

Ethnography, the Environment and Education—the Rottneest Voluntary Guide Experience

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Introduction

This paper was originally written as part of my Masters of Education study of environmental education on Rottneest Island, Western Australia. This paper describes an initial observation exercise employing ethnographic research techniques to reveal the motivations, culture and world view of the Rottneest Voluntary Guides, a group of people who volunteer their time to conduct free environmental tours for the public visiting the Island.

This observation exercise was followed up by an in-depth study, involving interviews with individual Guides, in an attempt to learn: how members of the group construct their world; what assumptions they make; what it is to be a member of that group; and why they chose to spend their time with the group.

What is ethnographic research?

The ethnographic approach to research is essentially a qualitative one where ethnographers look at a situation, problem or question and ask what is going on and what lies behind the activities being observed. Ethnographic research may also be described as qualitative, naturalistic, ecological or holistic. It has historical, methodological and theoretical links with anthropological research. (Heath 1982, p. 33) However, whilst the traditional anthropological approach describes the ways of living of a social group by looking at interactions and forces at work within the broad community, ethnographers work with a less broad scope, identifying common themes to:

learn what knowledge, values, beliefs and expectations lay behind what was occurring (Gallagher 1984, p. 1).

Traditionally educational research has relied on a quantitative approach where conclusions are derived from the statistical data produced. Qualitative research creates new options. An ethnographic approach can result in experientially rich, highly productive, descriptive data, enabling researchers to gain some understanding of the motives, beliefs, attitudes and commitments which lie behind the events that are observed—an understanding which could not be elicited by other means.

People are constantly ‘doing’ culture, though much of it is transparent to them. The process of culture formation (that is, the

negotiation of common meanings and re-negotiations of those meanings within a group) can be observed and identified from clues as to how it goes on by observing people's behaviour, dress etc. and ascribing meaning to them. It is often not what is said, but how it is said, which reveals underlying values of the group.

Ethnographic research is non-judgemental. Where the data is interpreted, alternative meanings should be sought. This apparently fluid concept of what ethnography is or how far it should go in ascribing meaning is perhaps a reflection of the nature of research itself as a political and social activity as well as an intellectual one and is therefore subject to evolve with the fashions that exist in the general culture.

Group observed

The group I chose for the initial observation was the Rottnest Voluntary Guides, an association set up to conduct free guided tours for the public on Rottnest Island, Western Australia. These tours are normally conducted during the school holidays as part of the public education/interpretation program of the Rottnest Island Authority. During the school holidays a group of usually six to eight guides and their immediate family/friends are accommodated in a couple of houses at the Environmental Education Centre at Kingstown Barracks.

The Association also meets on the mainland, the general body meeting approximately every three months to deal with general business and to listen to a guest speaker on a topic connected with Rottnest. The Committee meets monthly to attend to specific administration details.

Since the primary focus of the Rottnest Voluntary Guides Association is guiding on the Island, I decided to observe them as a group on the Island (rather than on the mainland) as here on the Island, I believe, they are in a more 'natural state'. It is here that they live together as a group, away from the everyday distractions of the mainland. It is because of this that I hoped their interaction and behaviour would reveal more of their culture, their view of reality, of what it means to be a Rottnest Voluntary Guide.

Accessing the group

I am known to most of the Rottnest Voluntary Guides, having worked with the group before and having previously attended their meetings—initially as a Voluntary Guide, but now as an employee of the Rottnest Island Authority. Both the Guides and myself work in the area of 'Educational Services' and are responsible to the Environmental Education and Information Manager, however my status could now be described as paid professional whereas the Guides have a volunteer, amateur status.

It was for this reason that I was careful in the approach made to the group.

The initial approval was sought from the President of the Rottneast Voluntary Guides Association. Permission was obtained with the proviso that it was 'cleared' with the Guides Co-ordinator. The Association's President also recommended that my introduction at the meeting be kept fairly low-key. This was fairly easy to comply with as I was 'known' to drop in occasionally to such meetings to meet up with the Guides on the Island.

The Co-ordinator was happy to allow me to observe the meeting and to take notes, but had reservations about audio-taping. I agreed to take notes only. At the meeting she introduced me briefly saying that I was present to take some notes for an assignment 'I had to do for University'. Whatever personal feelings people may have had, they were not obviously expressed.

As a matter of courtesy I did inform the Manager of Education and Information Services of what I was doing and why. This was readily accepted.

Thus access to the group was fairly easy to obtain, however I am aware that familiarity with the group and the setting could distort my perception of the group and the group's response to my presence. I have attempted to reduce the amount of personal bias/past experiences or, at least, to identify it or expose it where it exists so that the reader can compensate for it (Tripp 1981, p. 217).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework and observation methods used can affect the selection of what is observed, how it is reported and what findings may emerge. It is necessary to identify those methods used to place this observation exercise in a theoretical context.

The approach I chose to use in this observation was based on that of a 'Narrative System', in particular, 'Specimen Description' as described by Evertson and Green (1981, p. 171). These open, interpretivistic, ethnographic systems of observation are characterised by intensive recording of a broad series of events/behaviours in an uninterrupted stream with no pre-determined categories. The observer is the principal instrument of observation and selects the criteria of the who, what, why, when and where as I have already identified. The report of the observation is written in a narrative, journalistic style with no intentional attempt to filter what occurred in a systematic way, though a specific lens may be used. The research describes 'episodes' or 'naturally' occurring units or patterns of activity. The researcher avoids imposing external criteria in appraising what is described. In this way the approach is inclusive, the field is the focus and the details are obscured.

Using this 'open' approach, decisions concerning how the research is done can change as the study progresses, though it has to be done in a

systematic way so that hindsight does not come to present a different perspective (Tripp 1981, p. 221).

By using these methods a different version of the reality of the Rottneest Voluntary Guides is likely to emerge than when other methods are employed. When exclusive approaches are made, for example, specific details are selected for, obscuring the general field. With such 'closed' systems the study is restricted. Such 'Category Systems' (Evertson and Green 1981, p. 171) take a more positivistic stance, with checklists, tallies, numeric representations etc. providing statistical 'evidence' of 'the facts' which become generalised across contexts. At the other end of the continuum (see Figure One) the 'Technical Records' approach makes no attempt to filter/mediate what is observed, but, rather, makes a permanent record of all that occurs in front of the camera or microphone, 'freezing' the event in time for subsequent analysis (which could be made at a later time and by different people). This approach assumes, however, that *all* the action is 'seen' by the camera or 'heard' by the microphone.

'Critical incident' approaches highlight the 'bumps': the 'odd' things which happen that are out of the ordinary. Tripp (1981, p. 220) believes that these bumps could illuminate/expose an aspect of the culture which would normally be missed, though Evertson and Green (1981, p. 183) suggest that these bumps in fact do not occur frequently enough to be significant (and therefore are a source of error as they are not part of the common pattern).

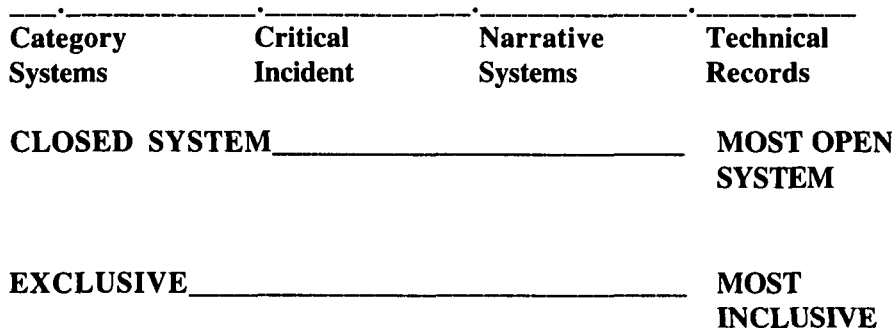


Figure One (based upon Evertson and Green 1981, p. 171)

The Narrative Systems approach fits along a continuum towards the Technical Records (right hand end). The observation is as open and as comprehensive as possible, but selection/filtering may occur. The credibility of such a report on an observation is enhanced by identifying the selection/filtering which has occurred. Thus the grounding of a study is not simple, but is *mediated* by the framework of reference, that is, the theoretical method/approach taken, the assumptions made of those being

observed in the situation and the past experiences of the person doing the observing.

Methodology of observation

The observational process itself can influence the representation of the group's reality. For example, the reaction of the observed to the presence of the observer can alter the behaviour. To try to minimise the effect of my presence, I selected to write up parts of the meeting where the participants had become involved (I believe!) in the proceedings. This I took to be evidenced by the body language—all were leaning forward into the circle and contributing to the discussion. I am assuming from this that the Guides' talk/interaction at this point was a more 'typical' example of that which would occur if I were not present, though my presence still obviously had an influence.

By making this choice I realise that, in fact, I have moved further along the continuum towards a more positivistic position to the left of the position the Narrative System might normally occupy.

Having been asked not to audio-tape the proceedings (presumably to cut down on people being self-conscious), I was restricted to note-taking, which worried me a bit as I felt I would miss out on rapidly moving discussion which may be crucial. I think that I did miss some specific detail, but the overall 'flavour' is there. I did miss however, instances where exchange of more than one communication was taking place, when, in particular, I caught the end of a non-verbal exchange.

Because I was not able to get everything down by the note-taking method of recording there is a loss of continuity in the description and 'episodes' seem to have been selected for (albeit unwittingly at the time of the observation). In this way I believe that this method of recording has limited and biased the material available for interpretation.

One advantage of having my head down writing for a lot of the time was that it helped me to cut down on my eye contact with the group (which I would normally use for a significant amount of the time in meetings). In this way the group tended to 'get on' with their discussions and not involve me or seek my reaction to what was said. Note-taking, therefore, was a useful distracting vehicle. This also had the effect that it made me concentrate on what was said (and perhaps the way it was said to a lesser extent) rather than the non-verbal communication which was going on—though I did make a note of spatial arrangements, seating arrangements, props etc. at the start of the observation.

Description

Five Rottneest Voluntary Guides sit around the plastic circular table in the lounge room of Hampton Cottage on Rottneest Island, Western Australia. Their daily meeting begins at 5pm and dinner is served in the Mess Hall at

6pm. Most are wearing their bright yellow Guide uniform, despite having finished their duties for the day. Of the five people around the table only one is male: a sprightly 60 year old with grey hair (Frank). The Coordinator, June, is aged around 65-70 years and has a loud voice. Beth, Ros and Alison are all approximately the same age—in their early 40s. I sit between Beth and Ros. Liz (June's daughter) has not yet arrived—she is finishing a tour—and Janet has sent her apologies.

Both Beth and Ros have their elbow on the table, chin in hand, leaning forward. Alison sits further back with her arms folded. Frank's hands are in his lap. June leans across to tap him on the arm with one hand, the other is on her hip. I sit back from the table, out of the circle, making notes on a pad on my lap.

On the table are packets of dips and biscuits and a bowl of fruit and nuts. I am invited to share them—which I do. Beth and Ros each have a can of 'Export' beer in front of them. June has her duty rosters in front of her with a pen. The mantelpiece over the fire place is littered with guide handouts, duty rosters, bits off the beach and assorted keys—otherwise there are no other objects belonging to the Guides in the room.

Much of the early business of the meeting revolves around the numbers of people who went on the day's tours:

Ros: Alison's doing salt ...

June: No—Beth did—and she had 27 and 14 go up on the bus—perhaps its important to keep a note of that. History—Ros, how many?

Ros: 36.

June: Quite a crowd—wonderful. Now the scouts—altogether we had how many on that?

Ros: 35.

Beth: Didn't he say ...

June: Think he did ...

Ros: What about the adults?—there were about 6.

June: Count the leaders because they were ...

Ros: 35 and 6 is 41.

June: How many on the bike tour?

Alison: 2 (Note: Alison has not been involved until now).

Ros: *Only 2!*

Alison: I asked a lot of people hanging around and they said no thanks. But we saw a dugite snake and a king skink ...

June: (breaking in) ... and then she brought them back and made a cup of tea and sandwiches. I thought that was very gracious.

Alison: You know that bike tour, we shouldn't publicise it as a bike tour ... just say I'll show you a few sights.

June: ... its probably worth having people down there.

Alison: ... when its not pushed as a tour ... it might account for the numbers.

The meeting continues through various accounts of the people whom the Guides met on their tours that day and reaches a time when negotiation of 'who is going to do which tour' is reached. At this stage all of the group are leaning forward—apparently engrossed in what was being discussed.

Beth: Janet wants to go—well she *can* come along—then she can go onto the beach, then I'll do the morning guns—so—can, in fact I sent people onto the guns because they have half an hour between the birds and the bus.

June: Ros, what would you like to do? I've got history, Kingstown, salt lakes.

Ros: I'll think I'd better stick to history—well I'll do a history and a salt lake.

June: Oh no, one's enough. Annette's coming in the morning—if Annette—if she doesn't mind doing the Scout's bike—see their lunch is at 12 and so bike tour at 1.30. Anyhow, getting back to Kingstown ...

And so the discussion continues, the group constantly negotiating and renegotiating tours with each other and side-tracking from the apparent business in hand:

Beth: No—you don't mind?

Frank: —I don't mind.

June: You can't, you're doing history.

Beth: ... *she'd* like to do that ...

Ros: ... well I was going to do the kiosk ... what time?

June: 10-12—it closes at 12.

Frank: Who's in there?

June/Ros: Ali.

Ros: Gee, she knows a lot too.

June: She should do—she's Charlie's wife.

Frank: Who's Charlie?

June: *You know*—the tree man.

Ros: (aside

to Beth): ... not the Myer Christmas tree man (ha).

Alison: No, I'll do the bike tour tomorrow—a couple of people on it have booked me.

June is scribbling down the roster with a lot of crossing out and changing around:

Beth: You need some more paper—and for your leaving present we'll give you a bottle of liquid paper.

Liz bursts in—out of breath.

Liz: Phew, made it.

June: ... and you had quite a crowd...

Liz: 14—and 14 on the beach walk (sits between Frank and June (her mother) and looks at tomorrow's roster)—you've put me down for *that*!

The latter part of the meeting is taken up with anecdotal stories of the day:

June: Frank did a tour today.

Frank: And you should have seen what I was wearing!—Chris's stripy American pants!

(Chris is a US exchange student staying with Frank on the mainland).

Liz: Why, what happened to your uniform?

Frank: My luggage hadn't arrived and I had to borrow some from Chris.

June: You told me they were his sister's!

(general guffaws of laughter)

Beth: Frank was in drag—put that in the notes, Annie.

The other reference to myself came at the end of the meeting:

June: (trying to recap on tomorrow's tours): Salt lake *Ros*--you right, *Ros*, love ... yeah! Anything else? Meeting closed ...

Beth: Glad you've stopped taking notes, Annie. Now I can tell you about this lady today. I nearly died when she started breast feeding her baby on the bird walk—and then she stripped her at the Museum.

and later:

Annie: Would you mind if I bring in my tape recorder tomorrow night?

Generally: ooh—we'll have to be careful what we say.

Interpretation

On a preliminary basis it appears that these Guides have a strong sense of purpose about what it is that they are doing. They appear to measure

'success' (or is it their 'worth?') in terms of the numbers of people turning up for their tours and they appear to enjoy the social opportunities which guiding affords them: they enjoy meeting different people and taking them on tours.

The Guides spent a lot of time negotiating consensual meaning—they were all very careful to cooperate with each other in negotiating who was going to do what, so that a sense of what was considered to be 'fair' and 'proper' to the group was developed. Perhaps it is the development of this consensual meaning of 'fairness' which goes some way to explain what was going on in what appeared to be a somewhat erratic, lengthy and involved process in the allocation of the next day's tours. Despite the frequent interruptions to the dialogue by individuals, this sense of common understanding appeared to be understood and maintained by the group.

It was interesting to me to note that in all of the exchanges bar the one reported (where fleeting reference was made to the dugite and king skink which had been seen) neither the *content* of the tours nor the context of Rottnest was discussed. This may be due to the fact the group was actually on Rottnest at the time of the observation and were conducting the 'set' tours which they were trained for. These matters of content and context may have been 'taken for granted' by this group of Guides or perhaps the location of what they were doing did not matter because they were getting something more than 'Rottnest' from the activity of guiding. From a psychological/sociological perspective it could be suggested that these Guides may be 'getting' a social/personal 'reward' where they can meet different people and lead them around. The Island then acts primarily as a vehicle for the individual Guides to continue to seek/negotiate their identity and value system (which we are all constantly doing—but it is in doing this very activity which can reveal our 'culture'). This may account for the large numbers of 40 year old plus females, in particular, who become Guides. It is often a time in their lives as the children leave home when their self-perceived 'use' as a mother has come to an end and they are looking for another purposeful activity to fill their time—one in which they have some control or sense of 'power' even.

These interpretations (especially those at the meta-structural level) are only some of the several possibilities for interpretation and themselves reflect the personal position of the writer. Other interpretations could be sought from other people who can bring a different 'position' to the data and can offer a different reading.

Reflection on the process of ethnographic research

In this kind of research, it is never possible, nor even desirable to try to interpret the material 'objectively'. To provide more information about the assertions made from this observation exercise, individual interviews

with the people present at the meeting may help. Further interviews could also be conducted with other Guides to increase the sample size if the study design required a generaliseable finding as the product. Observation at similar meetings with other groups of Guides may provide information to suggest whether the findings of this observation exercise are 'typical' of all Guides or not. However, the observation findings should be able to stand alone for that group of Guides in that particular place at that particular time. Similarly, the findings hold for the particular researcher at that place and at that time.

Difficulties were encountered in the ethnographic approach in recording by note-taking only, with so many conversations going on at once and with frequent interruptions resulted in the fragmentation of the record and therefore the description is not as rich as it might otherwise be. The result has become somewhat filtered because of this fragmentation. Selection of the episodes reported may have biased the findings. Further, my closeness to the situation made it more difficult to identify the assumptions made and personal biases. I have attempted to look at the whole field and interpret the data on a macro basis rather than look at the level of individual exchanges. There are more interpretations to be made about the individuals at this micro level which have been omitted here. This may yield more insights and/or provide more backing for my assertions.

The data obtained using an ethnographic approach are very detailed, in great quantity and takes a long time to transcribe, sift through, identify key themes and interpretation. Such research is likely to be more costly in terms of time, than more positivistic methods.

Ethnographic research methods provide a highly probing tool which can reveal more about a situation than the group or individuals probably intend. In the full study of the Rottnest Voluntary Guides, the data obtained has revealed emotional, sociological and cultural aspects which would not have been revealed with a positivistic approach to the research. For this reason, consideration of ethical issues and agreement of the ownership and use of the research findings need to be carefully established with the participants in advance.

In working through the ethnographic process I have become particularly aware of the influence of the assumptions/personal biases when designing and implementing a research study and have learned how to minimise their effects by exposing them so that the ethnographic approach to research has credibility.

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