

# The benefits of ethnographic research



To get to know your subject, one must be immersed with the subject in order to gain valuable information regarding the customs, culture, and systems of life from another culture other than your own. Immersing oneself can be a tedious project that lays ahead. But, if you are careful and well educated regarding the study of ethnography, then this task at hand should not be as tedious as one may think. Ethnography is the study of other cultures with clear and critical rules to engage interaction among non-Western societies.

We will first describe the study of ethnography in this paper to form the basis of what ethnography really is as opposed to what the study could be. The study of ethnography has had three important changes in the formation of ethnography which will also be a focus in this discussion in this paper so that we can better understand and use the study of ethnography as anthropologists. There are similarities and differences between the three changes which will be examined to fully gather the importance of the changes. We will also review an example of a real life ethnographic study to provide the discussion with evidence that the ethnographic study has clear rules and guidelines to describe other cultures. To add to our discussion, we will take an evaluation of ethnography whereby we will look at the pros and cons of using this method of inquiry.

The purpose of this paper is to review the importance of learning the study of ethnography to do the best way to study other cultures other than our own which includes the participant observation method. The next section will define what ethnography is, how anthropologists use ethnography, and carefully discuss why anthropologists use ethnography when studying other cultures.

## **The Study of Ethnography?**

We often take for granted the importance of learning about other cultures and peoples who live outside our communities, however, if there are efforts to learn about others, we can begin to understand the importance of similarities among human civilizations and societies. There is a study that studies the importance of other cultures as well as during the process we learn about ourselves. We come from a place of extravagance, where the modern world allows us Westerners to have everything at our disposal; therefore we must be cautious when we learn about other cultures especially from places with non-Western ways of doing things.

There are however certain forms and guidelines that are used for this purpose specifically. These guidelines are developed by anthropologists who use these guidelines to study other people's cultures in non-Western nations. Anthropologists determined that the study called ethnography would be the basis for studying other cultures than their own. Ethnography is the systematic study of other cultures by use of observation, participation-observation, and what I will coin the term, participation-observation-inclusion.

Ethnography is mainly used to gather in a scientific manner the evidence to show that how and why groups of people chose to live as they do.

Ethnography is more importantly used in purposes to perform a logical and laid out script to guide all ethnographic work. Some examples were provided in our textbook by Schultz. Ethnography is essentially the form of observation, whereby the anthropologist observes the actions, rituals, and customs of a society.

## **Three Changes in Ethnography**

We have now examined and defined what ethnography is and why we use such a method of inquiry when studying other cultures that may differ vastly from our own ways. Early founding anthropologists used specifically observation to study cultures around the world which laid the foundation for learning about human culture, which led to the first change in ethnography. The first change involved not being exclusively objective, rather they became aware of their biases. These early anthropologists knew that there were forms of subjectivity in their works produced and published; therefore, partly tarnished. This first change also involved not being able to be completely invisible. The subjects were aware of the anthropologist studying them from afar (Schultz: 2005).

The second change came from the first change where the subjects were studied as above but the anthropologists also included participation of the subject. They were now aware of the benefits of asking questions in order to compare to the actual actions of the subjects. When we ask the participants, we are including the subjects with the research which is more sophisticated than just learning from a distance. Anthropologists using this method of inquiry became more susceptible to more information that helped them understand the similarities and differences of other cultures among ourselves.

Lastly, the third major change in ethnography was the usage of multiple sites for locations of gathering information. Many anthropologists were unaware of the multiple sites of locations that participants participated in that this information of multiple sites may have been gathered when anthropologists

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asked participants questions of daily living. We have reviewed the three changes in ethnography and we can conclude that there are significant changes that led to the modern day ethnography that is still being perfected as we speak.

## **Similarities and Differences of the Three Changes in Ethnography**

There are several similarities and differences among the changes of ethnography. The similarities are they all require the study of the subjects, they all still gather evidence to support their arguments, and the last similarity is that they all try their best to study the best way possible.

The differences were lightly touched above but to get further in discussion, we can view the differences as ways of improving. One major difference is that the first change and the second change came out of misleading society about other cultures. The ramifications occurred due to the discriminatory practices from the outcome of the anthropologists. Another difference is that the third change became more inclusive than the other previous two changes in ethnography. Both similarities and differences are important to outline to provide a critical overview of the topic of ethnography and its changes to improve the method of inquiry.

## **Impacts of the Three Changes**

There were impacts of the three changes in the study of ethnography, which include having a more sound method of inquiry, more elaborate detailed descriptions of the societies they studied, and there is more sensitivity towards subjects. The method of inquiry, participant observation, was

improved with the three changes by ways of including participants themselves. This allows the researcher/anthropologists to fully engulf their selves into the society they are studying. Previous anthropologists who laid the groundwork for anthropology were Malinowski and Varandeh (Classnotes: 2010). They both developed ethnographical fieldwork to better study the cultures they were interested in. One major impact was the introduction to Reflexivity. When an anthropologist is reflexive, they are more aware of their assumptions and position they are working and imposing on (Classnotes: 2010).

### **An Example of Ethnography that should have utilized the Three Changes**

The anthropologist, Jean Briggs, studied the Utku in northern Canada in efforts to gather ethnographic research (Schultz; 2005). She was inducted into the community however there was a misunderstanding that prevented her from proceeding with her ethnographic study. The Utku were unable to fully communicate with the anthropologist and thus became frustrated with the anthropologists actions and misunderstandings. In short the anthropologist had a very difficult time in gathering valuable information that she ended up seeking help from a local Utku who could help her with the communication process. The anthropologist needed more than just the study of ethnography; Schultz suggests that there should be more work like this (2005). The Utku is a great example of how the anthropologist should have utilized the three changes in ethnography, which are participant observation and multiple sites. The example of the ethnographic study above was provided in this

essay to provide a detailed explanation of how ethnography can still require improvements.

The use of sensitivity is critical to understand others regardless of different cultures or races. The use of sensitivity allows researchers to understand that we are human beings with feelings, responses, and thoughts that the anthropologist would act very suspicious if there were no human effects of doing such research. For example, Briggs, the anthropologist discussed above, was not sensitive to the fact that these people of the north do speak a native language that would never have the same meanings in English. So there should have been some sort of awareness of this prior to going out and doing fieldwork in ethnographic methods of inquiry. Soon there will be educated native people performing ethnographical studies who enter into their own communities speaking their own languages that will make the ethnographic research more viable. These three changes have had a great impact on ethnography.

## **Critical Evaluation of Ethnography**

We have learned that there are three major changes in the way anthropologists conduct ethnographic research and that there must be an understanding from all areas of the research spectrum. Ethnography is the study of other cultures and there were significant changes in the way anthropologists perform observations of the other cultures. These changes benefited mostly the society the anthropologists were studying but the anthropologists also gained a modified form of gathering information. The impacts are important to study as well as the history of the ethnographic study whereby the impacts are also ways to improve the method of inquiry

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of other nations from the perspective of the anthropologist who happens to be subjected to Western ways of life. The perspective of the anthropologist is now a function in the reflexive process. Reflexive is the key to successful ethnographic research as now the research has a foundation to build on.

When the anthropologist includes their view of life and how it differs from the group they are studying, the work that is produced is more truthful. Let me explain so that there is no confusion. This is what we learned in other classes that there is a method called grounded approach. The researcher goes back and forth between the researcher's assumptions and the subjects' evidence in order to compare and modify the results that are being recorded and published. The grounded approach is a sensible way of conducting research by constantly checking and rechecking the data that is developed out of observation. The grounded approach verifies information as it is being recorded, as there is no other way to take apart a culture's complex systems of living. Overall, the ethnographic study of other cultures has many points that the evaluation of the three changes only proves that the study is improving.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the use and benefits of utilizing the study of ethnography to better understand the world we live in and the people who live in this world. There were three major changes that occurred over the course of the period of the development of ethnography, which included participant observation and multiple sites for gathering data. These three changes gave ethnography the substance to continue as a valuable and trustworthy method of inquiry that all anthropologists should be aware of

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these three changes. For a final thought, we should ask the subjects themselves which is the best method to inquire learning about their culture.