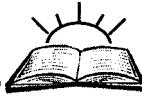


Unit 24

Field Research – I

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Learning Objectives

It is expected that after reading Unit 24, you will be able to

- ❖ Trace the history of field research
- ❖ Discuss the meaning of the term “ethnography”
- ❖ Select theme of the research and design its plan
- ❖ Learn the ways to enter the field and find those willing to and capable of giving information
- ❖ Practice the art of observation as a participant.

24.1 Introduction

In this unit, we are concerned with the subject of field research and how it is carried out. Research carried out through fieldwork has a specific connotation in the social sciences. By fieldwork is meant interacting with people in their natural habitats, observing them and collecting socially relevant facts about their lives over a lengthy period of time.

This notion of fieldwork should be distinguished from the work of journalists, who also go to the field (in situ) to collect information and prepare news reports. Fieldwork is also different from the work that market organisations carry out, sending their investigators to collect data on the responses of users (and prospective buyers) of particular products or brands. By comparison to this, fieldwork is an intensive data collection on a given subject over a prolonged period of time by staying with the members of a community (may be a village, urban slum, or an association etc.).

24.2 History of Field Research

The classical meaning of fieldwork has been derived from the work of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922a). He laid the foundation of the method of participant observation for anthropological fieldwork. Prior to the early 1900s, most ethnographic information was collected by what Malinowski

called the amateurs (missionaries, colonial administrators, and travellers) and survey work of sorts had been carried out measuring skulls and describing physical traits (O'Reilly 2005: 7).

Malinowski maintained that an ethnographer[®] needed to carry out fieldwork for not less than one year in a given community by staying there, learning their language and recording the behaviour of people. In this context, the notion of fieldwork meant going “out there”, or, in the words of John Beattie (1964), to study the “other culture”. Within the Western tradition, an anthropologist was required to take up the study of another society, the ways of which were unfamiliar to her or him, observing, describing, and analysing it in the form of a monograph[®]. This was primarily a response to the fact that small-scale, tribal cultures were fast disappearing and their cultures, customs and practices were urgently required to be recorded. Fieldwork thus emerged as a “scientific method” for collecting primary information from people.

The importance of fieldwork was also realised in the early twentieth century when sociologists at Chicago University started working through what was then called the “case study method”. This method also necessitated the collection of extensive case studies from smaller communities, like urban slums within large cities like Chicago and New York. Through this method, the sociologists posed a major challenge to the then influential “scientific statistical method”. The Chicago sociologists not only studied face-to-face interactions in everyday settings, they also produced narratives of the social world, thus yielding the method of life history and the use of documents, such as diaries and letters. The mention of British and American traditions of field research does not imply that there are no other important traditions with their own styles of generating data from the field. For example, the German tradition of field research includes the collection of museum specimens along with other information and uses the field material to build regional hypotheses. The French tradition is much influenced by Durkheimian sociology, while the Dutch tradition focuses on the academic training of administrators in anthropology, language and literature. Madge (1963), Easthope (1974) and Wax (1971) have discussed the development of field methods in sociology.

Malinowski's (1922) emphasis on understanding the “native point of view” through intensive fieldwork required that the anthropologist collected data on the *imponderabilia*[®] of actual life and of typical behaviour, i.e., every aspect of culture in order to have a full understanding of how a culture was organised and how it functioned. In addition to Malinowski, Franz Boas (1920) also popularised fieldwork as an important part of the training of anthropologists. Boas's influence was tremendous as he insisted on the collection of data from “primitive societies”, not only in terms of their social and cultural aspects, but also physical, linguistic, psychological and geographical dimensions. Therefore, from the early twentieth century, fieldwork became an essential aspect

of social research, and every researcher of the social world was expected to be initiated into it.

The focus on studying a single community through the use of participant observation came to be characterised as ethnographic work. The term “ethnography” owes its importance to the notion of observation and description of social behaviour in a single community. In India most anthropologists focused on the village for intensive study. For instance, Srinivas’s (1976) study of Rampura is a good example of field based research work.

Over time, the definition and character of fieldwork has undergone tremendous change keeping in line with the changing socio-political context and the theoretical advances in the field. The idea of field has moved away from studying another culture to studying one’s own culture, from a very small-scale unit to a larger social unit. Though the notion of “going to the field” is still popular among social scientists, it does not evoke the image of a bounded community. Today, we find social scientists not only studying villages, castes, tribes, but also co-operatives, NGOs, cinema, markets, the homeless, children and even literature. Social scientists today carry out multi-sited field research, producing monographs that are sensitive to contesting perspectives on reality (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

24.3 Ethnography

The word ‘ethnography’ is used to refer to ‘empirical accounts of the culture and social organisation of particular human populations’ (Ellen 1984: 7). Ethnography is, on the other hand, understood as a way of doing research, which studies people according to certain procedures and rules in their natural settings or fields to capture the social meanings of their everyday life. This indicates the intensive, field-based and qualitative research of human groups through “participant observation”. Ethnography may also refer to an academic discipline that involves the comparative study of ethnic groups. Often a distinction is made between micro and macro ethnography (sometimes referred to as general ethnography). See Box 24.1 on differences between macro and micro ethnography.

Box 24.1 Differences between Macro and Micro Ethnography

Macro ethnography attempts to describe the entire way of life of a group in contrast to micro ethnography that focuses on particular aspects at particular points in the larger setting, group or institution. Typically these points are selected as they represent in some manner salient elements in the lives of participants and in turn, in the life of the larger group.

A second fundamental difference between the two is that the former analytically focuses more upon the face-to-face interactions of the members of the group or institution under investigation. Despite these differences they both share the overarching concern for everyday community life from the perspectives of participants (Berg 2001: 136). Often both complement each other.

O'Reilly (2005: 3) recommends a minimum definition of ethnography in the following words.

It is an iterative-inductive research[®] that evolves through the study. It draws on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives. The field worker watches what happens, listens to what is said, asks questions, and produces a richly written account. This accounts the irreducibility of human experience, acknowledging the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role. Ethnography views humans as part-object and part-subject.

Despite the existence of a plural methodological position on the representation of the field and its analysis, the methods of fieldwork have not changed much. In other words there are certain standard methods and techniques of carrying out fieldwork. Many researchers recommend maintaining a value-neutral position, neither imposing their own views nor taking any stand on social or political issues. However, a number of social researchers have argued against this façade of value neutrality. Feminists have worked out a research orientation comfortable to both the researcher and the subjects (see Box 24.4). The researchers listen more and talk less. The orientation has humanised the research process, insisting that the researchers become both involved with their subjects and be reflexive about their thoughts.

Box 24.2 Accessing Domains of Feminist Discourse

Ursula Sharma (1981: 37) says,

In many areas male and female experiences do not diverge and there is no specifically male/ female model.

But also a little further she contends

So it is not just sensitivity to the presence of women, which is required of the ethnographer, but also sensitivity to the difference between different kinds of situations, and the correspondingly different ideas and experiences which will be expressed within them.

Shirley Ardener (1984) adds to the above and notes

This accords with the stress, which has been laid on the significance of identifying the relevant universe or domain of discourse for an understanding of "muting".

24.4 Theme Selection

Although there is a lot of flexibility in the ethnographic process, unlike the survey, field research still needs to be planned, co-ordinated and systematised. Prior to visiting the field, the researcher carefully prepares a research design, outlining the issues involved, such as the theme of the research, the questions to be asked, data collection techniques to be used, the use of triangulation, the techniques of data analysis and the ethical practices to be taken care of.

The popular notion in the social sciences has been that field research should not be preceded by well-formulated hypotheses, as the field itself

was expected to throw up questions. The anthropologists were expected to start their fieldwork *tabula rasa*[®], like a blank slate, for s/he did not want to be ensnared by any prejudices, stereotypes and preferences. However, the newer understanding suggests that the research design is critical for ethnographers as it guides the plan of the project. This design is made to allow flexibility and impromptu decision-making in the field, i.e., it permits unanticipated changes in the plan as the problem arises.

A piece of research is seldom undertaken with a neutral reason. The selection of a research topic typically derives from some researcher-oriented position. Furthermore, all wo/men are the products of social groups, where values, moral attitudes and beliefs orient people in a particular manner.

The use of personal biography or deep familiarity with a subject has become more common and accepted by ethnographers. Maintaining the façade of neutrality prevents a researcher from ever examining her/ his own cultural assumptions or personal experiences, while subjective disclosures by researchers allows the reader to better understand why a research area has been selected, how it was studied, and by whom. For example, if a nurse studies cancer patients and explains that her/ his selection of this topic resulted after one of his family members contracted the disease, this does not diminish the quality of the research. It does, however, offer a keener insight about who is doing the research and why. It will provide the reader with a greater understanding about why certain types of questions were investigated, while others were not. Today many researchers choose to work on problems relating to development issues, gender, environment and human rights, which reflect instrumental concerns in terms of the availability of funds and job possibilities.

Presenting subjective disclosures or giving voice to the researcher provides insights into the world of research. Everyday realities are heavily influenced by human feelings and presentation of these feelings is legitimate.

Besides the personal or theoretical interest in the topic, the feasibility of field research should also be considered. For instance, in north-eastern states of India, field research may not be easy owing to insurgency. Similarly, in some districts of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, it may be difficult to carry out fieldwork because of the rise of the Naxalite movement.

Reflection and Action 24.1

Read chapter 7 on Ethnography and Product by Gerald D. Berreman (2004: 157-190) in V. K. Srivastava's edited book, *Methodology and Fieldwork*. Write a short note on "Ethnographers' Craft" and on the basis of your reading and note, make a tentative selection of a theme of your research. Give reasons for selecting the theme and explain both its theoretical and practical aspects in about 500 words.

24.5 Designing Research

Brewer (2000: 58) discusses the general plan for ethnographic research design outlining the major features of the topic, including the aims and objectives of research (see Box 24.2).

Box 24.3 General Plan for Ethnographic Research Design

- ❖ The choice of research site/field and the forms of sampling employed to select the field and the informants.
- ❖ The resources available for research including money and time.
- ❖ The sampling of time and events to be experienced in the field, i.e., what events the ethnographer wants to cover and a general sense of time management.
- ❖ Methods/techniques of data collection to be used in the field.
- ❖ Entering the field through whom, how negotiating rapport and trust.
- ❖ Nature of likely adoption of roles, depending on one's age, gender, status and class.
- ❖ Forms of analysis to be used specially for both quantitative and qualitative details.
- ❖ Withdrawal from the field and the forms of dissemination that will be used to report the results.

Ethnographic research is not a particular method of data collection, but a style of research, that is, distinguished by its objectives, which are to understand the meanings and activities of people in a given field (or setting) and an approach which involves close association with, often participation in, this setting (Brewer 2000: 59). Field researchers, to begin with a general notion of the problems or issues that interest them, have a sense for the settings that will be relevant for examining these problems or issues. Some formulate tentative hypotheses, while research questions are rarely pre-formulated in great detail. Research questions and theoretical issues emerge as the setting is explored. Thus, field setting must be designated and access to the setting obtained. There arises the question of gaining entry into the research setting. The decision has to be made whether to enter the field openly as researchers or to conduct research covertly without revealing the actual purpose of being in the setting. The ethics of covert research are continually debated among field researchers (Denzin 1970 and 1978). Access to research settings also relate to issues of “reactive” effects, i.e. researchers' presence leading to changes in the settings.

This form of social research uses several methods of data collection such as participant observation, in depth interviewing, the use of personal documents and discourse analysis. Since this research combines many methods, it employs triangulation, a term coined by Denzin (1970). Researchers must decide on the roles they will occupy in the setting - complete observer, observer as participants, participant as observer, or complete participant. Data collection involves carefully watching, listening and recording the details of everyday activity in the setting under study. Further, the process would involve translating these observations into systematically organised data.

NGOs and development agencies have popularised a variant of fieldwork, which owes much to the classical notion of studying people in their natural setting and taking the people's point of view. Their fieldwork practices, however, differ considerably in methodology as well as in strategies. Fieldwork carried out by NGO workers often is project-driven, to be completed in a short span of time. They, therefore, have devised short cut, quick data collection techniques, ignoring the nuanced detailed meanings of ordinary activities of people. Here the concern is more with data collection of a special kind and its description. This kind of exercise has been termed by various concepts like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), etc. We will return to a discussion of these techniques later in the unit. An important point which needs to be noted here is that these strategies are shaped and suited for certain specific goals and not driven in search of knowledge as ethnography aims at.

24.6 Gaining Entry in the Field

The researcher has to enter the field carefully. Entering the field is often dependent on factors like the nature of the field and the social background of the researcher. In earlier days, anthropologists/ sociologists (as white men and women) entered tribal colonies as masters, administrators, missionaries or travellers. In developing countries like India the field researcher is often a middle class urban educated person. Race, caste, ethnicity, age and gender are other important factors in determining the course of successful entry into the field. Leela Dube (1975) describes how in three different phases of fieldwork in her career, gender, marital status, age and social status were crucial in making a rapport[®] with the respondents.

Mistakes in entry may endanger a fieldworker's success. Proper entry facilitates rapport. Important persons located at entry points to the field are called "gatekeepers"[®]. To gain entry one has to make use of formal and informal contacts. Previous acquaintances and introductory letters from research institutions or sponsoring agencies are helpful in gaining entry. The reputation of sponsors and support of gatekeepers helps in establishing authenticity. On the other hand, the researcher must keep in mind that one's behaviour affects one's reputation. Entering the field by not seeking permission from gatekeepers can cause problems for researchers. Also as a researcher enters a field through gatekeepers, s/he leaves it after informing them.

In studying the whole community, the most open points of entry are among those who share one's social class background. But not all contacts at a given level are of equal value. At an early stage, the researcher tries to identify those in leadership positions in the hope that they will provide useful contacts and even informal sponsorship. After gaining the

acceptance of some key people, the researcher then attempts to participate in ways that establish an acceptable personal identity, making it possible to move beyond the limits of the initial sponsorship.

In the early stages of the project, when the researcher is still consolidating a social base, it is not advisable to formalise one's methodology. When one is successful in establishing a social base one can get information without even asking questions. The first contact with potential participants needs to set the right tone by taking away fears, inspiring the potential participants with trust and making them interested in taking part in the research project. If one establishes contact through one's kith and kin, it is easier to get accepted. However, to associate oneself with a particular family might restrict one's freedom of movement.

The first thing people do is to locate the researcher in a particular position. The place where one is located must be acceptable to those who want to be studied. For example, one cannot identify with high caste or low caste only. One has to divide equally to have a comprehensive study of the situation. But at the same time it is impossible to claim to know everyone on an equal footing. One makes a good impression on people and wins their acceptance when one is honest and truthful about one's family background when local people enquire about it. A researcher takes on the role of a friendly stranger in the field. On entering the field, one ought to feel at ease and make others feel at home. The first day in the field is important as the researcher tells the people about her/ himself and what brings her/ him in their midst. Great care is taken not to evoke apprehensions in the people's minds. A researcher establishes contact with individuals in the field and starts becoming familiar with them. S/he has to avoid taking sides, causing offence to anybody, or interfering with their way of life. A researcher is neither a revolutionary nor a missionary. S/he observes them without trying to reform or convert them and participates with a view to observing, experiencing, and analysing a life different from her/ his life.

In order to perform one's role well a researcher has to establish good rapport with the people one is studying. To establish rapport one may reside with the subjects and familiarise oneself with the surroundings. It is essential to establish one's bonafides and reputation as a good person. A researcher's acceptance as such would facilitate unguarded natural responses. For gaining insights, the observer develops empathy with her/ his subjects. Empathy is the ability to put oneself in the other's position and imaginatively experience their thoughts and actions. A researcher is not indiscreet, does not carry tales from one person to another and does not let her/ his subject(s) feel threatened. Without competing with them for status and interacting with them wherever and whenever available, a researcher is not in a hurry and works out personal equations with some persons and through them with others. For this purpose one has to develop skills in establishing contact with the people. A researcher enjoys meeting people and talking to them and

does not feel irritated or annoyed with them. Handling situations tactfully and gathering information without becoming controversial in the field, a researcher does not accept all their statements at face value and corroborates the same with others, checks them up, and draws one's own conclusions.

Even though a researcher establishes close relations with those who are friendly, too much of familiarity and intimacy is avoided since that impedes objectivity. A researcher is aware of one's own limits and withdraws from relations before they become embarrassing. Initially concentrating on one or two key informants a researcher gradually approaches others. A few people may wish to keep themselves away from the researcher while s/he may also have to keep his distance from some in order to establish rapport with others. Those who are reticent initially may not be so later.

24.7 Key Informants

Not all contacts are of equal value. At an early stage, the researcher tries to identify those in leadership positions in the hope that they will provide useful contacts and even informal sponsorship. To handle initial relationships, one locates a guide or a key informant. Guides are indigenous persons found among the group and in the setting to be studied. They need to be convinced that the ethnographers are the ones they claim to be and that the study is worthwhile. The worth of the study must be understood and be meaningful to the guides and their group. The key informant must be convinced that no harm will befall them or other members of the group as a result of the researcher's presence. The guide (or key respondent) can reassure others in the community that the researchers are safe to have around.

One is advised not to take the leader of the organisation or community as the key informant, for the leader may be misinformed or not aware of certain things happening among the commoners. Sometimes persons who are willing to be guides or informants turn out to be restricted to their groups. Some may dissent from the group or may be disliked by others; the field workers are advised not to choose such persons to be their guides or key informants. Ideally, the chosen guides or key informants should be well trusted and liked by others in the group. Consequently the "snowballing" of guides and informants may assist ethnographers in their manoeuvrability while in the field. Snowballing refers to using people whom the original informant introduces as persons who can also vouch for the legitimacy and safety of the researcher. The larger the ethnographers' network of reliable guides and informants, the greater their access and ability to gain further co-operation. Eventually, the need for specific guides decreases as the network of respondents grows in size and the researchers are able to begin casual acquaintanceship by virtue of their generally accepted presence on the scene.

Reflection and Action 24.2

Continuing with the theme you selected in Reflection and Action 24.1, after reading sections 24.5 to 24.7, prepare a research design based on the theme of your research and decide how you would like to gain an entry in the field and approach the people there with a view to identifying key informants. Write a short note and include the following details in it.

*Design of my research

*How I will gain an entry in the field

*How I will identify key informants

24. 8 Participant Observation

Everyday seeing has to be distinguished from observation; the latter being more focused with a purpose and is done to understand the phenomena. Social research gives a special place to observation as it is considered to be one of the fundamental tools to study people's behaviour, exemplified very well in its origin in classical British social anthropology and Chicago School in sociology. Positivist tradition places a good deal of importance in this method of data collection as it is assumed that social behaviour is observable and amenable to sensory perception. (The other method through which researchers collect data is interview.)

Observation allows the researcher to understand people and their behaviour through direct focused non-verbal observing in their natural settings, whereas in an interview the focus moves to verbal communication. Observation is used as one of the primary techniques of data collection in sociological fieldwork, which can be both intrusive, i.e., as a participant (see Box 24.3), and non-intrusive, i.e., as a non-participant. Those researchers whose subject of enquiry does not necessarily involve mixing up with people employ the non-participant type of observation. For instance, a researcher can observe student-teacher interaction over a period of time without interfering in this type of interaction. The prerequisite of such an observation is working with an observation schedule where a list of topics is mentioned guiding the researcher to specifically observe certain types of behaviour. Non-participant observation has been found to be more useful in complex social situations. Another term, quasi-participant observation, is also used in literature to imply partial situational participation of the observer in the social life of people.

Box 24.4 Participant Observation

Participant observation entails data gathering through participation in the daily life of informants in their natural settings. A social researcher watches, observes and talks to people in order to understand their interpretations, social meanings and activities. The classical notion behind such practices is to discover the gap between what people think, do and say. The researcher adds to this the dimension of her/ his personal experiences of sharing the everyday life of those under study.

required the researcher to detach oneself from the people and interpret their behaviour. Today, however, subjectivist positions, of which Clifford Geertz is the pioneer, maintain that the main instrument of data collection in participant observation is the researcher (see Burgess 1982: 45). Malinowski saw observation as separated from description, while Geertz insisted on interpretative understanding as the link between observation and description. Malinowski, representing the positivist tradition emphasised the need to have a detached view of things and of the social life of natives, whereas for Geertz (1973a, 1988), the ethnographic exercise is an exercise in "thick description" trying to interpret meanings in terms of what people understand, think about and how they describe their behaviour. Here the understanding is essentially intersubjective as the observer is immersed in the social life and participates in actual terms.

The ethnographer is required to develop certain special personal qualities to maintain a balance between the insider and the outsider. Burgess (1982: 45) identifies other "personal abilities" to be able to share in the lives and activities of other people, to learn their language and meanings, to remember action and speech, to interact with the range of individuals in different social situations.

Brewer (2000: 60) writes that there are two ways in which the social sciences use participant observation to understand the world as it is seen by acting within it, and to reveal the taken for granted common sense nature of that everyday world itself. The former is the traditional usage in the social sciences, where social groups or specific fields are studied from inside. However, the development in the 1960s of ethnomethodology in sociology and some new forms of interactionism led to an interest in the common sense methods and procedures by which routine activities are accomplished. Such researchers are among many things studying the organisation of conversation decision making in an organisational setting, even walking and sleeping.

In some cases the participant observes those fields of which s/he is already a part. The requirements and problems of using participant observation as a method are very different from those for whom the settings are unfamiliar as in the traditional case. Sometimes an existent role is utilised to explore the dimensions of a new setting/ field in which the role naturally locates the observer. A good example is Cohen and Taylor's (1978) use of their role as part-time teachers to study prisoners and prison life. The strategy of observation in most roles can be covert or overt and the researcher needs to have special skills in order to be successful. In new roles, for instance, the observer has to win the confidence of people, resocialise into the practices and values of the group and spend a long time in the field to have a full experience of the activities and events. If the role is covert, the observer should be dedicated, tenacious and maintain the pretence of an insider. Depending

upon the field situation, the researcher often has to make a decision about the nature of participation required. Situations condition whether or not to participate, and to what extent. In such contexts, researchers, instead of getting totally absorbed in the field situation, choose to selectively participate. Such actions have been construed as quasi-participation in social science fieldwork. Participant observation involves not only observation but the researcher uses triangulation, i.e. using a number of techniques like observation, genealogies, interviews, questionnaires, schedules, life histories, case studies, oral histories, and today even participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) to collect both primary and secondary sources from the field. Although relying more on qualitative research, quantitative details are also used to substantiate arguments and construct case studies.

Participant observation therefore is an arduous and tough process of data gathering and cannot be replaced by smash and grab ethnographies. At the heart of this method is involvement and detachment. On the positive side, the access to social meaning, shared beliefs and values and nuances of everyday activity that one gets through this method, is difficult to get through any other technique. The scope and limits of participant observation are however constrained by the physical limits of the role and location of the researchers. Since this method is most useful in a micro setting the generalisations arrived at reflect a partial picture. The reflexive researchers recognise the value of their views as significant specially in articulating the linkages between the micro and the macro.

Reflection and Action 24.3

Read section 24.8 of the Unit and play the role of participant observer for a period of one month only at your Study Centre in order to generate information on the level of interaction between IGNOU students and the Centre. Based on your experience as a participant observer, write an essay of five hundred words on "the art of participant observation". Exchange your essay with the essays of other MSO 002 learners at your Study Centre and discuss each other's experience of participant observation as a means of gathering information for understanding the social reality around you.

24.9 Conclusion

Unit 24 has introduced you to the vast theme of field research, which is the mainstay of generating new information about the social world that sociologists and anthropologists try to understand and explain. It has traced, in brief the history of field research and discussed the subject of ethnography. Further, it has elaborated on the issues of selecting the research theme, designing the research plan and gaining entry to the field. Talking about the main sources of deriving information in the field, Unit 24 has explained what it is to be a participant observer and subsequent use of this experience at the time of analysing one's field data.

This detailed introduction to field research has paved the way for a discussion of field research methods in Unit 25 to which we will now turn.

Further Reading

Ellen, R. F. 1984. *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct*. Academic Press: London (chapters 3 and 4, pp.13-62)

Srivastava, V. K. 2004. *Methodology and Fieldwork*. Oxford University Press: Oxford (Introduction pp.1-50 and pp. 149-156)

