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## Finding a Way Out of the Ethnographic Paradigm Jungle

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### Abstract

In this paper, an attempt has been made to develop a hybrid ethnographic paradigm, taking the best points from the different approaches of ethnographic research. The pioneering proponents of ethnography differed in their conceptualization of the method, resulting in the development of three distinct schools of thought-holistic, semiotic and behavioristic. These three ethnographic paradigms have their respective benefits and shortcomings. Following any one of these approaches may lead to only partial comprehension of the phenomenon by the ethnographer. This study wished to address this issue by developing a best practice approach, which will have the virtues of all the three paradigms. It is hoped that this evolved paradigm will help in making the work of the ethnographer a lot more comprehensive and the experience much richer.

### Keywords

Ethnography, Holistic, Semiotic, Behavioristic, Paradigm

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## Finding a Way Out of the Ethnographic Paradigm Jungle

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*In this paper, an attempt has been made to develop a hybrid ethnographic paradigm, taking the best points from the different approaches of ethnographic research. The pioneering proponents of ethnography differed in their conceptualization of the method, resulting in the development of three distinct schools of thought-holistic, semiotic and behavioristic. These three ethnographic paradigms have their respective benefits and shortcomings. Following any one of these approaches may lead to only partial comprehension of the phenomenon by the ethnographer. This study wished to address this issue by developing a best practice approach, which will have the virtues of all the three paradigms. It is hoped that this evolved paradigm will help in making the work of the ethnographer a lot more comprehensive and the experience much richer.*

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The tribes of Indians are numerous, and do not all speak the same language..... They who dwell in the marshes along the river live on raw fish, which they take in boats made of reeds.....

- Herodotus (Rawlinson, 2000, pp. 105-106)

The above excerpt, taken from the historical accounts known as *The Histories* by the renowned Greek historian Herodotus, gives a very interesting description of India of that time. Herodotus was probably the world's first person to develop the practice of historical documentation of foreign culture (Sanday, 1979). Today's modern practice of ethnography has its roots in such early works of historians like Herodotus and explorers like Marco Polo. Modern ethnographic research has seen its empirical application in the works of both cultural anthropologists and social science investigators (Hill, 1993). Over the years, this methodology has been enriched by contributions from leading ethnographers such as Boas, Goodenough, Geertz, Malinowski, and others (Boas, 1920; Geertz, 1973; Goodenough, 1956; Malinowski, 1994).

However, these researchers have differed in terms of their approaches of conducting ethnographic studies, resulting in altogether different schools of thought (Sanday, 1979; Swan, McInnis-Bowers, & Trawick, 1996). The focal point of all diversion originates from the epistemology issue: Should researchers give more emphasis on the respondent's view or the researcher's view (Sangasubana, 2011)?

There are as many as three broad paradigms of ethnographic research-the holistic, semiotic and behaviorist styles (Sanday, 1979). Again, there are sub-divisions in the methodologies followed by the researchers within these schools of thought (see Figure 1).

For instance, within the holistic paradigm, there is a difference of approach in the styles followed by Benedict and Mead; the two major contributors of this school (Gregory, 1983). Then there is another diversion of approach within the holistic paradigm—the structural approach of Radcliffe-Brown and the functional approach of Malinowski (Gregory, 1983; Murdock, 1943; Sanday, 1979). Similarly, the two iconic stalwarts within the semiotic school, Geertz and Goodenough, have treaded separate paths in terms of research practices and have been highly critical of each other’s approach (Helm, 2001).

The inspiration for this paper came from our own experience of using ethnography in an ongoing study to explore the perception of national identity and regional identity among everyday Indian citizens. The Indian subcontinent presents a very unique geographical dilemma for the conceptualization of the term “nation.” For centuries, India has been ruled by various foreign powers—starting from the Aryans in the Vedic ages (1500-500 B.C.) till the 300-year-long British colonial rule which ended in 1947. It was not until late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the concept of India as one single nation was strongly formed for the first time. The people of today’s independent India represent one of the most diverse pools of ethnic races: in terms of skin complexion, religion (India is home to five world religions—Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Christianity), different customs (Berreman, 1960) and regional dialects (Mitra, 2008; Pai, 2005). There exists an invisible sense of groupism among certain sectors of the Indian population which is still prevalent even after more than 60 years of independence (Pai, 2005). We wished to explore the concept of national and regional identity among the everyday common man and understand the social and cultural antecedents and consequences of such conceptions. Our study objective required us to observe the behavior and perceptions of common Indian people regarding their theory of India as their nation and what they meant by the term “Indian.”

With that aim in mind, we conducted a review of the previous studies which have used ethnography as their study methodology to develop our understanding of the process of conducting ethnographic inquiry. The review revealed some potential benefits of each approach. At the same time, it was observed that each approach has something of virtue which can aptly complement the other. As an example, let us take a critical look at Van Maanen’s (1979) classic ethnographic work on nightlife of street police. Van Maanen adopted the semiotic stance of participant observation and thick description as prescribed by Geertz to understand the typical features of night-time work of the street police patrol. His study gave a meticulous description of some fascinating aspects of the night police’s activities such as the “call-jumping phenomenon” and the phenomenon of “street justice”. Despite the richness of the description, we felt that Van Maanen’s commendable work could have been more appropriately justified had he infused some aspects of holistic paradigm in his study. A holistic outlook would have guided Van Maanen to include the historical evidence of the facts documented by him in the police archives and in newspaper reports on incidents involving night police actions. Also, taking an ethnoscience stance could have enabled Van Maanen to describe the sign languages shared by the night police community to relay latent messages among themselves. Such symbolic interpretations could have added to the understandings provided through the native point of view observations. Van Maanen cautioned against the possibility of deliberate lying on the part of the respondents to keep hidden secrets disclosed from the

researcher and non-deliberate lying due to deeply rooted, taken for granted concepts which could be difficult to identify. From a behavioristic approach, Van Maanen could have devoted some time to observe the night life of street patrol from the point of view of an external observer, which could have helped him in distinguishing the truth from the taken for granted misconceptions. Thus, we can see that taking only one particular paradigmatic stance may severely limit the purpose of the ethnographic investigation. Some earlier conceptual discussions on ethnographic frameworks such as the papers by Sanday (1979) and Gregory (1983) did provide a nice distinction between the three broad paradigm models of ethnography, but these failed to give us a prescriptive solution towards when and in what context, which method will be better suited, or whether a judicial mix of all the three schools of thought could help in a more enlightened investigation.

However, some earlier studies have indeed attempted to use different combinations of ethnographic inquiries in a single study. Klinenberg's (2001) study on urban isolation in American society did use two different paradigms--detailed archival data as a build-up to the research problem, which was in line with the holistic school, and semi-structured interviews and participant observation of some of the members of the aging community. What we felt was missing in this study was that the interviews were conducted mainly from the external point of view and therefore the native's point of view was not highlighted--in fact, in this particular case, the Geertz style of thick description was not a suitable method after all; rather, an ethnoscience approach could have been applied to study the unspoken language of this aging community and to understand their latent cognitive processes. A structural approach of holism could also have been applied to link the secondary data with the primary findings; i.e., to demonstrate cause-effect relationships better, more historical linkages could be provided such as the influence of "Wild West" in American Individualist culture and a detailed discussion of the American ideology of individualism.

Thus the main issue which became apparent to us while studying these works was that there were no well-defined guidelines for the novice ethnographer as to which steps should be followed to generate more holistic and novel understanding of the contextual socio-political issues. Coming back to our study's objective, we were about to begin our ethnographic investigation of the perceptions of general public about their national and regional identities. We were faced with the following critical questions--should we find evidences of national sentiments from India's rich historical background to build the launch pad for our study as per the holistic paradigm? Should we observe only from the native's point of view (thick description) or should we consider an external perspective as well (behavioristic)? Do we need to develop a symbolic description of the phenomenon under observation as per Goodenough's ethnoscience style? When we looked for answers, we were faced with the confusion of following any one ethnographic style and dealing with the tread-offs of such choices. The extant literature is surprisingly silent in addressing this issue (Beatty, 2010; Williams & Patterson, 2007). Sangasubana (2011) has outlined some of the critical quality control issues faced by the ethnographers in respect to maintaining the reliability, validity and reactivity of the research. The level of involvement of the researcher in the field research can determine to what extent the behavior of the respondents become distorted. Hence, the key challenge of the ethnographer is how to maintain a certain level of unobtrusiveness during the data

recording stage. Again, to achieve a higher reliability of data, the findings must be both internally and externally consistent (Sangasubana, 2011). For this, data triangulation using multiple channels should be conducted. This is advantageous to the ethnographers, if they follow different data collection techniques advocated by the different schools of ethnography. When we reviewed the previous studies, we came across numerous instances of possibilities of data triangulation that the researcher(s) missed out on due to excessive focus on one particular ethnographic approach. For example, Herzfield (2009) provided extensive accounts of rich historical background, such as the history of Roman gestures, and a rich description of earlier empirical studies of gambling in Greece. He also used the ethnoscience approach to document the cultural meanings behind different gesture styles in Greece, Italy and Thailand. However, a lack of rich thick description and too much focus on gesture interpretation deprived the readers of a richer account of the experience felt by the author.

Contrastingly, Klenk's (2004) study provided a truly vivid description of a ghost exorcism program in a village in North India known as *jaagar*. Unfortunately, due to the lack of backup in the form of historical background behind such actions (e.g., discussions on prevailing social stigma among rural Indians) the readers could not get a deeper, better understanding behind such actions. Ethnoscience type descriptions (e.g., the process of *jaagar* may have been heavily laden with all ritualistic symbols of pagan worship to ward off evil spirits) could have helped to clarify the reader's understanding of the latent meaning behind such symbols and signs. These examples illustrate the point that we are trying to emphasize: each of these above studies have adopted their respective ethnographic stance, and in the process, missed out on one or another aspect of the big picture. These attempts can be best described using the analogy of the fable of the four blind men, each of whom interpreted the shape of an elephant by touching only a part of the elephant's body. We did not wish to be sucked in the same vortex. Unfortunately, there was no previous study which was available to us to make our job easier.

Hence, we are presenting a framework for an evolved, hybrid paradigm for conducting ethnographic inquiries, taking the best practices from all the three paradigms. We have maintained a flexible approach while developing this paradigm, as the objective was not to add yet another dilemma to the ethnographer's worries. This method is to be followed only if the core objective of the research dictates it to be so. It is expected that by following the guidelines of this hybrid paradigm, more insights to the research question may be revealed to the ethnographer. Before going into our conceptualization of the hybrid ethnographic paradigm, we presented a brief description of the three most prominent styles of ethnographic research which co-exist in today's ethnographic literature in the subsequent section.

## **The Diverse Paradigms of Ethnography: A Brief Review**

### **The Holistic Paradigm**

Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, was the first to use the ethnography method in anthropological research through his seminal works with the Eskimos of Greenland (Helm, 2001; Sanday, 1979). Boas firmly believed in the study of culture as a whole and the importance of a society's historical development behind such

culture formation (Helm, 2001; Stocking, 1966). He and his followers were the pioneers of the holistic style of ethnography (Sanday, 1979). Ruth Benedict, Boas' disciple, also believed in Boas' Baconian ideal of induction (Gregory, 1983; Sanday, 1979). The basic premise of the Boasian school of thought was that culture may be considered as the personality of a society (Sanday, 1979). That is, within every culture, some patterns emerge, which become permanent with time and gradually become the norms of the people living in the society. Such behavioral norms are features of all cultures across the globe and Benedict believed that on careful observation of a culture's history, ethnographers could identify some universal cultural configurations common across all cultures.

Margaret Mead, another of Boas' favorite students, however, belonged to the configurationalist branch of the holistic school. Mead's argument was that isolated human societies develop their own sets of cultural values partly from their ancestral heritage. The final manifestation of a society's culture is the generation-by-generation consolidation of such past heritage. Mead differed from Benedict's view of universal cultural configurations and took a more particularistic stand (Levine, 2007). Deviating from the above two approaches of ethnographic paradigm, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown advocated the structural school of thought (Gregory, 1983; Helm, 2001). Radcliffe-Brown focused on identifying the scientific process of culture formation. He emphasized on studying the different cultural traits and on arriving at a generalizable process of cultural development. The structural school saw the society as an organism; a dynamic system governed by cause and effect relationships between the different components of the system (Gregory, 1983; Murdock, 1943; Sanday, 1979; Snow, Morrill, & Anderson, 2003). Radcliffe-Brown discouraged any speculative historical reconstruction of culture from a society's heritage. The onus was entirely upon the scientific explanation of the rules that govern the cause-effect relationships between the functions.

Bronislaw Malinowski, the proponent of an altogether new style known as the functional school, believed in the theory of functionalism, i.e., explaining every feature of a culture of any group of people, past or present, with reference to seven basic biological needs of individual human beings (Sanday, 1979; Stocking, 1966). These seven biological needs identified by Malinowski were nutrition, reproduction, bodily comforts, safety, relaxation, movement and growth (Beatty, 2010; Helm, 2001). Malinowski shared Boas' views on studying culture as a whole, but he did not conform to the Boasian method of historical reconstruction. Rather, his emphasis was on active participation in the daily activities of the natives in order to gain the insight behind a particular cultural phenomenon. Malinowski further advocated that all functional activities were intertwined into the composite cultural whole of the native's society.

### **The Semiotic Paradigm**

An altogether different ethnographic paradigm, the semiotic school, laid more importance on presenting the native's point of view. Two parallel thoughts of semiotic ethnography have become popular among ethnographers over the years. One of them, the thick description school, proposed and advocated by Clifford Geertz (Hannerz, 2003; Ponterotto, 2006; Sanday, 1979), stressed the importance of details while reporting the researcher's experience about a foreign culture. According to the other school, the

ethnoscience approach of Ward Goodenough, culture is located in the minds and hearts of men; it is intertwined at different levels of social strata (Sanday, 1979).

Geertz believed that the anthropologists' writing or notes formed the basis of the external readers' own interpretation of other peoples' actions. Therefore, if the readers have to understand the real meanings of the interpretations conveyed by the authors about their ethnographic reports, the contexts at the background of such reports must be richly and thickly described (Geertz, 1973; Hannerz, 2003; Ponterotto, 2006). Thick description does more than just record a person's activities. It provides the contexts, the emotions and the web of social relationships hiding behind such activities (Ponterotto, 2006). In a way, thick description is the confluence of history and real-life experience. The readers, while going through the thick descriptions, can feel the emotions, voices and expressions of the actors (Gans, 1999; Geertz, 1973; Shoham, 2004; Ponterotto, 2006).

This special feeling has been referred to as a state of verisimilitude, which makes the readers bond with the characters (Ponterotto, 2006). There have been criticisms of the thick description approach by several ethnographers (Van Maanen, 1979). Fine (2003) stated that thick description approach leads to a type of "peopled ethnography" (i.e., the ethnographic findings echo the respondents' interpretation rather than the true meaning of the phenomenon itself). Similar views have been held by several other researchers who have stressed this heavy emphasis on the native's point of view as a potential handicap of this style (Beatty, 2010; de Volo & Schatz, 2004; Iszatt-White, 2007; Kelly & Gibbons, 2008). Goodenough's ethnoscience/ethnomethodology approach stressed the fact that culture represents anything that one has to know in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members (Goodenough, 1956; Sanday, 1979; Snow et al., 2003). Ethnoscience is the study of the grammar of culture. The ethnographer must act like a linguist to develop the idea of the whole from the parts. The role of the ethnographer should not be restricted to description alone; there has to be a leap from description to comparison (Goodenough, 1956; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1981; Wieder, 1977).

Goodenough further went on to state that the culture of a society is embedded at different levels of social strata, namely, at the individual level, the operational level, the public level, the social level and finally the entire culture pool (Klenk, 2004; Kusenbach, 2003). The challenge of the ethnographer is to unravel the latent meanings hidden behind the different native terms (homonyms and synonyms) to describe a relationship or phenomenon (Cohen, 2009; Goodwin, 2002; Snow et al., 2003). Thus from symbolic interpretation of the native's world (Geertz, 1973), ethnoscience enters the world of semantics to discover a native's culture (Herzfield, 2009).

### **The Behaviorist Paradigm**

The behaviorist school (Edwards, 2000; Weisner & Edwards, 2002) laid emphasis on first identifying some functionally relevant domains and then supporting the theoretical framework with observational data. The classic "Six Culture" study of children's personality development across cultures was one of the earliest studies to deviate from the earlier ethnographic emphasis on unearthing meaning within a context (Whiting, 1965). The "Six Culture" study was the beginning of a new ethnographic paradigm where the study drew its inspiration from the theoretical framework of the relation between a society's culture and its members' personalities. That is, the



researchers had an understanding beforehand how a society's culture may influence the personality formation of people from childhood. The observations were guided by theoretical presumptions held by the researchers regarding personality, biology, ecology, social interaction and culture (Edwards, 2000; Levine, 2007; Whiting, 1965). There was a mix of traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observation and standard techniques such as sampling and interviewing adopted by the researcher. In this aspect, the behaviorist school took a deductive investigation approach, which was a radically opposite stance compared to the Boasian school which believed in an inductive one (Munroe, Hulefeld, Rodgers, Tomeo, & Yamazaki, 2000; Munroe & Munroe, 1997).

One of the salient aspects of the behavioral school is the detail with which the sampling is carried out, as evidenced in the study by Whiting and Edwards (1988). The advantage of having a well-structured sampling frame can be very useful to the ethnographers for enhancing the external validity of their research. The innovative spot sampling technique also can be a very useful tool for ethnographers for proceeding with theoretical sampling of potential respondents. Munroe et al. (2000) studied aggressive behavior in children in four different cultural settings and whether such behavior differed on the basis of sex. They studied children from geographically diverse and isolated communities such as the Black Caribs in southern Belize, the Logoli of Kenya, Tibeto-Burman people of Kathmandu, Nepal and American Samoans. This study also extensively used pre-existing social theories on child aggression, social ecology of aggression and cultural theories to relate and analyze the findings of their study. The manner in which these ethnographers reported their study was identical to how traditional positivist studies are reported with detailed information on sample demographics using statistical parameters such as means and frequency distributions.

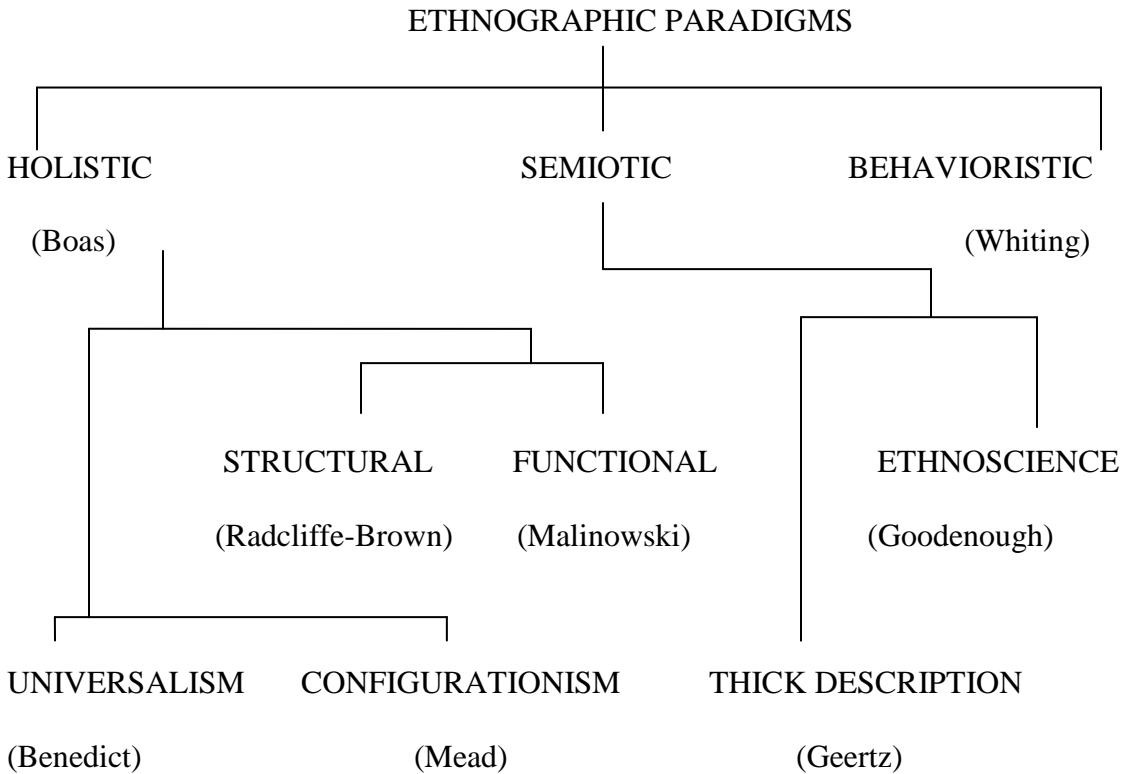
This is where the behaviorists brought about the paradigm shift in ethnographic studies (Edwards, 2000; Levine, 2007) through their emphasis on etic interpretation of results. While the behavioral school has shown how systematic ethnographic sampling can be beneficial for ethnographers to substantiate their findings (Munroe et al., 2000; Munroe & Munroe, 1997), it has also left behind questions such as whether the emic perspective of the phenomenon can be captured through such an approach. This never-ending debate regarding what should be the focus of ethnographic studies still remains a major drawback of this method (Beatty, 2010).

### **Comparing the Different Ethnographic Paradigms: Pros and Cons**

The contrasting epistemological stance of the different schools of thought that exist in the ethnographic methodologies may be confusing for the ethnographer. Considering the fact that the primary objective of ethnography is to understand the participants' view of the social environment surrounding them (Stocking, 1966), the ethnographer has some difficult choices to make while adopting any particular ethnographic paradigm. This issue is further complicated by the fact that ethnography is a blend of both emic and etic perspectives (Hill, 1993; Swan et al., 1996). The emic aspect of ethnography tells the researcher to find the native's point of view, while the etic perspective demands that the researcher makes the observations in a concrete scientific manner, isolated from the context (Hill, 1993), much in line with Malinowski's functionalism or Radcliffe-Brown's structural approach. Neglecting one aspect may lead

to a lack of rigor to investigate the other, which may decrease the richness of the study (see Table 1).

Figure 1. Classification of Ethnographic Paradigms



Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) have noticed a growing trend of undermining positivist methods among contemporary ethnographers. Such a stance may be helpful in adhering to the heart of the research—the native’s viewpoint. On the other hand, too much reluctance to use positivist methods may also be detrimental for the research as it may jeopardize the emic-etic synergy of the study (Hill, 1993). Ethnographers have been wrestling with this dilemma of where to strike a balance between positivist and interpretivist paradigms for decades (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; de Volo & Schatz, 2004; Sangasubana, 2011).

Williams and Patterson (2007) recently added fuel to this ongoing debate through their critique on the ethnographic work of Beckley, Stedman, Wallace, and Ambard (2007) in an attempt to address this issue of paradigmatic disparity. Beckley et al. (2007) applied a mixed method design in their study by using the method of resident-employed photography technique to investigate the phenomenon of “place attachment.” During the interview phase, the interviewees were asked to be imaginative in their response, thus promoting an emic stance. However, during the coding stage, they used a positivist approach of data analysis, where the respondents were instructed to describe their experience as per pre-defined categories/codes. In this regard Beckley et al. (2007)

followed the paradigmatic guidelines of the semiotic as well as the behavioristic school, and that is where they stepped upon the paradigm paradox. By following the mixed methods approach, they ended up with an analysis that fell short of its actual potential (Williams & Patterson, 2007).

Present day ethnographers are still debating if a holistic or a semiotic approach is a more justifying method of ethnographic research. Kelly and Gibbons (2008) are of the opinion that the initial objective of ethnographers was to report the culture and life of society of people. With this new shift in paradigm, the idea of investigating the latent meanings within the contexts has given rise to thick description and ethnoscience, which take into account the symbolic interpretation of the context.

However, Van Maanen (1979) raised his doubts regarding the accuracy of the semiotic school's propositions. Van Maanen stated that Goodenough's interpretation of the grammar of culture through semiotic analysis of a society is flawed--culture already is a familiar notion in the minds of the informants, which results in a mediated response, creating doubt over the validity of ethnoscience approach. However, if the same approach is combined with the epistemological stance of Boasian historical analysis, then the ethnographer may be able to identify the influence of culture on the informant's response.

The same view was supported by Roshan and Deeptee (2009) who highlighted the point that one of the major shortcomings of ethnography was a risk that while reporting thick descriptions, ethnographers may not be able to maintain their neutral stand as the study progresses and gradually may interpret the findings on the basis of their feelings. Such apprehension of researcher bias had been underplayed mainly by the thick description school, which relies heavily on the native's interpretation.

In an attempt to make clear that historical analysis and thick description were epistemologically separate yet complimentary, de Volo and Schatz (2004) have commented on the distinction between historical analysis and ethnographic research, suggesting that ethnography should deal with living characters in a social or cultural context, keeping in mind the native's own viewpoint, but not excluding the trivialities which surround the native's environment. Historical research should confine itself to studies of historical events and people, though such research may aid in complementing an ethnographic enquiry. This proposition gives indication that using historical narratives with field interviews may serve to complement the ethnographic study.

Beatty (2010) had argued that relying on first-person accounts of latent social and cultural elements may lead to misinterpretation of the key concepts behind the phenomena. He advocated the use of historical accounts as a follow-up of the face-to-face interviews in order to increase the reliability of the findings. He had insisted on using the Boasian holistic approach in ethnographic research. Beatty (2010) cited his own explorations in the study of emotion where he observed the emotional expressions in the face of a Javanese village headman during a religious congregation at a mosque. The author stated that sometimes an attempt to step out of the typical ethnographer's role and to take up an approach of a storyteller may lead to realization of a higher level of reality and truth. This is a notable deviation from the thick description paradigm, but essential as a part of unearthing the true meaning hidden behind the context.

Gans (1999) however had raised concern over the growing use of fictional approach in ethnographic reporting, citing that a fictionalized account of observed data were not accepted as reliable by the epistemology purists of social research. However, as

pointed out by Ortner (1995), ethnographic thick description has gradually moved to a stance of cultural holism as an object under study is a part of a highly integrated culture that can be studied as fragments of the whole system. Ethnographic studies on the concept of resistance have lacked the holistic prerequisites of thick description. Thus the conflict of approaching the ethnographic studies from the etic vs. emic perspective does not get resolved.

The holistic school's main virtue is that it gives the essence of both universalism and particularism. Boas and Benedict were primarily inclined towards finding similar coherent patterns of culture formation in different societies. Mead, on the other hand, focused on a particularistic explanation of cultural phenomena. However, they did not give the ethnographic investigation any scientific structure. That was done by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski through their conceptualization of society as an organism, where all social activities were functions of certain biological needs of the members of the society. This approach may be good for capturing the etic aspect of the phenomenon under observation, but it also ignores the emic aspect of the same. On the other hand, if we look into the postulates of the semiotic school, the emic aspect is captured very well in the thick description method, but the etic part is ignored. Only through Goodenough's ethnoscience approach can the researcher give some concrete structure to the observations. However, ethnoscience/ethnomethodology focuses more on comparison than on description. The emphasis is more on etic conceptualization than on emic realization (Sanday, 1979). Thus, though ethnomethodology provides a very structured framework for etic analysis of culture, it lacks in the emic observation part.

Now let us consider the advantages of having a behavioristic approach towards ethnography. The main advantage of the behavioristic school is that research is backed by an existing and relevant theoretical relationship (Edwards, 2000) and therefore, the study is more structured compared to other ethnographic investigations. However, the pitfall of having a preset objective before starting the research may limit the researcher's degree of openness towards the different elements of context specificity related to the phenomenon (Geertz, 1973). In a sense, the behavioristic school is closer to an objectivist epistemology rather than a subjective one. Nevertheless, if the aim of the investigation is to strengthen a theoretical relationship with empirical data, behavioristic approach may serve a better purpose compared to the holistic and the semiotic ones.

### **Ethnographic Paradigms: The Best Practice Approach**

As illustrated earlier, previous studies focusing on one particular ethnographic style have been found to lack different inter-related perspectives of the big social picture (Gregory, 1983; Herzfield, 2009; Klenk, 2004; Van Maanen, 1979;). We discussed earlier how Van Maanen over-emphasized the native's point of view, thus missing out on an opportunity to present secondary archival data from various sources to the readers to further validate his primary observations. In this case we saw how holistic, semiotic and behavioristic paradigms could be juxtaposed in one single study to enrich a study's findings. While Klenk's study was praiseworthy for its detailed thick descriptions, the same study could be criticized for not including the historical background of the actors in the study and their understandings of the ghost repelling ceremony, as well as not utilizing the observations to generate rich symbolic analysis of the pagan symbols and

signs of the rituals. Similarly, Herzfeld's external observations and historical research showed good application of the holistic and the behavioristic schools, but failed to bring the semiotic school's interpretation style into his analysis. The result was an insufficient description of the research setting and the participants, and a lack of explanation of the meanings behind the gestures of risk taking. Thus while studies using any one of the different ethnographic paradigms were able to generate rich and vivid descriptions of their observed phenomena, they missed out on one or another vital aspect of the big picture. The different ethnographic schools had their respective merits and demerits, and we felt that the judicious way would be to choose the respective good points of each style and integrate them into a hybrid approach of ethnography: an approach with all the best practices of the ethnographic research method. We coined the term "best-practice approach" to emphasize the presence of all the merits of the different ethnographic schools in one single style.

Considering the above facts, we propose that, ethnographers should begin their ethnographic enquiries with at least a limited understanding of the historical development of the culture in question. Culture is a relative concept and therefore should not be used as a universal generalization. Rather, study of culture should take a particularistic stand. While investigating the culture of a society, the researchers should take into account the native's point of view, because such an insider account may be very helpful in identifying the underlying themes of cultural relativism. At the same time, care should be taken to verify the primary interview data from other sources such as people from other societal levels and from historical and ancestral accounts. The historical accounts may serve as a source of triangulation of the primary data findings. At the very beginning of the study, though, one thing must be made clear: the study objective. If the study objective has a positivist orientation, then researchers should opt for the behavioristic school of ethnography. If understanding the emic perspective is the main agenda, then the investigation should be undertaken as prescribed above.

Thus, the best practice method of ethnography should follow the following steps: define the research objective, identify the different sources of data collection, identify the relevant sections of the society which need to be studied, train the ethnographer in neutral participant observation, record the data using the thick description method of Geertz, supplement the primary data with the historical records, understand the meanings hidden in the various social symbols to their fullest extent, relate the findings with some existing theoretical framework, if possible and lastly, maintain the emic-etic synergy wherever possible.

Figure 2 gives a detailed schematic representation of the hybrid ethnographic paradigm. The three broad elements to be considered while conducting an ethnographic query should be knowledge of the culture's history, a detailed description of the native's point of view and a deep understanding of the social semiotics. A fourth area of interest should be to have a priori theoretical framework to guide the ethnographic investigation only if the objective demands a closed system investigation, such as in the "Six Culture" study (Edwards, 2000).

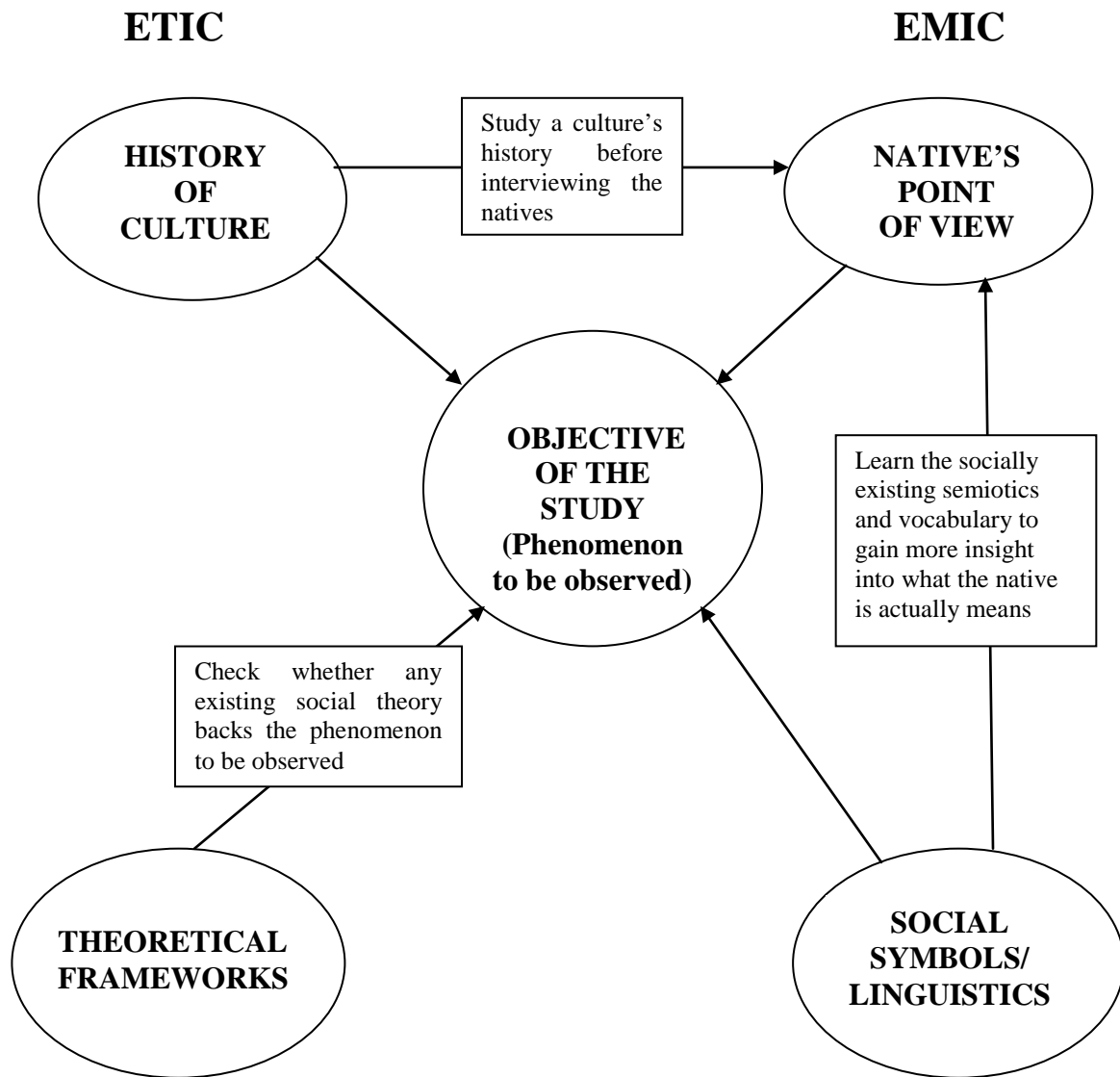
Table 1. Merits and Demerits of the Different Ethnographic Paradigms

| Ethnographic Paradigm  | Proponent       | Primary focus                                    | Source of data   | Advantage  | Disadvantage   |
|------------------------|-----------------|--|--|--|--|
| Holistic Universalism  | Benedict        | Historical reconstruction of culture             | A society's history  | Analysis of historical documents such as literature, religious doctrines, etc.                   | Assumption that historically developed cultural patterns are universal, no focus on understanding the process of culture formation or the native's viewpoint   |
| Holistic Particularism | Mead            | Studying ancestral heritage as culture formation | Customs and culture of the ancestor, local heritage        | Cultural patterns more localized, depends on geographic isolation                                | Still no focus on understanding the process, no attempt to understand the native's opinion   |
| Holistic Structuralism | Radcliffe-Brown | The scientific process of culture formation      | A society's rules and laws, the laws governing social life | Understanding of the cause-effect relationship behind a cultural trait formation                 | Not explaining the relation between the societal laws and basic functions of human life, not using historical records to further clarify the cause-effect relationships, not taking the society member's view in consideration |
| Holistic Functionalism | Malinowski      | Culture as function of human biological needs    | The seven basic biological needs                           | Understanding of the relation between the cultural patterns and lifestyle of the society members | Again lacking the native's point of view, no consideration of the historical perspective behind the functional relationships   |

|                   |            |  |   |  |  |
|-------------------|------------|--|---|--|--|
| Thick Description | Geertz     | Native's point of view through the eye of the ethnographer, to be a part of that world and live the experience | Native respondents  | Takes into account the respondent's own viewpoint, not the researcher's own interpretation during the analysis | Too context-specific, focus more on reporting findings, no further contribution to make any comparison or analysis from the findings, difficult for researcher to remain neutral in observations |
| Ethnoscience      | Goodenough | The grammar of culture   | Respondents at different levels of social strata                    | Going one step ahead of thick description and making societal comparisons.                                     | Does not take into account the historical background behind the symbolic discourse, nor the role of heritage and biological aspects of the society   |
| Behavioristic     | Whiting    | Verifying theoretically relevant relationships in cultural contexts  | Respondents observed in experimental designs in real world settings | Theoretically grounded study, leads to better understanding of the theoretical relationships                   | May lead to pre-defined objectives in the minds of the ethnographers, no new truths may emerge, relevant contextual issues may be overlooked   |

The historical accounts and the symbolic interpretations should form a supplementary source of data triangulation as shown in Figure 2. We propose that before starting any ethnographic investigation, the researchers must have a very clear idea about the phenomenon that they wish to observe and interpret. Depending on the study objective, it should be decided whether a priori knowledge of cultural history will help in refinement of the study or if such knowledge will cloud the interpretation of the ethnographers. If the historical accounts themselves lack accountability as in the case of several tribal cultures which are based more on myth than facts, the ethnographer may be wise to concentrate on the native's version initially, only to use the mythical records for later triangulation. Another a priori search that the ethnographers should conduct is regarding the existence of any prior theory about the phenomenon of interest. For example, if we are looking to study the phenomenon of urban isolation as in the study by Klinenberg (2001), then we should first have an idea of the national culture theory of Hofstede (2001), who researched the high level of individualism that prevails in American society. However, an excellent reading of this individualism phenomenon can be obtained by studying contemporary twentieth century American literature and research such as Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (1995).

Figure 2. Schematic Diagram of the Hybrid Ethnographic Paradigm



Researchers need to triangulate the responses received from the natives with the prevailing literary records of the culture. These records and data should ideally strengthen the findings from the natives' interviews, rather than obscure the findings. To ensure that researchers stay focused on the ultimate ethnographic realization of the emic world of the native, ethnographers should be trained to be culturally neutral in their report (Sanday, 1979). At the same time, another vital aspect of ethnographic research should be maintaining a synergy between the emic and epic sides of the phenomenon. In this regard, while the historical records and priory theories will help in developing the researchers' own outlook about the matter (the etic part), the native's viewpoint and the semiotic underpinnings should help the researcher get an insight into the narrator's inner world (the emic part). Getting properly acquainted with the social symbols and socially

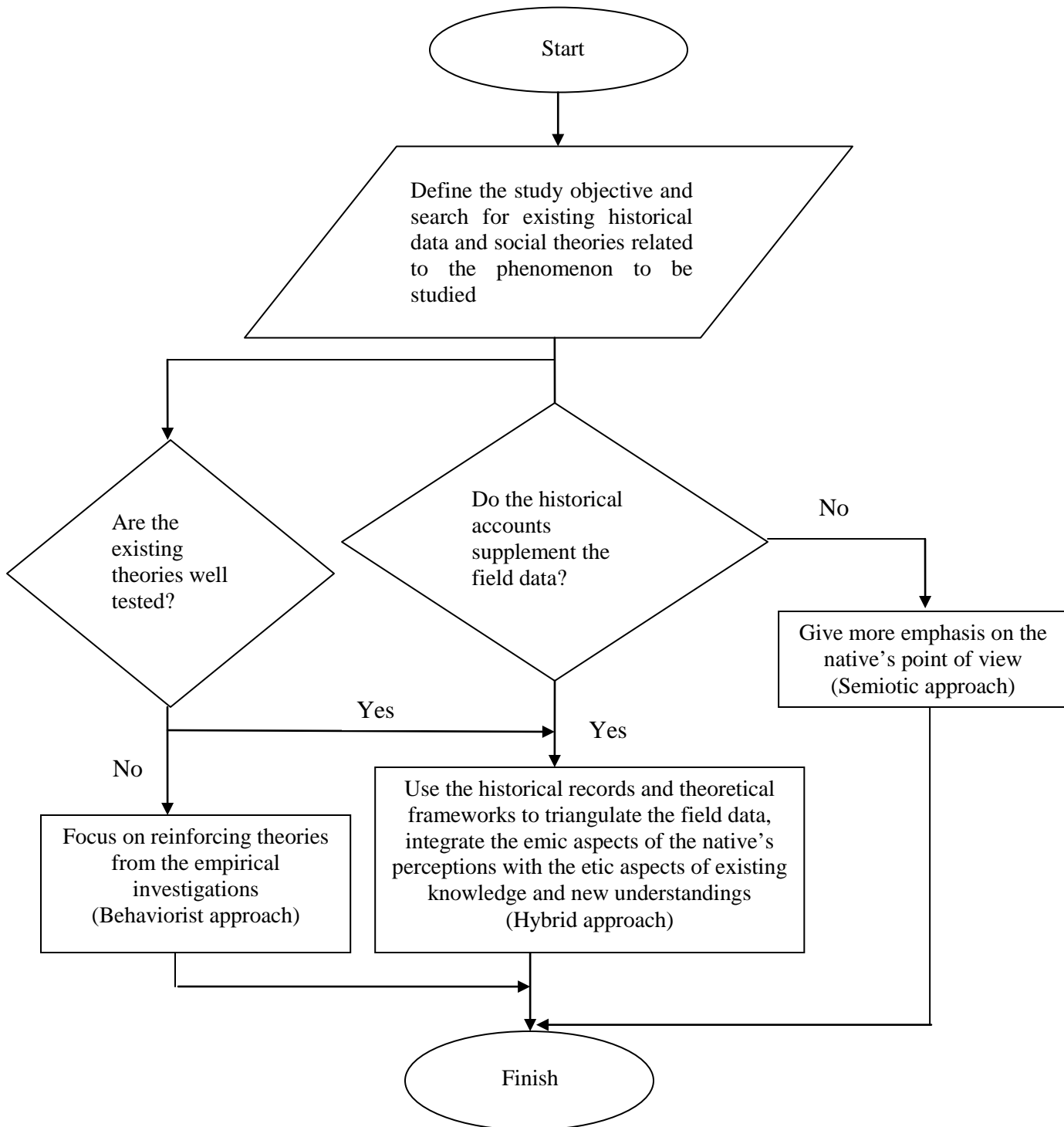


abbreviated terminologies in day-to-day vocabulary should also be the duty of a good ethnographer. Such training may enable the ethnographers to peel down the layers of latent content hidden behind a response or a dialogue. In this way, they may be able to reflect on the cultural relativism involved with the phenomenon at hand, and attain greater reliability in their results (Sangasubana, 2011). The only pitfall of this hybrid approach that we can conceive at present is the time for conducting all the essential steps described in Figure 3 can take too long for certain studies. However, we believe that with more and more practice using this new methodological style, ethnographers will be able to decide which section to elaborate on in order to optimize the exploration time and results. Therefore, at present the essence of the term “best practice” should be confined to the benefits of the different ethnographic styles that can be derived from following our guidelines. We do not claim that this is the ultimate best practice approach though, and we are quite willing to incorporate similar radical concepts in our own repertoire of ethnographic tools.

As discussed in the introduction, we applied this hybrid ethnographic paradigm in our own ongoing investigation on understanding the concept of national and regional identity among common Indian citizens. Earlier studies on national identity have not been conducted in India, which poses a unique case of unity in diversity through its multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual society. A study on Indian national identity could help us recognize the latent forces which are holding this essentially diverse and huge mass of human population as one integrated nation. Such understandings can be useful for comprehending the working mechanisms of multicultural societies, to understand the ingredients for the success of Indian democracy and for policy makers of countries with similar heterogeneous groups of population (e.g., China). We started our investigation by identifying critical historical literature on India’s pre- and post-colonial social and cultural characteristics as documented in Nehru’s (1959) *India: Today and Tomorrow*; Rushdie’s (1982) *Midnight’s Children*; and Jaffrelot’s (1996) *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: From 1925 to 1990s*. We further clarified our research question on national identity through a brief review of research debates on the topic of ethnic stereotypes from different parts of the world (Brigham, 1971; Titus, 1998; Yiftachel, 2008), works on social strata (Berreman, 1960; Das Gupta, 1987), national identity research (Mitra, 2008) and studies on regionalism (Mawdsley, 2002). Our next step was to get involved in two different types of participant observation: one in which we maintained neutrality of opinion thus emphasizing only the native’s point of view (semiotic thick description), and another where we included our own perceptions about the responses taking an external behaviorist stance and backing our study findings with pre-existing identity theories (behavioristic theory testing).

At the time of writing this paper, we have documented the observation data of 69 Indian individuals from three state capitals in India: 18 from Kolkata (capital of West Bengal, East India), 24 from Hyderabad (Capital of Andhra Pradesh, South India) and 27 from Dehradun (capital of Uttarakhand, in North India), and we were in the process of beginning our observations in a fourth capital: Mumbai/Goa (in West India). Choosing these four state capitals was prompted by the fact that the average population of these places had a more or less heterogeneous mix of people from different parts of India; that is, people of other states resided in these places in a large proportion. Hence our observations could readily identify latent perceptions of regional nostalgia and a bias for

Figure 3. Flowchart of the Hybrid Ethnographic Paradigm



regional stereotyping of the natives among these so-called outsiders. The original natives of these above three states were also observed on a daily basis during our stay in the respective state capitals for an average duration of one year starting from the April, 2010.

For the natives too, the sense of regional groupism and holding the outsiders as “significantly foreign elements” was observed as a unanimous trend (Pai, 2005). All through the observation and data collection stages, thick descriptions of the study backgrounds were carefully documented to ensure reader understanding and familiarity with the contexts. The subsequent phase of our study, which is yet to be completed, will include an ethnoscience analysis of the local signs and gestures of the natives to communicate such latent perceptions of national and regional identity. In the final stage, we will provide a triangulation of the findings from the different findings to develop the core understanding of the phenomenon of national and regional identity. Thus, in our study, we have already applied Boasian historical analysis, Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functional cause-effect analysis, Geertz’ thick description, Whiting’s behaviorist approach and will also be using Goodenough’s ethnoscience in the future. As the study is not yet complete, we are not in a position to share all the details of our ongoing investigation. However, we believe the brief sketch provided above will be helpful for researchers and ethnographers to apply the propositions in real practice. A brief outline of the steps in ethnographic research has been outlined through a flow chart in Figure 3 for a comprehensive understanding of the prerequisites of a good ethnographic design.

We sincerely hope that the guidelines developed through our observations and syntheses of existing methods of ethnography makes a valuable addition to the abundant and rich field of ethnographic research.

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