Ethnographic Fieldwork

Thomas Bürk, 06/2020

Aim of the method	Basically, ethnography is not only a method but also an epistemology. That means, that the interpretation and analysis of findings in the world of Ethnographic Fieldwork is not to compare or mix or evaluate by the logics of statistical methods or science. This is in a nutshell the meaning of qualitative research vs. quantitative methods. There are many ways to do Ethnographic Fieldwork, but any research procedure has first to define a field, and here especially its actors and im/materialities, social connections and spatialities. "Entering" the field is often discussed as crucial and tricky, but can be toned down by an open and lucid way of describing this phase of the research as well. The main practices in fieldwork are: - observing people - "nosing around" an area/field - talking to people, taking photographs and audio-tapes - sensing localities and events - collecting things, objects, artefacts, - writing down stories and narratives of the experienced and observed
Method suited for	Researchers of all kind, local activists and social interventionists, for example trained in the field of cultural anthropology/Cultural Studies/Gender Studies/Postcolonial Studies
Bibliography	Becker, Howard S. (1998): Tricks of the Trade. How to Think about Your Research while You´re Doing It. University of Chicago Press. Becker, Howard S. (1963): Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance. Simon & Schuster Eyben, Rosalind/Moncrieffe, Joy (2013): The Power of Labelling: How People are Categorized and Why It Matters. Routledge
Themes	Public Spaces, Club Cultures, governing the narcotic self, repression, Spaces of fear, Spaces of pleasure,
What do you need	Resources like time, basically for the research process, meeting people as well for the writing down of the findings, maybe audio technology, cameras and visualizing machinery, respect and sensitivity, bodily presence and critical reflections of colleagues and other actors in the field
Requirements	Ethnographic fieldwork can be the most demanding and exhausting research method in everyday cultural studies as well as in action research and other interventions. It's mostly long lasting and needs time and space to develop the right atmosphere to conduct findings and for reflections on research ethics, data protection, working with others, technics, access to, etc…
Links	oral history

Contents

Ethnographic Fieldwork as contribution to (critical) research on drug consumption, narcotic cultures and the self-governance of intoxication and ecstasy

Ethnographic Fieldwork on the consumption of drugs and narcotics has a long tradition in the classical field of Social and Cultural Anthropology, be it treated as perspectives of shamanism or religious/pagan rituals and practices of male bonding and/or community building. The ethnography of drug consumption therefore covers a wide field of secular and religious practices. The everyday life of drug users seems therefore more the issue of deviant Sociology, Social Psychology and Public Health-Studies. So, there are plenty of fields to do ethnographic based, e.g. self-centered, self-reflexive research on. Most important seems the de-mystification of the consumption of drugs and pharmaceutical substances as a central activity of the modern, self-governing subject in capitalist societies.
There is no preferable output of this research: Historically this used to be narratives, but very often underlined by maps, pictures, and the infamous ethnographic films and many collections of social objects/artifacts/maps/voices/ementoes/minutes/poems/drawings.

Strengths of this research practice	Ethnographic Fieldwork is the best way to bridge the gap between social Discourse and Dispositive/Apparatus by diving into social situations produced by these relationships. That can mean e.g. following as well the his/herstories of science and humanities, depending on the aim and the scope of the research questions and issues, like exploring e.g. the "noble savage" or "the deviant other half of an urban population". Ethnographic fieldwork was and is a highly sensitive, subjective and contested field of knowledge, often misused as mere methodology without regarding the epistemological foundations, which are totally different to empirical data collection or statistical methods of knowledge/truth production. Its best examples are thick descriptions of social interactions, turbulences and actions.
Limits of this research practice	Ethnographic Fieldwork is hardly to combine with scientific methods and findings, at least in the positivist way of knowledge production.

Getting Ready

Steps	First and foremost: Develop a "research question", start reading on the issue and try to define a field of interest, a social space where you believe to get some first information, hints and even answers to your curiosity. Keep the process open like in a snowball process, collecting layer by layer of impressions and experiences. Start writing from the beginning in e.g. a research journal or blog
Ethics	Since the early days of anthropology and its ethnographic fieldworkers, like B. Malinowski and his disenchanting diary journal, there has been a broad field of authors dealing with the same ethical problems of "authenticity" and "who speaks" and about representation in the research process. Look for debates about this topic, read about giving voices to the unheared and subaltern (Spivak), Orientalism (Said) or labbeling/othering people (Eyben/Moncrieffe)
Data Protection	Data protection is core business in the research process, it works fine with anonymous or pseudonyms/*noms de plumes* to protect the sources. The fact and truth checkers will anyway not be convinced by this method!

In Action

Steps	Fieldwork is simple and complicated, at the same time, so just do it: define a field, start observing, collecting, nosing around, writing about it and reflect on the situations and events that happen around that activities. There, for sure might be a hypothesis in your mind, you always have imaginations and stereotypes structuring your first impressions. Even if complicated, keep your mind open, and stay in touch with colleagues and friends to share your insights and confusions.
Ethics	One basic strand of the ethic debate demands to give back something to the people you did research on, to avoid one-way exploitation and simple knowledge extractivism. It's becoming more complicated by defining the ethical demands of the observed, especially if they are not part of an active communication and participate in the making of the results. Which sounds ethical like a brilliant idea, practical its very often, not only because of physical distances and language issues quite difficult. But let's try as good as you can. It's always a failure. That's also a result of ethnographic fieldwork!
Data Protection	See above

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