

# **Ethnography: a teaching resource**

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## **Overview**

This Unit will introduce you to some of the principles, theoretical linkages, methodologies, methods and analyses of ethnography. The unit presents some key debates, provides you with opportunities to critically reflect upon a number of readings and gives you the necessary knowledge to prepare for and complete a specific assignment on ethnography. You are asked to consider some key pre-readings from Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and are directed to some additional texts during the discussion of key themes. Finally, a list of further recommended texts is provided to further your familiarity with ethnography.

Ethnographic research is a fascinating, involved and potentially emancipatory form of educational enquiry. Ethnographers view their research as investigation through involvement within a given field of inquiry. In doing so, the ethnographer will draw upon a variety of qualitative (and quantitative) methodologies in order to make sense of the meanings abounding within a given social or cultural group. This may involve participant observation; observing / recording life in 'naturally occurring settings'; interviews with groups and individuals; collecting cultural stories and probing in/formal written and spoken documents produced by that culture. This process is never without dilemmas. Crucially, the commonalities and differences between an ethnographer's understanding of a given social group compared with the understandings held by members of that social group raise important questions about the nature of knowledge generation within educational research. As with all debates, of course, the terrain is an uncertain but exciting one. I hope that this unit conveys some of the exciting and cutting edge research debates that are ongoing in the ethnographic approach to educational research.

## **Pre-reading and critical questions**

To initiate your thinking around ethnography, take some time to read and critically reflect upon the following two readings:

**Tedlock, B. Ethnography and Ethnographic Representation, in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2001). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage**

**Chambers, E. Applied Ethnography, in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2001). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.**

Whilst going through these readings and this unit, you may find it useful to keep in mind the following questions:

- What roles do personal and theoretical knowledge have in ethnographic research?
- Who generates knowledge and how?
- What methods are and could be used by the ethnographer?
- To what extent could members of a given social group, 'under ethnographic investigation', be considered to be participating in the generation of ideas and meanings?
- Identify two potential negative and positive outcomes for a social group that emerge as a consequence of a researcher's ethnographic involvement?
- To what extent could ethnography be considered to be a subjective endeavour on the part of the researcher?
- To what extent could ethnography be described as transformative?
- Is there any room for 'objectivity' in ethnographic research?

### **Introduction**

Ethnography is an approach to research that involves immersion within, and investigation of, a culture or social world. Broadly speaking, researchers enter a given culture and draw upon a variety of methods in order to make sense of public and private, overt and elusive cultural meanings. Hence, ethnography can be conceived as a methodological persuasion: a guiding approach to research, in which the researcher attends to the rich generation of meanings by social actors, as a consequence of various structures and decisions made by individuals. As Vidich and Lyman (2001) point out – *ethnos* is a Greek term denoting a people, a race or cultural group that is described (*graphic*). However, as we shall see, this approach involves moving from description to explanation.

Historically, ethnography is rooted in descriptive anthropology (Tedlock, 2001; Vidich and Lyman, 2001). Indeed, the renowned modern anthropologist Malinowski (1922) argued that the role of the ethnographer was 'to attempt to grasp the native's point of view, their relation to life and to realise their vision of their world' (cited in Edgerton, 1984, p498). Consequently, there are clearly the remnants of a colonialist past in this

view of ethnography, with the omnipotent Western visionary attempting to make sense of the unknown, dark, hidden culture of the 'native'. However, what remains in a hopefully more egalitarian post/modern research landscape is the conceptualisation of ethnographic research as ***making the strange familiar***. This involves getting to know people by being there, alongside them, during ordinary days, to try and capture their experiences at first hand. Corbett (1998) describes ethnography as an immersion within the deep culture of a social group that attempts to find hidden treasures and submerged dangers. In principle, ethnography is committed to representing the actions of the relatively unknown, perhaps oppressed and ignored, insiders of a given social group. Ethnography has been used in studies that have tried to ground their analyses in everyday realities of a variety of social groupings whose agendas and meanings have been under-represented in theoretical, practical and policy debates (see Lincoln and Guba 1985; Erlandson *et al*, 1993).

While there is a clear vision of ethnography as making sense of the culture of the 'other', the use of ethnography in practical and policy making contexts *by practitioners* – particularly in educational, health and social care settings – has given rise to a different conceptualisation of ethnography. Here, the aims are to ***render the familiar strange***. I would anticipate that many readers of this unit are approaching their studies for the MEd Educational Research with some explicit aims to combine work-based issues and concerns with debates raised on this course. Indeed, for many practitioner-researchers, classic ethnographic texts fail to resonate with their aims to understand further (and change for the better) the very cultures that they are, and perhaps for a while have been, immersed within. Ethnographic research can be embraced as a methodology that aims to *look again at the cultures we may feel we already know so well*. In this sense, ethnography is about turning a critical eye onto practices, dynamics, policies and meaning making within familiar cultures. It means turning social contexts into research contexts: the latter associated inevitably with the participant-turned-researcher examining the social context anew through the perspective of a critical enquirer. While you might well want to take on the ethnographic challenge of examining some context of which you know little, you may also take on an ethnographic stance in relation to a well-known context.

Both of these takes on the aims of ethnography highlight one overarching concern. When researchers become part of the cultures that they describe, then researcher and participants interact together to produce the data (Charmaz 1995). Even when a covert approach to participation is adopted – and there are clearly ethical issues that we

need to explore – the researcher’s perspective on the actions of participants form a dialogue from which understandings emerge. Meanwhile, overt participant observation in a field of enquiry – where the researcher clearly states their reasons for involvement in the field and their research aims – will, of course, alert participants to the possibilities that their conduct is being watched. Turning social into research contexts raises more general considerations about the nature of ‘truth’ in research and brings with it a variety of troubling but often rewarding debates. We now turn, in more detail, to some of the epistemological, theoretical, methodological and analytical debates within ethnographic research circles.

### **Theoretical traditions**

Ethnography has its roots in a variety of epistemological and theoretical traditions in the social sciences. The following reading introduces some of these traditions from a British / North American educational research perspective:

**Gordon, T., Holland, J. and Lahelma, E. (2001). Ethnographic Research in Educational Settings. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland. (Eds.) *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: Sage.**

While most ethnographers would share the vision of making sense of a given culture, their theoretical position will noticeably influence the ways in which they choose their methods and conceptualise their analyses. Indeed, as we shall detail later, exposing theoretical agendas and frameworks is a key part of ethnography’s engagement with the generation and construction of meaning. Gordon, *et al* (2001) identify a number of epistemological persuasions, each generating particular theoretical accounts, some of which are presented in the Box 1:

#### **Box 1** ***Epistemology, theory and ethnography***

##### ***Social interactionism***

A variety of theoretical persuasions such as ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology prime the ethnographer to attend to the construction of meanings by social actors within particular contexts. Educational questions emerge such as ‘what do people do in school and what do they do to each other?’ Cultural dynamics are understood as processes of negotiation of the ‘order that is to be’: where

individuals come to a common definition of the situation, draw on similar commonsense knowledge and make common sense assessments of appropriate action. Here, there are clear origins with ethnomethodology; understanding 'folk' (ethno) methods. This approach to research is microscopic by design and tends to view the culture as already well functioning. The aim is to elicit the constituent actions and dynamics that contribute to the making of that culture. Hence, this approach is often termed 'constitutive ethnography'. While there are clear links here with notion of making sense of the 'parts of the sum', theoretically an interactionist approach has been criticised on the basis that it has problems with coming up with theoretical and structural accounts of culture.

### ***Cultural studies and critical theory***

Arguably, more conflict-oriented and structurally aware bases for ethnography are afforded by the approaches of cultural studies and critical theory. The former approach questions the structural logic of the taken-for-granted view that cultures already exist and are functioning well. In Britain, the *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham* (from which the renowned work of Stuart Hall was borne) has a reputation for capturing this purported preoccupation with the 'bigger questions' of cultural formation. Ethnographic studies on the reproduction and resistance by youth cultures – such as Punk in 1970s Britain – suggested that ethnographers needed to attend to the ways in which sub-cultural groups potentially challenged wider dominant cultural orders. Similarly, the importing of ideas from critical theory gave rise to critical ethnography. Drawing on neo-Marxist ideas, the aims here are to theorize social, economic and cultural constraints on human agency. Unlike the constitutive ethnographies of interactionists, critical ethnographers begin with the premise that men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege. As well as theorising the inter-relationship between structure and agency, Marx's notion of praxis is adopted by the researcher. Here the aim is not simply to understand the contradictions and oppressions within particular groupings, but as with action research, to promote empowerment. These theoretical resources appear to offer more structural and transformative qualities for ethnographers. Yet, these approaches have been criticised, respectively, for doing away with individual agency and confusing the knowledge focus of researchers: what counts as knowledge; the hermeneutic qualities of the critical ethnographic piece or the emancipatory aims of the research involvement?

### ***Feminism, postmodernism and poststructuralism***

Recent debates within the social sciences have impacted markedly on the doing of ethnography in educational research. Feminist theorists have imported a more self-reflexive philosophy to research. For ethnographers the critical potentiality of emancipation through their involvement has been raised by second-wave feminists who were particularly unconvinced by a model of research production that over-emphasised investigation and ignored emancipation. In particular, feminism has opened up crucial debates about the relationships between researchers and participants. Ethnographers are challenged to work together with participants in order to develop shared subjective understandings of a given culture, breaking down power relationships between the researchers and the 'researched' and to work critically and closely with subjectivity as a resource of the ethnographic project. Feminisms recognise a whole host of structural and agentic concerns within the doing of research and call for researchers to open up their own agendas for public viewing. Alongside these encounters with subjectivity has been an accompanying and not altogether comfortable relationship with the rise of postmodern and poststructuralist accounts. A 'turn to the textual' has problematised the interactionist vision of the ideal 'objective' ethnographic account. Malinowski's vision of capturing the 'native's vision of their world' is directly contravened by postmodern and feminist demands for researchers to openly and critically write themselves into their ethnographic accounts. If we accept the presumption that life is only a collection of narratives then researchers need to own their narratives of a given part of the social world. There are a number of dilemmas here. The turn to the text has led to the death of the subject. The reflexive, embodied, agentic human being is replaced by an attention to the ways in which (human) subjects and (social, cultural) objects are constructed through a variety of inter-relating stories and practices: or discourses. Hence, an ultra-constructivist account, so typical of a wholehearted acceptance of postmodernism, relates to the research(er)'s ethnographic story which develops a discourse about a given culture. Moreover, our characters of our stories are no longer understood as individuals with agency but mere characters in a discursive tale.

Recently, in response to these relativist claims, there has been an interesting revival in the contribution of materialist analyses to these textual ethnographies. Things have become far too textual in these postmodern accounts. Instead, we need to consider the underlying structures, material conditions and conflicting historically specific power relations and inequalities that give rise to certain forms of socio-cultural

inclusion and exclusion. This appears to be a sidestep towards critical ethnography.

For a further discussion of epistemology and the conceptualisation of research see Chapter 7 of Denzin and Lincoln (2001) by Schwandt; for a detailed discussion of critical theory see Chapter 10 by Kincheloe and McLaren.

Ethnographers are encouraged from the very outset of their research to tease out and illuminate their theoretical agendas. As the ethnography progresses, these frameworks will be drawn upon and challenged by the practices of the researcher and participants. Throughout they will impact upon the doing of ethnography and our hopes and aims for empowerment and social change. We turn now to consider how ethnographers go about collecting their material, recognising however, that different theoretical positions will have very different understandings about the wider reasons for collecting material.

### **Exemplifying ethnography**

Perhaps the first issue to consider when we are looking at how ethnographers go about doing their research is to recognise that this approach digresses markedly from the classic view of the dispassionate, distanced, objective scientific observer. In many ways, ethnography is about immersing oneself within a culture of investigation, drawing upon a variety of methods and analyses in order to tap into that culture:

Wherever it has been adopted, a key assumption has been that by entering into a close and relatively prolonged interaction with people (one's own or other) in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of their subjects than they can be using any other approach (Tedlock, 2001, p456).

According to Spradley (1979) ethnographic study aims to observe behaviour, but goes beyond it to inquire about the meaning of behaviour. The artefacts and natural objects of a culture are described but also considered in terms of the meanings that people assign to these objects. Moreover, emotional states are observed and recorded, but the ethnographer goes beyond these states to discover the meaning of fear, anxiety, anger and other feelings to cultural members. All sounds rather grand and abstract, wouldn't you say? In order to contextualised your



understandings of ethnography and demystify the research process, the following reading is provided to expose some of the modest realities of ethnography that exist behind the grand claims.

**Chapter 8 of Goodley, D. (2000). *Self-advocacy in the Lives of People with Learning Difficulties: The Politics of Resilience*. Buckingham: Open University Press.**

This reading is taken from a study of self-advocacy groups. These groups are run by and for adults with the label of learning difficulties ('mental retardation') as part of a personal and political quest for self-determination, voice and equalisation of human and civil rights. Generally speaking, members of self-advocacy groups are supported by 'advisors' – people without the label of learning difficulties – who offer themselves voluntarily or as part of a paid role to enable members of the group in terms of achieving their aims. The reading attempts to make sense of this support in terms of when it is disabled / obstructive and enabling / facilitative to the development of self-advocacy within four different groups. Whilst having a look at this reading it would be helpful to consider the following three questions:

1. What methods does the author draw upon?
2. To what extent could the author's analysis be described as 'an inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize' the processes being investigated? (See Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001);
3. With which of the theoretical traditions identified by Gordon *et al* (reading 1) would you align Goodley's analysis?
4. What alternative readings of advisor support could be offered?

**Box 2**  
***Critical commentary***

Goodley's analyses of the support of advisors to self-advocacy groups make use of the notion of 'discourse'. Here the interventions of supporters are considered in terms of how they reflect, build upon and resist dominant and alternative discourses of disability. Broadly speaking, we can pitch interventions on continua of discourse, where at one end the individual model of disability lies and at the other end is found the social model of disability. While this might be a useful approach to making sense of support there are clearly problems.

- *Understanding their acts as a reflection of discourses ignores individual responsibilities of supporters.* Here, perhaps, we have the problem of the death of the subject, so typical of poststructuralist analyses.
- *Institutional arrangements and locations of supporters are not given much credence.* Instead, the reading suggests that it is not institutions – such as health and social welfare institutions – that create certain types of intervention but certain dominant discourses. For some critical theorists, these type of analyses ignore the exclusionary impacts of certain institutions on disempowered people: the discursive reigns over the structural.
- While people with the label of learning difficulties are mentioned towards the end of the chapter, *the interventions of ‘significant others’ – supporters – is given primacy.* Yet again, it could be argued, disabled people are afforded a passive position in analyses of their welfare, while others’ actions are given credence.
- It could be argued that this reading exemplifies a rather *‘theoretically-informed’ approach* to ethnographic writing. The actions of cultural members are subjected to categorisation and discursive interrogation. But, what of the meanings and understandings that exist in the culture? Is the readings analytical framework authentically in line with the frameworks characteristic to the culture?
- Finally, note how author proposes to be on the side of people with learning difficulties. This *partisan approach* to ethnography raises endless debates about the place of subjectivity, objectivity, alliance, distance and relationships in ethnography (see Charmaz, 2001).

These critical points raise questions about the authenticity and the persuasive nature of ethnographic research. Where once there were questions of validity, generalisation and reliability, there are now concerns with the extent to which an ethnographic piece of writing authentically and meaningfully captures the specific nature of a given context.

If you interested in following up this example in more detail see the reflexive piece by Goodley (1999), which addressed some of these critical points.

With this example of ethnographic writing and research in mind, we now turn to a more general discussion of three key issues in ethnography: methodology, analysis and reflexivity.

## **Methodological pluralism**

The readings by Chambers (2001), Tedlock (2001) and Goodley (2000) highlight the many qualitative methods drawn into the ethnographic venture. Life stories, life histories, narratives, interviews, group discussions, documentary analysis and (participant) observations form useful methodological resources for the ethnographer. A general perhaps necessary resource is the field notebook or diary. This captures many different aspects of the culture under investigation as well as critically probing the research process. Schatzman and Strauss (1973, pp99-103) acknowledge that ethnographers will inevitably combine 'observational notes' (the who, what, when, where and how of human activity) with 'theoretical notes' (interpretations, inferences, hypotheses and conjectures) and 'methodological notes' (the timing, sequencing, stationing, stage setting and manoeuvring of research). Inevitably, the involvement of the researcher produces and creates the material that is elicited in 'the field'. One way of conceiving this is to consider the performative elements of a given culture.

**At this stage you *might* want to think about reading McCall, M. Performance Ethnography: A Brief History and Some Advice, in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2001). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.**

To borrow from an ethnomethodological persuasion, the performance of cultural members and researcher will influence the use of methods. For example, a nagging concern for ethnographers is that they are only seeing what cultural members want them to see. Participants may 'act up' for observers so as not present themselves in a bad light (Orne, 1962). Such impression-management is understandable if Barton's (1996) observation is a fair one - that most social scientific appraisals tend to look for failings in the social world. This goes beyond the age-old scientific concern of 'ecological validity'. We must ask additional and different questions about how researchers are perceived by participants of a given culture. A methodological pluralism may allow us to tackle these conundrums. By drawing upon a variety of methods we may, potentially, access a variety of voices from a culture. While observational notes capture certain 'distanced' and 'researcher-led' formulations of a given element of a culture (see Vidich and Lyman, 2001), narratives of and by members alert us to meanings that may remain hidden to the ethnographic eye. In this sense, ethnography opens up a dialogue

between different voices and meanings. What the researcher does with these meanings illustrates analytical dilemmas.

### **Analytical immediacy**

Analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions in order to build, little by little, a strategic knowledge (Foucault 1983, p197).

The way this unit separates methods and analyses into distinct subsections conflicts with the very aims of ethnography. *The model ethnographic researcher is always analysing the context.* As Tedlock (2001) notes, the researcher may conceptualise their positions as a 'marginal native', 'professional stranger' or see themselves as 'going native' or 'maintaining some distance'. Regardless of the position, however, analysis starts very early on in the research process (see Schatzman and Strauss (1973)). Moreover, a number of analytical considerations invest the ethnographic position:

- Analyses combine 'personal' and 'theoretical' understandings. Meaning-making is located between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority of cultural analysis (Tedlock, 2001, p455).
- Analyses emerge from the culture and are applied by the researcher. Charmaz (2001) articulate this in relation to grounded theory – where researchers dialectically bring together material from the bottom up (the culture) and the top down (theoretical views of the researcher).
- Analyses are influenced by intent and perceptions of possible audiences. As Tedlock (2001, p459) puts it, readers derive meanings from a text that are shaped by the discourse communities in which they are based. Ethnographers will have some ideas as to which discourse communities they are hoping to address. These questions about whom we are writing for and why are writing is discussed in detail in Richardson (Chapter 36 of Denzin and Lincoln, 2001)
- Different analytical approaches reflect different theoretical traditions (some of which are articulated in Box 1 above)

The ethnographer may adopt a variety of analytical approaches; often in response to the methods adopted, these include narrative analysis, discourse analysis, thematic analysis and grounded theory. The latter approach is one often associated with ethnography.

**Take a look at about reading Charmaz, K. Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods, in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2001). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.**

The hallmark of grounded theory consists of the researcher deriving his or her analytic categories directly from the culture under investigation, not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses (Charmaz 1995, p32). Theories, models and typologies must be teased out of an immersion within a social grouping (Harré 1981).

Building empirically grounded theory requires a reciprocal relationship between data and theory. Data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container into which the data must be poured (Lather, 1986, p267)

However, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) pointed out, qualitative methods are impressionistic and unsystematic. All descriptions are analyses. As method and analysis work from one another, in a hermeneutic-dialectical fashion (Erlandson et al 1993), the researcher's own analytical ideas become tangled up in description and analysis. Consequently, researchers may only see what they want to see. For example, Gerber (1990) appraised Edgerton's (1967) ethnographic study of people with learning difficulties in institutions. While acknowledging Edgerton's compassionate appeals for re-assessing how institutions stigmatised 'the retarded' (sic), Gerber suggests that Edgerton's naturalistic view of 'retardation' lurked behind the stories of those he presented. Consequently, the resilience of those who had been institutionalised was only partly highlighted because Edgerton's analytical framework failed to recognise the socially constructed nature of learning difficulties.

Indeed, in relation to the Goodley (2000) reading that tries to make sense of advisors' support as interventions reflecting discourses of disability, I had started to formulate this analytical framework early on during my involvement with groups. As much as I made conscious efforts not to, my observations were in part directed by this framework in mind. Here then, I might have missed more culturally pressing actions and occurrences that were far more significant and relevant to the participants of the culture than my analytical preoccupations. It is therefore necessary for researcher to critically reflect upon their

analyses and their subjectivities that shape their interpretations. This is a process known as reflexivity.

### **Sustained reflexivity**

Often, ethnographers formulate understandings of particular cultures that are in tune with the interests of the research population as well as those of the researcher (Peberdy 1993, p54). In addition, research brings something new to an understanding of a given context. It is not simply about re/presenting the common sense understandings of a group – even if that was indeed possible. Instead, researchers aim to combine their analytical skills with the richness of the material provided by the culture being investigated.

A key element of the researcher's knowledge is their experience of the research culture. Experience is always intersubjective and embodied, not individual and fixed, but social and processual (Tedlock, 2001, p471). It is open to 'contamination' by, for example, the researcher's growing sympathies and allegiance with participants of the culture. Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society* was criticised by Stott (1973) on the basis that Whyte had become totally accepting of his main cultural players the 'Cornerboys'. He remained uncritical of their contempt for college students, non-Italian teachers and social workers. In contrast, researchers may un/knowingly develop critical perspectives on their participants. Hence, a critical ethnographer's preoccupation with the false consciousness of, for example, the seemingly passive, non-politicised workers in a deeply oppressive work context may ignore other more resistant and resilient acts that workers draw upon. In short, there is a need for constant and consistent reflexivity. Halfpenny (1984, pp3-8) suggests that researchers should show how their interpretations are bound up in the study of a culture by detailing descriptions of activities, verbatim accounts of talk, key illustrations of their interpretations and a chronology of research experience. In doing so, a reflexive account can consider in some ways the interplay between the researcher's subjectivity, experiences in the culture and the analyses that are made.

**A useful resource here is the chapter by Denzin, *The Practices and Policies of Interpretation*, in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2001). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.**

In order to think practically about reflexivity consider the following activity:

**Box 3**

***Considering reflexivity***

Think about an event where you witnessed conflict in work. This could be, for examples, an altercation between work colleagues, a challenging experience between a teacher and a pupil, a difficulty you found in putting a policy in place as part of your work. Briefly describe it (no more than 250 words); identify the main protagonists and explain why this conflict occurred. On finishing this account, re-read it whilst considering the following questions:

- What past experiences and opinions are you bringing to the writing of this account?
- What alternative readings could be provided?
- To what extent do you think the players of the conflict would agree with your reading of the event?
- Viewing Box 1, above, which theoretical approach would you say best fits your style and approach to accounting for and explaining the event?

Hopefully, this activity will have given you the opportunity to critically reflect upon an element of your own subjective understandings of a very specific one-off event. Clearly, when ethnography draws together many different events, associated data and reflections, then reflexivity can only pick out some issues relating to the transformation of data. Yet, there are dilemmas:

Self-evaluative [reflexive] accounts seem in the main to be written (and expected of) three main groups: established researchers looking back on mistakes they are assumed to have learned from, PhD candidates writing methodological appendices, and action-researchers, who are often teachers. The latter two groups are made up of some of the least powerful individuals in the research community, and it is pertinent to ask who their accounts are for, and how they affect the power-knowledge relations within that community (Paechter 1996, p92).

There are clearly difficult issues involved in revisiting one's own interpretations, but it is probably best to think of reflexivity as fitting in

with the wider ethnographic project of disentangling meanings. Finally, another consideration must be kept in mind. Throughout this unit we have set up a model of ethnographic research whereby the researcher is in control of various stages of theory, method, analysis and reflexivity. Nevertheless, what about the role of participants in the process of research? Is it ethically, morally and politically right to treat our participants as passive elements of a culture to be understood by the all-knowing researcher? Various critics from feminism (Stanley and Wise, 1993) and disability studies (e.g. Oliver, 1996) have argued vehemently against such a non-participatory approach to research. It is sadly ironic to observe researchers (who are committed to making sense of social inequalities) adopting ethnographic research, which then reproduce other power relations (between the researcher and the researched). Clearly, there are ways in which researchers can work alongside participants – as co-researchers or co-members of a culture – in order to give rise to ethnographic accounts that combine different frameworks in a potentially egalitarian manner. This, however, raises many other issues about theoretical position, methodological persuasion and analytical preoccupations.

### **Assignment**

You are asked to implement and critically reflect on an ethnographic piece of research in the context in which you work. Drawing on the literature discussed in this unit, you must consider the following issues in order to write up a **Research Portfolio**:

1. Justify why a particular aspect of your work context requires ethnographic investigation;
2. Locate your ethnography in relation to some ethnographic literature;
3. Provide a literature review that outlines the need for an ethnographic study of a particular aspect of your work context;
4. Outline the aim(s) and research question(s) of your research;
5. Consider and justify the methods that you used in your research;
6. Provide an overview of the ways you made sense of the ethnographic material you collated – outlining your approach to analysis;
7. (Re)present three key findings of your ethnography, making reference to related literature outlined in the first three sections of the portfolio;
8. Examine the implications and applications of your findings to the practices and policies within your work context;



9. Provide a critically reflexive account of your ethnography – considering, for example, the impact of some aspects of your subjectivity on the methods and analyses employed in your research.

You may find it useful to consider each of the issues outlined above as constituting separate subsections of your **Portfolio**.

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### **Other recommended readings**

You will find the following journals very useful for ethnographic and qualitative accounts: *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Qualitative Health Research*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *Qualitative Research*.

The following chapters from Denzin and Lincoln (2000) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* are especially relevant to this unit:

- Vidich, A. and Lyman, S. *Qualitative Methods: Their history in Sociology and Anthropology* (pp37-84). This provides a well-worked account of the emergence of qualitative methods and is provides a particular focus on the development of (forms of) ethnography.
- Schwandt, T.A. *Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry: Interpretivism, Hermeneutics and Social Constructionism*. This

examines three key epistemological orientations and considers how they impact upon the conceptualisation and doing of qualitative research.

- Kincheloe, J.L. and McLaren, P. *Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research*. Invites a rethink of critical theory – particularly Neo-Marxist and poststructuralist readings – with an emphasis on the potentially transformative qualities of qualitative research.
- McCall, M.M. *Performance ethnography: A brief history and some advice* (pp421-434). Introduces a rather idiosyncratic vision of ethnography, permitting a reconsideration of the dramaturgical and performative elements of ethnography.
- Charmaz, K. *Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods* (pp509-536). An excellent overview of analytical debates with a focus on one dominant form of analysis – grounded theory. Charmaz has written a number of excellent texts on grounded theory and ethnography and this builds upon her reputation.

Other texts to consider include:

Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., Delamont, S., Lofland, J. and Lofland, L. (Eds.) (2001). *Handbook of Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. Is an excellent contemporary resource on ethnography, considering many debates in North American, Britain and Ireland, echoing the stance of a number of contributions to the Denzin and Lincoln text. For example, the following chapter is a wonderfully accessible overview of the use of grounded theory: Charmaz, K. and Mitchell, R.G. (2001) Grounded Theory in Ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland. (Eds.) *Grounded Theory in Ethnography*. London: Sage.

Coffey, A. (1999). *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: Sage. An accessible text that takes issue with the 'objective ethnographies' of classic anthropology and considers the ways in which researchers write themselves into their own accounts.

Evans, R. (2002). Ethnography of Teacher Training: mantras for those constructed as 'other', *Disability and Society*, 17 (1), 35-48. This paper captures some of the dilemmas involved in researching inclusive philosophies in educational settings. Very useful insight into the ways qualitative analyses and material are dialectically linked

Hammersley, M. (1990). *Classroom Ethnography: Empirical and Methodological Essays*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press. This is seen as a classic in the field of educational research and provides an

accessible view of the practical and theoretical issues that faced the ethnographic researcher in educational institutions.

Kondo, D. (1990). *Crafting selves : power, gender, and discourses of identity in a Japanese Work Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. Provides a powerful account of immersion within a non-western context and reflects upon the ethnographic processes involved.

Paechter, C. (1996). Power, Knowledge and the Confessional in Qualitative Research. *Discourse: Studies in Cultural Politics of Education*, 17(1), 75-84. This provides a critical take on the use of reflexivity in educational research and provides some 'health warnings' and pointers for would-be self-critical qualitative researchers.

Schatzman and Strauss (1976) *Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall. A rather 'old-school' approach to ethnography, hence, wonderfully readable and reflexive. Particularly useful for seeing how qualitative methods and analyses look in practice.

Vlachou, A. (1997). *Struggles for Inclusion: An Ethnographic Study*. Buckingham: Open University Press. Demonstrates how ethnographers can critically engage with professional, policy-making and institutional contexts within education. An invaluable resource for anyone thinking of doing ethnography in educational settings.

## EXEMPLIFYING ETHNOGRAPHY

Dowson and Whittaker (1993) conceptualise 'good support' by introducing the notion of **intervention**. They argue that at particular times different types of intervention are required on the part of the supporter, including:

- Prescriptive interventions - aim to give advice, recommend a behaviour or course of action,
- Informative interventions - aim to give knowledge or information,
- Confronting interventions - challenge attitudes, beliefs or behaviours,
- Cathartic interventions - provoke a release of tension,
- Catalytic interventions - elicit information or opinion from the group,
- Supportive interventions - affirm the value or worth of the group.

**You will remember from Unit 6 that to support disabled people means that certain models of disability will be drawn and built upon. For sure, any intervention that (re)creates dependency is an intervention that is at odds with the aims of self-advocacy and campaigning (Goodley, 1997): as evidenced in the last section when the culture of a Day Centre impacted upon the workings of the self-advocacy group. It is therefore necessary to probe further the meanings of interventions offered by supporters to self-advocates.**

### 4.2. Understanding support as reflections of discourses of disability

You will remember from Unit 6 how dominant discourses of disability inform everyday understandings of what 'causes' impairment, how it is experienced; through to the ways in which it is treated. To understand disability in terms of 'discourse' ties together knowledge, our subjectivities and our actions. Discourses are social phenomena in the sense that whenever people speak, listen, write, read or act, they do so in ways that are determined socially and have social impacts:

How a discourse exerts power is through individuals who become its carriers by adopting the forms of subjectivity and the meanings and values which it propounds. This theory provides an understanding of where our experience comes

from and can explain why so many of our experiences and opinions are sometimes incoherent and contradictory (Sidell 1989, p268).

Discourses and practices are inseparable: both refer to either what people are doing on a particular occasion, or what people habitually do given a certain sort of occasion:

The social nature of discourse and practice always implies social conventions - any discourse or practice implies social conventional types of discourse or practice ... people are enabled through being constrained: they are able to act on condition that they act within the constraints of types of practice - or of discourse. However, this makes social practice sound more rigid than it is, ... being socially constrained does not preclude being creative (Fairclough 1989, p28).

This last sentence links into an important point about discourse and practice, that where there is power there is also resistance (Foucault 1975). This notion of resistance to oppressive discourses recognises a key issue associated with power. People are not simply empty vessels receiving powerlessness or powerlessness, people reproduce power in various ways, with good or bad effects upon themselves and others. Oliver (1996, p144) points out that:

Understanding societal responses to long-term disability is no simple task and requires us to analyse ourselves and the discourses we use in order to talk about our world.

When researchers are accounting for discursive and social interactions then they need to make explicit reference to broader cultural beliefs. Taking advisors' interventions of support within groups, we can examine how these **interventions reflect and reproduce discourses and practices of disability**. The disciplinary power of disabling discourses can lead supporters unconsciously or unintentionally to operate under the taken-for-granted contentions and customs of their 'knowledge tradition'. Conversely, other discourses can be embraced which inform more empowering practice. So what are these discourses?

#### **4.2.1. Discourses of disability as individual tragedy**

Learning difficulties, and disability in general, has largely been understood in terms of individual naturalised impairment. Consequently, impairment whether it be physical, or 'of mind', is perceived as creating disability. This understanding of learning difficulties (and disability in general) embraces what has been called the individual model of disability or Personal Tragedy Perspective (Oliver 1990, 1996). Discourses originating from the individual model locate disability within the individual, and his / her impairment. Further discourses and practices emerge of personal pathology, of individual difficulties and of dependency in the face of care. Moreover, people so-labelled are required to adjust to their environments, be the recipient of professional expertise and medical dominance, and are the focus of policy that at best intervenes and at worse controls. By placing disability resolutely in the realms of personal tragedy, the individual model perpetuates a culture of dependency and non-acceptance. As with most dominant regulatory discourses, it is hard for people to break through and away from the concept of learning difficulties as individual pathology. Consequently, those that step out of this socially prescribed role flout the rules, challenge dominant hegemony, and threaten the very foundations of society's understanding of disability. When people with learning difficulties step out of the passive role assigned by society, and take up the active role of self-advocate, the resulting drama is unfamiliar. Consequently, if the actions of advisors are embedded in an individual model of disability then their support appears to be at odds with facilitating the self-determination of self-advocates (Goodley 1997).

#### **4.2.2. Discourses of disability as social problems**

In opposition to the dominant individual perspective that locates disability in the realms of individual impairment, the alternative social model of disability attends to the ways in which society disables (Swain et al, 1993). To find the dominant origins of disability we are encouraged to turn attention away from the individual onto a society that excludes. Disabled people are disabled by a social, economic, cultural and political contemporary climate. The application of the social model of disability permits a different way of conceptualisation and practising self-advocacy. The discourses and practices of the social model address notions of social problems, of societal / environmental barriers and of in(ter)dependence and capacity. Moreover, there are demands for

societal adjustment and calls for individual and collective responsibility of all societal members to redress disabling environments. Now when people with learning difficulties step out of the passive role assigned by society, and take up the active role of self-advocate, this feeds into the political aims of the social model. Where once stood a model of learning difficulties as individual inadequacy now stands a model that embraces individual and collective empowerment. Assumptions are shifted away from what people cannot do, to what people can do. Consequently, if advisors adopt a social model of disability in their support then this appears to be congruent with facilitating the self-determination of self-advocates (Goodley 1997).

#### 4.2.3. Inclusive and exclusive support - individual and social models of intervention

**The links made above between discourse, models of disability and the actions of advisors and self-advocates are at this stage speculative. The subsequent analysis therefore delves deeper into the relationship between discourses of disability and the support of advisors. Particular reference will be made to components of the individual and social models. By grounding an analysis of their actions in models of disability, it is possible to provide a framework for uncovering the meaning and effects of interventions. First, however, consider the following vignettes presented in the box below.**



## **Box 6 – Supporting self-advocacy**

**Activity - The following vignettes are taken from observational notes written after meetings with a number of self-advocacy groups, including the Centre-based group cited in section 3 of this unit (from Goodley, 2000). Read each vignette and ask yourself the following three questions:**

- (1) Were the interventions of the supporters / advisor or researcher helpful?**
- (2) What view of ‘learning difficulties’ and ‘disability’ appears to have been drawn upon and reinforced by the supporters / researcher? E.g. Were their assumptions of (in)competence?**
- (3) In what did the self-advocate react to the intervention(s)?**

### **Vignette 1**

Cliff has reported to the group many times of being bullied by supervisors at work and staff in his group home. Tonight he mentioned it again. One day after work, the taxi did not turn up as had been ordered, and he told the group how he angrily reacted to this lack of punctuality by hitting a staff member. One of the staff advisors said to another, though loud enough so the group and Cliff could hear, that, “Cliff is always taking out his anger on others”. She told him that she would put him down for a place on the new ‘anger management course’ run at one of the Centres where she works (7<sup>th</sup> meeting).

### **Vignette 2**

Ken told the group that he had asked one of the staff members in his house if he could make a cup of tea. He had said yes but on boiling the kettle another member of staff came in and told Ken to stop. Ken said this was because they thought he might scald himself. The advisors suggested that he ask the staff in his home to show him how to make a cup of tea (5<sup>th</sup> meeting).

### **Vignette 3**

Lillian said she needed to phone a taxi to get home. One of the members, Karen, offered to sort it out. “What’s the address Lil’?”, she asked, “24 Coathall Lane” replied Lillian. Off Karen went but one of the supporters, Jurgen, was not happy, “She’ll confuse that with her own address”, he warned another supporter. Karen returned and was asked which address she had given on the phone, replying “24 Coathall Lane”. Even this was not enough for another supporter, June, who now questioned Lillian’s knowledge

"I'd best ring Lillian's house to see that address is right". "No it is", shouted up Jurgen (Social Group, 9<sup>th</sup> meeting).

#### **Vignette 4**

Imran found an old lighter in my car. He asked me if he could have it. I gave it to him with a patronising warning, "Now don't go burning down your mother's house will you?!" He looked at me with despair and retorted, "I'm not fucking stupid you know" (Independent Group, ON, 6<sup>th</sup> meeting).

#### **Vignette 5**

As the meeting went on a young Asian man stood outside peering through and knocking on the window. The members shouted at him to "go away". The advisor suggested that he was trying to get their attention because he wanted to join the group. One of the members exclaimed, "He wouldn't understand". The advisor replied, "You don't know what he understands" (Centre Group, 4<sup>th</sup> meeting).

#### **Vignette 6**

One of the members, Denise, said that a particular user in the Centre was "being a right pain". The advisor reminded Denise, "He has a lot of problems at home you know. You should bear that in mind" (Centre Group, 5<sup>th</sup> meeting).

#### **Vignette 7**

Virginia explained 'problem behaviour' as when people have a bad day or get upset and then might feel angry. Jarrord asked, "What like hitting you?" "That's right", replied Virginia (Social Group, 4<sup>th</sup> meeting).

#### **Vignette 8**

Rudi admitted, "It's not always easy to stick up for yourself against nasty people". Paul [supporter] agreed, "Yes some people don't listen do they?" (Advocacy-supported Group, 5<sup>th</sup> meeting).

**One way of making sense of these interventions is to consider where they lie on a continuum where at one end lies assumptions of 'Deficit' and the other lies assumptions of 'Capacity'. At one end of this continuum of support then – deficit – advisors lean too far towards presuming incompetence on the part of self-advocates (Booth and Booth**

1994). This is an intrinsic part of oppressive discourses that position disability in the realms of individual pathology, personal problem and individual incapability (Booth and Booth 1998). There is a tendency to assume incompetent behaviour on the part of people with learning difficulties and to attribute this exclusively to physiological causes. Supporters who view incompetence in others, help to enhance their own rewards of 'helping' and 'caring'. When someone is unable to do something, we will do it for him or her, we feel needed, but our control increases as a result. In relation to vignette 1, no supporter asked Cliff why he reacted like he did, or took into account the frustrations he had been feeling. The supporters might have considered what had made him feel so angry and perhaps supported him in bringing up his grievances at his workplace and home. In relation to vignette 2, no one asked Ken if he had made a cup of tea before. There was a focus immediately on what he couldn't do, and ways and means of remedying these deficits. Ken's capabilities were not considered. When I asked him if he had made tea before he replied, 'Oh yes, I make it for the mother when I saw her at weekends'. Probing wider social reasons for someone's actions opens up numerous causes. Ken later told me that he had been in institutions for 22 years and was on the same ward with Cliff, who is some ten years older, suggesting an even longer spell of incarceration. These life experiences may explain Cliff's anger and perhaps he just wanted someone to be on his side. Friedman-Lambert's (1987) profile of Martin Levine, a Canadian self-advocate, is relevant here. Levine recalls punching a fellow (non-disabled) employee at a work placement after being the butt of some hostile ridicule. As Friedman-Lambert tried to suggest some alternative ways by which Levine could have handled the situation, Levine replied: 'Come on Phil, what would you do?'. Cliff continued to get a hard time from some of the supporters. There appeared to be a generally pervasive assumption of his 'deficits':

Cliff told the group that he had fainted at work because of the heat and nearly fallen into one of the machines. June, a supporter, asked, "Is that because you were in the wrong room?" (Social Group, 8<sup>th</sup> meeting).

This understanding of people as incompetent can potentially suppress the formation of a valued collective identity within the

group (see Campbell and Oliver 1996). When self-advocates are trying to help one another, assuming inabilities can disturb supportive interactions between peers, discourage risk-taking, self-belief and reinforce self-appraisals which augment deficits – as evidenced in vignettes 3 and 4.

In contrast there were many occasions when advisors opposed pathological assumptions of inability, sometimes espoused by self-advocates, taking a **capacity** perspective (Booth and Booth 1994). In vignette 5, the advisor alerted members in the group to the notion that a person's abilities are not a mere reflection of some assumed 'impairment'. Moreover, the social bases of a person's 'problems', an important construction of the social model of disability, are reiterated (vignettes 6, 7 and 8). To reiterate the views of the Canadian self-advocate, Pat Worth, it is important that advisors reject a focus on supposed deficits and emphasise competence:

The major barrier is attitude. People see our disability only, they don't see our ability. We may have a handicap but we're not the handicap (Quoted in Yarmol 1987, p28, italics in the original).

**The fluidity of support means that advisors can support in good and bad ways, and these interventions can be understood as reflecting positions on a continuum from individual to social model thinking.**

#### **Key points of section 4**

- Supporting others to 'self-advocate' is a complex process;
- Support can be conceptualised as interventions that can be viewed as reflecting different understandings or discourses of disability;
- Discourses are social phenomena in the sense that whenever people speak, listen, write, read or act, they do so in ways that are determined socially and have social impacts;
- Broadly speaking two disability discourses can be identified – individual model discourses (which locate disability in the 'deficient' individual) and social model discourses (which considers disability as the exclusion of people with impairments);

- Interventions of support that reflect a social model position are more enabling than those that reflect an individual model position;
- Support is more enabling when it reflects a capacity perspective rather than a deficit perspective.