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A Simple Introduction to the Practice of Ethnography and Guide to Ethnographic Fieldnotes

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Abstract

In this article, will provide a simple introduction to the practice of ethnographic fieldwork and practical advice for writing fieldnotes. Ethnographic approaches, while born of the work conducted by anthropologists over one hundred years ago, are increasingly employed by researchers and others from a variety of backgrounds and for a multitude of purposes from the academic to the applied and even commercial. I will provide an introduction intended for those persons new to the approach but who have already had some basic experience or training. I also provide a discussion of the centrality of fieldnotes to the conduct of this very personally engaging form of research. Finally, those in training are given lists of questions to ask and points to consider in the conduct of their ethnographic fieldwork projects.

What is Ethnography?

First, let's review some ideas and set the stage for the primary purpose of this document, which is to set out some useful guidelines for thinking about and doing fieldwork notes from an ethnographic approach.

The term ethnography has come to be *equated* with virtually any qualitative research project where the intent is to provide a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice. This is sometimes referred to as "thick description," which is a term attributed to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz writing on the idea of an interpretive theory of culture in the early 1970s (e.g., see *The Interpretation of Cultures*, first published as a collection in 1973). The use of the term "qualitative" is meant to distinguish this kind of social science research from more "quantitative" or statistically oriented research. The two approaches, i.e., quantitative and qualitative, while often complimentary, ultimately have different aims.

While an ethnographic approach to social research is no longer purely that of the cultural anthropologist, a more precise definition must be rooted in ethnography's disciplinary home of anthropology. Thus, ethnography may be defined as both a qualitative research process and method (one *conducts* an ethnography) and product (the *outcome* of this process is an ethnography) whose aim is cultural interpretation. The ethnographer goes beyond reporting

events and details of experience. Specifically, he or she attempts to explain how these represent what we might call "webs of meaning" (Geertz again), the cultural constructions, in which we live.

Ethnographers generate understandings of culture through representation of what we call an *emic* perspective, or what might be described as the "insider's point of view." The emphasis in this representation is thus on allowing critical categories and meanings to *emerge* from the ethnographic encounter rather than imposing these from existing models. An *etic* perspective, by contrast, refers to a more distant, analytical orientation to experience.

An ethnographic understanding is developed through close exploration of several sources of data. Using these data sources as a foundation, the ethnographer relies on a cultural frame of analysis.

Long-term engagement in the field setting or place where the ethnography takes place, is called participant observation. This is perhaps the primary source of ethnographic data. The term represents the dual role of the ethnographer. To develop an understanding of what it is like to live in a setting, the researcher must both become a *participant* in the life of the setting while also maintaining the stance of an *observer*, someone who can describe the experience with a measure of what we might call "detachment." Note that this does not mean that ethnographers cannot also become advocates for the people they study. Typically ethnographers spend many months or even years in the places where they conduct their research often forming lasting bonds with people. Due to historical development and disciplinary biases, in the past most ethnographers conducted their research in foreign countries while largely ignoring the potential for work right here at home. This has meant that much of the ethnography done in the United States today is now being done outside of its disciplinary home. Increasing numbers of cultural anthropologists, however, have begun doing fieldwork in the communities where they themselves live and work.

Interviews provide for what might be called "targeted" data collection by asking specific but open-ended questions. There is a great variety of interview styles. Each ethnographer brings his or her own unique approach to the process. Regardless, the emphasis is on allowing the person or persons being interviewed to answer without being limited by pre-defined choices -- something which clearly differentiates qualitative from more quantitative or demographic approaches. In most cases, an ethnographic interview looks and feels little different than an everyday conversation and indeed in the course of long-term participant-observation, most conversations are in fact purely spontaneous and without any specific agenda.

Researchers collect other sources of data which depend on the specific nature of the field setting. This may take the form of representative artifacts that embody characteristics of the topic of interest, government reports, and newspaper and magazine articles. Although often not tied to the site of study, secondary academic sources are utilized to "locate" the specific study within an existing body of literature.

Over the past twenty years, interest has grown within anthropology for considering the close relationship between personal history, motivation, and the particulars of ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., see [Hoey & Fricke 2007](#)). It is undeniably important to question and understand how these factors have bearing on the construction of theory and conduct of a scholarly life. Personal and professional experiences, together with historical context, lead individual researchers to their own particular methodological and theoretical approaches. This too is an important, even if unacknowledged, source.

Ethnographic fieldwork is shaped by personal and professional identities just as these identities are inevitably shaped by individual experiences while in the field. Unfortunately, the autobiographical dimension of ethnographic research has been downplayed historically if not discounted altogether. This is mostly understandable given a perceived threat to the objectivity expected of legitimate science, to reliability of data, and to integrity of our methodology, if we appear to permit subjectivity to intervene by allowing the ethnographer's encumbered persona to appear instead of adhering to the prescribed role of wholly dispassionate observer.

Most anthropologists today point to Bronislaw Malinowski, author of such landmark ethnographies as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (first published in 1922), as a kind of founding father to ethnographic fieldwork, the practice of "participant-observation." Malinowski's early twentieth century ethnographies were written in a voice removed and utterly unrevealing about the nature of the ethnographer and his relationship to people studied. Since Malinowski's time, the personal account of fieldwork has been hidden away in notes and diaries. These "off the record" writings document the tacit impressions and emotional experiences without which we cannot, as ethnographers, fully appreciate and understand the project of our research itself. Malinowski's diaries were published after his death in a revealing autobiographical account of his inner life while in the field (*A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, first published in 1967). We learn in his diaries that, among other details, Malinowski longed to write great novels even as his scientific writing effectively defined the practice of cultural anthropology for much of the twentieth century.

Of many important lessons for anthropologists, Malinowski's diaries hold two especially relevant ones here. First of these is that, at its heart, ethnographic writing is a means of expressing a shared interest among cultural anthropologists for telling stories – stories about what it means to be human. The other is that the explicit professional project of observing, imagining and describing other people need not be incompatible with the implicit personal project of learning about the self. It is the honest truth of fieldwork that these two projects are always implicated in each other. Good ethnography recognizes the transformative nature of fieldwork where as we search for answers to questions about people we may find ourselves in the stories of others. Ethnography should be acknowledged as a mutual product born of the intertwining of the lives of the ethnographer and his or her subjects (e.g., see [Hoey 2008](#)).

Fieldnotes

Given that so much of ethnographic fieldwork depends on the researcher's own experience and perspective—i.e., the “I” must be acknowledged—it really does matter where you as that researcher “stand” relative to the process of your own fieldwork and ultimately to the subject of your study. That means not only whether or not you might consider yourself an “insider” or an “outsider” to a group that may be your focus but also the attitudes and/or preconceptions that you bring to that study.

This is true of any science—regardless of whether or not other sciences tend to address the tension between objectivity and subjectivity or ignore it altogether. In any event, it is unavoidably true for ethnographic fieldwork. If you are judgmental in your treatment of your subject, this will affect the product of your work by affecting the process—your capacity to accurately capture the details that become your data, to interpret that data, and to represent the lives of others as well as the account of your fieldwork. That much seems clear.

However, it is more than this. I have found that many students in ethnographic training are reluctant at best and, at times, highly critical of the demands that ethnographic work places on them. Frankly, these students may resent the time and energy it requires. Doing this work can be disruptive to one's everyday life. If you are judgmental of the process itself by being dismissive of the work that you are doing, this can be very harmful as well. It is insidiously distortive and destructive. You need to always be open-minded to allow for possibilities. If you say “nothing happened” then clearly, you've shut off any possibility that there was something there of significance. Do not fall into the trap of not seeing what you have come to take for granted. This is especially hard for those of us who work within our own culture(s) or communities.

Ethnographic fieldwork is, indeed, challenging. It is also immensely rewarding when you allow for that possibility. Keep in mind a few things:

1. While you can and should acknowledge your challenges—e.g., they could become at least some of the “limitations” of your study to be addressed in a report on that research for publication—it isn't a good idea to write in a consistently negative way about the work in which you are engaged.
2. Similarly, it is uncommon to describe either one's field site or the people with whom one works negatively—you may not always enjoy your time, but it is understood that you're expected to do your best to be non-judgmental.
3. It is entirely possible to have a less than stellar ethnographic fieldwork/training experience. This might be measured by how well you are able to collect sufficient data to work with and what conclusions you may be able to draw from that work. It may simply be how well you feel your experience lived up to your own personal or professional expectations or standards. Nevertheless, these experiences may still be

analyzed for their potential contribution to a discussion about fieldwork generally— possibility a discourse on methods specifically. Simply stated, we can learn from challenging experience if that experience is examined for insights.

Keep on Writing

Doing an ethnography is not at all like doing a research based on books or articles—what is typically referred to as “secondary” research. Although as a student (and even a credentialed scholar) it is possible to neglect writing of the latter sort until the proverbial last minute, such a strategy is a simple recipe for disaster when doing ethnographic fieldwork with the intent to write-up an ethnography—a report or account of that work. Ethnographic fieldwork is *primary* research and is thus very different what college (and other) students may be used to in *secondary* research.

Keep something with you at all times in which you can jot down noteworthy observations and impressions. It can be a small (pocket sized) notebook or even just a folded piece of paper. As soon as you can work from these jottings to longer fieldnotes that “flesh out” the bullet points, do so. Some people will nowadays use a small voice recorder to record impressions. If that’s your thing, it could work for you. I would still think it necessary to get that information out of the recorder and into some graphical form (e.g., text) so that you can begin to make representations of your experience in the field and to work with that data.

One of the most essential purposes for writing fieldnotes is to—as Geertz would say—turn the events of the moment into an *account* that can be consulted again (and again) later. That account allows for you to commit what you might not know is important in that moment to memory. It is often the case that you will not know what is important until later. If you don’t record things now, they won’t be there later. Immediately following from this is the opportunity to recognize *patterns*. Are there things that people say or do, for example, that appear to suggest consistencies or relationships that are patterned? Does something seem to appear as a “ritual,” for example? Remember, “ritual” isn’t something far-out and exotic. They happen in voodoo parlors, yes, but they also happen in churches and football stadiums. They’re apparent in town meetings and college classrooms. You can find them in the bathroom as well as the bedroom. They’re everywhere. Though dated now in some important ways, you may want to take a look at Horace Miner’s (1956) article “[Body Ritual among the Nacirema](#)” for somewhat timeless insight into how we can make the familiar, unfamiliar.

Normally, ethnographers can spend a good long time (months at least) working in the field so that they can literally discover their purpose through lengthy participant-observation. This is why we refer to ethnographic research as “emergent” or “from the ground up.” In most undergraduate courses in ethnographic methods, students should be given a set of training experiences that at least approach what would be typical of the professional ethnographer. In most cases, however, instructors cannot exactly duplicate the full rigors of fieldwork for practical reasons—given that we don’t have enough time. Courses should be structured to

allow for lots of exploration of the experience of participant-observation and ongoing feedback. This is why it is so important to undergo fieldnote reviews throughout the process of instruction.

So, by now you can see that **ethnographers never stop writing**. In keeping with the open-mindedness that comes with the approach—in the preliminary stages—ethnographers write about things that interest them generally about their fieldsite. They may even just begin writing about their own lives as a way to raise questions about the world around them.

When a subject is raised—often as a question about a particular group or at least a cultural practice or belief—this begins to give focus and direction to the inquiry and the writing. It is increasingly purposeful. The ethnographer may then spend time discussing in his/her notes how they came to select a given group/community or question/problem/issue. They are writing “thick” descriptions about what is going on with the people in their focused area of inquiry. They are recording what is said, how it is said, where it is said. They are recording their sensory impressions as well as their insights.

Because **fieldnotes are where patterns emerge**, ethnographers rely extensively on them to provide insight into what qualities may define members in given group: What become essential to understanding group identity, for example? **That is to say, ethnographers depend on their fieldnotes to discover, to work toward preliminary understandings, to develop interpretations, and eventually to reach their conclusions.** Ethnography, in large part, may be said to take place in and through the fieldnotes. If it isn't in there—as I like to say—you do not have it. As I started this section, rather than waiting until it is time to finish a study and potentially leave a fieldsite, ethnographers are constantly writing-up observations and results, drawing at least tentative conclusions that they will continue to revisit in their fieldwork notes in order that they can continue to refine them. Again, this is an interpretative science in search of meaning. We understand that this meaning is always tentative in some measure so we aim for refinement—at Geertz would say—of debate rather than “the final word” on the subject.

What Sort of Questions Do Ethnographers Ask Themselves?

Basically, our orienting questions are pretty mundane—even journalistic—but they are essential for informing the ongoing process of discovery while in the field. You're just asking yourself: Who; What; Where; When; How; and, Why? Simple stuff, right?

1. Who are key actors in a given context—your defined group, your site, within a putative culture?
2. What happens in a given place and time? What catches your attention? Often we tend to notice what seems “unusual” or “different.” That's why working in another culture than our own can be helpful. We tend to notice those things with which we are not familiar. What illustrative occurrences, *utterances* (what people say), or social interactions would you be able to describe in your fieldnotes that later—when refined in

your written account of that fieldwork in a report that will be read—**could lead to a keen sense on the part of the reader** of the problems or issues that a group faces, to the values that are basic to their behavior, to the quality of the place(s) where they live, work, or play? Are there any keywords that seem to be repeated? What markers of identity are there in this group or at this place? Would the people with whom you are working recognize these markers themselves or does it take an “outsider” to see them as such?

- a. While we’re on the subject of “what,” be sure to ask yourself (as you’ll need to answer the question in your final report) what your relationship is to the persons and places in your study. Are you an “insider” or an “outsider?” Explain the relationship and how it changes as you engage in this fieldwork. What drew you to this study?
3. Where do you find the subjects of your study, i.e., the people from whom you are learning? What does this place look like? What does it sound like? Basically, what are your sensory impressions of this place?
4. When do things happen? Do they always happen at this time? Again, we’re looking for suggestive patterns. So, do any behaviors, events, or utterances seem to follow a certain order? Are there any non-verbal cues or body language that prompt people to take action in a given situation according to what appears to be some pre-arrangement or understanding?
5. How do things appear to work? That is, are there written rules that people follow? Are there tacit understandings? How do people know how to behave? Is it always the same? Do different “categories” of persons behave differently—young or old, “black” or “white,” male or female, newcomer or old-hand?
6. Gradually, as you work through the nuts and bolts, you can begin to think about the larger questions. You start doing this early on because (again) you’re trying to develop an understanding. You will need to continue to refine this understanding but start asking things like: Why did this thing happen?

What About after I’ve Written Notes?

As I have already noted, you should always be conscious of the opportunity to record your fieldwork observations, impressions, and experience. So, you’ll be jotting things regularly. After the preliminary notes you take on-the-fly, you should work with them further as soon as you can. Remember, you are *processing* them. They don’t do this by themselves. **Fieldnote writing is an interactive, iterative process.** You go back and work with and through them. Again, it is leading you toward the interpretations that you must make. Be sure to take time to fill in what may present as “gaps” in your presentation of things in quickly taken notes. At least initially, you are writing for yourself but **ultimately you must represent things so that other people can experience—through your account—what you encountered.** They need to be able to be there too.

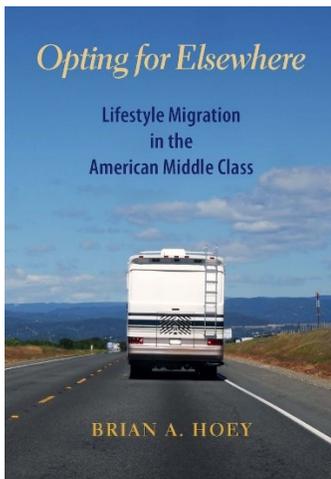
So, that's why you cannot get in the habit of saying "Oh, I remember the details so I don't need to write them down." Imagine that you're describing things to someone in a letter. You're on a trip and writing home to someone you really care about and want to "tell them everything" so that they too can see and understand what's going on. So, **you need to have an intimate relationship with your notes**. They don't "get done" so that you can forget about them until I look at them later. Ethnography happens through the fieldnotes. You are taking notes on your notes on your notes. **You are in a dialog with your notes and with yourself**. Think about the following as you go back through, reflect on, and variously process your notes and thus your participant-observations.

1. What are your immediate impressions or responses to the notes that you've previously taken? Do they seem "partial" or "incomplete?" Do you feel like your understanding has changed since you took them? If so, how?
2. Do your notes raise any questions? Are these questions about the subjects of your study? Might they also be about how you're conducting your study? In other words, think not only about who/what you're working with but also about how you're going about your work.
3. Do you need to make any adjustments to your approach? If so, what? How will you go about making those changes and why? What have you learned about the process?
4. What might you need to ask people in order to answer questions raised that you cannot answer on your own based on your observations?
5. Do you find that there are things that you would like to know more about that would require further study? What are these things? What might knowing more about them "do" for you in terms of your emerging project?
6. Much of fieldwork involves serendipity. We unexpectedly find things. We discover. So, there are many "surprises." What surprised you? Why? Listen to your reactions. What was so remarkable about whatever or whomever it was that surprised you?
7. Are there noticeable differences between what you think or believe to be "true" regarding the people and places you are studying and what you are finding that the "locals" or "natives" think or believe about themselves? If so, from where does this difference come? Is it simply the distinction between *emic* and *etic* categories, for example? Try to explain the differences—explore them as potential pathways to further insight. Comparison, of many types, is often used to provide the opportunity to learn.
8. How do you think you are perceived/received by the group or in the place where you are working? What is the nature of this relationship? What steps are you taking to assure that you are treating people with respect and that you, yourself, are being treated in this manner? What sort of things do people say and do because of your presence? Sometimes called "reactive effects," these can be very revealing. That is, rather than being "bad" because it suggested that you've caused influence (or "contaminated" your site), this becomes a form of data. It can be "good," as long as you don't ignore it. Explore it.

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An Ethnographic Text



You may be interested in having a look at my book *Opting for Elsewhere*, which is based on my own ethnographic studies. It is available through a variety of sources. You can find ordering information from the publisher, [Vanderbilt University Press](#).

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