

Lecture 003: Thinking Sociologically

1 Sociological Objectives: What Can a Sociological Outlook Achieve?

“Cultures, as shared systems of meaning and practice, shape our hopes and beliefs; our ideas about family, identity, and society; our deepest assumptions about being a person in this world” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 1).

“Ethnographic researchers attempt to develop an understanding of how a culture works” (Bell, 2005 p.17).

“Ethnography is a method for understanding culture” (Hine, 2005, p. 8).

“The goal is to grasp everyday perspectives by participating in daily life, rather than to subject people to experimental stimuli or decontextualized interviews. Ethnographers often speak of their work as ‘holistic’. Rather than slicing up social life according to variables chosen for their contribution to variance in a statistically drawn sample, ethnographers attend to how cultural domains constitute and influence each other” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 3).

2 Structure or Structures of Feeling?

“The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills, 1959, p. 5).

“Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between ‘the personal troubles of milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure.’ This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science” (Mills, 1959, p. 8).

3 Hypothesising or Describing?

“Ethnographic research is fundamentally distinct from experimentations; the goal is not to determine how controlled variables account for difference, but to trace and interpret the complex currents of everyday life that comprise our collective lived experience as human beings” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 3).

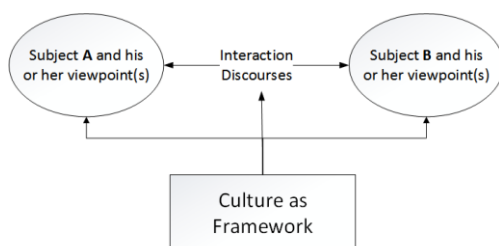
4 What do People Do?

“From this point of view we can say that sociology is distinguished through viewing human actions as elements of wider figurations: mutual dependency (dependency being a state in which the probability that the action will be undertaken and the chance of its success change in relation to what other actors are, do or may do). Sociologists ask what consequences this has for human actors, the relations into which we enter and the societies of which we are a part” (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 5).

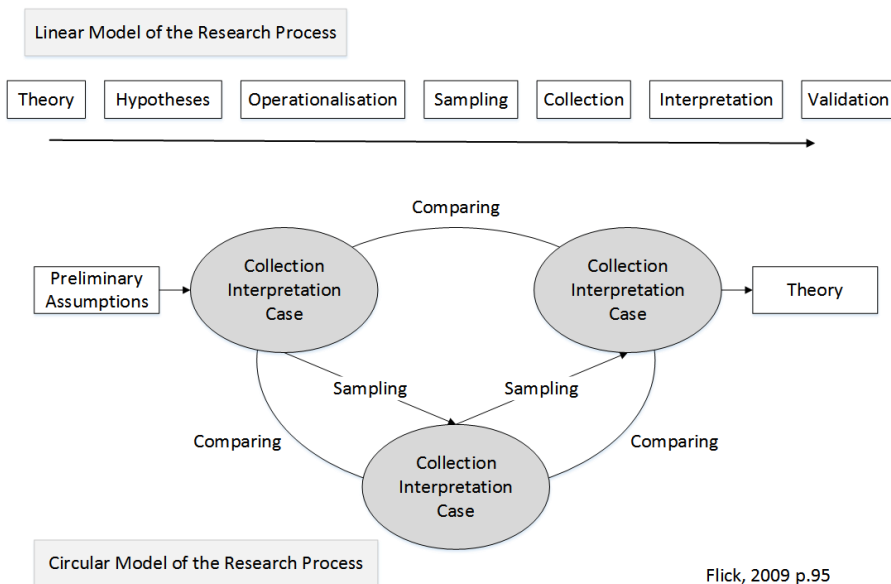
5 Theorising?

“That there is no ‘grand theory’, no one universal scheme in terms of which we can understand the unity of social structure, no one answer to the tired old problem of social order taken *uberhaupt* [in the first place]” (Mills, 1959, p. 46).

“Thinking sociologically is a way of understanding the human world that also opens up the possibility for thinking about the same world in different ways” (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 5).



(Flick, 2009 p.65)



6 Being in the Field - Observations of Lifeworlds

“Usually ethnography is concerned with all aspects of social life, or all facets of a social setting. Broadly, the idea is for the researcher to be immersed in the setting, to generate an understanding of the context in which interaction is rooted” (MacKay in Hine, 2005, p. 134).

When we set out to research social interactions we cannot specify in advance just what form those interactions will take, nor how we will be able to participate in or observe them” (p. 2).

7 Participant Observation

“Participant observation enables researchers, as far as is possible, to share the same experiences as the subjects, to understand better why they act in the way they do and ‘to see things as those involved see things’ (Denscombe 1998: 69)” (Hine, 2005 p.17).

“The very act of participating in a community changes the nature of later data analysis. This is what makes ethnography and netnography so thoroughly different from techniques such as content analysis or social network analysis. A content analyst would scan the archives of online communities, but she or he would not be reading them deeply for their cultural information, pondering them and seeking to learn from them how to live in this community and to identify as a community member. This is the task of the netnographer” (Bell, 2005, p. 96).

http://wps.pearsoned.co.uk/ema_uk_he_plummer_sociology_3/40/10342/2647687.cw/content/

8 Interviews

“Sociology is an extended commentary on the experiences that arise in social relations and is an interpretation of those experiences in relation to others and the social conditions in which people find themselves” (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 180).

<http://www.sociology.org.uk/methfi.pdf>

9 Field Journals

“Because ethnographers can anticipate large amounts of data, categories for interpretation emerge from the ground up, and research questions and foci shift during fieldwork. It is thus best to categorise and continually sort and re-sort the data as these are collected”.

“The better you can get at organising data as you collect them, the more methodical and systematic about data collection that you can become, then the better a netnographer you will be”.

“It is also valuable to record observational fieldnotes written in the margins of downloaded data, elaborating upon subtleties noticed at the time but which are not captured in the text or data itself. These fieldnotes offer details about the social and interactional processes that make up the members of online cultures and communities’ everyday lives and activities. It is best to capture them contemporaneously with interactive online social experiences is important because these processes of learning, socialisation, and acculturation are subtle and our recollection of them becomes rapidly diluted over time”.

<http://instruct.uwo.ca/biology/320y/fj.html>

10 Reflection

“Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence – a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors” (Dewey 1910 p.2).

“Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance” (Dewey 1910 p.13).

“Reflexivity is thus the extent to which the netnographic text acknowledges the role of the researcher and is open to alternative interpretations”.

- What is the role of the researcher in this process?
- What kind of assumptions do we make and what kind of bias do we retain?
- How can we incorporate our own experience within the research process?
- <http://science.jrank.org/pages/11000/Reflexivity-Reflexivity-in-Sociology.html>

11 Empathising, Being and Participating with Others

“We are both enabled and constrained in the everyday practices of freedom. At one level we are taught that there are types of desires that are acceptable and achievable within the group. Appropriate ways to act, talk, dress, conduct ourselves generally provide for the orientation that is needed to get us through life within the groups to which we belong. We then judge ourselves according to these expectations and our self-esteem is given accordingly” Bauman and May (2001, p. 20).

12 Generic Social Processes

“People in all manner of associations find themselves coming to terms with a relatively generic set of processes. These include the matters of:

- (1) acquiring perspectives;
- (2) achieving identity;
- (3) doing activity (performing activities, influencing others, making commitments);
- (4) developing relationships;
- (5) experiencing emotionality; and
- (6) achieving communicative fluency.

We may expect that people participating in any setting may be differentially attentive to these dimensions of association on both an overall, collective basis and over time. However, by attending to each of these sub-processes, researchers may more completely approximate the multiplistic features of particular roles (and relationships) that the participants in those settings experience” (Prus, 1999, p. 144).

13 Generic Social Processes

“This overview of generic social processes is organised around three very broad concepts:

- (a) participating in situations,
- (b) engaging subcultural life-worlds, and
- (c) forming and coordinating associations.

These three themes should not be seen as stages or sequences but, instead, represent interrelated sets of processes that people implement on more or less simultaneous basis as they do things in the community” (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 142).

14 Settings and Life-Worlds

“The interactionist, generally, concentrate on the ways in which people manage or deal with particular aspects of their life-worlds. While this agenda is still rather encompassing, the underlying attentiveness to the ongoing accomplishment of human activity represents the essential core for approaching the study of the human condition” (Prus, 1999, p. 140).

“The very act of participating in a community changes the nature of later data analysis. This is what makes ethnography and netnography so thoroughly different from techniques such as content analysis or social network analysis. A content analyst would scan the archives of online communities, but she or he would not be reading them deeply for their cultural information, pondering them and seeking to learn from them how to live in this community and to identify as a community member. This is the task of the netnographer.

15 The task before us, therefore, involves

(a) attending to the various life worlds or subcultural realms that *the participants* distinguish and

(b) establishing intimate familiarity with those participating in these life-worlds so that we might be better able to acknowledge and identify the situated and emergent interlinkages, disjunctures, and irrelevancies that people experience in the course of conducting their affairs.

Minimally, this requires that social scientists suspend the pursuit for cultural holisms or overarching rationalities, or at least approach these with exceedingly great caution, even in what may seem the most simplistic of human communities” (Prus, 1999, p. 136).

“Hence, even when analysts focus on people’s participation in specific settings, it is important that analysts be mindful of these overlapping life-worlds and the ways in which people manage their multiple realms of involvement” (Prus, 1999, p. 143).

16 Collecting Stuff and Reporting Back

1. “Qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with process, rather than outcomes or products.
2. Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning – how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world.
3. The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through the human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines.
4. Qualitative research involves fieldwork. The researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site, or institution to observe or record behaviour in its natural setting
5. Qualitative research is descriptive in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through words and pictures.
6. The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details” (Creswell 1994 p.145).

17 Reporting and assessing social media usages:

The idea behind this approach to data analysis is straightforward:

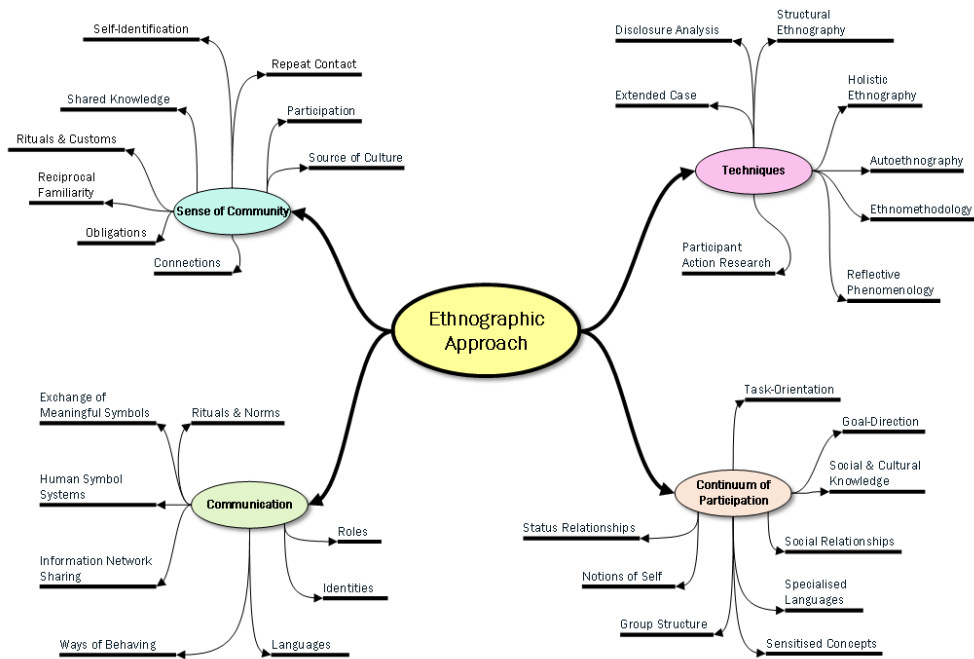
- Consider the online environment a social world.
- Assume that online environments have social and language games, with attendant rules, fields, winners, and losers.
- Treat online data as a social act.
- Seek to understand the meaning of these acts in the context of the appropriate social worlds.
- When appropriate, broaden the particular online social world to interact with other online social worlds as well as other social worlds that are not exclusively online, or not online at all”.

“Individual actors come into the view of sociological study in terms of being members or partners in a network of interdependence. Given that, regardless of what we do, we are dependent on others, the central questions of

sociology, we could say, are: how do the types of social relations and societies that we inhabit relate to how we see each other, ourselves and our knowledge, actions and their consequences” (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 5).

“The social scientist who spends his intellectual force on the details of small-scale milieux is not putting his work outside the political conflicts and forces of his time. He is, at least indirectly and in effect, ‘accepting’ the framework of his society. But no one who accepts the full intellectual tasks of social science can merely assume that structure. In fact, it is his job to make that structure explicit and to study it as a whole” (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 78).

“The better you can get at organising data as you collect them, the more methodical and systematic about data collection that you can become, then the better a netnographer you will be”.



Kozinets, R.V. (2010) Netnography – Doing Ethnographic Research Online; Sage, London

18 Conclusion

“In our quest to find the ‘difference that makes the difference’, how do the practices of these branches of study differ from each other?” (Bauman & May, 2001; Prus, 1999, p. 4).

19 References

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20 Qualitative Research Design

Watch the introduction to the Faculty of Technology Research Ethics:

<http://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-governance/pg-and-research/human-research-ethics/technology/human-research-ethics.aspx>

20.1 Introduction:

- “Qualitative research occurs in natural settings, where human behaviour and events occur.
- Qualitative research is based on assumptions that are very different from quantitative designs. Theory or hypotheses are not established a priori.
- The researcher is the primary instrument in data collection rather than some inanimate mechanism.
- The data that emerge from a qualitative study are descriptive. That is, data are reported in words [primarily the participants words] or pictures, rather than in numbers.
- The focus of qualitative research is on participants’ perceptions and experiences, and the way they make sense of their lives. The attempt is to understand not one, but multiple realities.
- Qualitative research focuses on the process that is occurring as well as the product or outcome. Researchers are particularly interested in understanding how things occur.
- Idiographic interpretation is utilised. In other words, attention is paid to particulars; and data are interpreted in regards to the particulars of a case rather than generalisations.
- Qualitative research is an emergent design in its negotiated outcomes. Meanings and interpretations are negotiated with human data sources because it is the subjects’ realities that the researcher attempts to reconstruct.
- This research tradition relies on the utilisation of tacit knowledge (intuitive and felt knowledge) because often the nuances of the multiple realities can be appreciated most in this way. Therefore, data are not quantifiable in the traditional sense of the word.
- Objectivity and truthfulness are critical to both research traditions. However, the criteria for judging a qualitative study differ from quantitative research. First and foremost, the researcher seeks believability based on coherence, insight and instrumental utility and trustworthiness through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures” (Creswell 1994 p.163).

“A compendium of Data Collection Approaches in Qualitative Research:

- Gather observational notes by conducting an observation as a participant.
- Gather observational notes by conducting an observation as an observer.
- Conduct an unstructured, open-ended interview and take interview notes.
- Conduct an unstructured, open-ended interview, audiotape the interview, and transcribe the interview.
- Keep a journal during the research study.
- Have and informant keep a journal during the research study.
- Collect personal letters from informants.
- Analyse public documents (e.g. official memos, minutes, archival material).
- Examine autobiographies and biographies.
- Examine physical trace evidence (e.g., footprints in the snow).
- Videotape a social situation or and individual/group.
- Examine photographs or videotapes.
- Have informants take photographs or videotapes.
- Collect sounds (e.g., musical sounds, a child’s laughter, car horns honking).” (Creswell 1994 p.149)

20.2 The Type of Design Used

- What is the typical unit of analysis used in the design? [Interview, Survey, Journal, participant observation, document tracking, etc. Or, does this mean what is the theoretical model that is used – i.e. interpretive, grounded, conversation, discourse analysis?]
- Are there any alternative types of problems often studied by using the design? [Survey journals focussing on cultural practice, e-learning and social media, include Digital Ethnography]
- What are the various data collection processes? [Outline data collection mechanism, the relationship between online material and reported material, how they correspond or interact between informants and change over time.

How will I physically record data and track this information? Will I use video recordings, audio recordings, field notes, etc.?)

- What are the various data analysis processes? [Outline modelling process, how different elements interact or correspond, and how they change over time. Will this include any specific models worked out via other studies, for example, organisation management, behavioural studies, conversational analysis?]
- What are the typical formats for reporting the information? [Tabulated, narrative, relationship mapping, etc?]
- Are there any other special characteristics of the design? [Does digital ethnography pose any specific problems? What are the contingencies between what people say and what they are observed to do? Are the observations of the researcher verifiable?]

20.3 The Role of the Researcher

- What is the role of the researcher in the design? [Relate and describe my personal involvement in the project, and the ongoing relationship with the informants. How will my professional involvement affect the research? Will I be able to manage potential conflicts between my research role and my professional role?]
- How will the researcher gain entry to the situation being studied? [A moderation role within DemonFM, and a teaching role within modules]
- Why was the site chosen for study? [Direct access, full involvement with project, early originator of structure, professional interest in outcomes, direct relationship with respondents]
- What will be done at the site during the research study? [How am I proposing to observe, interact and collect data from informants? What type of data collection will I deploy?]
- Will it be disruptive? [How will this data collection be conducted unobtrusively and without disruption? How will I do this ethically? Seeking to integrate in to some teaching activity and some additional meetings and discussions]
- How will the results be reported?
- What will the 'gatekeeper' gain from the study?
- What process will be followed to ensure ethical integrity for the informants?
- How will sensitive issues be managed and maintained?

20.4 Data Collection Procedures

- What are the parameters for the data collection? [What and who are being excluded from the study?]
- What is the setting?
- Who are the actors?
- What are the events?
- What is the process?
- What form will any observations take? [Mixed-media recordings of discussions?]
- What form will any interviews take? [Structured or unstructured? Recorded and annotated?]
- What documents will be referred to? [Online media, email communications, Twitter Feeds, Facebook groups, station planning material, participant journals?]
- What audiovisual materials will be referred to?
- How will these activities will be conducted simultaneously? [Collecting a range of data at the same time is going to be essential, how will the integrity and continuity of this data be ensured?]

20.5 Data Recording Procedures

- What is to be recorded?
- How is it going to be recorded?
- In what way will the process of qualitative evaluation be based on data 'reduction' and 'interpretation'?
- How will this information be represented in matrices?
- What coding process will be used to reduce the data to themes or categories?
- Are there any specific data analysis procedures that are inherent in qualitative design?

20.6 Methods of Verification

- How will the study address the issue of internal validity, the accuracy of information and whether it matches reality?
- To what extent are the findings limited or generalisable – the external validity?
- What are the limitations of replicating the study?

20.7 Outcome of the Study and its Relation to Theory and Literature

- The qualitative narrative –
- What form will the qualitative narrative take?
- How will the narrative outcome relate to the design type?
- How will the narrative outcome be compared to theories and the general literature on the topic?

This study will utilise the ethnographic research tradition. This design emerged in the field of anthropology, primarily from the contributions of ... The intent of ethnographic research is to obtain a holistic picture of the subject of study with emphasis on portraying the everyday experiences of individuals by observing and interviewing them and relevant others. The ethnographic study includes in-depth interviewing and continual ongoing participant observation of a situation and in attempting to capture the whole picture reveals how people describe and structure their world (from Creswell 1994 p.163).