Working With Ethnographic Fieldnotes: Learning Tango
Working With Ethnographic Fieldnotes: Learning Tango

Student Guide

Introduction
Ethnographers are committed to the study of the everyday life of people and groups. Taking ethnographic fieldnotes, writing down observations and experiences from the setting under study, is a key part of doing ethnographic research. This data exemplar illustrates one possible approach to the analysis of ethnographic fieldnotes. The data used in this exemplar are provided by the Distinguished Research Professor Paul Atkinson and is taken from research he conducted on the South American partner dance, the tango. The aims of this research project were to document embodied teaching and learning. The exemplar consists of the ethnographic fieldnotes Paul dictated immediately after he attended his first tango class as a learner, together with an analytic memo which outlines how he approached the initial stages of the analysis of these fieldnotes. The exemplar will help you to think about the preliminary analysis of field data, particularly data collected in the first days of being in the field.

Ethnographic Fieldnotes
Fieldnotes are a key part of ethnographic research. Fieldnotes are where researchers record research notes, often extensive and detailed, of the experiences and observations they have seen while participating in or observing the activity they are studying. There is no fixed way to take fieldnotes and the setting will often dictate when and how you record them. In this case, as Paul was participating in the tango lesson, he experimented with dictating his notes
into a digital recorder after the event. Of course, others might prefer to write their fieldnotes in a book or type straight into a computer. Obviously you cannot record everything and one of the main challenges is to decide what is important to record and what to leave out.

Data Exemplar: Learning Tango

This data exemplar is intended to illustrate one way in which you might approach the analysis of ethnographic fieldnotes. The data used in this exemplar are provided by the Distinguished Research Professor Paul Atkinson and are taken from research on the South American partner dance, tango. The aims of this research project were to document embodied learning and teaching of a tango class in Cardiff, United Kingdom. The data exemplar is comprised of the ethnographic fieldnotes Paul dictated immediately after he attended his first tango class as a learner, and an analytic memo which outlines how he approached the initial stages of the analysis of the fieldnotes. The exemplar is not intended to stand as a completed mini-ethnography of tango, still less a study of tango to stand alongside major published sources, but as an example of how you might approach the thematic analysis of this kind of field data.

Analysis: Thematic Analysis – Analytic Memo

How you treat this research material in terms of analysis will depend on the aims of your research, your epistemological persuasion and your research question. Below Paul provides an example of how you might approach a thematic analysis of the ethnographic fieldnotes in this data exemplar.

First, I would think about some local issues. That is, themes and ideas that are more or less specific to those events and that stick fairly closely to the narrative. So things to start thinking about might include:
Finding the rhythm: How do I and the other students find ways of responding to the music? Does the class find a collective tempo and rhythm, or do individuals and couples seem to have their own? How do couples negotiate the coordination of their physical movements? How do men learn to lead and women to follow? How do we learn to socialise our bodies in accordance with the music and with the style of tango?

The etiquette of the dance floor: How do members respond to dancing with strangers of different shapes, sizes, ages, sexes and levels of competence? How do couples manage their brief encounters? Tango is a pretty intimate activity, and we dance in a close embrace. Does this create problems of civility? How do we manage our mutual gaze? How do we try to develop a shared physical and temporal rapport with a stranger (or series of strangers)?

Argentine authenticity: References to the milonga as a social event are used to introduce ideas of an authentically Argentine dance. Is this regularly involved as a pedagogic justification? The authenticity of the dance is closely related to the authenticity of the body – the feline movement that is enjoined on men for instance, and injunctions such as the fact that one should never see the soles of your shoes (because one glides in a sensuous manner). Is the talk of an authentically tango or Argentine body something that will persist? Is it pervasive in tango discourse?

But right from the outset I’d also want to start working with some more generic ideas. That is, ideas that might transcend the local and the specific, and link the tango class with other kinds of setting: other cases if you like. For instance, I might take my first one and rework it as something like The Discourse of Authenticity. That would then lead me to think about other settings where similar phenomena
might be visible. So I’d maybe look at literature on authentic instruments for baroque and classical music. I’d definitely look at various martial arts where national/ethnic origins, partly of tradition and so on, are regularly invoked. I might look at literature on food and ethnic cuisine – where "eating" authenticity might be a relevant issue. I might want to look at studio potters and how Japanese traditions got talked about. There is a similar kind of discourse around glass-making and the Murano tradition. And so on. I happen to know that there’s some fascinating anthropological work on oriental carpets that deals explicitly with authenticity. In turn that would probably lead me to think about the anthropology of art and value. I should then want to think about related phenomena – like connoisseurship. So I would seek out published accounts by people who had studied art collectors and how they become connoisseurs of particular styles, periods or artists.

I’d want to think about some of the forms of the encounter. For instance, the nature of repetition. Repetition is a key feature of lessons, of craft apprenticeship and learning and rehearsal in the theatre, the ballet, the opera, and so on. I might seek out ideas from settings like language laboratories, where repetition and imitation are key features of a particular pedagogic. So I’d be thinking about the Pedagogy of Repetition.

I’d also want to start linking my specific ideas and experiences to ideas of embodied incompetence, competence and coordination. The disobedient body, the body that is out of time. I’d again look for other examples of problems of mastering physical skills in workplaces, in laboratories, among professional dancers, among sportsmen and women. Obviously there are lots of settings to think about in that context. My partner Sara studies the Brazilian fight-dance martial art capoeira. It immediately provides many parallels. Like Argentine tango, it is predicated on a particular type or style of movement – Brazilians say that European men (in particular) can rarely master the forms, as we all have what they call ‘hard waists’. That is why we can’t dance samba or play football beautifully.
The sexy movement of the tango is similarly predicated on a style of physical technique that is held to be distinctively Argentine (or Latin) and therefore especially hard for white European men to master. Note – this is not a matter of believing that European men cannot dance, that Brazilians play football ‘naturally’, or that only Argentine men can dance tango. It is a matter of analysing how such a rhetoric of justification and embodied authenticity is used to justify certain kinds of embodiment. Therefore I would want to extend my thinking and my analysis to consider a wide variety of such imagery and rhetoric: white boys can’t jump; Africans and African Americans have a natural sense of rhythm.

I would like to extend my analysis of dance by thinking more fully about rhythm in everyday life as well as in music and dance. Of course, the tango class is pervaded by the rhythms of the tango itself. But there are other rhythms as well. There is the rhythm of the lesson – its distinctive shape, its pacing. There is the relationship between musical rhythm and the support of mood and enthusiasm. So obviously I can turn my attention to other settings where music is a key element in such a pedagogic encounter. In this case I would refer in detail to Tia DeNora’s ethnographic study of music in everyday life that includes observations in aerobics classes. So, again, I would be extending my thinking by reading about soundscapes and sonic phenomena: how sound and music are used to co-ordinate shared activity, intimacy, emotion.

Reflective Questions

1. The fieldnotes in this example were dictated immediately after Paul’s first tango lesson. How might alternative ways of recording fieldnotes – dictation, writing brief notes or producing extensive narratives – affect the way you treat the data?

2. Taking gender and self-presentation as two further key themes in the data, what sort of ideas could you explore further?
3. Reflect on how fieldnotes should or should not reflect the researcher’s own involvement and explanation of the setting.

Further Reading


