

Chapter 2

The Ethnographic Research

Abstract This chapter of the book deals with the nature of ethnographic research and the research tools it employs—ethnographic interviews and participant observation. The chapter focuses on the role of ethnographic researchers, the dimensions that ethnographers must consider in order to get a comprehensive collection of information, and the analysis of findings.

Ethnographic research is a genre of qualitative research, which developed out of anthropological methodology. It investigates societies and cultures by examining human, interpersonal, social and cultural aspects in all their complexity. Ethnography is a research approach that refers both to the process and method according to which research is carried out and its outcomes. This is an approach that combines methodology used for research and data that emerges from it, the analysis of this data and researcher's interpretation thereof (Sabar-Ben Yehoshua 2016; Shlasky and Alpert 2007). A researcher's interpretation will include a summary of the research process, identifying the subjects, carrying out observations and interviews, document analysis, describing research findings and new discoveries learned from the research (Alpert 2016). Ethnography as a product, is predominantly text that presents research to the public and appears as written academic work in the form of a research report, article, monograph, book and the like (Shlasky and Alpert 2007).

Ethnography is used for research in many areas such as medicine, psychology, sociology, information systems, education and more, and it focuses on the natural surroundings of cultural systems such as community, society, groups, systems, organizations and such. This genre enables study of behaviours, norms, beliefs, customs, values, applied human patterns and human phenomena as these are expressed in practice. It enables understanding of life forms and systems of thought and behaviour in different cultures, organizations, and social systems, both cultural and political as reflected in daily conversations and local events. Ethnography provides rich and wide-ranging insights into actual reality, ways of life, social interactions and peoples' perceptions as expressed by the actions and the surroundings in which they live. It enables seeing entire phenomena, understanding

their complexity and significance, and making generalizations on human behaviour in general.

Ethnographic research requires intense and long term investigation in order to collect data and record sequences of events, conversations between people and their relationships. To do this, researchers must be present at events and situations and spend a lot of time in the studied environment in order to learn about what takes place, what is said when and in what circumstances. Once data collection processes are over, an ethnographer undertakes the important work of interpreting and ascribing meaning to all actions, words and events that were examined and data that was collected (Harvey and Myers 1995; Heyl 2001; Karnieli 2008; Mutzafi-Haller 2012; Reeves et al. 2008; Shlasky and Alpert 2007; Van Maanen 2011).

Ethnography in education is a tradition that keeps evolving.

2.1 The Role of the Ethnographic Researchers

In ethnographic research, researchers have a key place. In order to understand the daily life of a studied culture, researchers cannot carry out their research in laboratories or rely on proving assumptions, hypotheses or doctrine. They have to join the natural environment they are investigating, remain there for some time, establish participant observations, interview people who are part of the society, hold formal and informal conversations with them, and document most of that is said and observed (Alpert 2006; Genzuk 2003; Gordon et al. 2001; Shlasky and Alpert 2007).

As a first step, ethnographic researchers must get permission to access a society being studied so as to collect data in the most convenient and appropriate way possible. Researchers who enter the research arena encounter study subjects, their perceptions and understanding of the world, and they must possess social creativity. Researchers who come from a similar world of action and activities, who clearly see what is done and why, in cultures and society different to their own, will have easier access (Trahar 2009). They need to learn in advance about local culture and identify its views, opinions and perceptions in order to enter it smoothly and choose what is appropriate to the purpose of their research. They have to establish close and ongoing relationships with research population and learn from them their thoughts and world views, their place in society and the significance they attribute to their lives and what is going on around them. This task is not likely to be easy, as often research population are afraid of direct and unmediated communication with researchers during a study (Mutzafi-Haller 2012; Reeves et al. 2008).

Studies have shown that research population prefer to establish contacts with researchers who come from similar categories to themselves, and perceive those who resemble them with regard to their social identity as less threatening. Researchers who are perceived as unknown and different are viewed with suspicion by participants. Those who are seen as at least somewhat similar hold similar values and norms and their behaviour is somewhat like their own. As such, researchers'

belonging, their roles and place, are extremely important in ethnographic research (Harrington 2003; Heyl 2001). Researchers' identity, origins and professional background are significant in social processes needed by the research, and researchers who come from similar professions or society are perceived as authoritative and reliable, able to listen, allow expression and better understand the relationships in which they are involved.

During research, researchers must maintain reliable and participatory relationships with research population, and prevent, as much as possible, any opposition or restraint on their part. They must carry out extensive documentation about what occurs and behaviours, a process that sometimes arouses suspicion and makes it more difficult for participants to cooperate. Therefore, their role is to recruit participants who will cooperate with and trust them, and to develop significant dialogue and interpersonal relationships with sensitivity, flexibility and care. Creating a healthy interaction such as this between subjects and researchers is gradual and takes time (Harrington 2003). However, researchers remain on the fence as external observers of events, who do not try to interfere with or influence events or change participants' behaviours. Researchers must choose what they observe and what interests them, according to the aims of their research; to understand phenomena they witness without influencing them at all (Alpert 2006).

As it is difficult to predict events and happenings, researchers must take the unexpected into account, be flexible, patient and consistent in their work, in case data collection is disrupted by local events or social, political or other changes (Reeves et al. 2008).

Ethnographers gather their information using different research tools, such as observations, interviews, structured and informal conversations, document analysis and others (Gordon et al. 2001; Stemler 2001). Data is collected from a number of information sources and in a variety of ways, such as observing processes and interpersonal interactions, listening to what people say and discuss, examining phenomena, texts and customs as they happen, documenting interviews with participants, analysing documents, journal, photographs and certificates and examining objects and accessories (Genzuk 2003; Karnieli 2008; Shlasky and Alpert 2007).

Owing to the vast complexities of natural social life, Reeves et al. (2008) suggested a number of dimensions that ethnographers must consider in order to get a comprehensive collection of information:

Dimension examining where research took place: examination and detailed description of the physical space and place where research was carried out;
 Dimension examining participants/subjects: description of the range of people active in the surrounding and involved in the activities under investigation;
 Dimension examining activities: description and documentation of the activities that transpired during and at location of research;
 Dimension examining objects: detailed descriptions of objects, physical elements found in the research space;
 Dimension examining actions: description of individual actions performed by each and every participant;

Dimension examining occurrences: description of events and activities in which some of the participants are involved;

Dimension examining time: measure frequency and duration of happenings;

Dimension examining aims: description and documentation of aims that participants stated they wished to achieve or reached successfully;

Dimension examining emotions: detailed description of emotions felt by participants as expressed by what they say and do (Reeves et al. 2008).

After research is carried out, the work of ethnographers focuses on developing conclusions emerging from the research and putting together reasons and explanations that led to them. To do this, ethnographers arrange findings according to their point of view and invite readers to see things as they analysed them, and their interpretations will refer to their world views and their credo (Sabar-Ben Yehoshua 2016). In the writing process, researchers present their interpretations through descriptions, summaries, quotes, arguments and theories. Simultaneously to summarizing a research process, researchers will describe what they themselves learned from what they saw taking place, heard from conversations with interviewees or others, and their experiences in the research field (Alpert 2016). Alpert (Ibid.) defined writing a research report as follows: writing moves on a continuum between personal discovery and public argument and is realized through narrative forms that consolidate into general arguments and critical theories.

The two principal ethnographic research tools are interviews and observations.

2.2 Ethnographic Interviews

Interviews are a means of collecting rich and detailed information directly from research population, as presented in their words. The purpose of interviews is to establish basic processes for transmitting information, opinions and perceptions, while giving interviewees time and opportunities to express their opinion fluently and openly and giving interviewers time to ask questions and request clarifications in order to get a broad picture of information, opinions, thoughts and emotions. Interviewees have the opportunity to provide completely honest answers, to explain what they mean and how events and place in their lives and environment, to present their relationships with people around them and provide their interpretations to all these (Heyl 2001; Zanting et al. 2003). They are asked to reconstruct and describe in their words events and social experiences, their opinions, beliefs and feelings.

Ethnographers must be skilled in-depth interviewers, enabling their subjects to recount their experiences, describe their thoughts and feelings. For them, this research tool contributes to expanding information they collect and enable them to get a comprehensive picture as well as broad and rich insights about their subjects, their culture and conduct (Reeves et al. 2008). Interpersonal relationships between interviewer and interviewees are very important to the research process and therefore researchers must be punctilious and respectful listeners (Harrington 2003;

Heyl 2001). They must maintain interviewees' dignity during interviews and encourage them to participate and narrate while maintaining interaction with them.

Sometimes only partial information is revealed in interviews and therefore interviewers must encourage interviewees to impart information. Nevertheless, they must take into account unspoken information and silences that testify to interviewees' deliberations and complexities of their answers. Hesitations, contradictions, indecisions, changes in points of view and subjects that are not spoken about in interviews are a significant part of the information gathered for research (Heyl 2001). The way in which interviewees choose to present their words enables one to understand their identity and the significance that they attribute to their words (Clandinin et al. 2007) while giving voice to personal experiences, to the "I" that operates in a cultural context, to advance interpersonal conversation and appreciate social happenings (Holt 2003; Trahar 2009; Wall 2008).

2.3 Participant Observation

Observations are a further means used by ethnographers to collect data for research. In observations, researchers watch personal happenings in specific contexts, by making themselves suitable to the environment, but not part of it. Participant observation enables provision of explanations, contexts, reasons and reinforcement for assumptions, and as such will take place often during research and at different times.

Researchers who use observations to collect information must be intimate partners, as much as possible, in the lives and activities of participants. They must act skilfully, as an internal observer of everything that happens, see and feels things as part of a group without influencing participants' behaviour. This way, researchers can study the culture of a subject group in depth, and accordingly explain participants' behaviour and events (Genzuk 2003).

Observations enable distinction between behaviours and gestures, examination of interactions and lack of interaction between people, listening to formal and random conversations and their tone and seeing people's movements and extent of their presence (Guest et al. 2013). They take place in natural surroundings and researchers report what they saw, heard and felt from their point of view.

2.4 Analysing Findings in Ethnographic Research

As previously mentioned, ethnography is a research approach and the way in which research is carried out as well as its outcomes often appear as an academic essay combining research steps, analysis and interpretations of findings (Sabar-Ben Yehoshua 2016; Shlasky and Alpert 2007).

Ethnography as a means of research enables in-depth observation of human, social and organizational aspects arising from collated findings. It enables detailed analysis not only of these qualities, but processes as well (Genzuck 2003; Harvey and Myers 1995). Once the process of data collection is complete, researchers analyse their findings, making every effort to reach a comprehensive understanding of the world under investigation and provide scientific interpretation to collated findings (Karnieli 2008). Researchers provide elucidation for behaviours and events by detailing their significance as they understand them. In ethnographic research, it is not possible to encode information during the research or decide in advance how to categorize information (Genzuck 2003; Reeves et al. 2008). Structure emerges while analysing data and identifying findings as they emerge from the research.

At the stage of data analysis and reaching conclusions, researchers should pay attention to their experiences, thoughts and emotions and understand that they do affect their interpretations, conclusions and research outcomes (Shlasky and Alpert 2007). They are confronted with a wealth of findings, piles of texts, documents and records and they have to identify connecting strands that will enable them to construct significance and interpretations, a process that demands emotion and intellectual abilities (Harvey and Myers 1995; Reeves et al. 2008).

When analysing data, researchers must consider a great many different components that emerge, distinguish between events in different contexts, and identify the similarities and disparities between them. Using a number of research tools contributes to a broad understanding of studied phenomena and possible contradiction between participants' actions and what they say about or explain these actions. Relating to many findings enables development and identification of significant broad and generic conclusions and insights. Identifying themes and their categories within these findings surface key subjects and enable provision of theoretical explanations, identification of phenomena and arriving at generic conclusions, which are likely to be significant for the studied body of knowledge (Reeves et al. 2008).

This way of analysing findings is based on researchers' perceptions and how they observe matters from the outside and how they interpret them. This approach, known in the world of ethnography as the *etic* approach, allows researchers to clarify and interpret matters as they understand them from the point of view of a person outside the research field. Researchers' interpretations are based on research, scientific and universal aspects and serve as theoretical models to illustrate, explain and provide insights (Harris 1976; Shkedi 2003; Shlasky and Alpert 2007).

In analysing findings and providing interpretations, researchers emphasize their internal world, their world views, points of view and insights of people who operated within the research field, and present them as part of their research's output. This approach, known in the world of ethnography as the *emic* approach presents people's subjective points of view and their self-perceptions and as such enables an understanding of matters as they themselves see and understand them. This approach enables exposure of how people interpret and relate to their culture, their beliefs, their behaviours, their lives, events that take place and their relationships with others.

Work on the final product of research, the researcher will connect emic issues arising from subjective perspectives and etic issues arising from external perspectives, so as to consolidate them into one research whole (Harris 1976; Olive 2014; Shkedi 2003).

In summary, the characteristics of ethnographic research enable its presentation as a diagnostic, as a microcosm of knowledge on a subject, and turn this knowledge into generic and recursive knowledge. Collecting information on real situations that took place in complex realities of social, cultural and political cultures as they are, makes it possible to reach conclusions, construct a developing body of knowledge and contribute directly to existing practical knowledge (Harvey and Myers 1995). Ethnography presents an opportunity to conduct meticulous research directed at the relevance of practice, which makes it an appropriate tool to link between scientific and practical knowledge, and to enable them to exist cooperatively:

This makes the ethnographic approach a worthy contender for bridging the gap between scholarly knowledge and practical knowledge, thus allowing for scholarship and practice to develop in collaborative coexistence (Harvey and Myers 1995, p. 24).

Analysing the unique experiences of a veteran teacher educator was carried out with the intention of deriving important insights from her personal experiences that would benefit her colleagues, both in teacher education and the accumulated body of research knowledge in this profession. Research characterized analysis of experiences produce conclusions that both other teacher educators and the system of teacher education can use, and as such the research, which is a type of socio-cultural academic experience, becomes generic knowledge that everyone can use.

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