THE ASSUMPTIONS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH
(based on the work of Dr Liz Godfrey)

*Man (woman?) is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning*  
Geertz, 1973, p. 5

Ethnography is the scientific investigation of human culture, but culture is itself such a slippery and multifarious concept that it has proven singularly difficult to define. Whatever different ethnographers have thought culture might be, they have used a wide variety of methods to investigate it and usually using many more than one method in each case. In some quarters ethnography is equated with qualitative methods, often reduced to interviews. Here we put forward a more expansive and traditional view of ethnography as a multi-method approach to studying culture whose disparate activities are base on a number of similarities.

**Assumption 1: the need for participant observation**
Participant observation is the process of establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate the social life and processes of the setting. As an outsider the participant observer has special insight into those aspects of the local culture that are most taken for granted and hence invisible to the locals. Prolonged exposure to life in the setting as locals live it gives extra insight into the meanings being locally created. The advantages of participant observation are:

1. Opens up a greater variety of data gathering opportunities
2. Reduces observer effect
3. Allows use of locally meaningful questions
4. Provides powerful triangulation on self-report
5. Allows better grasp of meaning of data

Insider research refers to ethnographic study made by a member of the community in question. Insider researchers have to work hard at maintaining the naivete which allows them to scrutinise the taken for granted aspects of culture.

**Assumption 2: explaining one’s stance**
There are two reasons for having to make one’s theoretical and methodological assumptions very clear in ethnography. The first relates to the ill-defined nature of the constructs and the other to the fact that the researcher is also research instrument.

Given that so many definitions exist of central concepts in social research, each researcher needs to explain and justify which position they are adopting. Engineering faculty are not accustomed to explicitly articulating the theoretical frameworks or assumptions underlying their disciplinary research. Scientific and engineering laws and theories, such as Boyles Law, are implicitly agreed upon by the discipline and not explicitly stated as assumptions, whereas in education research such certainty and agreement are not uniformly agreed upon. Frameworks, assumptions, perspectives and paradigms must be stated and their relevance for the study discussed. Without this sort of explicitness, informed peer review is deemed impossible

Because it is the researcher’s experience and interpretation of data that forms the basis of ethnographic analysis, transparency requires that the researcher consider possible biases in their own position and make these clear to the reader. This requires a sophisticated degree of reflexivity, not only about one’s practice but about the construction of knowledge.
Assumption 3: the need for triangulation
Where the researcher is the instrument, sources of data are subject to reactivity and circumstances change over time, the security of an interpretation needs to be enhanced through triangulation.

- **Methodological triangulation**, combines dissimilar methods such as interviews, observations, and physical evidence to study the same unit. Within the interpretivist research paradigm the majority of data will be qualitative i.e. words, but quantitative data are also appropriate within the same study particularly in support of a generalisation made from a single or limited observation.

- **Data triangulation** uses purposive sampling within one method, such as interviews, to ensure different perspectives by choosing participants of different gender, status, ethnicity, and, where deemed useful, participants known to hold opposing or alternate viewpoints.

- A comparison of data from different years and different students and staff, made possible by long term and repeated observation is another way of validating the interpretation of data, and this has been named as time triangulation.

**Sources of error in ethnography**

- Reactivity
  - Informant researcher
  - Context
- Questions
  - Ambiguity
  - Means nothing locally
  - Biased phrasing
- Respondent
  - Uninterested
  - Fatigue
  - Embarrassed
  - Memory
  - Threatened
- Ethnographer
  - Bias and filters from previous experience
  - Memory
  - Perceptual errors of recording
  - File coding errors
  - Absence of empathy, engagement
  - Failure to understand language/jargon

*both figures adapted from Handwerker (2001)*

Further reading:


Handwerker, P. (2001) *Quick Ethnography*. AltaMira, Walnut Creek, CA.

