

Ethnography

A presentation for Qualitative Methods

2014-02-26

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Outline

- First, I will discuss what scholars of political science mean by ethnography - including in relation to interpretivism and participant observation
- Second, I will discuss the objectives of ethnographic methods and some of the ways in which they have been applied
- Third, I will discuss some of the tensions between ethnographic approaches and some of those we have examined so far

Outline for Michael

- Michael will be focusing on how ethnography can help us understand collective action by uncovering the experiences and world views that shape individual behaviour

1) What is ethnography?

- The term originates in English from 1834, and initially referred to what we now call anthropology - literally 'folk' or 'nation' and 'writing', from Greek
- Kubik: Seems generally understood to have emerged into political science from social and cultural anthropology
- Wedeen argues that by the 1980s, anthropology had essentially abandoned the idea of an objective observer (76)
- Relies on interpretative accounts of the social world
- Essentially a methodological and theoretical perspective in which political questions are studied through direct personal observation

'Political' ethnography

- In the conclusion to his edited volume, Schatz identifies why ethnography - unlike, for instance, statistics - can be meaningfully divided into a political sub-category
- Rather than seeking a holistic understanding of a group or society, political ethnographers focus specifically on the exercise of power
- This is a theme that arises throughout the literature - including in terms of how the power structures within polities being observed affect how ethnographers are treated and what within those societies is accessible to them
- Ethnographers may have an especially broad view of what qualifies as political (Schatz conclusion)

Interpretivism

- AKA 'antipositivism'
- A perspective that rejects the view that the methods of the natural sciences are generally applicable in the social and political realm
- Focuses instead on phenomena like the meaning of social actions, including from the perspective of participants
- Interpretivists seek meaning within a culture that is understood as constructed
- This may be especially useful in a world that "cannot be rationalized and homogenized" and where identity politics are pervasive

4 characteristics of interpretivists (Wedeen)

1. Accept knowledge as historically situated and dependent on power relations
 2. See the world as socially made - constructivist view
 3. Reject rational / economic accounts of individual behaviour
 4. Focused on language
- “The ethnographer cannot know the whole story” (86)

Participant observation

- Perhaps the most apparent inheritance from cultural anthropology into political ethnography
- An approach that uses “proximity and intimacy” as routes to knowledge
- Kubik: “a disciplined immersion in the social life of a given group of people” (30)
- Anecdotally, many researchers describe how fruitless research efforts suddenly became productive when they were able to make a human connection with their subjects
- Involves many challenges: the scale at which political phenomena operate may not make for a feasible research project, research subjects may not be willing to share honestly, access is on a ‘sliding scale’, a high level of linguistic and cultural familiarity may be required

More on participant observation

- Wedeen argues that it is possible to observe how people get constituted through their political activities
- ‘Participation’ means that the ethnographer is affected by these activities as well and can “produce rigorous knowledge in part *because* she participates” (89)
- Pachirat makes an important point about one limit to the practice - the observer always has the option to leave, which limits the degree of their immersion and the degree of their common experience with their research subjects (158)

Writing on ethnography

- There seems to be quite a split linguistically between ethnographic work that takes the general form of field reports and theoretical analyses of the field
- In the former category, there are pieces like the Zirakzadeh and Wood chapters from the Schatz volume, which are accessible and have an autobiographical tone
- The introduction and Kubik chapter are more of the second type, with difficult terminology, constant use of metaphors, and frequent use of foreign terms
- The Pachirat chapter comes closest to combining both - incorporating both highly autobiographical 'field note'-style portions with dense theoretical analysis

2) What is ethnography good for?

- The Wedeen chapter in the Schatz volume suggests some possibilities:
 - An alternative approach for evaluating causal claims arising from other methodologies - ethnographers can be field researchers who go out and evaluate their plausibility
 - Ethnographers can focus on the types of questions best suited to their methods - for instance, questions about group experiences or motivations in specific historical circumstances
 - The practice of ethnography can be turned on the discipline of political science itself: as Heider 1988 identifies “a positivist search for truth versus error may be less fruitful than a constructionist examination of the research itself

What are some ways in which ethnographic techniques are applied?

- Numerous examples in the Schatz text:
 - Zirakzadeh trying to study the motivation of ETA associates in the Basque region of Spain
 - Pachirat examining the political ethnography of an American slaughterhouse
 - “People relying on a politically and economically disenfranchised minority to carry out a repetitive labour of violence on their behalf” (195)
 - Wood’s research in militarily contested areas of El Salvador
 - Walsh examining the micro-level processes of opinion formation

More benefits from ethnographic approaches

- Offer the possibility of allowing those who have been traditionally silenced to be heard
- Allows for the interrogation of power structures, including between the researcher and their research subject
- Allina-Pisano: practitioners may be able to assess the impact of their presence on the outcomes they observe (57) such as speech that is “a performance for a foreigner” (69)
- Ethnographic approaches may help counter the tendency to base conclusions on whatever data is most available (61)
- Approaches like KKV deliberately excluded many theoretical and normative concerns from the realm of political science - ethnography may help bring some back in (79)

3) Tensions between ethnographic and other approaches

- For one thing, ethnographers may well disagree among themselves (Heider 1988),
 - A similar example can be seen among anthropologists in strongly conflicting accounts of the Yanomamo tribes of the Amazon (Napoleon Chagnon's infamous initial investigation, and subsequent work)
- Since ethnographers tend toward constructivism, they may be more open to see themselves as involved in an intersubjective process of meaning creation
- As Heider identifies, disagreement may emerge most readily and have the most significance in 'realms of culture' which are 'problematical and interesting' - for example, war, religion, and sex

Internal disagreements continued

- Ethnographers may disagree for a range of factual reasons: someone misinterpreted data, people studied different cultures or subcultures, or the same subculture at different times
- In these circumstances, with complete information, all parties would presumably move closer to agreement
- There are also areas of more profound disagreement: ethnographers come from different cultures and value systems, and may deeply disagree about the nature of the social world
- They may have additional personal characteristics that influence their observations - language ability, capacity to build trust, etc

Ethnography and positivistic social science

- Ethnographers and other political scientists may disagree on a range of important matters: what sort of truths can be uncovered by political scientists, what sort of evidence ought to be used to support those truths, and whether those truths are universal or particular to those who identify with them
- From a positivist impression, ethnography may be the mere collection of anecdote - lacking the critical distance and sample sizes necessary for meaningful generalization
- From an ethnographic perspective, large-n and supposedly objective studies may be sterile and divorced from their objects of study

Politics within academia

- Several ethnographic accounts discuss the internal politics of academia
- Dimensions include the relative preference for different kinds of research topics and findings, which affect the strategic decision-making of researchers - especially junior researchers seeking work
- In a best case scenario - as discussed by Zirakzadeh - successful ethnographic work may help undermine pre-packaged narratives that serve the interests and biases of their potential audience, rather than reflect the circumstances on the ground

Views on participation

- These differing perspectives can be summarized and clarified in terms of their attitudes toward participation
 - From a positivistic perspective that aspires to scientific objectivity, participation is corrupting, makes meaning more obscure, and is to be avoided
 - From an ethnographic perspective, participation can often be the only way to get the data you're after, and can be essential to justify explanations

Questions raised

- How do the methods and ‘sensibilities’ associated with ethnography mesh with the desire to be ‘social scientists’?
- Can we most effectively integrate ethnography as a way of checking generalizations derived from other methods against directly observed reality - or does it raise more profound questions about how knowledge works in relation to the social world?

- Is something as non-specific as a 'sensitivity' valid as a field of study or method of investigation? When he sought to understand the American Dream through rampant drug use, was Hunter S. Thompson practicing ethnography?
- If explanations for political phenomena are justified in incommensurable ways, is all political science essentially storytelling?