

# Ethnography

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- What is ethnography?
- Ethnography for development
- Examples

# What is ethnography?

- “particular method or set of methods”
- “involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions”
- “making sense of everyday world”

(Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:1)

# Some more definitions

- Study of social life as it happens
- Researcher participating unobtrusively
- Deep hanging out (Wogan 2004)
- Not artificial, following the flow
- Aim:  
“to understand parts of the world more or less as they are experienced and understood in the everyday lives of people who live them”  
(Crang and Cook 2007)

“Imagine yourself, suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight” (Malinowsky 1928/1961, quoted in Homes and Marcus 2005)

- Exoticism
- Far away places
- Discovering ‘the Other’

# Ethnography: some initial questions

- Is it a method, a set of methods or an output?
- Who can conduct ethnographies?
- The issue of place:
  - Is ethnography only ‘over there’?
  - Does it have to be place bound?
- Different type of ethnographies
  - Comprehensive “thick descriptions”
  - Systematic and problem-solving
- Rapid ethnography – possible?

# Ethnography in development studies

- Scepticism
  - One way process
  - Not participatory
  - Too time intensive (Chambers 1992)
- Support
  - Studying development interventions, institutions, values...
  - Possibility to reconsider initial impressions, analyse relationships between development agencies/agents and development 'recipients' over time (Long 2001; Mosse 2005)

# Ethnography as a research method/ set of methods

- Not a method in itself but a type of research, an approach (Wolcott 1999)
- Research 'tool' (methods) used in ethnography:
  - Casual conversations
  - Life histories
  - Key informant interview
  - Semi-structured interview
  - Structured interview
  - Survey
  - Household census
  - Questionnaire
- Participant observation is the method usually associated with ethnography

# Participant observation

- Participating in everyday activities, joining in...
- Issue: Level of involvement
- Some believe that level of involvement should be minimal (e.g. Malinowski) → fits with naturalistic research
- Others see participation as an advantage and ethnography as political → detachment rejected
  - Feminist research
  - Action research

## The Observer-Participant Spectrum





# An example of ethnographic research

- Philippe Bourgois
- *In Search of Respect* (1995)
- Presents “brutal events, uncensored as I experienced them, or as they were narrated to me, by the perpetrators themselves” (p.12)

“I have tried to build an alternative, critical understanding of the US inner city by organizing my central arguments, and by presenting the lives and conversations of the crack dealers, in a manner that emphasizes the interface between the structural oppression and individual action.” (Bourgois, 1995:12)

“I hope to restore the agency of culture, the autonomy of individuals, and the centrality of gender and the domestic sphere to a political economic understanding of the experience of persistent poverty and marginalization in the urban United States” (Bourgois, 1995:12)

# Bourgois: method

- Moves into East Harlem in 1985 as newlywed
- Interested in the political economy of inner-city street culture and “documenting how [the richest industrialized nation] imposes racial segregation and economic marginalization on so many of its Latino/a and African-American citizens” (Bourgois, 1995:1)

# Bourgois: methodology

- “in order to collect “accurate data”, ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research: we become intimately involved with the people we study” (Bourgois, 1995: 13)
- Witnessing violence, drug use
- Suspending ‘moral judgement’ challenging
- Example p.187
- See also: Next Door But Invisible: The World of Homelessness and Drug Addiction  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT1PjDvL6cs>

# Ethnography: an evaluation

- Strengths

- Face to face discussions, closeness
- Understanding inner circle, local way of life, realities
- Break preconceptions
- Accessible
- Raises awareness
- Detail of social relationships
- Value of knowledge gained
- Low tech
- Understand development more/ outcome
- Process
- Flexible
- Serendipity
- Help formulate hypothesis

- Weaknesses

- Lose objective detachment
- Biased
- Attachment, affection
- One man and his opinion
- Too time consuming
- Limited to one community
- Risky
- Can raise expectations
- Policy link?
- Validity? Snapshot
- Stereotyping

# Ethnography in the development literature

- Move from focusing on “*particular* social processes as practiced by *particular* people in *particular* settings” (Wolcott 1999:253) towards global (Burawoy et al. 2000) and critical ethnography (Hart 2004).
- From people and places to institutions and global interconnections.

# Burawoy (2000) Global Ethnography

- Marxist sociologist
- Ethnohistories combined with ethnographies:
  - External forces
  - Connections between sites
  - Distilled imaginations from daily life
- Explore changes in globalisation
- Challenging methodological nationalism

# Gillian Hart (2004) Critical ethnographies

- Makes the case for *critical ethnography*
- Global ethnography focuses only on the experience rather than the production of globalisation
- Shows how ethnographic studies have contributed to a better analysis of capitalism and neoliberalism
- Ethnographies of the state (e.g. Li 1999; Gupta 2001; Moore 2000)
- Challenging notions of capitalism as monolithic and the economy as being separate from society



“A processual and relational understanding refuses to take as given discrete objects, identities, places and events; instead it attends to *how* they are produced and changed in practice in relation to one another” (Hart 2004: 98)

# Mosse (2004) Is good policy unimplementable?

- Asks: “What if development practice is not driven by policy? What if instead of policy producing practice, practices produce policy, in the sense that actors in development devote their energies to maintaining coherent representations regardless of events?” (p.640)
- Two positions in development:
  - Instrumentalists
  - Critical view
- Ethnography: can examine institutional practices

# Mosse (2004) continued

- “The new ethnography of development is distinctly uncomfortable with monolithic notions of dominance, resistance, hegemonic relations” (p. 645)
- Not whether but HOW development works
- Not whether it is successful but HOW success is produced

# Propositions

1. Policy primarily functions to [...] legitimize rather than orientate practice
2. Development interventions are driven [...] by the existence of organisations and the need to maintain relationships
3. Development projects work to maintain themselves as coherent policy ideas
4. Projects do not fail
5. “Success” or “failure” are policy-oriented judgements that obscure project effects.

# Mosse (2004) conclusions

- Good policy unimplementable
- Policy is the end product, rather than the cause
- Policy not unimportant, but part of the context of action
- Policy followed action
- Everybody involved works to sustain policy model because it's in their interests to do so
- Policy ideas sustained by institutions, actors and beliefs
- Concludes that policy more important than we imagined but managerial view of policy is ignorant of social and political life of their ideas
- Ethnography offers critical reflection

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