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Ethnographic Methodology

Experiences from Fieldwork Among Vulnerable Informants

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Ethnographic Methodology: Experiences From Fieldwork Among Vulnerable Informants

Abstract

The empirical foundation for this case is 2 years of fieldwork among vulnerable employees in three business social enterprises in Denmark. A business social enterprise has an emphasis on the inclusion of vulnerable employees, with a significant participatory dimension. In addition, any profit is reinvested in the enterprise for these purposes. The research has provided a framework for understanding how vulnerable employees reflect and navigate their day-to-day experiences, specifically in relation to the local municipality. The case discusses themes of how fieldwork requires being able to improvise and conform to practicalities in the field. By using the ethnographic methods of observation, informal conversations, and interviews, a researcher can become aware of informants' experiences. Being aware of how to navigate in fieldwork among vulnerable informants is imperative both when a researcher wants to interact with the informants and, not least, when wanting to respect the informants as equal individuals. The relevance of discussing methodology related to vulnerable informants is important because informants are often not heard when it comes to societal matters concerning municipal and governmental decisions.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand methodological issues involved in doing research among vulnerable informants
- Reflect on relationship building and the fieldworker–informant relationship
- Assess the pros and cons of different methodologies as a means of accessing empirical fields
- Gain insight into positions of the ethnographic fieldworker

Introduction

The purpose of the research discussed in this case was to gain insight into the reflections and experiences of vulnerable informants employed in Danish business social enterprises. Business social enterprises have as a main goal the inclusion of vulnerable citizens in their workforce, and for this purpose, all profits are reinvested in projects that benefit the employees (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013; Teasdale, 2012). In addition to this, business social enterprises have an autonomous ideal, which stresses that the enterprise must be organizationally independent of outside stakeholders. They also have a high degree of employee participation with a substantial degree of collective steering (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010).

Despite shared aspirations of social inclusion and being in the same geographic municipality, the three enterprises at which I conducted my ethnographic study are quite different. One enterprise is a thrift store and sewing workshop, which is venturing into a new market by producing its own clothing brand. This enterprise

employs people with long-term unemployment and with drug or alcohol abuse. The second enterprise produces woodwork and high-profile industrial components sold to larger corporations. This enterprise employs people with mental health challenges. The third enterprise is a grocery store in a rural area of the municipality. This enterprise mostly employs people who have not been able to gain a foothold in the labor market.

In this study, I applied an ethnographic approach to gain insight into actions and experiences among employees in three social enterprises. One of the objectives was to report back to the local municipality on challenges and possibilities in social work specifically related to vulnerable citizens.

To construct a field of research, researchers often categorize informants as homogeneous groups. This presents some ethical challenges, as each individual is different in a dynamic understanding of culture. I negotiated this dilemma by attempting to build a relationship with the informants. Consequently, the informants may be more likely to be viewed and to view themselves as equals, and from a methodological point of view, they may be more open in discussions with the researcher.

The first section of this case addresses relevant cultural issues and how to construct a group of people as an ethnographic field—in this case, vulnerable informants. This is followed by an overview of my research design and context, which leads to an account of some of my experiences when gaining access to informants. In the next section, this case's central ethnographical approaches of observation, participation, and interviewing are presented. Finally, issues of how to enter and leave the field are discussed.

A Brief Discussion of Ethnography and Culture

Anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1981) emphasizes that ethnographic researchers are often in fields where research has not been carried out before, thus requiring observation and dialogue to produce knowledge. Although ethnographic research is an individual process, it is affected by the field of study, theoretical issues, and a researcher's personal interests. For these reasons, Etienne Wenger (2008) recommends long-term ethnographic studies and a broad methodological approach using informal semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews to provide insights into socio-cultural norms, social interaction, and experiences.

In my research, it was additionally important for me to gain an understanding of sensibilities among the vulnerable informants. I constantly reflected on the empirical data, analytical themes, and theory, which, combined with the employees' patterns and ideas, continuously deepened the scope of the study.

Because nothing is a cultural given, as Clifford Geertz (1973) argues with the advent of modern anthropology, there can be no fixed formula for ethnographic studies. Every field is different in relation to specific participants and contexts. Cultures are not predefined recipes for human action, but are constantly debated in relation to what participants themselves define as needs and necessities. Ethnographic fieldwork attempts to uncover these needs to obtain an impression of participants' experiences. This is closely related to cultural criticism, where the aim is to challenge centric viewpoints and common sense constructs. George Marcus and Michael

Fischer (1999) stress the importance of ethnography to gain insights into these social relations in each specific field and context.

Overview of the Research Design and Context

The applied ethnographic methods in this case consist of participant observation, 17 semi-structured interviews, and three focus group interviews, with three to four participants in each. All interviews were from 1 to 2 hr in length and took place at the employees' workplaces. In addition, I carried out numerous informal and unstructured conversations with vulnerable employees.

My fieldwork was financed in part (15%) by the local municipality, and the rest was funded by my university. The only requirement on behalf of the municipality was that the fieldwork must be among enterprises with significant social value aspirations. Therefore, before focusing on these three particular enterprises, I spent several months in preliminary fieldwork, roaming the municipality for enterprises with the required social profile.

Because my study was funded in part by the local municipality, I often encountered skepticism regarding the municipality's motives. A common challenge with ethnographic research is that participants and gatekeepers often have their own preconceptions of what the researcher might be interested in participating in or observing. Such preconceptions contribute to the overall impression of a field, yet they are never neutral or constructed only by the researcher (Marcus & Fischer, 1999).

I also encountered several challenges when seeking access to the field, not least of which was that I received frequent cancellations for meetings and interviews. This could have been a sign of disinterest in my research, although I repeatedly stressed that an activity like meetings was of specific importance for me. This passivity may as well have been an indication of a more or less deliberate strategy not to grant me access to daily work procedures. Alternatively, it may simply have been because municipal officials have a busy schedule and forgot to include me in their work-related processes.

I collected all data with informed consent and assent from participants. Because of the often delicate life circumstances among vulnerable informants, I guaranteed full anonymity concerning any information given to me. In addition to this, all names used in this case are pseudonyms.

Being Vulnerable

Methodology involves conscious choices concerning meta-theoretical and analytical perspectives, and as qualitative researchers, we must ask ourselves why certain activities and persons present an empirical field, and the extent to which they are typical or not. These research design choices should relate to the field's social, historical, and cultural contexts.

With regard to my research, it was relevant to ask what it means to be "vulnerable." To avoid any misconceptions of informants being seen as inferior individuals (Evers, 2009), it is important to stress that the informants in my research were all quite different and, although considered to be vulnerable, often had well-functioning families and social lives. They were able to navigate day-to-day challenges with fluidity and changeability and with a diversity of experiences and actions. Such diversity is particularly well exemplified by Erving Goffman (1959) when he uses the terms "frontstage" and "backstage" to stress that we all behave differently, and are constructed differently, in different settings. Especially relevant to this case, Goffman (1963) stresses that being stigmatized or categorized may present tensions and awkward moments.

Being vulnerable is not a final state of being, and Raymond M. Lee and Claire M. Renzetti (1990) stress that being vulnerable is not and must never become a commonsensical concept. Instead, I attempted to see the informants (as is the case for any informants in any research) in their own context. In my research, being vulnerable mainly entailed lacking certain skills when navigating in the municipal system where issues like bureaucracy and getting job or an education are regarded as important.

It was important for me to maintain contact with my informants so as not to view them as categories or self-fulfilling prophecies of being vulnerable. My wish not to construct the informants as a group of socially abstract individuals without reservations opens to the recurring ethnographic discussion of avoiding *them and us* constructions (Barth, 1981; Eriksen, 2001; Geertz, 1973).

This is particularly important when dealing with vulnerable informants or minorities. Indeed, by constantly renegotiating constructs made by the researcher or by others, new ways of viewing informants and analyzing their current situations become possible (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2006). Moreover, Virginia Dickson-Swift, Erica Lyn James, and Pranee Liamputtong (2008) argue that emancipating potentials and benefits of dealing with societal issues like power structures far outweigh potential disadvantages both for vulnerable informants and for the researcher.

Gaining Access to Informants

After I identified the three enterprises at which to conduct my research, I began the fieldwork. I explored structural dimensions, like how often there are employee meetings, who attends them, and formal relations between the vulnerable employees and external stakeholders and customers.

I initiated my access to the field by participating in meetings and social events and by interviewing local politicians and managers of a variety of organizations with which the three enterprises interact.

After the initial stage of ethnographic research, categories frequently arise that cover many different themes, creating the basis for a deeper and more context-specific analysis, but also a necessity for diligence in deciding which themes to follow. I began focusing on specific areas following the employees' detailed and often exasperating accounts of difficult relations with the municipal system. Their relation to the municipality became the overall focus, and the specific sub-themes were the employees' challenges, how they navigate,

and what actually does work in the collaboration.

Designing and gaining access to a field are often pragmatic issues depending on social and physical conditions, and it is often not possible to obtain a uniform and equal access to each subfield. In my case, it turned out that I indeed engaged quite differently with each enterprise. In the enterprise that produces components for larger corporations—while I was there, they were assembling parts for conveyor belts—I participated to a lesser degree because of the more vulnerable group of citizens employed there, and I did not participate in official meetings where the employees were present. At the very beginning of fieldwork in this particular enterprise, I was told by Helen, an executive employee, that it would not be appropriate for me to walk around by myself and observe employees. She later told me that most employees gradually have become "weaker," signifying that even minor changes in their everyday life—like the presence of a researcher—often will have negative consequences for their mental stability. After these discussions, I decided to not conduct the same amount of observation in all three enterprises.

In each of the three enterprises, there was always a lot of activity and every employee had his or her own specific function. I especially experienced this when walking around by myself and becoming aware of my own relatively non-active role. When I participated in activities, I did whatever I could to help while constantly considering whether I interfered with possible pedagogical agendas. Being constantly aware of how as a researcher one affects the field is important. James Spradley (1980) highlights the researcher's dual role, alternating between positions depending on the situation, where constant uncertainty is the only thing that can ever truly characterize each situation.

Participant Observation

A purpose of ethnographic work is to acquire knowledge of the field and contexts within the given time period. One way to do this is through observation and participation in routine activities.

One afternoon in the enterprise with the sewing workshop, three employees—Burda, Katrin, and Johnny—needed to go buy some ornaments and candles for Christmas decorations. I immediately grabbed the opportunity and asked whether I could participate in this activity. Just as I concluded that I had now embarked on deep participant observation as an embedded researcher in the field, Burda, a middle-aged woman struggling with long-term drug addiction, asked me whether I was joining to observe them. This exemplifies well the difficulty of breaking down the wall between researcher and informants.

Throughout my research, I attended as many routine activities as possible. I helped arrange meetings and performed cleaning chores, and I visited administrative offices, libraries, local shops, and cafes. Visiting different spaces, places, and environments was important to gain a broad understanding of contexts and to gain a sense of informal cultural factors and local knowledge, which paint a varied picture of a field (Barth, 1981; Spradley, 1980; Wenger, 2008).

Participant observation additionally made it possible to gain insight into both individual and collective practices

as well as social interactions and relationships among the employees. In addition, it provides an opportunity to assess differences and similarities between what participants say and what is observed.

As social structures are often expressed on more subtle levels than what can be learned through interviews and conversations, I focused on the unsaid and what I sensed and felt. This was a fruitful methodological dimension because the majority of the employees were not very outspoken. Participation in as many ways as possible allowed access to beliefs, actions, and silences. By attempting to view their lived worlds from within, I believe that I discovered several of the many stories that cannot be reduced to a single image. For example, enjoying home-baked cake and a cup of coffee each Friday afternoon with the employees in the grocery store enterprise created an intimate relation whereby we bonded as equals and I gained insight into the employees' most personal challenges.

Ethnographic fieldwork is often about starting with people's own experiences and perspectives as a supplement to a focus on cognition, rationality, and intention. This contributes to an understanding of informants' experiences, and thus insight into the social and cultural systems of which they are a part.

Conversations and Interviews

The majority of the employees seemed very interested in talking about their experiences, and consequently, both semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were a large part of my empirical data.

I often talked with employees in informal places: on the way to the car park, in cafeterias, during shopping, on the street, or while we ate lunch. In these situations, shared identifications often arose, and informal conversations became a good counterbalance to structured interviews. In relation to this, during interviews, I applied an exploratory approach without a predetermined frame or interview guide.

For various reasons, many of the employees had had previous negative experiences with interviews, structures, and authorities, and as a researcher from university, I was also sometimes perceived as an authority figure. To navigate this, informal conversations were a way for me to gain insight into employees' reflections, and simultaneously a way for them to feel more relaxed, and ideally as a way for me to be accepted. As Steinar Kvale (2007) argues, this builds trust, and there is even the possibility that the researcher is considered almost a "normal" person.

In addition, I conducted focus group interviews, which are similar to informal conversations in that they generate previously unspoken knowledge and social dynamics. These group interviews often developed into informal situations with lively exchanges of opinions and imaginings in terms of how something could be different.

Another methodological tool I used was to purposefully downplay my own preconceptions and attempt to leave it up to the employees which themes they wished to discuss during conversations and interviews and how to present themselves. Occasionally, I knew of a specific problem, but chose not to make this clear

in advance, which would often lead to themes I had not previously heard of or had even considered. An example of this was my own presumptions of the collaboration between the municipality and citizens. All the informants, except for two, told me that it can be quite difficult to make their needs understood, and what they felt they needed most was genuine dialogue with social workers from the municipality. This also related to practical challenges when dealing with a municipality, which they viewed as based on technocratic values like formal evaluation and disengaged social workers.

Engaging and Leaving the Field

Choices regarding how to engage in the field are important when dealing with vulnerable informants. In this study, I was physically present in the field over a number of time periods because it was necessary to be away from the field to process and reflect on the gathered data before returning to collect more data. An advantage of this model is that it allows one to be mentally separated from the field while analyzing the empirical data.

For me, going to and from the field was a conscious ethnographic decision. The municipality at the center of my research is in Denmark, and because I am Danish, in many ways I belong to the same cultural and social spheres, so home-blindness could be a possible consequence. That is, if a researcher is too much in a field that resembles his or her own cultural references, the researcher can find it difficult to reflect and analyze with mental distance and return with renewed wonder (Geertz, 1973; Spradley, 1980).

A disadvantage of this conscious decision to periodically leave the field was that I often had to renegotiate access to the field. This was most evident when after a period of 4 months I returned to the enterprise with the conveyor belt components. In the interval, this enterprise had gotten a new manager, whom I had not previously met. Jansson told me that he was aware of my existence and my research, but apart from that he was not very engaged in my work, and more surprisingly, he did not seem interested in any of my findings that could develop the enterprise. I attempted to navigate this by twice meeting with him personally to present myself and the research. Later on, I also attempted to wake Jansson's interest by telling him that the research was a large project financed both by my university and by the municipality. All in all, I must admit, neither of these efforts was overly successful as I never heard from him again.

It is a question of balance and sensitivity whether a research chooses to be implanted in the field for a longer concentrated period of time. An advantage of concentrated stays is that they generally allow for deeper embedding and participant observation. In my research among vulnerable participants, a further advantage might have been that I would not constantly have to renegotiate their trust in me.

When ending fieldwork, there are a number of issues to take into account. At the end of each interview, I would always ask whether there was anything in particular the participants wanted to add or ask. Doing so frequently led to subsequent conversations for up to an hour in which themes were further elaborated. I was regularly asked about the research and my own personal background. In these situations, most employees were eager to talk about their own day-to-day life experiences.

After the first couple of interviews with informants, after having spent time with them for several hours and talking about their very personal stories, I noticed a recurring ethical dilemma. When I was forced to end the conversation and say goodbye, I was careful not to treat the employees as *use-and-throw-away-informants* who just provide information for empirical data. Instead, I consciously addressed them as people with individual stories and legitimate opinions.

After leaving the field, it is often important to maintain contact by returning and discussing the results of the study with participants. As Richard Jenkins (2002) emphasizes, only self-awareness and reflection before, during, and after fieldwork can clarify one's own preconceptions and ideologies. I was continuously interested in the employees' own approaches to the study and always asked about their experiences and views, so I regularly held meetings with employees at which I referenced and reflected on my findings and analyses in a dialogue.

Themes in their responses were often thoughts of being labeled as a specific group of informants and of whether my findings would be used to generate better conditions for vulnerable citizens. I was happy to tell them that this specific theme was a significant part of the project. A further advantage of hearing employees' agendas and stereotypes is that they often provide valuable insights into challenges and what actually works well. This ideally gives an understanding of what should be continued in a practice field and what ought to change.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

This case addressed some of the challenges and necessary methodological reflections for a researcher when entering into a new field, especially when approaching vulnerable informants. I hope that my reflections inspire readers when they are doing their own research and making ethnographic choices.

In my research, I attempted to gain insight into experiences and interactions among vulnerable informants (employees) in three business social enterprises. The empirical insights generated analyses of why and how the employees negotiate social arenas, which gave rise to a discussion of larger issues related to social work policy in a local municipality. Cultural aspects like relations within the groups of employees and their relation to municipal social workers were prevalent features, and in a dynamic understanding of culture, I wanted an emphasis on the employees' ability to act and navigate through active reflection and participation.

An important effort for ethnographic researchers is to constantly reflect on their own position and objectivity in the field. For example, my reflections included the following: How did each meeting with the employees go? When should I keep a low profile? Am I a subconscious mediator of informants' attempts to make me an agent for their empowerment agendas?

Even though I gained a profound knowledge of the field and often a familiarity with the employees, both they and I were aware that I was not one of them and never would be. To negotiate this issue, I was constantly self-reflective and reflected on preliminary analyses with the employees. This latter approach also gave rise

to dialogues about what I noticed during the study. Thus, my research became a balanced blend of participant observation and active discussions with the employees.

The researcher has a conscious and visible role and will always be the research instrument par excellence. The difference between the researcher and informants is that the former should retain a conscious meta-view on actions and positions. It is not possible to be a fly on the wall in fieldwork because working ethnographically brings specific interests, personal experiences, power relations, and theoretical approaches to the field. In this perspective, ethnographic fieldwork can never be carried out without social and cultural themes characterizing the fieldworker's actions or thoughts.

Simultaneously, when the researcher enters a field, he or she will often appear as a novice who learns by observing and testing. Methodologically speaking, it was only through watching, listening, asking questions, and making blunders that I was able to acquire a sense of the social settings to begin to understand the employees' world.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Two approaches of being in the field are discussed in this case: for a concentrated term versus going in and out of the field periodically. What are some additional pros and cons of these approaches when relating specifically to vulnerable informants?
2. What other approaches than the ones discussed in the case could have been used to gain access to the participants' day-to-day lives?
3. Discuss additional situations in fieldwork where the researcher relates to vulnerable informants—and some situations when the researcher definitely does not do this.
4. How would you design a research in a similar field with vulnerable informants to gain more emotionally embedded results?
5. Discuss some other ethical issues to be aware of when doing research among vulnerable citizens.

Further Reading

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