Ethnography

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The Motivation

Qualitative method that aims to open up and extend understandings of how human beings live in the world.

Does this by engaging people on their own terms in a relatively undirected way.

A disciplined preoccupation with social imaginaries – with values, ideas and practices that have become thinkable, plausible, self-evident.

A counter-point to metrics
Ethnography …

Relational – knowing through engagement – learning ‘from’ no simply ‘about’.
Requires an ability to unlearn and to not know – methodological ignorance
But empirically motivated – learning from engagement over time
Slow - patience
A navigational skill
A theoretical practice
Ethnography as Theoretical Practice

Non-metric abstraction:
Attempts to clarify how existing ways of thinking (and acting) are reproduced – in relation to specific situations – including how ‘change’ is recognised.

To enquire into the spaces in which people make up their minds – insisting that making up your mind is always a relational process and not the autonomous choice of an individual.

To show that things might be otherwise than had previously been assumed, and to bring new questions to the table.
Historical Origins

Early 20th century - study of human diversity – other ways of being human – critique of modernist assumptions.

Participation – building relations

Minute and systematic observation

Focus on collective practices – ritual, myth, kinship, production and exchange, political structures – and the interconnections between these.

A mode of collection – language, image, artefacts
The Crisis of Representation
The Problem

- Local cultures under threat: modernity/tradition
- Cultures/sub-groups as islands: homogeneous, singular
- Anthropological accounts subjective
- Anthropological accounts collusive
- Culture as difference – primitive, exotic, elsewhere
What is Ethnography?

• What…
• Where…
• Who…
• When…
• How…
• Why…
WHERE?
What is the Local Scale?
Who?
WHEN?
How?

Classical Ethnography
Anthropologist travels to another culture – place, culture, subjects awaiting discovery and description
Thick description
Contemporary Ethnography

Anthropologist as navigator, on a journey, finding her way in a world which is also on the move.

Participation, Learning, Recording, Writing
What kinds of understanding does ethnography offer

It can help to give new perspectives on how problems are approached, how questions are posed …. allows new things / relations to come into play

Allows unauthorised connections to be made …. 

“A nomadic approach in a world of fortified hill towns” - Westbrook
Examples of ethnographic research in Manchester

Anthropology Department in Manchester – huge range of projects from all over the world – all committed to ethnographic methods of the kinds outlined above – all have web presence.

www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/socialanthropology/about/staff/
Things to Read


Blogs

ASA Globalog
Open Anthropology
Savage Minds
Anthropology.net