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Leah Rosenblum Emary

Librarians are Already in the Field: How and why to Begin Ethnographic Fieldwork

Abstract: Librarians want to know what users need and want from the library. Ethnography is a useful method for gaining insight into user needs and wants. Because of our presence both inside and outside of the communities we serve, librarians are uniquely well-suited for using ethnographic methods to observe and analyze how our users behave. This paper will therefore describe why librarians are ideal ethnographers and how ethnography provides unique data for library and information science (LIS) researchers. It describes two ways to enter the field: first it explains how to establish rapport with the wider study population and second how to begin fieldwork with a straightforward, low-risk data collection task.

Keywords: Ethnography; libraries; rapport

Wir sind schon im Feld. Wie und warum man ethnographische Feldarbeit in die Bibliothekswelt integrieren kann

Zusammenfassung: Bibliothekare möchten wissen, was Bibliotheksnutzer von Bibliotheken wollen und brauchen. Die Anthropologie bietet eine nützliche Methode, durch die man einen Einblick in die Bedürfnisse und Wünsche von Nutzern gewinnen kann. Weil Bibliothekare gleichzeitig außerhalb und innerhalb ihrer Nutzercommunities stehen, sind sie aus ethnographischer Sicht gut geeignet, um das Nutzerverhalten zu beobachten und zu analysieren. Dieser Artikel beschreibt, warum Bibliothekare gute Anthropologen sein können und welche Daten die Anthropologie der Bibliothekswissenschaft bieten kann. Er beschreibt zwei Wege, um sich dem Forschungsfeld anzunähern: erstens, wie man ein gutes Verhältnis mit der Untersuchungsgruppe aufbauen kann (der sogenannte ‚Rapport') und zweitens, wie man mit unkomplizierter Datenbeschaffung die Feldforschung mit geringem Risiko beginnen kann.

Schlüsselwörter: Ethnografie; Bibliotheken; Zusammenarbeit; Rapport

Leah Rosenblum Emary: l.emary@yorksj.ac.uk

1 Introduction

Librarians want to know what users need and want from the library. Ethnography is a useful method for gaining insight into user needs and wants. Because of our presence both inside and outside of the communities we serve, librarians are uniquely well-suited for using ethnographic methods to observe and analyse how our users behave. Doing ethnography means 'entering the field', a phrase used to describe the site where ethnographers and anthropologists collect data. Rock[1] describes the reluctance ethnographers frequently feel about beginning to collect data and the tendency to avoid it by searching for more background material. There is a danger that projects will stall at this stage.

Rock points out that being outside the field is more comfortable than being inside it. Whereas field research is unpredictable, full of rejections and without chances to re-read an interaction, background research is largely predictable with its familiar scholarly resources: histories, review articles, classics, databases etc. Unlike a group of people, scholarly resources cannot ignore you or get angry. Books can be difficult to understand, but they will wait patiently for the researcher to read and re-read them.

Librarian ethnographers (who will be using ethnography to study communities of library users and non-users) may feel as reluctant as any other researcher to enter the research field. It is likely, however, that because of our training and librarian skills, establishing rapport and entering the field may feel similar for many of us to carrying out our daily work of reaching out and listening to our users[2].

This paper will therefore describe why librarians are ideal ethnographers and how ethnography provides unique data for library and information science (LIS) re-

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1 Rock, P.: Symbolic Interactionism and Ethnography. In: Atkinson P. et al. (ed.): Handbook of Ethnography. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications 2001, pp. 26–38.
2 This article is limited to my experiences and perceptions of university libraries and academic librarians' skills and identity in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany and things may be different in other types of librarians and other countries. The terms ethnography and anthropology are used interchangeably.

searchers. It describes two ways to enter the field: first it explains how to establish rapport with the wider study population and second how to begin fieldwork with a straightforward, low-risk data collection task.

2 Why ethnography for LIS?

Cultures, especially strong academic cultures, have an enormous impact on whether library services and resources will be adopted or rejected. Anthropological methods have great potential for helping us understand our users and reveal them to us in all their complexity. This will, ultimately result in good library services that are relevant to the way that our users work and think, rather than creating services based on what we assume they might be like or what we assume they might want or need.

Ethnography is a qualitative method that approaches culture as a 'text' to be read, rather than an object of study to be tested in search of laws. Clifford Geertz, a late 20th century anthropologist, stressed the importance of interpreting culture in terms of meaning and believed that it is impossible to understand humans away from their place in time and space. Rather than seeking to create a representative sample of humans, remove biases from the study, and generalize research results to describe universal truths, ethnography attempts to describe and translate culture using what Geertz calls 'thick description': a way of describing a cultural behavior in such a way that it makes sense to an outsider, brings to light information about library users and their context[3]. That is just the piece of the puzzle that we so often lack (Greifeneder[4]; Seadle[5]).

The ethnographic research product tends "to look at least as much like romances as they do like lab reports though [...] not really like either"[6]. Translation involves not only fully understanding what is meant in the native but then creating that meaning again in another culture, while somehow maintaining that 'foreignness'[7]. Ever at the edge of our users' cultures, librarians are well-positioned to strike the balance between foreign and familiar, as is discussed below.

Ethnography is not, of course, a suitable method for every library and information science project. It's particularly useful for helping us to see the world through the eyes of our users but not for documenting past events or for predicting future behavior[8]. LIS researchers have used ethnographic methods for several decades, though the approach is increasingly popular, as Khoo et al.[9] document in an excellent survey of the use of ethnographic methods for studying library use and library users.

3 Entering the field

After making sure that the project's aims can be achieved with ethnographic methods, researchers will likely have an idea of how to approach the culture that they would like to study. For example, library ethnographers can use participant observation where they join in with the study population's everyday activities. They can conduct interviews or use cultural probes, such as asking the study population to keep a diary, draw a map, or take photos or videos. Nevertheless, library ethnographers may still experience fear before entering the field, not least because of the dizzying amount of information that confronts them as research begins, where subjects and their actions seem both "mysterious and banal"[10]. DeWalt and DeWalt[11] describe the feelings of entering the field as 'culture shock' whose hallmarks include feelings of inability, failure, hopelessness and stress. Geertz describes how, for several weeks upon beginning their field research, he and his wife were treated as though they were simply not there by a community in Bali:

> "As we wandered around, uncertain, wistful, eager to please, people seemed to look right through us with a gaze focused several yards behind us on some more actual stone or tree. Almost nobody greeted us; but nobody scowled or said anything unpleasant to us either, which would have been almost as satisfactory. If we ventured to approach someone (something one is

3 Geertz, C.: Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1988.

4 Greifeneder, E.: Does it Matter Where We Test? Online User Studies in Digital Libraries in Natural Environments. PhD Thesis, Institut für Bibliotheks- und Informationswissenschaft, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin 2012.

5 Seadle, M.: Project Ethnography: An Anthropological Approach To Assessing Digital Library Services. In: Library Trends 49 (2) (2000) pp. 370–85.

6 Geertz (note 3) p. 8.

7 Crapanzano, V.: Hermes' Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description. In: Clifford, J.; Marcus, G. E. (eds.): Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1986, pp. 51–76.

8 Emary, L. F. R.: When (and When not) to Use Ethnography for LIS Research. In: Priestner, A.; Borg, M. (eds.). UX in Libraries. Surrey, Ashgate [forthcoming].

9 Khoo, M.; Rozaklis, L.; Hall, C.: A Survey of the Use of Ethnographic Methods in the Study of Libraries and Library Users. In: Library & Information Science Research 34 (2) (2012) pp. 82–91.

10 Rock (note 3) p. 3.

11 DeWalt, K. M.; DeWalt, B. R.: Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press 2002.

powerfully inhibited from doing in such an atmosphere), he moved, negligently but definitely, away [...] [T]hey acted as if we simply did not exist, which, in fact, as this behaviour was designed to inform us, we did not, or anyway, not yet."[12]

Participant observation looks a lot like 'hanging out.' The highly social nature of the method makes the possibility for rejection and mistakes very high and researcher anxiety is understandable. These anxious feelings can be alleviated and the barriers to begin with data collection can be lowered if the researcher begins with a relatively straightforward low-risk data collection technique such as a survey, some counting, sketching, or creating a map.[13] If, for example, librarians were interested in finding out about how a particular group of researchers wrote and published their work and they planned to do some participant observation, they might begin field research in the researchers' offices and draw a map of their workspaces. If librarian ethnographers were there for the group's team meeting or coffee break, they might again draw a map of where the group members sit around the table. This type of map, as the library ethnographers collect more and more of them, may give them insight into relationships, power dynamics, a group's history, and communication patterns. If this type of map proved useful, a librarian might also consider having the study populations draw their own maps as librarians did at the University of Rochester.[14] Students were asked to map their paths around campus over the course of 24 hours. These maps demonstrated how students constructed the campus landscape as well as how they allocated their time.

Librarians may find, however, that they are already in the field and have a far greater familiarity with it than they realize. An experienced librarian will have been in conversation with researchers for years in the course of supporting research and teaching. Because of this ongoing contact with practitioners, librarians already know much of the language that users speak and are used to translating information into and out of scholarly jargon while assisting undergraduates and new researchers. In the case of the academic liaison librarian, we collect our academic faculty's scholarly work in repositories, teach in their classes, attend meetings with them, go for coffee, and purchase the resources that support their teaching and many other tasks. As a part of this process, many librarians

will become highly conversant in the powerful ideas which shape the disciplinary cultures of the subjects they are responsible for[15]. We already see and move among our user population every day and implicitly understand their information ecologies.[16] Ethnography will draw upon that implicit knowledge and force librarians to make this knowledge explicit, as well as challenging our own assumptions and received wisdom about our user communities are like.

4 Establishing rapport for librarians

In order to have access to culture, rapport must exist. Rapport means that a researcher and the participant are approaching the project with the same goals and with a great deal of trust. The more trust that exists between the researcher and the participant, the more likely it is that information will flow.[17] Establishing rapport can take a long time and there is not a single recipe to follow for establishing it. The classic example of the surprising way in which rapport is established is the Balinese cockfight described by Geertz[18], who, after fleeing from the police with the community he was studying was accepted into their midst.

Other than joining in as much as possible with the activities and simply being there, one of the most important ways to establish rapport is to learn to speak in the local language or dialect. Consistent with speaking the language, an ethnographer must also be able to act properly and use the local manners. Inevitably, the researcher will make mistakes, especially in the domain of language and manners. Use these experiences to learn the boundaries of what is correct and as a chance for the participant to instruct the researcher about what is correct.

In addition to the outreach we do to our user communities as described above the skills librarians employ in the reference interview – listening, patience, encouragement, asking questions, hearing 'behind' the initial information request and making certain we understand the true

12 Geertz (note 3) pp. 412–13.
13 DeWalt and DeWalt (note 11).
14 Foster, N. F.; Gibbons, S.: Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries 2007.

15 The ways in which theory and ideas shape academic culture is explored in depth by Abbott, A.: Chaos of Disciplines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2001.
16 Nardi, B. M.; O'Day, V.: Information Ecologies. Massachusetts: Institute of Technology 1999.
17 DeWalt and DeWalt (note 11).
18 Geertz, C.: The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books 1973.

(as opposed to the assumed) information need – are key skills for developing rapport among our study population.

4.1 Identifying a primary informant

Upon entering the field, the researcher should be on the lookout for someone who can sponsor their research and provide them with opportunities to enter more deeply into the community. These informants should be well-respected in the community but as neutral as possible, because someone who acts as a polarizing force could possibly sway access too much in one direction and close off contact from other factions of the community. A researcher should be able to establish a relationship of mutual trust with this primary informant.[19]

Again, as a part of the academic liaison librarian's work, a librarian ethnographer will be familiar with finding library advocates among the communities that we are trying to reach. Whether it's finding a keen library user (or a critical friend) among the lecturers, graduate and undergraduate students, or administrative or management staff, these relationships are key for exchanging information and for doing academic liaison librarian work. If librarian ethnographers wanted to gather data on a particular user group, they should recognize this relationship with their library advocates as a primary informant relationship. In this way, their primary informants can introduce them to others and model acceptance of the researcher and the project. This relationship will also alleviate some of the fears of entering the field as described above.

4.2 The librarian ethnographer's 'insider-outsider' identity

The ethnographer is in fact the data collection instrument (as a contrast, a survey could be a data collection instrument for quantitative data collection). Understanding one's own identity as a librarian ethnographer – of which personal characteristics, skills and training are a part – it is key to collecting valid and reliable data.[20] Librarians wishing to study their users' cultures are perfectly positioned to do so. Librarians are just close enough to their user populations to develop rapport easily but just outside enough to see it with an outsider's eyes and to translate it

for outsiders. Using ethnographic methods properly will allow a librarian to leverage established relationships to get objective data on what users actually want and need, rather than relying upon assumptions of what they want and need.

Academic librarians occupy a unique position in higher education, neither wholly academic nor wholly administrative. Many studies have confirmed librarians' hybrid status within the academy (Fleming-May and Douglass[21]; Shaw[22]; Walter[23]). Though institutions such as the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) recommend that academic librarians receive faculty status based on service, research, and training, whether librarians have equal status to disciplinary faculty remains disputed. Differences in the way a library environment is structured (strong management, large technological structure, hierarchical communication) as opposed to the environment in which disciplinary faculty operate (strong autonomy, weak middle management) likely has a large effect on the librarian's professional status.[24]

The academic librarian is also located both inside and outside the two important realms of academia: teaching and research. As Walter (2008)[25] describes, academic librarians are teachers. In the UK, many academic librarians are getting a Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PCAP) qualification or Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowship designed to professionalize university teaching. These qualifications were designed for lecturers (equivalent to tenure-track professors in the US) and it illustrates the significant amount of teaching that academic liaison librarians are doing in higher education and the evolving emphasis on understanding curriculum content, assignment setting, and assessment methods. And yet librarians don't spend 100 % of their time in the classroom.

Librarians do a great deal of research and collect a great deal of data. Though the quality varies, through our many conferences and the vast professional literature, we are certainly prolific. In an academic setting, doing high quality research can improve the liaison bond between

19 DeWalt and DeWalt (note 11).

20 Clifford, J.; Marcus, G. E.: Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press 1986.

21 Fleming-May, R. A.; Douglass, K.: Framing Librarianship in the Academy: an Analysis Using Bolman and Deal's Model of Organizations. In: College & Research Libraries 75 (3) (2014) pp. 389–415.

22 Shaw, L.: Representations of librarianship in the UK press. In: Aslib Proc. 62 (6) (2010) pp. 554–69.

23 Walter, S.: Librarians as Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry into Professional Identity. In: College & Research Libraries 69 (1) (2008) pp. 51–71.

24 Fleming-May and Douglass (note 21).

25 Walter (note 23).

librarian and faculty.[26] This is the same as developing rapport. Something as small as knowing the correct words to use to describe the research process can be the difference between being accepted into a community and being rejected as an outsider. Someone who speaks correctly is more accepted.

This 'insider-outsider' identity, though not always advantageous, proves useful for a librarian wishing to study academic culture[27]. A certain amount of foreignness is good because it helps a researcher to see things with fresh eyes, to not just accept certain things as universal truths, and to ask 'stupid questions'. This foreignness is essential for then being able to translate that data into information which is meaningful and convincing to other librarians, administrators, funding agencies and other community members.

transition into ethnographic data collection. Because academic librarians are most of the way into the field already, beginning to observe and describe our user populations is a matter of research design and thoughtful planning. Of course, every project will founder if it is poorly designed or if the data are poorly analysed, and just because an academic librarian is well suited to entering the research field that is no substitute for substantive understanding of the complex and time consuming nature of ethnographic methods. Done well, however, cultural data can be used to enrich the quantitative data that libraries routinely collect including circulation statistics, web server logs, footfall, and money spent per student.

Whatever else the outcome, librarian ethnographers who develop rapport for ethnographic research will improve their link to the faculties which they support.

5 Conclusions

Librarians who are engaged in teaching, research and embedded into their faculties are not only doing good library work, they are also well positioned to make an easy

Leah Rosenblum Emary
Academic Liaison Librarian
Information Learning Services
York St John University
York, YO31 7EX
United Kingdom
l.emary@yorksj.ac.uk

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26 Grant, M. J.; Sen, B.; Spring, H. (eds.): Research, Evaluation and Audit: Key Steps in Demonstrating Your Value. London: Facet 2013.

27 This would probably be the same for public, school or special librarians wishing to study their patrons' culture, since those librarians are simultaneously 'of' the user culture, yet play a different role. Further research is needed here.