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Introduction to ethnographic research and main challenges of gathering data

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Introduction to Ethnographic Research and Main Challenges of Gathering Data

Abstracts

EN

In this article, ethnography is introduced as a research method and research attitude with a special focus on the role of the researcher in the field and on data collection. First, important characteristics of ethnographic research and their theoretical roots are presented. It will also be discussed which research questions, in the context of school and teaching, work particularly well with ethnographic research. Furthermore, steps and problems of field access are shown and the role of researchers in the field is reflected. Participant observation as a central method of ethnographic data collection is associated with the visible and audible presence of one or more researchers in the field, whose influence on the field must always be considered and reflected upon.

DE

In diesem Artikel wird die Ethnographie als Forschungsmethode und Forschungshaltung vorgestellt, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf der Rolle des:der Forscher:innen im Feld und auf der Datenerhebung liegt. Zunächst werden wichtige Merkmale der ethnographischen Forschung und ihre theoretischen Wurzeln vorgestellt. Es wird auch erörtert, welche Forschungsfragen im Kontext von Schule und Unterricht sich besonders gut mit ethnographischer Forschung bearbeiten lassen. Weiterhin werden Schritte und Probleme des Feldzugangs aufgezeigt und die Rolle der Forschenden im Feld reflektiert. Wenn die teilnehmende Beobachtung die zentrale Methode der ethnographischen Datenerhebung ist, dann ist es leicht nachvollziehbar, dass für alle Beteiligten die sichtbare und hörbare Anwesenheit eines oder mehrerer Forscher:innen das Feld beeinflusst. Dieser Einfluss muss stets berücksichtigt und reflektiert werden.

PT

Neste artigo, a etnografia é apresentada como método de investigação e atitude de investigação, com especial enfoque no papel do investigador no campo e na recolha de dados. Em primeiro lugar, são apresentadas características importantes da investigação etnográfica e as suas raízes teóricas. Discute-se também quais as questões de investigação no contexto da escola e do ensino que funcionam particularmente bem com a investigação etnográfica. Além disso, são apresentados os passos e os problemas do acesso ao campo e é refletido o papel dos investigadores no mesmo. Se a observação participante é o método central da recolha de dados etnográficos, então é fácil compreender que, para todos os participantes, a presença visível e audível de um ou mais investigadores influencia o campo. Esta influência deve ser sempre considerada e refletida.

JA

本稿では、研究者のフィールドでの役割とデータ収集にとくに焦点を当て、研究方法として、また研究する際の態度としてエスノグラフィを紹介する。最初に、エスノグラフィによる研究とその理論的基盤の主要な特徴を示す。あわせて、学校や教授という文脈でどのような研究設問がエスノグラフィを用いた研究に適しているのかを論じる。さらに、フィールドへのアクセスの各段階に生じる問題を示し、フィールドでの研究者の役割を省察する。参与観察がエスノグラフィによるデータ収集の主たる方法であるかぎり、姿や声が見えるために研究者の存在はフィールドに影響を与える。この影響は、たえず考慮され、省察されねばならないのである。

1 What is ethnography?

"Ethnography is [...] a research attitude and strategy rather than a research method and is used to approach a social phenomenon empirically showing itself to the observer in its diversity, complexity, and contradiction"¹ (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 8-9). The understanding of ethnography as an attitude or strategy thus reflects the objective of being able to examine a social phenomenon in its complexity. The procedure is based on the "primacy of the *object* of research over the methodology of empirical access" (Breidenstein & Kelle 1998: 138, emphasis in original). The focus lies on the social phenomenon and the field itself based on which decisions are made and actions are taken in the research process.

1 German quotes have been translated by the authors.

To understand ethnography as an attitude and a strategy, one should first look briefly at the roots of modern ethnography:

The term “ethnography” is derived from the Greek words (éthnos – people, graphé – script) and refers to the roots of ethnography in ethnology, namely the description of peoples or ethnic groups that were unknown from a European point of view (Fabian 1990: 757f.). This was and to some extent still is closely linked to a colonialist and Eurocentric perspective. Ethnologists travelled to the regions to be researched, lived there with the ethnic groups for some time and thereby tried to understand and describe their way of living, rules, religions, and their rituals. To prevent a colonialist attitude, it is important to understand the patterns of interpretation of the group observed from their own perspective (Breidenstein 2012: 29).

From the 1920s onwards, sociologists – starting in Chicago – began to investigate subcultures within their own society, for example, the juvenile gang system in Chicago (Thrasher 1927). On the one hand, it is about the description of subcultures that are unknown or foreign to many, although these groups are living within one’s own society. On the other hand, it is about the discovery of social order and social interactions of our own everyday life, which is related to “ethnomethodology” (Garfinkel 1967) and symbolic interactionism (Rock 2007: 29f.).

This also includes the ethnographic studies of school and education, which were first carried out in the UK and the US about 50 years ago, since the 1970s. Although all researchers themselves attended school for a long time and know it well, they try to describe and understand the everyday structure of actions in schools that hardly anyone reflects upon (Gordon, Holland & Lahelma 2007: 188). The social world is not understood as a simple, existing fact, but rather as a phenomenon that is constantly produced interactively while following its own logic and order which must be recognised.

On the one hand, ethnographic studies can focus on describing (sub)cultures that are less known in order to make these more approachable to a broader readership. On the other hand, ethnographic studies can also focus on particularly familiar (sub-)cultures, which are so familiar that internalised practices and implicit structures of meaning can only be revealed through precise description.

Even though there are different approaches, research interests and theoretical perspectives, the following characteristics of ethnography can be summarised:

Research Questions

Ethnography is mostly explorative and takes a case-related approach. The central question, which is often quoted, is “What the hell is going on here?”

(Geertz 1983, cited after Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 20). Therefore, it is a matter of describing and understanding what happens every day in a certain social environment or in a specific social group, so-called “thick description” (Geertz 1973: 5f.). It is *not* about the *evaluation* of situations or actions. This is difficult for many beginners, especially in ethnographic teaching research. One’s own experience with school and teacher action may lead to a quick assessment of what can be considered as a good or bad practice. However, ethnography wants to describe and understand and not to evaluate actions. Nevertheless, an evaluation regarding a scientific theory or scientific discourses is possible but needs to happen in a *second step*. An example with regard to discrimination: In the German movie “Almanya” about Turkish migrants in Germany there is a classroom scene, where the teacher asks the young pupils, where they are from and puts little flags on a map of Europe. Cenk says “Germany” – the teacher: “Yes, but what’s the name of the nice country where your father is from?”. Cenk says “Anatolia” (in the eastern part of Turkey) and the teacher puts Cenk’s flag outside of the map because Anatolia is not on it. This is the *description* of the scene. Regarding theories of *everyday racism*, you can emphasise that the teacher doesn’t accept the self-placement of the pupil Cenk in Germany, where he was born and lives, but pins him down, as being a foreigner. Therefore, in this *second step*, one can *evaluate* the scene as everyday racism.

The outlined characteristics of ethnographic research are also shown in the following, exemplary titles. All studies are based on an explorative approach with the aim of achieving a “thick description”:

- ‘And what language do you speak at home?’ Ethnocentrism and cultural openness in teacher-parent interactions in disadvantaged and ethnically segregated schools (Payet & Deshayes 2019)
- Doing Gender in a rural Scottish secondary school: An ethnographic study of classroom interactions (Menzies & Santoro 2018)
- School between tradition and modernity – a case study in rural regions of Mozambique (Mulhanga 2002)
- Homework practices: role conflicts concerning parental involvement (Bräu, Haring & Weyl 2017)

All these studies began with open research questions: what is going on ... during teacher-parent interactions, between girls and boys in schools, in rural Mozambique regarding education and school life or while doing homework at home.

The Issue

The issue of ethnography is the study of social practices. A practice “is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other” (Reckwitz 2002: 249) and involves environment and things/objects/artefacts. In the context of educational and classroom research, it is therefore a matter of behavioural routines of pupils, students, teachers, headmasters, and other persons who are influenced by tacit/implicit knowledge about school and teaching. The participants in the field may be unaware of these routines (because it is a *tacit* knowledge) and yet still integrate them automatically into their actions. These social practices are culturally shaped so they can vary in different cultures and societies (Reckwitz 2002: 253). One example of a social practice in the classroom:

- Observation: The teacher usually uses the blackboard; pupils seldom write on the blackboard during lessons and only do so at the teacher’s request.
- Implicit knowledge of the pupils (like unwritten laws): The blackboard is an object or artefact in the classroom, used for holding knowledge that is correct and shall be learned or retained (Kalthoff 2011: 461). The teacher determines when and what is written on the blackboard and whether a pupil should write on it. Writing on the blackboard without permission could result in sanctions.

Relation to Theory

In addition to the “thick description”, a further goal of analysing ethnographic observation protocols can be the elaboration or discovery of “middle-range theories” (Charmaz 2008: 397). In principle, neither the participatory observation nor the sorting, systematisation and interpretation of the data should be pre-structured by pre-defined theories and concepts. Theories should not impede the creative process of data-based discovery and theory formation (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 23).

At the same time, this rule of openness does not mean that a researcher is not informed about the literature on the research subject beforehand. Rather, as far as the subject of research is concerned, it is important to be scientifically informed as well as to remain open to new findings (Blumer 1954: 7).

Methods

Ethnography is methodically diverse. The central element is participant observation. The observed persons are visited within the context of their living conditions. Regarding ethnographic school and classroom research, the researcher participates in class or other activities at school to observe and take notes.

The presence of the researcher provides an introspection into social practice. The purpose is to achieve a “deep familiarity” (Goffman 1989: 130) with the field in order to be able to grasp it in all its facets. However, this requires a longer-lasting or repeated participation (Rock 2007: 32). In addition, artefacts can be collected or photographed (for example worksheets, blackboard presentations, classroom situations), or short ad-hoc interviews can be included (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 16).

Writing

As the term of *ethnography* already shows, writing is a central characteristic of ethnographic research. Writing is not to be understood in the sense of a documentation aimed at producing “a ‘copy’ of social processes as neutral as possible” (Hirschauer 2001: 436). On the contrary, observations and findings must be first put into language. In this process, ‘Silent things’, such as movements, rooms, objects, and smells as well as unspoken things, are made linguistically accessible in the first place. The special achievement of ethnography emerges from the “verbalization of the social” (Hirschauer 2001: 436): It puts the observed phenomena into words and generates a verbalised composition of social practice (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 30; Hirschauer 2001: 432-437). The verbalisation is a selective and interpretative activity that depends, among other things, on the attributions of meaning, linguistic abilities and selection mechanisms of the researcher. It is a specific construction of the experiences made in the field which is shaped by the location, the experiences and ideas of the researcher. At the same time, it is also shaped by the anticipated expectations of the readers (Amann & Hirschauer 1995: 30f.; Hirschauer 2001: 439f.; Kalthoff 2003: 71). This verbalisation is therefore a decisive step in the production of a “thick description” (Geertz 1973: 5f.), it is a structured description of social practices, including their understanding.

2 The researcher(s) in the field

Above all, ethnography is field research. This implies the direct contact/interaction between researchers and the subjects of research in their everyday environment. Based on an open approach, the researcher is able to find out what is important and relevant to the actors in the field and how they structure their everyday lives (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995: 1f.). Therefore, it is the established logic of the field that is the predominant criterion of the researcher’s decisions on behaviour and methods – not his/her own view or the logic of the research. The rules, including the behavioural possibilities, options, opportunities and restrictions in the field, control the researcher’s behaviour and

areas. At the same time, they are a source of knowledge: what the researcher may and may not do and how the researcher is addressed already refers to the logic of the field (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 19f.).

For example, the way schools approach the arrival of the researcher may differ completely. The school management may welcome him/her and introduce him/her to the staff in a friendly manner or the researcher may find a different culture where initial enquiries are answered slowly and access is made more difficult by bureaucratic hurdles. The way in which the researcher is treated and addressed already shows something about the everyday life at a school and what is going on there.

The openness of ethnography is also reflected in the fact that the researcher first enters the field with an open question and then, step by step, develops a concrete research question. He or she will use several research visits, interrupted by phases of data interpretation. By making initial observations and then interpreting those, the ethnographer can make more targeted and focused observations during his next field visit based on the initial findings. It may also be possible that he/she makes observations that were not in the focus at first but which have turned out to be relevant. In the process of repeatedly entering the field and distancing oneself from it, the research question is increasingly becoming focused (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 45).

Furthermore, to work analytically outside the field, is a prerequisite to avoid "going native" (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 17) so-to-speak, a strong identification of the researcher with the actions of the observed persons. The researcher must find a *balance* between appropriate closeness to and getting familiar with the field, on the one hand, and the avoidance of "going native" and over-identification on the other. Familiarity with the field and the trust of the observed persons is essential in order to obtain relevant information as well as to recognise authentic action. The analytical distance is necessary in order not to be too attached to the situation and to be able to work out the implicit knowledge in the field (Emerson & Pollner 2001: 240).

Since the researcher is visible and audible in the field and communicates with the observed persons, the field is not unaffected by the researcher. If you take part in school lessons, it is likely that the teacher or individual students speak to you. Probably the researcher should introduce himself/herself in class and is then asked about the question of the observations. On the one hand, it is ethically inappropriate to keep the focus of the observation secret and leaving teachers and students in the dark. On the other hand, the answer may influence the actions of teachers and students. Insofar, reflecting upon one's role as a researcher in the field is very important, being aware of what he/she has done and said and how teachers and students react to him/her.

The necessity of reflexivity also applies to the question of the subjectivity of the researcher. Ethnographic research aims to make limited generalisable statements on the field within the context of school and teaching. However: Is there a risk that the observations and interpretations could be highly *subjective*? It should be noted that an *objective* observation is not possible (not even with standardised or videotaped observation) and that always a certain perspective is taken (while another one is not). The perspective of one's own observation and perception should, however, always be taken into consideration. This occurs, for example, when the researcher records subjective impressions in the field notes, such as astonishment at a particular event or situation, and subsequently realises that these are regarded as normal by the (other) actors in the field. In addition, interpretation groups are helpful in the interpreting process, if several people can bring together different perspectives and interpretations.

As a participant in the field, it is sometimes necessary for researchers to "expose themselves to, adapt to and, in a certain sense, submit to the cultural orders and situational practices lived in each case" (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 40) in order to become a seismograph of the social processes of the field and to be able to understand them (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 25).

By exposing herself or himself to social events and adapting to them, the ethnographer also makes the participants' settings of relevance and the associated selective mechanisms accessible. Here, 'selectivity' is understood as a fundamental characteristic of social situations and is demanded by the participants because it organises social practice and provides it with meaning. One requirement for the researcher is to be guided by these selection mechanisms to be able to decipher the attribution of meaning and setting of relevance in the field (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 22). From this perspective, selectivity, i.e., the focus on the phenomena, rules and processes set as relevant in the field, do not become disturbances or a lack of methodicality, on the contrary they are precisely the epistemological moments, the "modus vivendi" (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 17) of research, by revealing what the field actually is and what specific social order underlies it. This understanding is also adopted in the face of emerging uncertainties, irritations, or other reactions of the field participants due to the presence of the researcher. The reactive movements of the field do not represent actions that are artificially generated by the presence of the ethnographer, but rather refer to field-immanent structures and existing knowledge that are activated, explained, questioned, or justified by the field participants under the observation of the researcher (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 37-39; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995: 3; Kalthoff 2003: 76). To gain in-depth knowledge and understanding of the field, a longer-term participation is required. The establishment of an observer position recognised in

the field and an established trust of the field participants creates the basis for the researchers to become involved in processes, to ask for information and contextual knowledge and to gain access to relevant information (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 26).

3 Steps of data collection

Access to the field

Good planning is important for access to the field. Thus, it must first be decided which schools are suitable (or particularly suitable) for an ethnographic study. Geographical proximity, a certain pedagogical concept (one should inform oneself as much as possible about the school) or also the acquaintance with the headmaster or a teacher at school are decisive factors. These people can be gatekeepers, thus actors, who simplify, enable, or deny access. Hierarchies must be respected in all cases. Even if, for example, one gets in contact with the field through an acquaintance with a teacher, the gatekeeper at school is always the school management, who ultimately decides whether the researchers get access or not. In many cases, a research project and access to school must be applied for at the education administration.

Once the research permission is granted, the researcher must be able to find his/her way in the field and to seize the opportunities of the observation:

“Access to the field was via Mrs Acivatan. The researcher enters the teacher’s room with her and was the first to attend her lessons. Once familiar with the environment, the researcher moved in the field without Mrs Acivatan. These first movements in the field were uncontrolled, so that depending on the circumstances different teachers were accompanied in the unpredictable course of everyday school life. To be a visitor in the teacher’s room literally meant to be introduced in passing to colleagues, to react to spontaneous offers for classroom visits [...]” (Akbaba 2017: 111f.).

This shows that diverse and heterogeneous observations in class become possible only through the communication and flexibility of the researcher.

Field notes

The researcher takes notes during the observation, the so-called ‘field notes’. Short dialogues and context information can be recorded, and actions can be described. The notes serve to remember what has been seen or heard. In addition to the notes – strictly with permission – photographs of the room, the blackboard, or learning materials can be taken. Because of data protection, either no persons should be on the photographs or the faces must be made unrecognisable for publication (pixelated).

The field notes are taken simultaneously with the event and will therefore include abbreviations, incomplete sentences, or only key notes. Observation protocols must then be written promptly based on these notes, preferably on the same day or the next, to allow a detailed description of the observed phenomena (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw: 14).

Observation protocols

In some publications, only the term 'field notes' is used. Since the notes taken on site differ from the protocols to be interpreted later, it is preferable to differentiate between field notes (written by hand on-site) and observation protocols (later formulated on a computer). This distinction is also underlined by the respective relationship of the two text forms to the field: While the field notes have a double affiliation – "as local practice on site they belong to the field, as writing practice to the academic context" (Hirschauer 2001: 443) – the observation protocols also provide a distance from the field in spatial terms when they are written in a different environment, for example at the researcher's desk. Thus, the preparation of observation protocols represents an interruption of the process in which the researcher performs a *going native* while entering the field, by a *coming home* (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 28; Emerson & Pollner 2001: 254).

An observation protocol is a more detailed, prompt description based on the field notes and memory. The events/actions are described as precisely as possible, so that everyone not being present in the field can understand them. Names should be anonymised. These protocols are the basis for further work, analysis, and interpretation. This is where the step is taken to describe everyday routines and to put non-verbal things into language.

Characteristics of good observation protocols are above all:

- The event is described as precisely as possible so that one can imagine and understand the situation well.
- Since descriptions are already interpretations, one should try to distinguish linguistically between more 'objective' descriptions (blue pullover) and interpreting comments.
- Example: "It seems to me that the man near the window is bored" (but he could also be tired or introvert). Or idioms like probably ...; In my opinion ...
- The behaviour and reactions of the researcher to the event should be included in the protocol, so that they can be integrated into the data interpretation and enable to reflect upon the researcher's role in the field.
- Perhaps photographs or drawings/sketches complete the protocols.

Change between periods of field research and periods of data interpretation

Once you have created a series of protocols, the first data interpretation can begin. A common procedure for the evaluation of the data material obtained in the field is the coding procedure according to the Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Grounded Theory is not to be understood as a fixed analysis process, but rather represents “a conceptually condensed, methodologically grounded and consistent collection of proposals” (Strübing 2014: 2). They are applied in accordance with the requirements of the respective research context (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 26). Since this article focuses on data collection, the Grounded Theory is not elaborated further at this point.

With the ideas you got from the first analyses, you return (if possible) into the field with more focused observations. This could change several times, creating a circular research process. Such a process is associated with the requirement for researchers to constantly make decisions based on the data, and lead to a shift in the focus of the observations. Moreover, it can also occur that an opening for progressive theorisation may become necessary. The ethnographic research process thus requires a high degree of flexibility, openness and creativity.

4 Conclusion

For researchers, the ethnographic research process is linked with the requirement to react flexible to the situational conditions and circumstances of the field. The decisions and challenges associated with the researchers' participation in social events refer to the structures and dynamics of the field. Therefore, the reactions prove to be moments of enabling insights into the field's immanent modes of action. A reflexive attitude towards one's own role as a researcher provides a further understanding of the field in its peculiarities. With this approach, the knowledge about the object of research can also be condensed.

By establishing access to the field and making the first observations, it is possible to reconstruct how the role of the researcher is constituted in the field, what possibilities but also limits of participation are connected with it and how this affects the observation activity. On the one hand, the foreignness of researchers can become a challenge, especially if it is necessary to establish familiarity with the field and its participants. On the other hand, it also represents a central resource for taking an alienated view and for questioning the self-evident nature of routine practices. The simultaneous requirement to gain trust, while at the same time maintaining a disconcerted view of the phe-

nomena, is a central element in the ethnographic research process. This also includes reflecting on one's role as a researcher in the field by being aware of own assumptions, and thus, always keeping the perspective of the field present.

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