role of dance in Garifuna ceremonies, it is important to sit back and watch the different parts of the ceremony with respect. It is also important to participate in the dance if the community invites you so that you can deeply understand the rules and the moves involved in the dance. Thinking like an ethnographer means being willing to both sit back and observe and to join in the action, AND trying to understand which action is appropriate at which time.

4. Holistic and Immersive

Thinking like an ethnographer relies on seeing details but it also takes a broad view of human behavior. Anthropologists often say that they study humans "across time and space" and it is important to keep the big picture of human behavior in mind when conducting ethnographic research. Developing the ethnographic mindset includes fostering an interest in how the details connect to each other to form the whole view of a community or culture. Often, this view is formed by ethnographers immersing themselves in the community. Immersion means that you spend some time surrounded by the everyday practices where you are focusing your research and take into account details that may not seem directly related to your research at first. In contrast to conducting a survey, as an example, collecting ethnographic data is enriched by spending extended periods of time in a community and really understanding the context for the observations, interviews and other data to be collected. Traditionally, ethnographers spend at least a year living and researching in a community in order to fully immerse themselves in the details of daily life. We might not have a year, a month or even more than an hour to do an assignment or conduct our research but we can still keep in mind how we can go deeper and be more holistic in our study rather than skimming the surface.

5. Awareness

The ethnographic mindset includes a heightened sense of awareness about what is happening around you. Being aware of your surroundings, the context of what is going on around you and how people are considering and affected by your presence is an important piece of the ethnographic puzzle. Ethnographers can never "check out" as they will never know what small detail will become important to understanding what they are studying. As an ethnographer, there is no "time off" and you are always "on" as you observe and engage.

6. Openness and Curiosity

Ethnographic thinking is characterized by an openness to the process of exploration and a curiosity about the process of discovery. Ethnographers should not enter a fieldwork situation already knowing exactly what they want to find and how they are going to find it. While they are often guided by a broad research question, they should strive to be open to new ideas and directions that the research takes them in. Exploring unexpected ideas that arise and being open to thoughts the community members participating in the research have about the direction of the inquiry are critical to thinking like an ethnographer. While sometimes frustrating at first, unexpected avenues to explore can really enrich the research and produce new and useful knowledge.

7. Empathy and Humility

In order to understand another person, it is valuable to develop empathy for that person. You can do this by trying to put yourself in that person's shoes and consider their choices from their own perspective, not from yours. This is a difficult task but critical to the development of the ethnographic mindset. One focus, which makes the process of developing empathy easier, is to develop your own sense of humility. When you work on allowing yourself to understand that your perspective is not better or greater than anyone else's, but simply different, you help to open your mind to different ways of seeing and thinking about the world. This is key to understanding and can help in doing ethnographic research- but also in navigating a complicated and diverse world.

Example activity: Honing empathy skills can be challenging, particularly when we are conducting research with people in communities different from our own (of course, it can be challenging even with those closest to us!). To practice empathy, engage in an activity that you would not normally do. This may be as simple as riding the bus or preparing a meal. Before you actually engage in the activity, write a short paragraph about what you expect the experience to be like. After participating, write your answers to the following questions: How did engaging in that activity make you feel? How was this the same or different from what you anticipated? How did this activity help you understand the value of empathy in doing ethnography?

Moving Forward

Keeping these qualities and examples in mind will help prepare you as a researcher to engage in the methods described in detail later in this book. Training yourself to have an ethnographic mindset does not happen overnight. It takes focus and practice to really step outside your own culture and be an open, empathetic observer without making assumptions and passing judgment. With some preparation, however, the results of the ethnographic research are likely to be richer in detail and accuracy.

In Summary

- Thinking like an ethnographer requires training yourself to observe the details of a culture or community without passing judgment.
- The concept of cultural relativism, first developed by Franz Boas, means that each culture should be evaluated only by its own standards and not by the standards of the observer's own culture, and this guides ethnographic thinking.
- Empathy, humility, openness, curiosity and the ability to separate yourself from your own cultural norms are all qualities that good ethnographic thinkers develop

Key Questions

1. What do you think are the benefits of conducting ethnographic research in the culture or community you are already part of? What are the challenges?
2. What do you think are the benefits of conducting ethnographic research in a culture or community that is different from the one you are part of? What are the challenges?
3. Which quality do you think is most important in thinking like an ethnographer? Why did you select this one?
4. Why can it be challenging to practice cultural relativism?
5. How does thinking like an ethnographer help you collect different data than a survey, for example?

Key Terms

- Cultural Relativism
- Ethnocentrism
- Cultural Norms
- Immersion

- Empathy
- Western/Non-Western

Resources

https://www.ted.com/talks/tricia_wang_the_human_insights_missing_from_big_data/transcript

<https://blog.simonassociates.net/podcast/043-jay-hasbrouck-thinking-like-an-anthropologist>

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