

An Ethnographic Approach to Education: What Are You Doing in This Village?

Betül Yanık
Mehmet Afşar Primary School, Kahramanmaraş, Turkey

Abstract

This study describes the ethnographic approach used in educational research, as seen through the eyes of an ethnographer. This work is the product of research that investigates the transition of young children to pre-school, within the cultural processes of their everyday lives. The article describes the village setting and the processes in which I engaged in my role as participant observer for seven months, as well as the difficulties I encountered, and the strategies I developed. The practical experience I gained in the research provided me an important foundation for my ethnographic research methods. As a result, the products of this study emphasize that the ethnographic method doesn't necessarily relate to fixed rules; instead it usually occurs in three basic steps. These are: initial, activation, and acceptance. The content of these three phases was determined by the sociocultural structure of the society in which I became a participant. In this study, the decisive role of the community's cultural structure in the research method and techniques is discussed in the framework of the three basic stages.

Keywords: Qualitative Research; Ethnographic Approach; Education

1. Introduction

The ethnographic approach, one of the most common methods of social sciences, focuses on a specific lifestyle. It is seen as a way to explain and define the perspective of a society or an individual of the group (Neuman, 2007). Malinowski (2005) defines ethnography as: comprehending the perspective and living approach of native people and reflecting the way they perceive their world. Reflecting the native person's perspective is possible when ethnography is included in the culture being studied. Ethnographers have established various methods and techniques to become a part of the culture they study. The methods used are crucial in obtaining the desired data for researches. Thus, the majority of ethnographic studies are focused on methods and techniques (McNiff, 2013; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). While the ethnographic method is used in such studies, there are points to take into account, problems that can be encountered, and research examples on these issues (Woods, 2005). The practical benefits and suggestions that these sources offer to researchers who apply the ethnographic method are indisputable. In other words, the notes and experiences of ethnographers are a guide for researchers. In this respect, the research examples that people applying the ethnographic method offer, will play a key role in the increase in diversity and the development in research techniques.

In this study, I discuss the ethnographic experiences and practical knowledge I obtained through my research. I mentioned about the dynamic structure of the methods and techniques I used in my study, based on understanding the school transition experience of pre-school students with regards to the cultural process. I tried to demonstrate how my pre-planned strategies were transformed, along with culture, during the research. During this process, I didn't strive to set a criterion about what and how the appropriate and effective method should be. Rather, I stated that my ethnographic study consists of a three-stage natural process namely initial, activation and acceptance, and offered examples that show how the content of these stages shape the cultural structure of the society. Thus, I believe that this cultural study will contribute to expanding methodological diversity. I guide ethnography method users by conveying my personal experiences and the practical knowledge I acquired during the research to the readers.

2. Method

This work is the product of research that investigates the transition of young children to pre-school within the cultural processes of their everyday lives. How such children interpret the objects, events and behaviors within their village culture constituted the basis of the study.

In this study, I discussed the ethnographic approach, which I consider an effective research model in understanding cultures. The content of the article consists of the data that resulted from my researcher position (ethnographer) while I was applying the ethnographic approach. These data were obtained from my researcher diary and visual documents that I used as research techniques. The researcher diary enabled me to systematically note my village experiences, some difficulties I encountered in the field, and the strategies I developed to deal with these difficulties, during four days every week for seven months. In addition, photographs I was in, and which I took, during the research helped me preserve details that I overlooked. After the data collection finished, all the data were transcribed and went under the coding process. After the free coding, the codes were grouped in order to set the categories. This process was repeated many times while collecting the data and the findings were examined with regards to the data.

3. The Village I Participated in and Its People

The village, in which I was a participant-observer for seven months, is set between two stream beds at the base of a mountain in Turkey. In the flood disaster of 1971, many people in this village died, and many survivors endured great economic losses. The government built new houses one kilometer away for those whose houses were destroyed or damaged, and enabled the sufferers to settle there after the flood. This new settlement area was referred to as the New Village among local people. Thus, the flood disaster led to the separation of the village as Old and New.

For this study I decided to focus on the Old Village. My connection, and the reason I preferred it in this study, started in the New Village where I had worked as a teacher for eight years. There, in the New Village, I heard many negative comments about the Old Village, including claims that it is not a good place to live. Some parents of my students even called the Old Village “backward,” increasing my curiosity about it. Second-hand information I confronted during those eight years increased my interest and desire to understand the Old Village. This helped me determine the area of research and make a connection with the region.

For many years the Old Village had no road connections to other villages. Only one five-kilometer road connected the village to the nearest city, which villagers had to use to visit the city, any time of the year. A small school and a cemetery are at the entrance of the village. Some houses are low in the valley, the rest are on the mountain slope. The typical single-floor unpainted houses have a garden. There is a mosque for worship in the center of the village, a small store near it, and behind it a carpet course building for women to attend.

The villagers used to make their living on breeding cattle. However, deforesting of the land around the village and a water shortage led to a decline in this way of living. People continued stockbreeding and fishing only for their own needs. Today, income is supplied by the males working in factories in the city. Females are responsible for house chores and taking care of the children.

Traditionally, males dominated female-male relationships. Males don't give permission for their wives to work and earn money, and they don't find it appropriate for their wives to go to the city by themselves and without permission. The villagers also deem it inappropriate for females to roam around in the village too much. A woman who roams in the village and goes to the store too frequently is condemned and considered indecent by everyone. Thus, females, and especially the teenage girls, go outside only to visit their neighbors or to deal with an issue.

4. Results

Ethnographic research does not have a fixed and tested technical method. Rather, it involves a dynamic method that changes according to the context. In this section, I attempt to set out the dynamic structure of the ethnographic method under three groups. I discuss these groups under three titles, namely initial, activation, and acceptance. In the initial section, I note how I entered in the village life and how the plans I made later changed in the village culture. In the activation section, I describe my initial interactions with the villagers, my strategies for introducing myself and the methods I followed in adapting to the village culture. Finally in the acceptance section, I consider the process of how the villagers no longer considered me as a stranger and accepted me as a member.

4.1. Initial

My initial purpose during the research process was to introduce myself and explain to the villagers why I was there. However, I needed to make a plan about where and how to start introducing myself in a village I've never been to and wasn't familiar with. It was difficult introducing myself to a village with over two thousand population. In addition, I had to do something for the villagers to gain their trust. These thoughts at the beginning of my research caused anxiety and stress. The anxiety, however, decreased as I started to interact with the villagers.

First, I searched for a guide who I needed to help me introduce myself and gain the peoples' trust. So, I contacted the staff of the village school and introduced myself to them. However, the apparently weak relationship between the school staff and the villagers showed that the contact would give me no help. Instead, I introduced myself to the village headman and asked for his help. The village headman was warm toward me, and he arranged a guide to help me explore the village for one day.

My male guide showed me around the village the first day and helped me by introducing me to the people we met. However, the fact that my guide was a male limited my relationships with female villagers. Because I couldn't enter with my guide those places where females were, I had to introduce myself on my own. I soon realized that introducing myself to the people was both exhausting and time consuming. I knew that I would need a female guide to meet other people more easily. I saw that being in places where the villagers gather around is a fast and effective method for introducing myself.

My guide had told me that the mosque was a place where the villagers, especially the females, met in large groups. My guide said that the women met at the mosque every day and attended a Quran course. Because I

thought that the mosque would be an effective setting for introducing myself, I made my first indoor visit there. Because my guide was a male, I went in the mosque alone. The women knew I was a stranger and stood up to greet me. The women, who greeted me very warmly, showed me a place to sit and offered me tea. While explaining to the large female group in the mosque who I was and why I was there, I tried to gain their trust by telling them that I was a teacher in the new village. The women's positive attitude toward me and my research eliminated my anxiety. I then visited the mosque every day, which helped me change my position in my research.

4.2. Activation

My role as a researcher changed positively after the mosque visit. I got the chance to meet many female villagers and children there. I also learned of the news and events in the village. The mosque setting, which turned into my news resource, helped me learn about the time and place of the collective events in the village. Women who attended the mosque not only told me the place of the events but also took me there and guided me at the events as well. At times when they didn't have the chance to guide me, they arranged a small child to help me. Thus, I introduced myself in collective events such as weddings, funerals, bread making, hay making and wool scouring and explored the culture closely as a participant-observer.

Introducing myself progressed rapidly, thanks to the mosque. As I attended the events in the village I met new people and told them who I was. However, becoming known by everyone in the village was not a fast process. My uncovered hair indicated that I was a stranger to a village where females covered the hair and wore long-sleeve clothes. Thus, many people stopped me to ask who I was, while I walked around the village on my own. While these questions were typical at the beginning of the research, they changed in later periods. Some of these questions are given below:

Whose family are you from? Whose daughter are you? What are you doing here? Did the government send you? Are you going to give aid here? We need to know, are you a terrorist or an agent? Are you a bookseller? Are you a doctor?

I answered every question that aimed at learning who I was and why I was in their village. But I had difficulty in explaining my researcher identity to the older people of the village. During these times, villagers who knew me came and introduced me to the elders using language they could understand easily. The statements below were used by the villagers in explaining my researcher position to the other villagers:

You know how they come from the television and record the village, show it, get information and stuff... She's asking for information about the village, give the poor thing information.

The cultural programs on television helped me a lot in introducing myself to the elder villagers. However, the complexity of my researcher identity continued for some while. Some of the old people in the village thought I was a doctor and told me about their pains and turned their backs to me. This decreased and changed as my research progressed.

As I came to understand the village cultural structure, I started choosing long-sleeve clothes. Although this was difficult in June, July and August, I realized that it improved my reputation among the villagers. In addition, I also thought that covering my body with proper clothing would enhance my communication with the male villagers. While it was normal for male villagers to communicate with foreign woman, it was unacceptable for female villagers to communicate with foreign men. My communication with males was limited during the research. Staying alone with a male villager wouldn't have been found appropriate and could have produced gossip. Thus, I communicated with the males when they were with their wives. The event given below from my daily notes demonstrates this situation more clearly:

While I was watching the children play a game, I noticed them heading toward a house of their relative. I went in that house with them. There were ten children inside the house. They were all playing on the balcony at the entrance of the garden. There was only one male in the house. He recognized me and invited me inside. I hesitated. There was no one else around except for the children. I got courage from the children being there and agreed to go inside. We sat on the balcony for some time and talked about the village. I got a bit anxious when I found out that his wife was at the hospital. I knew that the villagers wouldn't find this appropriate. The man's phone rang during our conversation and it was his wife. He had a tough time explaining that I was there. He hung up by saying that we were talking about the village. After a while the man's mother-in-law came. She acted as if she didn't know that I was there. But I realized that she had come to control us.

My village experiences with female and male relationships give crucial clues for my study. The relationship style I had to create with men gave me information about the cultural structure of the village. In the later stages of the study, after I was no longer a stranger and was familiar to the villagers, I started to better understand the cultural structure of the village. The change in my researcher position was evident in the behaviors of the villagers. Some people who I came across on the road greeted me without questioning who I was and some invited me to their house after asking how my research was going. This familiarity in the village increased as I attended the events. This method I used in collective events was effective in meeting many new people but I also

had difficulty in remembering the faces I saw. I tried to overcome this by focusing on the unique and evident characteristics of each individual I met.

4.3. Acceptance

The progress in the relationships with the villagers enabled my researcher position to completely change and for me to be accepted as a member of the village. The villagers treating me as a member of the village became even more evident after some started trying to gain control over me. As an indicator of this control, some women, noting that I was not covering my hair, warned me that I will go to hell. Some villager statements given below are about my hair being uncovered and that I will be punished for this after death:

Didn't I tell you to cover your head? Do you know that you're going to be burnt for this hair? Showing a piece of hair is like committing adultery. Women are going to be burnt from their throat (opened her scarf with her hand and showed her throat). If seven pieces of hair are seen from a woman's scarf then it is like she committed adultery.

This control over me was a sign of the villagers having accepted me as one of them. Being aware of this helped me tackle the control more moderately and offered me crucial data about my study. I observed the values and pressure of the village more clearly through the control that was imposed on me.

Having been accepted as a member also helped me better understand the tradition and values of the village. I realized, for example, the tradition of using a nickname of one's grandfather rather than the surname, after people referred to me with the nickname they gave to me. Then I understood that the "*Whose family are you from?*" question that the villagers had asked me when I began my research was actually to learn my nickname! I learnt my own nickname after I heard some villagers talking about me as "*the bookseller is coming, the author came*".

Exploring the village also helped me understand the desires and interests of the females. They would approach me by saying: "*You walk around with your horse in your hand, your gun on your waist*" and likened my car to a horse and my notebook to a gun. Walking around by myself as a woman revealed the female villagers' desire for freedom. As I spent more time in the village, I better observed that desire, behaviors and experiences of the villagers. The hospitable nature of the village was evident as the people I came across always invited me to their house and greeted me with a smile. There were many people in the village who invited me, "*Come to my place too. Don't walk around all hungry, come and eat something*". The villagers who informed me about the events of the village also warned me about eating the food they prepared.

The villagers volunteering to assist me on my research was not only about informing me of events. They also offered information about their village by saying "*Write this down too*". The villagers also had demands for me along with their volunteering assistance. They wanted me to take their photos, or to drop them off in the city center with my car. These mutual interactions helped us get closer and allowed them to accept me.

5. Discussion

Ethnography is an approach designed by social anthropologists to study culture and social science. This approach aims at deeply understanding human activities, behaviors, and values. All ethnographic studies are based on social relationships, a learning researcher, and first-hand natural observations over long periods of time (Byrne, 2001; Zaharlick, 1992). These primary characteristics enable the experiences of ethnographers to be compiled in a shared context.

Up to now, many researchers like Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) have listed the principles of the ethnographic method by sharing their experiences. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) focused on practical principles in the ethnographic approach and listed specific items that would guide researchers. The topics discussed include; formulating research questions, deciding whom to observe, gaining access, establishing rapport, choosing a field role, dealing with informants, recording observations and conducting ethnographic interviews. In my study, rather than listing items on the ethnographic approach, I discussed my research experiences under three stages as initial, activation, and acceptance. I tried to explain my research experiences and strategies under these three stages.

In the initial stage, I emphasized my connection with the village and the process of being included in the village. This stage, which was referred to as "accessing" in Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) items, was referred to as "contacting" in various other resources. Suggestions such as resorting to formal or informal organizations, accessing through e-mail, accessing someone through snowballing to get into contact with the people in the research area, are among these (Crang and Cook, 2007). While some of these suggestions offered a good experience for my study, other suggestions were not convenient for this village I was studying. Methods including using technological devices such as sending e-mails were not useful. The main reason for this is that, clearly, computers were rare in the houses of the village, and so the number of people using a computer was very low. Thus, I had to make face-to-face contact, as the villagers had a weak link with technology.

The face-to-face connections I made with the village continued with the male guide arranged by the village

headman. This guide, who was referred to as a “Gatekeeper”, helped me in contacting and accessing the place I was studying. The limitation of female-male relationships in the village prevented me from entering in female settings together with the male guide. A similar limitation occurred in the study conducted by Marvasti and McKinney on the lives and discrimination experiences of Muslim American people. It wasn’t easy for the researchers to enter a mosque where they went to discuss the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in America (Marvasti, 2004). In my study, it wasn’t possible to enter every setting in the village together with the male guide. Thus, I overcame this obstacle by seeking help from volunteering female guides.

In ethnographic studies, not only finding a guide or getting into contact but also explaining and clarifying your project to people is crucial (Beattie, 2005; Berg, 2001;). In this respect, while there are methods that can create ethical problems in several ethnographic studies, such as concealing the researcher’s identity, in my study I didn’t see any problems in explaining who I was and why I was in the village. Revealing my identity helped me answer questions about whether or not I was an agent and also increased the villagers’ trust in me. The female guides who I met in the mosque and who assisted me were very helpful while I was explaining my research. My civil servant identity enabled the villagers to see me as a reliable person. In such studies, the identity of the researcher is recognized as an important factor in being accepted in the group. Just like how my civil servant identity engendered trust in the villagers, in the PhD study by Pakistani Muslim Robina Muhammed, born in Britain (2001), on Muslim women in England, the researcher was accepted as a member of the group by the women, whose beliefs were being studied, due to their skin color.

News resources, like the researcher’s identity, are crucial components of studies. Obtaining a news resource indicates the transition to the second, activation, stage of my study. The activation stage refers to the researcher taking action according to the people contacted, or in other words, the process of being included in the culture through the information obtained from the news resource. In ethnographic studies the news resource can be either a person or an institution. In my study, the place which helped me in finding out the time and place of village events was the mosque institution. However, in the study conducted by Marvasti on homeless people, the news resource was a person living in a shelter with the nickname “Ace” (Marvasti, 2004).

In the activation stage, there are various points the ethnographer should consider while being accepted by the participants. This stage, which is called establishing intimacy by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), consists of the relationships I created with the participants. Among these, the facial expressions made while meeting with the locals were effective in the change of my researcher position (Berg, 2001). In addition, the clothes I wore during my study were effective in entering in close relationships with the participants. In studies conducted on homeless people, wearing "designer" outfits was observed to make it difficult to be included in the group (Marvasti, 2004). In my study, in order to comply with and get closer to the female villagers who wore long-sleeve clothes and covered their hair, I also preferred long-sleeve and covered clothes even in the summer season.

The language used by the researcher, along with the physical appearance, is also a crucial factor in improving the relationships. Thus, in ethnographic studies conducted in different cultures, the ethnographer is obliged to learn the language of the culture being studied. American William A. Corsaro and Molinari (2005) conducted an ethnographic study on Italian small children and Corsaro learned Italian while conducting the study. In my study, although we spoke a common language, Turkish, with the participants, I was careful in acting like I was learning a new language. The reason for this was that as I spent more time with the villagers, I encountered new words and terms that I had never heard of before. These words I learned enabled me to grasp the hidden meanings within the social context.

These factors, which are considered so as to be close to the group in ethnographic studies, were carried out in order to become invisible. This is explained as the ethnographer having to suffer from erosion and be eroded in time within the group he studies. The researcher is believed to decrease the attention given to his status by participating in the work of the participants (Berg, 2001). This stage, which I discussed as acceptance, refers to the process in which the ethnographer is accepted by the participants. In this stage, the participants start considering the researcher as one of them and reflect this perception in their behaviors. The pressure and nicknames given to me by the participants throughout my study are concrete evidences of my acceptance process. The pressure imposed on little girls in the village to cover their hair was imposed on me as well. On the other hand, the nicknames given by the villagers and referring to me with those nicknames are clear signs of me being accepted in the village culture.

In conclusion, the three stages I put forward in my article reveal the transition of an ethnographer’s researcher position. In my opinion, every researcher who conducts an ethnographic study undergoes these three stages with various experiences. Other examples of ethnographic studies, like this study, will enable diversity in the experiences. This diversity will enable many ethnographers to be guides in similar events they will encounter in different places and times.

References

Beattie, J. (2005). *Other cultures: Aims, methods and achievements in social anthropology*. Routledge:

Taylor & Francis e-Library.

Berg, L. B. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. London: Allyn & Bacon.

Byrne, M. (2001). 'Ethnography as a qualitative research method', *AORN Journal*, 74(1), 82.

Corsaro, W. & Molinari, L. (2005). *I compagni: Understanding children's transition from preschool to elementary school*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Crang, M. & Cook, I. (2007). *Doing ethnographies*. London: Sage.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I. & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press.

Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. New York: Routledge.

Malinowski, B. (2005). *Argonauts of the western pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge.

Marvasti, A. B. (2004). *Qualitative research in sociology*. London: Sage.

McNiff, J. (2013). *Action research: Principles and practice*. 3rd edn. New York: Routledge.

Mohammad, R. (2001). 'Insiders' and/or 'Outsiders': Positionality, theory and praxis. M. Limb & C. Dwyer (Ed.). *Qualitative methodologies for geographers: Issues and debates*. (p.101-117). London: Arnold.

Neuman, L.W. (2007). *Social research methods*, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Woods, P. (2005). Educational ethnography in Britain. R.R. Sherman & R.B. Webb. *Qualitative research in education: focus and methods*. (p.88-108). Routledge: Taylor & Francis e-Library.

Zaharlick, A. (1992). 'Ethnography in anthropology and its value for education.' *Theory into Practice*, 31, 33-42.