UNIT 10 : ETHNOGRAPHY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- understand the meaning of ethnography
- explain the importance of ethnography
- identify the purpose behind ethnographic study
- discuss the advantages of taking ethnographic work
- understand the limitations of ethnographic work

10.2 INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is one of the qualitative research methods to study human science. The method was initially adopted in the discipline of Anthropology. Later, it gradually becomes popular in other disciplines of humanity such as sociology, communication study, history etc. Although ethnography is now considered as a separate discipline, it is seen here as a method of doing research in social sciences. We will discuss about this aspect a little later.



Gerhard Friedrich Muller
29 October, 1705- Born
22 October, 1783- Died
1725 – He is invited to co-found the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg
He is considered as 'father of ethnography'

Gerhard Friedrich Muller developed ethnography as a separate discipline. He is regarded as the 'father of ethnography'. As ethnography developed, anthropologists grew more interested in less tangible aspects of culture, such as values, worldview and what Clifford Geertz termed the "ethos" of the culture. In his fieldwork, Geertz used elements of a phenomenological approach. He has traced not merely the doings of people, but the cultural elements themselves. For example, if within a group of people, winking was a communicative gesture, he sought to first determine what kinds of things a wink might mean. Wink might mean several things. Then, he sought to determine in what contexts winks were used, and whether, as one moved about a region, winks remained meaningful in the same way. In this way, 'cultural boundaries' of communication could be explored, as opposed to using 'linguistic boundaries' or notions about residence. Sociology is another major discipline where ethnography has a preponderant presence. Urban Sociology, Clark Atlanta University and the Chicago School are major contributors in this field. Some well known early examples are 'The Philadelphia Negro' by W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Street Corner Society' by William Foote Whyte etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Who is regarded as the founder of discipline of ethnography?

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Q2: Which discipline for the first time adopted ethnographic method?

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'The Philadelphia Negro' is the first case study of African American community and one of the earliest works of sociology as a statistically based social science. From August 1896 to December 1896 he gathered information. He went to house to house and conducted personal interviews with individual head of household. Then he combined it with census data to analyze the social and economic conditions of African Americans in

Philadelphia. In this unit, we shall discuss in details about Ethnographic as a Research Method.

10.3 MEANING OF ETHNOGRAPHY

The word 'Ethnography' is derived from two Greek words- 'ethnos' meaning 'folk, people or nation', and 'grapho' meaning 'to write'. So, Ethnography means writing about the people, their culture and life-worlds. J.W. Creswell in his book 'Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches' has described ethnography as "description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system". He has explained that the ethnographic study looks at people in interaction in ordinary settings and attempts to discern pervasive patterns such as life-cycle, events and cultural themes.

The researcher is called the ethnographer. The ethnographer stays among the people he or she is studying. The ethnographer attempts to live the life-world of the subject population. That's why it is called as 'participant observation'. Whereas in other observation such as short interviews the researcher does not need to stay with the people he is studying; in ethnography it is a must condition. The 'vantage point' here is that of the studied group, not the researcher's own view. Vantage point means the location or the point from which one begins to see the surroundings, thereby making assessment on the basis of that particular point or location. Besides, the duration of the research work is also relatively longer than other research methods. The researcher attempts to understand the meanings and values that the studied areas and its subjects are giving to different phenomenon of their day to day life. Values, meanings etc are not measurable and quantifiable. It's not easy to simplify them either. Therefore, what the researcher does is stay among the people and tries to understand the correct meanings and values. Besides, values and meanings that people attach to different things could not be explained by casual explanations. These have certain inner meanings attached to the symbols used to express those values. Therefore, ethnography follows a reflexive observation of the studied group. Moreover, as it tries to describe the meanings and values, the

approach adopted here is a holistic approach. Its holistic study includes wide areas involving a brief history, ongoing practices and symbols, different demographic aspects etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3 : Fill in the blanks:

a) Ethnography is also called as _.

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b) Ethnography follows a _ observation of the studied group.

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10.4 ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

For a clearer understanding of ethnographic study we can first discuss some of its features. The characteristics are discussed below.

- Explore social phenomenon: Ethnographic study usually undertakes the function of exploring social phenomenon rather than testing some pre-considered hypotheses.
- Primary role of interaction: As ethnography is engaging in interpretation, interaction and verbal expression play a major role than some other methods such as data analysis.
- Extensive field work: Ethnography involves extensive field work. The data is collected through interviews, observations, symbols, artefacts etc.
- Methodological emphasis on reporting of data: The ethnographers focus more on questions about how to report the findings of the field. It's given more importance than statistical methods such as data collection or interpretation.

  Data collection of the life-world is very complex to record. Once recorded it is difficult to arrange the vast data collection. Therefore,

one of the most important things that an ethnographer takes care of is maintaining the records. The ethnographer maintains a diary of his field work. There he writes down the notes he has collected from field work every day. It then becomes easier later to arrange them. In short, along with the field work, the post-field work time of the researcher is one of the important things that the ethnographer takes utmost care.

10.4.1 General Structure of Ethnographic Study

J.W. Creswell has identified the following as constituting the structure of ethnographic study:

- Introduction: Problem and Question
- Research Procedures: ethnography, data collection, analysis, outcomes
- Description of culture
- Analysis of cultural themes
- Interpretation, lesson learned, questions rose.

10.4.2 Ethnographic Study as a Method

The ethnographic method is distinct from other methods of carrying research in social sciences. Some of the observations regarding ethnographic methods are discussed below.

- **Field based method :** As mentioned earlier, ethnographic method is completely field based.
- **Personalized method :** Ethnographic study is conducted by researchers through day to day, face to face contact with the people they are studying. The researchers are thus both participants and observers of the study.
- **Inductive method :** It is conducted in such detail as to accumulate descriptive details to make some general observation. Ethnography renounces deductive methods such as testing hypothesis that is derived from existing theories or models.

- **Holistic method :** The ethnographic study follows holistic method. It attempts to write down holistic account of the studied group or area.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4: What are the characteristics of research study?

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Q5: Fill in the blanks:

(i). Ethnography involves _ field work.

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(ii). Ethnographic study usually undertakes the function of exploring _.

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(iii). Ethnography renounces _ methods

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Q6: Why ethnography is regarded as personalized method?

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10.5 IMPORTANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Many a time, the life-world of a group of people could not be understood unless one participates in that life-world. Without understanding it properly, there is the possibility of hegemonic interpretation of those groups dominated by the researcher's own interpretation rather than the correct meanings. The extensive, participant- observant nature of the researcher enables him to decode the correct meanings of the practices followed by the studied group. Therefore, to interpret the values, meanings etc of a particular group, ethnographic study is a more useful method.

Ethnographic study is also significant as micro analysis. Some time, general or macro analysis and approaches cannot explain what is actually going on in a group of people. Some time, even, it may even give a wrong explanation, thus misleading the readers. In this respect, ethnographic study is important to look at the diversities and varieties, the distinctiveness that could not be explained by macro-studies.

Besides, ethnographic study could avoid the damage of cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism is the process through which a dominant culture exercises power over small cultural groups. It is caused by lack of representation, lack of voice of that small cultural group. Ethnographic study, in this context functions as the voice of the so far unheard groups. By taking note of the small cultural groups, recording their world, ethnographic study is raising the voice of those studied groups.

Moreover, ethnographic study could help in policy formulation. Any public policy formulation requires the adequate knowledge of the group for whom the policies are being formulated. Ethnographic study could provide that knowledge. For instance, while making case for a medical policy, such as immunisation vaccination for a cultural group that believes in some traditional healing practices rather than modern medicinal practices. It would not be useful in this context, to implement the medical policy from the above. The correct understandings of reasons for the traditional healing practices, their efficiency, reasons for suspicion towards modern medical treatments etc could help. An ethnographic account of the discussed social group's healing techniques could make the policy makers more sensitive towards the preferences of the group. The policy makers then could work out some alternative policies that could accommodate their traditional healing practices with scientific efficiency.

10.6 PURPOSE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

The central aim of ethnographic study is to narrow down the gap between outsider's interpretation of social order and the real meanings of life experienced by those under study. Besides, the real meanings are attempted to give a 'voice' through ethnographic work. Hence, it could be

regarded as the 'voice of the unheard'. Moreover, it intends to come up with description of the culture-sharing group by themes or perspectives. Besides, it gives interpretation of culture-sharing group for meanings of social interaction and generalization about human life.

10.7 ADVANTAGES OF ETHNOGRAPHY

There are several advantages of doing ethnographic study. Firstly, the ethnographic work could avoid the possibility of a hegemonic interpretation. Since, the researcher is participant-observant in this research; he is sensitive to the real meanings. Besides, the researcher always tries not to be judgemental about the studied group. His attitude is reflexive. Secondly, it can bring out the miniscule details of the studied group in a coherent way which is not possible through other distant study. Thirdly, in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology which intend to study human society, the structures of different social relation, ethnography is a suitable model. It provides the researcher the lens and tools to look at those structures of interaction, relation etc. Fourthly, it can open up certain experiences during group research that other researches cannot do because of lack of interaction and participation. Fifthly, through an ethnographic work, some notions that are so far taken as granted could be confronted and challenged.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7: Mention two advantages of ethnographic work.

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10.8 LIMITATIONS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

However, there are several limitations of carrying out ethnographic work. The descriptive approach adopted by ethnography is itself subjected

to suspicion because of its lack of generalizability. Ethnography heavily relies on descriptive methods such as story-telling and presentation of critical incidents. This is inevitably selective. Therefore, it is viewed as weakness by those who use scientific methods of hypothesis testing, quantification, replication etc. Let us discuss some other limitations and challenges before ethnography.

Firstly, deep expertise is required for carrying ethnographic work. Ethnographers must possess the knowledge about methods and domain of interest. It takes considerable time and training. Secondly, the researcher's subjective assessment of the studied group is not eliminated totally in it. The researcher has enormous scope to interpret in this study. This scope might be misused by the researcher. Thirdly, the accessibility of the resources is major challenge in ethnographic work. Negotiating access to field site and participants can be time consuming and difficult. For the ethnographer, winning the confidence of the studied group is an essential condition to access the resources. Fourthly, the further intensification of prejudices about the studied group is another direct limitation of this kind of research. Ethnographic studies done during colonial period about the colonial subject is frequently blamed for this kind of intensification of prejudices, and exercise of colonial superiority. Fifthly, as communication observation, there are many ethical issues embedded in all aspects of communication in the field. D.M. Fetterman in the book 'Ethnography: Step by Step" has suggested some guidelines to avoid such ethical issues. These are - doing no harm to people or the community under study, respect for rights of the people, for integrity of the data, and for people's way of life. Sixthly, maintaining the anonymity of the studied group is a difficult challenge before the ethnographer. Lastly yet the most important, the potential risk of harm after publication of the ethnographic work is also there. We have already discussed the importance of anonymity and principle of damage avoidance in Unit Two (2.5 Research Ethics Section) that should be followed to avoid such limitations.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q8: Give a reference of ethnographic work furthering prejudice rather than bringing out the real meaning.

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10.9 LET US SUM UP

- Ethnography is one of the qualitative research methods to study human science.
- Gerhard Friedrich Muller developed ethnography as a separate discipline.
- He is regarded as the 'father of ethnography'.
- The word 'Ethnography' is derived from two Greek words- 'ethnos' meaning 'folk, people or nation', and 'grapho' meaning 'to write'.
- J.W. Creswell described ethnography as "description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system".
- Ethnography is called as 'participant observation' method.
- The 'vantage point' here is the vantage point of the studied group, not of the researcher's own view.
- The characteristic features of ethnographic study are- exploring social phenomenon, primary role of interaction, extensive field work, importance of reporting the data etc.
- Ethnographic study as a method is – field based, personalised, inductive and holistic method.
- To understand the life world of studied groups correctly, to describe micro details, to avoid cultural imperial attitude, to make efficient public policy etc ethnographic study is significant.
- The central aim of ethnographic study is to narrow down the gap between outsider's interpretation of social order and the real meanings of life experienced by those under study.

- There are several advantages of ethnographic study including bringing out the minuscule details, avoiding cultural imperialism etc.
- There are several limitations and challenges of ethnographic research such as requiring high degree of expertise, accessibility of resource, enormous scope of interpretation in the hands of the researcher, possibility of intensification of prejudices, maintaining anonymity and possible harm after publication etc.



10.10 FURTHER READING

1) Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

2) Fetterman, D. M.(1998) . *Ethnography: Step by step*, 2nd edition. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

3) Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardorff, Ines Steinke *ed.* (2004) *A Companion to Qualitative Research,* London, Sage Publication.



10.11 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Gerhard Friedrich Muller

Ans to Q No 2: Anthropology

Ans to Q No 3: a) participant observation; b) reflexive

Ans to Q No 4: The characteristic features of ethnographic study are- exploring social phenomenon, primary role of interaction, extensive field work, importance of reporting the data etc.

Ans to Q No 5: a) extensive fieldwork; b) social phenomenon; c) deductive

Ans to Q No 6: Ethnography is regarded as a personalized method. It is for this reason that this kind of study is conducted by researchers through day to day, face to face contact with the people they are studying. The researchers are thus both participants and observers of the study.

Ans to Q No 7: Two advantages of doing ethnographic study are as below-