

# A Handbook *for Social Science* *Field Research*

Essays & Bibliographic Sources  
on Research Design and Methods



*Edited by*

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# 3

## Ethnographic Methods

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### Ethnography: Theory and Methods

*Alma Gottlieb*

#### What Is Ethnography?

Interviewing the minister of finance about current trends in the local economy. Riding in a taxi all day with an immigrant cab driver as he picks up and drops off his fares. Helping young mothers as they pound corn in adjoining courtyards and gossip about recent village events. Joining in a lesbian and gay rights march and observing relations between marchers and bystanders.

What do these disparate activities have in common? They are all examples of ethnography—a powerful, multistranded method first developed by cultural anthropologists and now adopted by researchers in many disciplines, from political scientists and economists to scholars of education and media studies. Why is ethnography so widely used? Put simply, ethnography offers an unparalleled set of methods for exploring and gaining insight

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into people's values, beliefs, and behaviors. Qualitative methods, of which ethnography is the quintessential exemplar, seek to explain what quantitative observations actually mean to actual individuals. Moreover, qualitative methods have the potential to explore ruptures between individuals' stated opinions and beliefs (such as those they might express in survey questionnaires), on the one hand, and their actual behaviors, on the other hand, since the latter may not always reflect the former. Ideally, quantitative and qualitative methods can be harnessed to work together, as well-paired as couples on a dance floor.

### What Is the Value of Doing Ethnography?

Among the methodologies available to social science researchers, ethnography is the only one based explicitly on the recognition of three fundamental and interrelated presuppositions: (a) that data are not just gathered like grapes on a vine but are also created by human effort; put more prosaically, the way in which information is collected affects the content of the data themselves; (b) that scholars who "produce data" are complex creatures whose perceptions and communications are shaped at every turn by the context in which they find themselves and the level of comfort—or discomfort—they experience in that context; and (c) that both the quality and the content of the "data" that a researcher "gathers" have as much to do with the researcher as they do with the informants or research participants.

These presuppositions are in turn premised on a philosophical orientation, developed by the branch of philosophy known as hermeneutics, that human life is about interpretation—that developing and working with systems of meaning constitute both the prime motive in, and the prime mode of, being human (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Cassirer 1944; Geertz 1973a; Langer 1942). It follows from this perspective that it is crucial to pay attention to intersubjectivity—the process of individuals encountering one another both empirically and psychologically—in the course of conducting research. Recent examples of works critically examining the theoretical foundations of longstanding anthropological practices (positivist and otherwise) include, among many others, Clifford and Marcus (1986); Harrison (1991); James, Hockey, and Dawson (1997); and Marcus and Fisher (1986). Indeed, qualitative researchers writing since the 1980s have increasingly worked through the productive implications of such a hermeneutic approach. While some qualitative methods emphasize externally imposed analytic models and downplay both subjectivity and intersubjectivity, the orientation of this chapter is informed by the hermeneutic perspective.



Let me illustrate the potential value of a hermeneutically informed qualitative approach—and the intellectual payoff it can offer—by way of a story from my own research. Before I began conducting my doctoral research in a group of small villages in Côte d'Ivoire, my graduate adviser counseled me to inaugurate my fieldwork by compiling basic census data in the village in which I would settle, noting names and ages of all residents, their clan membership, their relations to others in the household, and any other information that appeared relevant. The strategy seemed reasonable, and soon after settling into a village, I followed my adviser's instructions and began trying to collect primary census data. It was an unmitigated disaster. The residents would not even divulge what I assumed would be unproblematic facts, such as their own names or how many children they had, let alone clan affiliation or more private information (Gottlieb & Graham 1994, pp. 65–69). I immediately gave up on my census efforts and, for the next few months, settled for conducting innocuous conversations about the weather, the names of house parts, clothing styles, and anything else I hoped would be uncontroversial. Apparently, the residents of this village had reason to suspect my motives, and I would clearly need to make great efforts to win their trust before they would willingly share even basic aspects of their lives. Entrée into this community—one of my prime goals—would apparently be a protracted process, and delicately exploring the motives for their suspicion became a theme in my research that ultimately helped me understand their bitter experiences with French colonial domination earlier in the century.

Pursuing participant observation—better known among anthropologists as advanced hanging out—combined with systematically learning the local language, proved to be my primary research method during my first six months. Only after I could conduct a simple conversation in the local language (Beng) did people start talking with me about issues that mattered to them. In the end, I filled out my census cards on the run, jotting down demographic facts about lives and households as I came to know my neighbors. When I returned to the region five years later for another research project, one close friend confided that my initial attempt at a census had done even more damage than I had realized: Only then did I discover that on my previous visit, people had interpreted my questions as a sign that I was a spy for the government and intended to help the regime reinstate the French colonial system of forced labor (Gottlieb & Graham 1994, pp. 287–288). Had I *initially* attended to the hermeneutic dimensions of research and taken the time to build rapport before embarking on a census, I might have saved myself—and my Beng hosts and hostesses—much heartache.

My case is not unusual. Gaining rapport with a group of people can take far more time, attention, and imagination than one might anticipate.

Another real-life fieldwork story can illustrate the point well. A medical anthropologist, Denise Allen, planned a two-year doctoral research stint in a small town in Tanzania on the topic of childbirth and midwifery practices. Soon after moving into the town, she decided that during her entire first year, she would never carry a notebook with her as she walked around town. Out of concern that taking notes in front of people would raise too many suspicions, Allen deferred her note taking to evenings when she was alone in her room. Her first priority was earning people's trust, and she did this by eating meals with her neighbors, helping out with babysitting, and asking as few direct questions as possible. Only after a year of working to develop comfortable relations with her neighbors did Allen begin asking formal questions about her research topic, and only then did she begin writing in her notebook while observing births (Allen 2002).

Granted, Allen's is an extreme case, and most researchers lack the luxury of both time and money to carry out such a relaxed schedule. But the lesson is worth attending to. The more rushed you are, the more superficial will be the information you collect. Put simply, skimpy methods produce skimpy data. Conversely, the more time you take to get to know the people whose lives you are trying to understand, the more likely it is that they will take the time to share their honest reflections with you.

This principle is equally relevant in more familiar settings. A researcher in communications, Mary Anne Moffitt, envisaged a doctoral study of the reading habits of teenage American girls who read dozens or even hundreds of romance novels each year. From her formal interviews with a group of girls, she learned what they thought about the plots of the books, but she had a hunch that there was more to the girls' reading experiences than what they were telling her. To probe how the girls' responses to a survey on their experiences reading romance novels squared with their actual reading behaviors, she decided to add a qualitative component to her study. The girls agreed to allow Moffitt to follow them around on weekends as they spent hours at the local mall's bookstore. Here, Moffitt discovered the inner workings of an elaborate exchange network that had not come to light from her more formal surveys: One girl would buy a book and then share it with the others, with each book passed back and forth multiple times so as to reach the entire reading group. Although this project was initially conceived as a purely literary study, the charting of the girls' exchange networks through both a survey and a set of ethnographic observations provided it with a dynamic sociological perspective and helped put this initially more textually oriented study into broader perspective (Moffitt 1990; Moffitt & Wartella 1992).

Such cases point to the difference in scope between ethnography and survey research. While a national survey conducted over a period of a month



may obtain data from 10,000 respondents and have statistical reliability and a low margin of error, ethnographers may spend a year living among and studying the lives of only three or four neighboring families. An ethnographic study may even focus extensively on one person's life in order to produce a full-scale biography of that individual, with nuanced discussions of all stages of the life cycle. Is there a payoff for this focus on depth rather than breadth?

### Depth Versus Breadth

Think of the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods as a seesaw. As if attached by a fulcrum, they form part of a single dynamic system, but at any given moment they produce two different, indeed sometimes incommensurable forms of knowledge: Quantitative methods produce breadth but sacrifice depth; qualitative methods produce depth, revealing a complexity that quantitative methods might miss, but they sacrifice breadth. Of course, this perfunctory description is something of a caricature; the best quantitative studies also build on at least some level of depth, and the best qualitative methods also offer at least some level of breadth. But at their most extreme, the two approaches have very different goals (on quantitative methods, see Chapter 7 in this volume).

Ethnography often produces spectacular results in terms of depth. A beautifully written ethnography based on long-term involvement in a community and fluency in the local language allows the reader to virtually taste the flavors of the local cuisine and smell the sea breezes. Most important, it allows the reader to gain a deep understanding of, and empathy for, lives lived and values held in a very different fashion from one's own (see, e.g., Bowen 1954; Briggs 1970; Cesara 1982; Dumont 1978; Fernea 1965, 1975; Lareau & Shultz 1996; Powdermaker 1967; Read 1965; Rabinow 1977; Stoller & Olkes 1987). Sometimes this understanding is of a group of people defined by their gender, as with Abu-Lughod's sensitive portrait of Bedouin women in Egypt (1993b); sometimes it is of a group of people who are related by affiliation to a political ideology, as with Crapanzano's disturbing portrait of racist whites living in late-apartheid South Africa (1985); sometimes it is even of a single individual whom the reader gets to know in exquisite detail, as in Shostak's renowned and intimate biography of a !Kung woman leading a somewhat traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle in southern Africa (2000) or Crapanzano's provocative portrait of a male Moroccan tile maker (1980). All these results could be achieved only through fine-grained ethnographic research conducted extensively or even exclusively in the local language.

In the best of all possible worlds, every study would provide for both optimal depth and optimal breadth. In generously funded projects, this might be achieved through research teams consisting of both quantitatively and qualitatively oriented researchers who collaboratively design a study to take advantage of the skills and training of each team member. In more modest projects, a single scholar might seek training in both quantitative and qualitative research methods so as to craft a well-integrated research agenda aiming for a balance between the statistical breadth of quantitative methods and the cultural depth of qualitative methods (see Chapter 7 in this volume).

### **Ethnography as Social Science: Some Ethnographic Techniques**

What techniques do ethnographers use in creating such evocative portraits of individuals and their social universe?

Many cultural anthropologists used to argue that ethnography is such a personal process that it cannot be taught. By contrast, nowadays few cultural anthropologists would espouse this quasi-mystical perspective. In fact, the current generation of anthropologists aims to demystify the process. Despite the uniqueness of each fieldwork experience, many scholars now suggest that much can be learned in advance from thinking and reading about others' experiences and mistakes in conducting research.

Graduate programs in anthropology often offer courses in fieldwork methods that are open to students in any discipline, and the National Science Foundation often offers such summer courses at one or more campuses around the United States. Most such courses provide an opportunity to conduct a modest fieldwork project locally, on the premise that it is preferable to make your worst mistakes during a trial run, when the success of your major research will not be affected.

A good field-methods course should offer intellectual and emotional tools to help you analyze and learn from your mistakes and deal with the frustrations that you will inevitably encounter in any fieldwork project. Let us explore briefly a few formal techniques that are often taught in such courses.

### **Language**

The first and perhaps most important tool for conducting effective ethnography is language. If most residents of your research site speak a language other than one in which you are already fluent, you will reap great rewards



if you work to become competent in that language *before* you embark on your study. If you are a U.S. citizen working on your doctorate at a U.S. university, you can apply for the federally funded Work-Study Program and for a FLAS (Foreign Language and Area Studies) fellowship, which funds a full year of language study on your campus. If your campus does not teach the language you need to learn, you can find a campus that does and then apply for a FLAS fellowship to study there for a summer or a semester. Even without a FLAS fellowship, you may be able to study a foreign language relevant to your research. Your institution may be part of a regional agreement that funds students to take courses at other universities. Ask your adviser or college dean about funding opportunities for language study both on and off campus. For suggestions on how to improve your knowledge of a new language through means other than formal coursework, and a general “pep talk” to give you courage if you are intimidated by language study, see Farber (1991).

Perhaps you will protest, “It takes too long to learn a language. I have to complete my doctorate in five years, and I can’t possibly do this if I am taking extra courses outside my field.” Well, perhaps it is the (folk) custom in your home department to complete a doctorate in five years. But folk customs are often far more pliable than they at first appear. Do not give up on studying the language before exploring the options!

If you will be conducting research in a developing nation, even if you already know the colonial language that is spoken in your planned field site (e.g., French, Spanish, or Portuguese), it is wise to spend some time learning the indigenous language that is native to most residents. The more people you can converse with comfortably in their first language, the richer your research will be. One graduate student I worked with devoted extraordinary energy in studying four languages before embarking on his doctoral research in a multilingual region of Senegal. His competence in the appropriate languages greatly strengthened his applications for dissertation research, which was ultimately funded by two national agencies. Equally important, his linguistic competence allowed him to hit the ground running once he began his research (Westgard 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Still you may object, “Why go through all this trouble when English is now a global language?” Contrary to increasingly common perceptions, only about 8% of the world’s citizens are currently considered competent in English (Gordon 2000). Moreover, in many parts of the world where English is the official language, relying on English in effect means limiting yourself to speaking to elites and excluding the majority of the citizenry, who will inevitably have very different perspectives on whatever topic you are aiming to research.

Is it necessary to become fully fluent in the local language? Most people are genuinely touched when outsiders try to learn their language, and no matter how modest your level of competence, your attempts will probably be greatly appreciated. Winning people's trust and willingness to share their opinions can be accomplished far more easily and quickly once you have convinced them that you are on their side. And making at least some effort to speak their language is a prime way to demonstrate this.

A final objection you might have to language learning involves translation and interpretation. Surely ignorance of the local language will not prevent me from having access to non-English speakers, you may be thinking, since I can always engage the services of a reliable interpreter.

My response to this frequent objection is that interpreters can themselves create problems, however inadvertently (Gentzler 2001; Newmark 1991; Pochhacker & Shlesinger 2001; Schäffner & Kelly-Holmes 1995; Tymoczko & Gentzler 2002; and Wagner, Bech, & Martínez 2001, pp. 62–81). First, as in all skills, some interpreters are better trained and more competent than others, but you may not have much choice in whom to hire as an interpreter. You may discover the hard way that hiring an interpreter can be risky—for instance, when you find that your interpreter has mistranslated or incompletely translated essential conversations. Political agendas can also interfere in the delicate process of translation. Consider this example from my own research. In my first months of fieldwork in Côte d'Ivoire, I discovered that the young man I had engaged as an interpreter was delighted to translate pleasant conversations and information about traditional customs, but he refused to translate disputes and conversations about unpleasant or controversial topics. He hoped my work would bring renown to the Beng people via an imagined Voice of America radio broadcast, and he was adamant that I represent his people in a positive light. Our agendas were at loggerheads, and we eventually had to part company (Gottlieb & Graham 1994). As this example suggests, you will generally be much better off becoming as competent as you can in the local language(s) and using interpreters just to check your own understanding.

Once you have attained some level of competence in the locally spoken language(s), you can consider a range of ethnographic methods that will allow you to understand what people think about a particular issue or topic and how they experience some aspects of their lives.

## A Potpourri of Ethnographic Methods

The classic formal ethnographic method remains the long interview with, ideally, several follow-up interviews. A short version of this is the one-shot, quick-and-dirty, prescheduled, short interview. This is certainly better than



no interview, but it is far from optimal. The sorts of information and opinions that a person will give you in a short, structured conversation are quite different from—and often far more superficial than—the sorts of information and opinions that same person will give you in a more leisurely but less structured situation once he or she has come to know you and feels comfortable sharing more heterodox, complex, or even intimate thoughts with you. Fortunately, helpful guidelines on a variety of techniques for conducting different kinds of interviews are now readily available (see, e.g., Arksey & Knight 1999; Briggs 1986; Fontana & Frey 2000; Holstein & Gubrium 1995; Ives 1995; Kvale 1996; McCracken 1988; Rubin & Rubin 1995; Spradley 1979; also see Chapter 4 in this volume).

After your first interview, jot down further questions that occur to you as you read through your notes. Then try to schedule a follow-up interview. If your informant seems congenial, suggest a more informal venue for the second conversation. What your informant is willing to talk about in, say, a park or out-of-the-way café may be quite different from what he or she might say in an office or a living room crowded with noisy relatives. In Africa, I have had some of my most productive interviews in buses, where my informant and I spoke a language that the other passengers did not know, and my interlocutor felt free to share opinions about quite sensitive issues and even to divulge otherwise secret information (although for ethical reasons, I never published the latter). If you look creatively at your surroundings, you can propose a site where your respondents will feel relaxed enough to confide their thoughts. Ideally, you will be able to conduct a series of follow-up interviews in such sites, with greater levels of depth occurring each time.

Focus groups offer an intriguing variation on the individual interview. Citizens of democratically oriented nations may be aware of focus groups largely through reports that journalists provide, in which they summarize opinions offered by members of focus groups concerning political campaigns or issues. However, the relevance of this research technique goes far beyond the journalistic. Social scientists can make exciting use of focus groups in any number of research projects. The key lies in the selection of the focus group: The researcher should aim to assemble a set of individuals who will offer an informative spectrum of ideas about a particular subject but whose backgrounds are not so diverse that comparing their opinions becomes meaningless. Fortunately, excellent guides now exist to help you avoid the possible pitfalls, and make use of the great potential, of this valuable research method (see, e.g., Chapter 5 in this volume).

Attending to social connections among individuals leads us to consider a more active technique: the ethnographic charting of social networks. From work conducted in the mid-20th century in London (Bott 1971) and southern Africa (van Velsen 1964), social scientists have developed techniques to trace

the networks that individuals maintain across a variety of identity factors and social groups (Freeman, White, & Kimball 1989; Schensul et al. 1999; Scott 1991; Wasserman & Faust 1994; Wasserman & Galaskiewicz 1994; Wellman & Berkowitz 1988). Researchers in several disciplines have expanded this method to study topics as diverse as AIDS (Frey 1989), conspiracy (Davis 1984), and organized crime (Klerks 2001)—and most recently, Al Qaeda networks (Krebs 2002a, 2002b).

Related to the charting of social networks is another classic technique long used by anthropologists and taught in many fieldwork courses and texts: the construction of genealogies. Even with the shrinking of families and their dispersal across the globe—or perhaps because of these epic changes—family relations remain key to many individuals. Uncovering what such relations mean to people in the face of new reproductive technologies, intercultural adoption, and other contemporary means for creating families is a central endeavor for many in the current generation of anthropologists (e.g. Franklin & McKinnon 2001; Franklin & Ragoné 1998; Graham 1996; Lomnitz & Lizaaur 1987; McKinnon & Silverman 2005; Stone 2001; Strathern 1992; Weston 1991; Yanagisako & Delaney 1995). With helpful resources available for teaching the novice, you will not find it hard to learn how to develop an efficient shorthand to chart genealogies as a first step to exploring the meanings of kinship (whether biologically based or otherwise) in contemporary life (see, e.g., Barnard & Good 1984; Crane & Angrosino 1984, pp. 44–52).

Anthropologists have developed additional techniques to analyze other specific domains of social life. For example, scholars interested in rituals and other symbolically resonant events often make use of an analytic method created by the renowned anthropologist Victor Turner (1967). To understand the complex meanings embedded in any given site of cultural production, the analyst, Turner urged, should explore three levels of inquiry: exegetical (explicit exegesis or interpretations offered by informants), operational (how a symbol is actually deployed in a particular cultural practice), and positional (the range of culturally meaningful events in which a given symbol is deployed). Furthermore, to investigate the performative nature of legal proceedings, Turner developed the concept of “social drama” and associated methods for investigating such dramas (1957). Although Turner developed these two methods to understand initiation rituals and village-level legal battles, respectively, among the Ndembu of Zambia, he later adapted them for investigating sacred and secular rituals and performances of modern Western life as well (Turner 1975, 1988), and the methods remain impressively adaptable in any number of cultural settings.

So far, all the methods discussed in this chapter rely on verbal techniques, with the practice of asking people questions being central to these methods. Although ethnographers uncover impressive layers of meaning when they



talk with people, conversation does not afford the only means of gaining insight into social life. If “a picture can tell a thousand words,” ethnographers have begun to make good on this claim by incorporating visual images into their work. Even a casual museumgoer discovers the dramatic truths that the visual can uncover for the viewer. As research tools, still and video photography have the potential to harness such truths. We may not all be Walker Evans, but surely the way his photographs awakened an earlier generation of Americans to the appalling realities of poverty in rural America—or the central role of photojournalists’ images from Hurricane Katrina in putting pressure on the Bush administration to attend to the ravages of race and class in America, the disturbing inefficiency of our federal emergency organization, and the risks of deferring prevention upgrades for large-scale infrastructural technologies such as levees—reminds us of the power of the visual (for engaging examples of the visual used to good effect in contemporary social science, see the journal *Visual Anthropology*). The development of digital technology in both still and video modes makes it increasingly appealing for ethnographers to explore these technologies as they become both more affordable and more user-friendly (see, e.g., Barbash & Taylor 1997; Bauer & Gaskell 2000; Biella 2001; Collier & Collier [1967] 1986; el Guindi 1998; Harper 1998).

Although visual methods such as still and video photography challenge the verbal domination of most scholarly research methods, all these methods nevertheless depend on the single sense of vision for making their point. Yet, as many thoughtful scholars have pointed out, privileging the visual sense dooms us to neglect the other senses, all of which play an active role in how we as humans experience the world (e.g., Howes 1991; Mauss [1938] 1973; Stoller 1989, 1997; Strathern 1997). Trying to put into operation this philosophical observation, some ethnographers have begun employing body-based techniques. For example, some researchers have developed a notational system called labanotation to chart bodily movements in dance and other body practices (see, e.g., Farnell 1995). Taking seriously the body and all the ways it communicates meaningfully to others can also allow us to pay attention to a group of people that most social scientists other than psychologists routinely neglect: infants (Gottlieb 2004). Developing means of analyzing body-based communications affords us new theoretical insights into important domains of human experience that Western scholarship often ignores.

## Field Notes

Many issues present themselves with reference to the use of field notes. First, no matter which methods you employ, you will need to spend significant periods of time writing, reading over, and thinking about your notes while you



conduct your research. Previous generations of scholars tended to regard the process of note taking as transparent and unproblematic, comprising an objective record of verifiable facts. By contrast, most contemporary ethnographers now view the practice as a site of cultural production that is deeply (if invisibly) informed by both cultural values and systems of unequal power relations.

Bresler (1997) explores the emotional consequences of the researcher's transition from quasi-member of a community to distant observer of the community during the process of taking and writing up research notes. Ottenberg (1990) goes so far as to question the hegemony of the *written* field note, pointing out that the process of thinking about, interpreting, and reinterpreting data—a process he intriguingly dubs headnotes—may be at least as important as the process of physically recording the data. As Ottenberg points out,

the words in my written notes stay the same. . . . But my interpretations of them as my headnotes have altered. My headnotes and my written notes are in constant dialogue, and in this sense the field experience does not stop. (p. 146)

A small but growing body of social science literature discusses a variety of these and related provocative issues raised by the process of taking notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995; Sanjek 1990; Vermeulen & Roldán 1996). At the same time, computer software is now being developed that makes the task of writing up research notes appealingly systematic (e.g., Coward, Moore, & Wimbish 1998; Richards & Richards 1998).

In spite of the fact that ethnographers regularly make use of relatively formal, learnable techniques such as those discussed above, ethnography nevertheless remains as much art as science (Wolcott 1995). Thus, most ethnographers will tell you that intuition, the hallmark of artistic practice, can be as important as rational plans in making for successful research.

## Ethnography as Art

First, there is the matter of serendipity. A beautifully planned research project may prove hopelessly unviable due to changed political circumstances that may necessitate dramatic revamping. For example, cultural anthropologist Michelle Johnson changed her doctoral research field site from West Africa to western Europe when the country in which she had already conducted a year of predissertation research, Guinea-Bissau, became embroiled in civil war. After moving her dissertation project to an expatriate, refugee community of Guineans living in the former colonial metropole of Lisbon, she began writing and publishing on previously unanticipated topics (Johnson 2002, 2006). Even when changes in research design are not necessitated by political



upheavals, ethnographers may choose to alter their strategies and aims based on early findings. Another cultural anthropologist, Shanshan Du, originally intended to focus her doctoral research on the disturbing number of love-pact suicides among the Lahu, an ethnic minority group in Southwest China. But while conducting interviews, she discovered the extent to which a basic ideology of gender equality accounted for the suicide pacts and decided to focus instead on the broader issue of egalitarian gender relations among the Lahu (Du 2002).

Both these stories underscore how important it is to remain flexible in conducting research (Moore 1973). As you “collect data,” your understanding of the local situation *should* keep changing. Attending to your own changing understanding may well suggest reorienting your original focus.

In addition to serendipity, there is also the human factor in conducting social science research. Attending to the humanity of research subjects suggests a consideration of our own humanity as researchers as well. If a previous generation of social scientists assumed the positivist premise commonly espoused in the natural sciences—that all researchers work as neutral observers in conditions that should approximate as much as possible the laboratory conditions of the physical sciences—many in the current generation of social scientists challenge this epistemological orientation. Rather than trying to neutralize our identities—a quest that many contemporary researchers think is doomed—many of us now ask, How do our own identities shape our research questions? And how do they shape the answers we receive from our informants?

One productive way to approach these questions is to assess the extent to which you are an insider or an outsider in your research community. This may appear to be a simple query, but globalization now produces such a complex interweaving of identities that the answer to this question is often murky. More and more of us are “halfies,” straddling two—or more—identity borders (Abu-Lughod 1991). Let us take the case of two recently minted scholars.

Jonathan Zilberg, a middle-class student and sculptor of European/Jewish background born and raised in Harare but later educated in the United States, returned to Zimbabwe to conduct doctoral fieldwork. Most of his informants were black Christian Zimbabwean artists, some were white Christian or Jewish Zimbabwean art gallery owners, and later some were European gallery owners who dealt in Zimbabwean art. Was Zilberg a native in any of these communities? He embarked on this research in his homeland as if he were returning as a native, and he was treated as such by successful black sculptors among the artistic elite. Yet he was acutely aware that his skin color and class brought him privileged status compared with

other sculptors who were quite poor and struggling (Zilberg 2000; also see Zilberg 1995a, 1995b).

Or consider another case that complicates the issue of “native.” Cultural anthropologist JoAnn D’Alisera is an Italian American raised in a working-class neighborhood near New York City who conducted research with immigrants and refugees from Sierra Leone living in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., region. Initially she was teased by some peers and professors for doing “easy” fieldwork, not only in her home country, but in a familiar urban environment as well. The criticism ceased when she demonstrated that she had discovered an Africanized Washington that was as culturally different from her American experience as was the small village in northern Sierra Leone where she had conducted predissertation research (see D’Alisera 2004). Both these cases remind us that while one’s national citizenship contributes to one’s cultural identity, the two are not necessarily the same. For other recent stimulating discussions of this issue, see, for example, Altorki and El-Solh (1988), Amit (2000), Bresler (2002), D’Amico-Samuels (1991), Fahim (1982), Hong (1994), Jones (1982), Khare (1983), Kuwayama (2003), Messerschmidt (1982), Narayan (1993), and Ohnuki-Tierney (1984).

In any case, being fully native to a local community is not necessarily a guarantee that fieldwork will proceed smoothly. To the contrary, being a native can produce its own intellectual and emotional challenges. For example, Matti Bunzl, a gay, Viennese-born Jew who has conducted extensive research with gays and Jews in Vienna, found that the most serious challenge he faced during fieldwork was creating sufficient *distance* between himself and his research subjects to see them as subjects and not just friends (see Bunzl 2004).

In recent years, an outpouring of writing has explored such human factors in research (see the bibliography accompanying this chapter for some examples). Your own fieldwork will surely present its idiosyncratic challenges. Reading about others’ experiences should at least help you mentally prepare for some of them and reduce the likelihood that unexpected challenges will overwhelm you.

### What are the Pitfalls of Doing Ethnography?

For all its satisfactions, ethnography can also be deeply frustrating. Where there are people, there are inevitably misunderstandings, disputes, and imbroglios. As Nietzsche once wrote somewhat cynically, “Whether in conversation we generally agree or disagree with others is largely a matter of habit: the one tendency makes as much sense as the other” ([1878] 1999, aphorism 334).



Ethnographers have documented all manner of conflicts they have encountered with neighbors, rivals of their hosts, and even the police (see, e.g., Geertz 1973b; Straight 2002). In my own case, halfway through my doctoral fieldwork in Côte d'Ivoire, I found myself in a local village court holding a trial against the powerful chief of the village in which my husband and I were living (Gottlieb & Graham 1994, pp. 181–194). Although disputatious situations can become unpleasant and even dangerous, the hermeneutic perspective suggests that it is best to treat them as part of, rather than an obstacle to, your research, and as valuable lessons to be learned from your research experiences—as opposed to hindrances to your “real” study.

The topic of conflict raises a related issue: How do you know whether your informant is lying? And if you discover an informant is lying, what should you do about it? Even if your informant is not deliberately trying to deceive you, is the informant telling the whole story (Bernard et al. 1984; Nachman 1984; Salamone 1977)? Cross-checking information among several individuals is a classic technique whose nuances are explored in fieldwork methods literature and courses. At a more general level, the value of in-depth ethnography becomes apparent in this context: The longer you know your informants and the more fluently you can communicate with them in their own language, the better you will be at judging their reliability.

Still, the question itself raises certain epistemological issues. If you assume that there is a single, whole story to be told, you will probably never be satisfied. Indeed, with such an assumption, cross-checking all information across several informants may prove an exercise in frustration as each informant offers a variation of the previous informant's claims. Acknowledging the inevitability of this reality, many contemporary ethnographers operate on the more hermeneutic principle that every story is by definition incomplete, and that the richest ethnographic portrait comes from collecting and presenting several stories across divergent lines of class, ethnicity, religion, and gender rather than seeking just one as the single, authoritative version (Altheide & Johnson 1998).

Sampling decisions become critical with this set of assumptions. The hermeneutic approach insists that both the psychological and the demographic profile of any person you decide to ask about any given topic will determine the information you learn. It follows that you should give careful thought to how to select your informants. Consulting a reliable guide on this subject (e.g., Johnson 1990) will alert you to consider many factors that, at least ideally, should help guide your selection of informants. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that you may not always have full control over who participates in your research. Some potential informants move away, fall sick, or refuse to join in the project for reasons of their own that you have no choice but to respect. Following the protocols of your campus



institutional review board also legally obliges you to adhere to ethical guidelines in all your dealings with your research community.

## Ethical Issues

Implicit in all the above is the more general question of ethical conduct. Most fieldwork courses and textbooks include a unit or chapter on ethical issues. But the truth is that ethical issues pervade every decision, great and small, that one makes during ethnographic research, and scholars now grapple with a far-ranging set of ethical questions that inhere in any qualitative research project.

In fact, submitting forms for approval by the institutional review board of your campus will alert you to a host of ethical issues that you will do well to think about while you are still in the early stages of designing your project. Perhaps most obvious among such issues looms the question of compensation. How can you avoid exploiting your research assistants (see, e.g., Sanjek 1993)? It is essential to consider how you will compensate informants for their participation. The time is long past for social scientists to expect people, especially impoverished people from developing world nations, to take time away from their own labor or other affairs to freely provide information for the sake of disinterestedly contributing to the goals of science. At the same time, notions of what constitutes acceptable forms of compensation are intimately bound with cultural values. A careful reading of Mauss's classic text (2000) on the nature of reciprocity will prepare you to think carefully about the general issues involved in gift-giving.

In some settings, cash payments will be most appropriate; in other settings, however, cash might be considered insulting or disruptive (Srivastava 1992). Bars of soap, bags of salt, bottles of peanut oil, baby clothes, and small cash payments were all gifts that young mothers especially appreciated in a study I conducted in West Africa concerning infancy and child rearing (Gottlieb 2004, pp. 3–37). Rather than such tangible goods, residents in other developing world and rural settings may prefer services that visiting researchers can provide, such as nursing care, translation into the colonial language, help with filling out complicated bureaucratic forms, help with reading for those with limited literacy skills, transportation to town, and information on specific topics of interest to those with little formal schooling. By contrast, a copy of your published works might be the most appropriate gift to offer highly educated elites in a different sort of project. Keep in mind that people in some places may feel perfectly comfortable specifying how they would like to be compensated for their time while others might consider it inappropriate, rude, or even taboo to discuss the question of compensation.



Beyond the immediate issue of how to appropriately compensate participants in your study loom many additional challenges that may be harder to anticipate. Field researchers often find themselves in difficult, even threatening positions that require immediate responses whose ethical implications are far from apparent *in the heat of the moment*. For example, is it better to expend a large proportion of your scarce research funds trying to save the life of a gravely sick infant with only a 50% chance of survival or to save the funds for other infants with a greater likelihood of recovery (Gottlieb 2004, pp. 249–260)? What are the particular challenges posed by conducting research on especially sensitive issues (Lee 1993; Renzetti & Lee 1992) or with specific populations, such as infants and children (Fine & Sandstrom 1988; Gottlieb 2004)? Is it ethical to use your professional expertise to help the U.S. and European military in their efforts to combat violence committed in the name of Islam (Gusterson 2003; Wax 2003)? By contrast, is it ethical to *avoid* conducting research in war-torn areas when so much of the contemporary world is, in one way or another, victimized by violence (Hoffman 2003)?

Broader issues concerning the shape of scholarly careers should also be the object of some reflection on your part as you think beyond the immediate research situation and contemplate writing plans. Should you use pseudonyms for specific individuals and places in your writings, and if so, how should you choose them (see, e.g., van der Geest 2003)? In what ways should “developed world” scholars collaborate with “developing world” scholars to avoid paternalism and racism, however inadvertent (see, e.g., Louis & Bartunek 1996; Smith 1999)? One of the most effective ways to anticipate how best to address dilemmas and issues posed by such questions is to read a broad selection of frank memoirs of field research written by anthropologists and other scholars who write honestly of the ethically complex situations they faced and how they responded (see the bibliography following this chapter) as well as to read more theoretical texts addressing the intellectual implications of ethical issues such as those broached above (see, e.g., Appell 1978; Bresler 1997; Brettell 1993; Caplan 2003; Cassell & Jacobs 1987; de Laine 2000; Fluehr-Lobban & Rhudy 2003; Katz, Ruby, & Gross 2003; Kimmel 1988; Kirsch 1999; Lee 1993; Mitchell 1993; Punch 1986; Salzano, Ferling, & Hurtado 2003; Scheper-Hughes 1995; and see Part II of this volume).

## Personal Issues

Attending to the hermeneutic foundations of research means considering very personal issues. Increasingly, social scientists are acknowledging that

what all researchers bring to their work is colored as much by emotional as by intellectual factors. It is important to think about how your own emotional biography may shape your research agenda—the basic question(s) and issue(s) you have chosen to address, the sorts of people you feel comfortable seeking out for answers, and the ways you intuitively tend to deal with whatever challenges you may encounter (Hunt 1989; Kleinman & Copp 1993; Wengle 1983).

Gender plays an enormously determinative role in shaping one's research experience, but until recently it has been a somewhat invisible factor (Bell, Caplan, & Karim 1993; Caplan 1988a, 1988b; Golde 1986; Gregory 1984; Keesing 1985; Kirsch 1999; Lewin & Leap 1996; Warren 1988; Whitehead & Conway 1986; Wolf 1996). Even now, it is mostly discussed in relation to female researchers but rarely male researchers. And issues specific to gay and lesbian anthropologists are only now beginning to be discussed (Lewin & Leap 1996). A related issue for fieldworkers concerns the intimate question of the impact of family members (spouse, children, or others) who may accompany you during your research. A few scholars have begun to write about the profound ways in which a spouse's presence may shape fieldwork (see, e.g., Ariëns & Strijp 1989; Firth 1972; Gottlieb & Graham 1994; Oboler 1986), but this remains an underresearched topic. More has been written about the impact of having your children accompany you to the field (Butler & Turner 1987; Cassell 1987; Sutton & Fernandez 1998), although this question raises many issues that need to be explored further; I am not aware of any published discussions of the role that other relatives may play in accompanying field researchers.

By contrast, loneliness can be a significant component of one's field experience, especially if one is not accompanied by family members. While some have questioned the possibility of friendship between a researcher and a member of the community being studied, given the inevitable power relations involved, others argue that meaningful friendship is indeed possible (Grindal & Salamone 1995). The interpersonally knotty as well as ethically problematic issues raised when such relationships become sexual have only recently begun to be broached in print (Kulick & Willson 1995; Tierney 2002; Watkins 2001).

At the same time that fieldwork can lead to personal entanglements—for better or for worse—with members of an adopted community, it can also lead to changes in intellectual orientation toward the world. A recent collection of essays documents some ways in which the rational world view that is a hallmark of Western thought has been challenged through ethnographers' profound encounters with non-Western cultural traditions (Young & Goulet 1994).



## Writing

Over the past two decades, ethnographers have begun thinking both critically and creatively about their lives, not just as researchers, but also as authors (see, e.g., Geertz 1988). Rather than making the positivist assumption of previous generations of social scientists that ethnographic texts easily reflect a single objective and nonproblematic reality, many ethnographers now take a hermeneutic perspective and see texts as products created by the scholar-as-author on the basis of the author's *interpretation* of the data collected. Starting from this perspective, ethnographic writing can become a site for creative experimentation with voice and authorship. Some recent experimental ethnographies include Behar (1996), DeLoache and Gottlieb (2000), Narayan (1994), Stack (1996), Stoller (1999), Tedlock (1990), and Wolf (1992), among others. At the same time, two scholarly journals encourage experimental writing in the social sciences and related fields (*Anthropology and Humanism* and *Cultural Studies* ↔ *Critical Methodologies*), and the first of these journals now offers prizes in ethnographic poetry and fiction.

Complementing these somewhat literary works are a host of theoretical as well as pedagogical texts that critically examine the writing of ethnography (see, e.g., Becker 1986; Ben-Ari 1987; Davis 1992; Denzin 1997; Marcus & Cushman 1982; Richardson 1990, 1998; Thornton 1988; Van Maanen 1988; Wolcott 1990). A recent series of articles appearing in the widely circulated monthly newsletter of the American Anthropological Association reports on a "Writing Culture Planning Seminar" (held at the School of American Research, Santa Fe, New Mexico, October 2004), at which a small group of distinguished scholars and authors brainstormed about how to transform the discipline of anthropology into one that values good writing (*Anthropology News*, February 2005, March 2005, April 2005, May 2005, et al.). As you move from conducting fieldwork to writing about it, you may find yourself inspired to write not only clear, scholarly prose but also accessible texts that may make your expertise available to a broad educated readership. I tell the students in my Writing Ethnography classes: If a research project is worth funding, it is worth sharing your findings with the general public. Finding the voice to convey your passion for your subject to a broad readership may be an unexpected pleasure encountered as you write up your findings.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, I have outlined both major satisfactions and major challenges posed by ethnographic research. For any given research project, how does

one decide whether ethnography can contribute to answering the questions one hopes to address?

By way of example, let us consider an article recently published in a scholarly journal. In “War and Children’s Mortality,” Carlton-Ford, Hamill, and Houston (2000) use statistical tools to analyze the many ways in which children become casualties of contemporary wars, from direct combat to more indirect but nonetheless potent pathways of destruction. Noting that the data available to them are incomplete, the authors signal the gaps in data concerning access to safe water, and they question “the reliability of information about involvement in war” (p. 416). They conclude that “a more finely grained measurement of involvement in war should reveal more precisely *how* war has its impact on children’s mortality” (p. 417; my emphasis).

A qualitative ethnographic investigation of these issues would have filled in these frustrating gaps in the extant data sets. Such an approach would have added a human dimension to this statistical report on children and war, providing a portrait of suffering that would lend a human face to the numbers. Elsewhere, scholars have taken up the daunting challenge of conducting ethnographic field research in war zones, and recent texts resulting from qualitative research carried out in zones of violence are moving indeed (see, e.g., Hoffman 2003; Kelleher 2003; Nordstrom 1997; Nordstrom & Robben 1995; Quesada 1998; Sluka 2000).

In the end, as this case suggests, the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative methods can only enrich the findings of the research. Whether you are a researcher already trained in quantitative methods or a student just beginning your training in the social sciences, making qualitative techniques central to a research project should prove exciting because of their potential to make the human stories behind large “data sets” and theoretical models come alive.

## Note

1. If the language that is spoken locally in your research site is still undocumented and not yet taught anywhere, do not despair. Generations of travelers and scholars have managed to learn unwritten languages while living in a community. Try to prepare yourself ahead of time for the general grammatical and other linguistic structures you are likely to encounter by taking a field linguistics course. If this proves impossible, read a guide such as Burling’s *Learning a Field Language* (1984).



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