Chapter 4

Ethnographic Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Ethnography is a research methodology that aims to describe and understand social groups and their culture. During the process of describing such a group, insights and explanations regarding the perceptions of the members of the group of themselves, their co-members, their social views, their group and individual values, and their behaviours may, or even should, occur. Ethnography is a systematic study about people and their culture from an insight perspective (as evolved primarily in the twentieth century). Ethnography is study by prolonged field experience, with the researcher immersed in the daily life of the observed.

In order to collect the data, the researcher acts as a participant observer, making observations, talking to members of the group, collecting documents, and collecting group artefacts which may shed light on the processes to be studied and to be understood. For an example of the methodology involved, see Dana (1995, p. 58), who describes, in a study about entrepreneurship in a remote sub-arctic community, his method of working: “Methodology involved the researcher taking temporary residence in the community under study, in order to observe and record interactions and to conduct extensive open-ended interviews with business owners, employees, and key informants. Substantial information was obtained only after a personal, trusting relationship was established. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions to capture what people..."
had to say in their own words, about how and why they got involved in their own business and what their entrepreneurship or small business experiences meant to them. Interviews lasted between two and five hours”. As another example, Wagstaff et al. (2012) employed ethnographic techniques such as observation, field notes and reflexive diary, and interviews and informal communication.

The analysis constitutes of a largely unstructured process of trying to think of and reflect on possible reasons why the group under study, and its members, hold the specific views, beliefs, perceptions, and understandings, and exhibit certain behaviours that were observed. In this way explanations, which may be of a cultural nature, are probed, reformulated and refined in order to derive meaning from the data. Where explanatory patterns occur, these patterns may be formulated as theoretical notions, and presented ultimately as formal theories. An example of an ethnographic study may be found in Dana and Anderson (2007), who studied an indigenous community holding on to Promethean values.

4.2 Definition and Use

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 1) indicate that the roots of ethnography may be found in nineteenth century Anthropology; research was based on the accounts of travellers and missionaries visiting non-Western societies and cultures. Later on, “tribes” and communities, such as villages and towns, were studied in an effort to “document and interpret their distinct way of life, and the beliefs and values integral to it”. Thus, human social life and culture were studied in various different ways. A core definition of ethnography, according to the authors (p. 3), includes the following features: people are studied in everyday contexts, data may be primarily collected by participant observation (taking field notes) and talks with the group members (without a pre-defined structure), only a few cases may be studied, and the analysis of the data is carried out through interpretations of meanings and consequences of human behaviour on the (local) living context. As a result, descriptions, explanations, and theories are produced.
Cresswell (2014, p. 496) lists the main characteristics of an ethnographic study as studying cultural themes on a culture-sharing group. This group shows shared patterns of behaviour, belief, and language. In order to acquire the data, the researcher engages in fieldwork. The analysis involves descriptions, themes, and interpretation. During the process of analysis, the researcher considers context or setting while carrying out reflective processes.

A range of paradigms of ethnography exists nowadays. Sanday (1979, p. 537) presents a typology of paradigms when he says: “Obviously, the ethnographic paradigm in anthropology is internally differentiated. The main differences are whether the primary focus is on the whole, the meaning, or the behaviour and the degree to which the analytic goal is diagnosis or explanation. Which mode one adopts in one’s own work is a matter of taste and not of dogma.” He then goes on to explain each of these three foci:

- A focus on the whole implies that (Sanday, 1979, p. 532) the key concepts here are process, maintenance, survival, adaptation, change, imbedded in, and integral part of. Such concepts convey the image of a dynamic system straining towards maintenance and equilibrium. Each part of the system has its function, no part can be studied without considering its relation to other parts, and each new part that is added to the system must find its accepted fit. This image of social behaviour as a dynamic system is one which most social scientists share.

- A focus on the meaning is explained by Sanday (1979, p. 533) by referring to a quote from Mead (1959, p. 38), “The basis for the semiotic approach can be traced to Boas’ notion that the main task of the anthropologist was ‘the adoption of an informant’s mode of thought while retaining full use of his own critical faculties.’”

- A focus on the behaviour means (according to Sanday, 1979, p. 536) entering the domain of behaviourism. Behaviourism in anthropological ethnography involves the formulation of deductive propositions. The ethnographic portion of such studies is not meant to uncover meaning or to diagnose the whole. Rather,
its purpose is to provide observational data on pre-selected functionally relevant categories.

Furthermore, the author notices that ‘ethnoscience’ as a related research approach, has developed over time, as compared to ‘thick description’. In his words: "In recent years the semiotic approach has produced the highly specialised field of ‘ethnoscience’ on the one hand and ‘thick description’ on the other. These two prongs of the semiotic approach, guided by different epistemologies, have produced the usual exchange of prickly remarks”.

Geertz (1973, pp. 5–6), in this context, believes that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”. He continues (pp. 5–6) to state that culture is to be viewed as one of those webs and the analysis of culture to be "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning". For Geertz, anthropological analysis requires thick description, that is, wading through the clusters upon clusters of symbols by which man confers significance upon his own experience.

By contrast, Creswell (2014, p. 492) presents 10 types of ethnographies:

- **Realist ethnography**: An objective, scientifically written ethnography.
- **Confessional ethnography**: A report of the ethnographer’s fieldwork experience.
- **Life history**: A study of one individual situated within the cultural context of his or her life.
- **Auto ethnography**: A reflective self-examination by an individual set within his or her cultural context.
- **Micro ethnography**: A study focused on a specific aspect of a cultural group and setting.
- **Ethnographic case study**: A case analysis of a person, event, activity, or process set within a cultural perspective.
- **Critical ethnography**: A study of the shared patterns of a marginalised group with the aim of advocacy about issues of power and authority.
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- **Feminist ethnography:** A study of women and the cultural practices that serve to disempower and oppress them.
- **Postmodern ethnography:** An ethnography written to challenge the problems in our society that have emerged from a modern emphasis on progress and marginalising individuals.
- **Ethnographic novels:** A fictional work focused on cultural aspects of a group.

In spite of this diversity, it is still possible to denote the common elements of ethnography. Originating in anthropology, the purpose of ethnography is to describe the cultural characteristics of a group and to describe cultural scenes. The researcher is the research instrument, not limited to survey or interview. The key of ethnography is for the researcher to become immersed in the everyday life of the observed. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Denzin (1978) emphasised the role of ethnography in developing and testing theory. An appropriate data collection method in ethnographic studies is (participant) observation.

Describing the cultural characteristics of a group, and its (sub) culture, extends to the business domain as well. A specific example within this domain is the study of informal ethnic and ethnographic entrepreneurship. Ramadani et al. (2019, p. 2) define ethnic entrepreneurship as “a process of identifying opportunities in the market, undertaking innovative, unsafe, and dangerous activities by individuals who are not members of the majority population in a given country, to ensure prosperity for themselves, family and whole society”. And, “The informal economy provides individuals with business opportunities regardless of immigration status or educational qualifications and this is especially important to entrepreneurs”. The book focuses on issues such as the evolution and activities of ethnic entrepreneurship and informal business activity, and innovation and creativity as processes that occur in this domain. A content analysis of the methodologies, sampling techniques, data collection approaches, and analysis approaches, as used in this book, demonstrates that the ethnographic approach, next to other qualitative approaches, may be utilised fruitfully in this type of research.
We will conclude this review of ethnographic varieties with a comparatively new member of the ethnographic approach family. It is called *Netnography*. Here, empathic, non-obtrusive observations in existing online communities (forums and social media) are carried out. Specifically, in the areas of marketing and customer research there is a focus on listening to the “voice of customer”, spotting new trends and opportunities, building emotional bonds with customers, gaining unbiased consumer insights, and creating user groups’ typologies. While this approach is less obtrusive, studies adopting this approach may be costly and time consuming when compared to, e.g., interviews. Issues to be addressed here are: who is engaged on such forums? Bots? Super fans? In sum, sample issues are to be solved. And, as always, the researcher’s interpretive skills need to be available to be used for the analysis.

### 4.3 Advantages and Disadvantages

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 9), a major advantage of the ethnographic research approach is that of being part of the “natural setting”. External validity may be high because of this method of working. Also, learning and appreciating the culture of the group, both from within and at an external angle, produces both inside and external knowledge.

The authors (p. 7) continue by saying: In contrast, criticisms from Positivism have been voiced. That is, data, interpretation and findings are subjective, they are mere “idiosyncratic impressions of one or two cases”; the qualitative approach — called Naturalism by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) — emphasises that specific behaviours of an individual cannot be caught in general or universal laws, and therefore questions positivist approaches to unravel general and universal laws of causality, and its determinants. Instead (p. 7), “human actions are based upon, or infused by, social or cultural meanings”. However (p. 9), some form of theories may have the structure and contents that allow for explanatory power of “capturing social complexity”. In this context, Tavory and Timmermans (2013) state that causality in ethnography may be based on multiple “activities”, that is, embracing
a mechanism-based approach to causality by tracing iterations of meaning-making-in-action, while examining forms of observed variation to distinguish regularly occurring causal sequences and temporally and spatially remote causal processes. Finally, they suggest that the plausibility of claimed causality, including assessments of explanatory fit, must be presented to a disciplinary community of inquiry. Thus, causality can never be claimed in absolute, universal, and timeless dimensions.

Summarising, advantages include getting in-depth insights you wouldn’t be able to gather otherwise, the researcher himself functions as research instrument, data collection occurs in a natural setting, and the ability exists to verify what people say. Disadvantages include the notion that you might need to “get your hands dirty”, the data collection is often unstructured, and these types of studies are often time consuming and expensive. Commitment and social skills are needed by the researcher, only limited generalisation is possible, and past papers can be considered racists in the present because of changed social views and values.

A final word about the noble art of interpretation, as creating adequate, rich, and insightful interpretations is a major prerequisite for a successful study in terms of academic adequacy and societal impact. Van Maanen (1979, p. 549) sketches the interpretation problem when stating: This normative discussion raises a final concern because it suggests that the expressed aim of ethnography, “to depict”, in Goodenough’s (1964, p. 14) terms, “the system for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting” is a shockingly broad and preposterous one. Culture is itself an interpretation and therefore most of the facts one goes into the field to discover are themselves already known and interpreted in a particular light by the people one talks to in the setting. The results of ethnographic study are thus mediated several times over — first, by the fieldworker’s own standards of relevance as to what is and what is not worthy of observation; second, by the historically situated questions that are put to the people in the setting; third, by the self-reflection demanded of an informant; and fourth, by the intentional and unintentional ways the produced data are misleading. Though most ethnographers are
well aware of this irreducible dilemma, they still maintain the stance that if they spend some more time in the field to dig a little deeper and probe a little further, certain crucial facts will be revealed which will tie up loose ends and provide closure to a study in danger of infinite expansion. Ultimately, this is an illusion although, I hasten to add, it is an altogether necessary one. The world, according again to Sherlock Holmes, is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance will ever see.

4.4 Best Practices

For an overview of the steps to take in carrying out an ethnographic study we will present the suggestions given by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), occasionally interspersed by other sources of relevance. The following steps will be presented and clarified: formulating research questions, creating the sample design, providing access to the data, collecting the data, and analysis of the data, in that order. Finally, we will present some general criteria for judging the quality of an ethnographic study.

**Formulating research questions:** This may imply (p. 24) a narrative description of a sequence of events, a generalised account of the perspectives and practices of a particular group of people, or a more abstract theoretical formulation. A researcher may choose between a topical and a generic research problem. During the research process the research questions may be adapted in either direction.

**Creating the sample design:** Generally speaking, sampling strategies have to be developed and may have to be updated several times during the research process.

    Furthermore, and in particular, both settings and cases have to be chosen. A setting is a named context in which phenomena occur to be studied. Settings have to be both suitable and feasible for carrying the study. This choice may have an influence on the formulation of the research questions. Cases may be available both inside and outside the chosen setting. The selection of “typical” cases for the context of the study may enhance its generalisability. Also, the
principle of “snowballing” may be applied, where a current subject suggests the next subject. Typically, a sample consists of one to a few subjects.

Sampling within cases is carried out along three dimensions (p. 35): time, people, and context.

- **Time** refers to the choice of which episodes of the process to study are to be selected.
- **People** refers to choosing subjects based on specific combinations of characteristics and features as decided by the researcher (observer-identified categories), or on labels used by the population under study in their natural habitat (member-identified categories).
- **Context** refers to the various settings in which the process under study occurs. Obviously, a choice must be made here that ultimately allows collecting the most relevant data for the study, and as a consequence finding the most adequate and rich answers to the research questions.

**Providing access to the data:** It is important to take in advance all of the steps to be allowed to enter the settings where the process to be studied is taking place. Permission may be both a formal and an informal matter. In both cases, the parties in command and with the necessary power have to be addressed. Both sacred and taboo settings may be present. Obviously, this is true for the overt participant observer; but even covert participant observers have to take care that their covert observations are not problematic, overt behaviour. Finally, the overt participant observer has to define and negotiate his role in such a way that the other parties involved in the setting agree on this role. Personal characteristics of the researcher, including the gender characteristic, may either open up the research settings, or may create problems with those who are part of the setting.

**Collecting the data:** Dynamic data may vary from (solicited or unsolicited) tales the subjects tell, to observations made by the researcher, and to informal and planned interviews. The researcher is to determine where and when to interview. It is up to the researcher to
determine the value and use of each of these types of information. The researcher engages in reflexive interviewing, that is, on the one hand the phrasing and order of the questions may vary, and on the other hand, often a list of issues to be covered is present. The interview process usually takes the form of a conversation, allowing for non-directive questions.

Morgan (1997) suggests that, as part of the ethnographic research process it may be desirable to carry out focus groups. Focus groups may be employed in order to acquire an initial understanding of topics and interactions of the population to study. These insights may subsequently suggest avenues to design the ethnographic research design. Also, Kuhn and Koschel (2018) indicate that focus groups may be fruitfully combined with ethnographic research as the former may yield specific additional information about the subjects which may be utilised to improve the observation process as carried out in a next step of the research process.

Furthermore, when multiple sites are available for the ethnographic study focus groups may aid as to make an informed choice of the sites for the main ethnographic study. In the same vein, the researcher may use focus groups in order to decide on a subsequent, theoretical sample to study ethnographically.

Data may be of various sorts, as follows:

- **Static data** refer to documents and material artefacts.
- **Documents** of three kinds may be available: informal, formal, official. Informal documents may include diaries and letters, formal documents may include published biographical and autobiographical sources. Finally, official documents are publicly available documents such as rule books, and instructional and regulating publications.
- **Material artefacts** may cover material goods such as products used or manufactured at the setting, and objects such as technical equipment.

The data for this type of research may also include audio and video recordings, and data retracted from the Internet. Dana and Dana (2008) provide insight into the use of pictures in an
An ethnographic study on entrepreneurship in Morocco. Another example: Dana (2011) carried out a study about entrepreneurship in Bolivia. To that end, he studied ethnographic literature, carried out field interviews, and also presented photography of the Pueblo Indians and their culture. Finally, data may be collected from “digital spaces” (p. 137) such as virtual communities.

**Analysis of the data:** The analysis of the — unstructured — data of a study is of a process-like nature. This process is initiated at the start of the study and continues until the phase of report-writing. In the early phases of a study, the elaboration of the research problem already may influence data analysis and the approach to be taken. In that sense, the procedure resembles the workings of grounded theorising as carried out in the Grounded Theory approach. Furthermore, there is no general recipe, there are only guiding principles. In what follows, we will discuss each of these guiding principles:

- Ideas and data are considered in an iterative process, that is: there is (p. 157) “a constant interplay between data and ideas, throughout the research process”. For that reason, moments of reflection on the process of collecting data and the way they are analysed should be made available by the researcher.
- A funnel structure is developed where over time research questions may be amended or transformed, and scope and structure of the study may be further specified or even changed.
- Starting with the description of events and processes, next steps may involve clarification and hypothesis testing. Also, typologies may be developed, and analytic categories created.
- Initial (analytical) concepts have to be looked for in the data or are constructed by the researcher. Next, relationships have to be defined between concepts. Following, and at a more general level, patterns are to be found which make sense with regard to the research questions and the broad issue to be studied. Ultimately, by developing a fabric of these patterns, an understanding of the processes under study may be unclosed that shares the characteristics of a theory.
• The analysis may follow the actions, and social actions, of those observed while attempting to analyse the reasons for these actions. The reasons take the form of (situated) “meanings” involved. The basic premise is that (p. 168), “people construct their social worlds through engagement in concerted social activities”. In this way, also cultures and subcultures may come into being.

• Actions may take the form of routine behaviour. In addition, rituals and ritual behaviour may be studied as specific forms of behaviour, and their antecedents. Finally, deviant behaviour and unexpected behaviour are of importance here, as they may give rise to crises.

• Acts may also be studied in conjunction with informal rules or norms that guide these acts. In this sense, decisions that guide these acts may be studied. Finally, “spoken actions” may be analysed. That is, the analysis of talk implies that (p. 170) “social actors do things with words”.

• Typologies may be developed from the data, for instance the various different ways a member of a community under study may respond to a crisis that presents itself to this community member. It is important to define the underlying dimensions of such a typology, and its subcategories, as the availability of these dimensions makes it possible to evaluate or criticise the validity of the proposed typology structure.

• During the analysis, the researcher has to be aware of the fact that receiving information from those observed always occurs within a social context. It matters what authority the observant is imputed by the subject. Moreover, this subject may decide to be honest or not. When recognising the social context, however, this information may still be valuable.

• Also, the temporal elements of the data are relevant for the analysis. On the one hand, this involves temporal processes, that is, things that happen as time goes by. On the other hand, the phase a subject is in with respect to a maturity process may be of importance. For instance, a group member may start as a novice
in his eyes, or the eyes of the comembers of a tribe, or a company, while trying to reach maturity. His current position in this temporal framework, and his idiosyncratically constructed memories about the past may have explanatory power as such.

- Subjects, as information carriers, occupy a certain place in the social order of the group. As a consequence, they have certain knowledge that is based on this position. Furthermore, they have a reference framework, or perspective, that is also connected to their place in the social order of the group. While carrying out analyses the researcher has to take this into account.

The analyst may or may not decide to present draft outcomes of his analysis to the subjects involved in the study. On the one hand, this may create additional insights as they may provide new information through their feedback. On the other hand, the feedback may be biased. A researcher deciding to ask feedback should be aware of this.

The design of the study may include various forms of triangulation. In effect, this means that data from different sources are collected and compared in the analysis. In this context, we may distinguish between data source triangulation, observer triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and method triangulation. Most commonly, data source triangulation is available as the researcher routinely collects data from various sources such observation, documents, narratives, interviews, etc. The challenge here is to meaningfully relate research outcomes from these diverse sources while realising that parts of the differences of the outcomes must be attributed to the inherently differential characteristics of these sources. If successful, the study may benefit from elevated levels of validity.

The research report is a textual report. Obviously, the report presents the research outcomes and their interpretations, while moving from descriptive outcomes to outcomes and their meanings at the explanatory levels. Also, the researcher presents his reflexions on these outcomes and their meanings. At the onset of the writing process, the researcher chooses (p. 193) a “style of ethnographic
writing” that both fits the type of outcomes to report and the academic audience to which the study is addressed.

At the end of this expose, the question may be raised as to how the “quality” of the reported study may be determined. While no clear-cut criteria are available that are supported by all of the members of the academic community of ethnographic researchers a number of criteria merits attention and consideration. Patton (2002, p. 544) presents general criteria “for judging the quality and credibility” of ethnographic studies and they include both traditional scientific research criteria and social construction and constructivist criteria, among others.

**Traditional scientific criteria** refer to the following:

- Objectivity of the inquirer (attempts to minimise bias);
- Validity of the data;
- Systematic rigor of fieldwork procedures;
- Triangulation (consistency of findings across methods and data sources);
- Reliability of codings and pattern analyses;
- Correspondence of findings to reality;
- Generalisability (external validity);
- Strength of evidence supporting causal hypotheses; and
- Contributions to theory.

**Social construction and constructivist criteria** refer to the following:

- Subjectivity acknowledged (discusses and takes into account biases);
- Trustworthiness;
- Authenticity;
- Triangulation (capturing and respecting multiple perspectives);
- Reflexivity;
- Praxis;
- Particularity (doing justice to the integrity of unique cases);
- Enhanced and deepened understanding, i.e., *Verstehen*; and
- Contributions to dialogue.
Obviously, the overview as presented above holds the characteristics and has the status of an objectified consideration set; it is not a formalized, logical, comprehensive, and exhaustive list of rules and criteria. Specifically, the rules and praxes are not objective, in the sense that every researcher would interpret these criteria exactly in the same way. Nonetheless, this broad set of criteria may be quite useful as such when carrying out an ethnographic study aimed at high levels of academic “quality”.

4.5 Sample Study

In order to demonstrate how an ethnographic study may be carried out an overview of Dana’s (2007) study is provided, and the excellent ethnographic characteristics of this study are highlighted.

Issue and relevance
The Amish form an enterprising community with their own way of living, educational process, and commercial activities, while refraining from assistance from the outside world and refraining from government help. It is of social and academic importance to acquire both knowledge and insights regarding the origin, and current existence and activities of this subculture.

Research goal
The purpose of this study is to add to the understanding of humility-based economic development and entrepreneurship among the Amish — a religious group — in the USA, whose culture values asceticism, frugality, thrift and work, as well as humility.

Research design
A classical ethnographic study based on the immersion of the researcher in the community under study in order to develop “inside” knowledge and understanding.

Sample design
The population to study was the Amish community; the sample consisted of a few Amish families and individuals.
Data collection
Data were collected using participant observation and interviews as the primary tools.

Data analysis
Data were analysed through a process of meaning-making as based on the stenographic notes of the interviews and the field notes made both by the researcher and an assistant. Thus, triangulation was carried out.

Report
A text report describing and explaining the observations and interview outcomes, thus offering meaning as to the experience world of the subjects and their behaviour. Citations were included to offer more insights to the reader.

Excellent ethnographic characteristics of the study
For an ethnographic study to be excellent a number of conditions have to be met. These include the following: the research problem has to be clear and relevant; the research design must be functional for the research purpose; data collection must be to the point and exhaustive; data analysis must involve the culture of the members of the community while providing novel and deep insights into the social world of the community. That is, above all, interpreting meaning processes as these provide an explanation of the mental processes and the behaviours of community members. All of this is the case in this study.

This is a classical ethnographic study. The research objective was clearly formulated, as based on the extensive literature.

The researcher was able to live with an Amish family for a prolonged time in order to make observations and do the chores at the farm as a truly participant observer. He devised a strategy to get acquainted with Mennonite individuals who were befriended with Amish individuals and requested the former to introduce him to the latter individuals — his target group. The Amish speak a specific form of German; however, the researcher spoke the language fluently.
Difficulties such as not being allowed to take pictures or make sound recordings were overcome by using stenography during the interviews. An assistant took field notes and assisted in checking the accuracy of the data collected. Triangulation was used for verification. The researcher focused on belief and symbolism, which are part of the subculture of the Amish, their humility expressed as simplicity, while maintaining their social fabric of brotherhood.

The analysis is a mix of description and meaning-making. Systematically, all aspects of Amish life are presented and explained in terms of the beliefs and values of their religiously inspired subculture. In that way, the reader is presented with the ways the Amish define and live in ways that are meaningful for them. Both views on life and consecutive behaviours are treated this way. Furthermore, an effort is made to tie causal factors to the empirical phenomenon where the Amish continue to exhibit a propensity for entrepreneurial behaviour within their community and in the form of self-employment or to work amongst themselves.

The report is written in such a way that the reader easily picks up life, life conditions, and entrepreneurial behaviour of the Amish. Thus, clear insights are offered into the fascinating world of this community.