CHAPTER

11

ETHNOGRAPHY RESEARCH

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KEY IDEAS

- Ethnography is a systematic study of a particular cultural group or phenomenon, based upon extensive fieldwork in one or more selected locales.
- Ethnography research focuses on cultural interpretation, for the purposes of description or extension of social theory.
- The ethnographer is the data collection instrument.
- Ethnographers use multiple data sources and methods of data collection to increase the validity and trustworthiness of the findings.
- Ethical ethnographers are careful to reduce any risks to themselves and the other participants before, during, and after the research process.
- Ethnography brings complex, personal, and thoughtful insights and meaning to the inner workings of social settings.

GROPING IN THE DARK

WHEN I began my first ethnographic research project, I was not an ethnographer. I was a teacher and a student, living in the city, pondering questions about education and social mobility, poverty and work. I had enrolled in a doctoral program and taken classes in research methods, but I became an ethnographer by doing the things that ethnographers do. I learned how to ask questions by asking, and how to watch, listen, and document the moments of everyday practice by watching, listening, and recording. My experience was what ethnographic evaluator David Fetterman (1989) described when he wrote, ''Ethnography is what ethnographers actually do in the field. Textbooks . . . together with lectures—can initiate the newcomer to the field and refresh the experienced ethnographer, but actual fieldwork experience has no substitute'' (p. 26). During this entire ethnographic research effort however, I felt as though I was groping in the dark, making decisions with the discomforting tentativeness of most first-time ethnographers. Uncertainty was my own repetitive refrain. Over and over I asked myself such questions as, ''Is this an appropriate site to do research? Should I be spending more time there instead of here? Should I be observing more, or observing less? How can I make myself more visible? How can I make myself invisible?'' Months passed before I came to understand that uncertainty was a fundamental part of the ethnographic method. Much more time passed before I began to feel even slightly comfortable fumbling with the unfamiliar.

In addition to my own somewhat bewildering experience, I have heard students speculate about ethnographic research after reading a classic ethnography conducted in an exotic locale or a more recent ethnography conducted in a classroom or neighborhood somewhere. But all too often, they are enticed by the lure of ethnography without understanding or appreciating its strengths, constraints, and demands. In this chapter, I address these gaps in awareness by drawing on my own journey through unfamiliar ethnographic territory, as well as on the work of classic and contemporary ethnographers. Writing this chapter for the reader of ethnography, who hopes to gain a general familiarity with the theoretical assumptions, methodological procedures, and standards of quality involved in ethnographic research, I discuss ethnography as a research method and examine ethnographers' assumptions about knowledge, characterizations of culture, considerations of methodology, and toolbox of methods.

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY RESEARCH?

So what exactly is ethnography and what does an ethnographer do? **Ethnography**, embedded in an anthropological tradition, is essentially the study of a particular

cultural group or phenomenon. **Fieldwork** is a fundamental part of that study, and for anthropologists, ethnographic fieldwork involves documenting people's beliefs and practices from the people's own perspectives. Margaret Mead (1928) went to the Pacific for nine months to document the ways adolescence is negotiated by Samoan islanders. Clifford Geertz (1965) studied religious practices in Bali, and Sherry Ortner (1978) traveled to Tibet to study the relationships among cultural symbols in the organization of a society. For educational anthropologists, the field may be a classroom, a school, a literacy group, or any other place where learning or teaching takes place. To conduct his first ethnography, Harry Wolcott (1967/2003) spent a year in a Kwakiutl Blackfish village in British Columbia. He taught in the village's one-room school while documenting the ways children learned their culture's values both in and outside the classroom. Alan Peshkin (1986) lived in a midwestern United States community and studied the social dynamics of Bethany Baptist Academy, the town's fundamentalist Christian school. Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart (1990) spent time at two colleges, examining what they came to call a pervasive "culture of romance" on the campuses.

Other ethnographers conduct research in hospitals and family dining rooms, in geriatric centers and on the shop floor, in jungles and recreational parks, wherever the activity in which they are interested takes place. For me, the field was the workplace. In an attempt to understand how men and women marked by the status of welfare recipient entered, were received by, and participated in the social organization of work, I spent two years watching new workers assemble science kits in a nonprofit business, care for elderly residents in a long-term care facility, fill prescriptions in an inner-city hospital pharmacy, and build spiral staircases at a woodshop in the suburbs (Riemer, 2001).

But whether the culture under study is a village, classroom, or shop floor, the ethnographer's aim is **cultural interpretation**. "Cultural interpretation involves the ability to describe what the researcher has heard and seen within the framework of the social group's view of reality" (Fetterman, 1989, p. 28). In order to craft descriptions of culture, cultural events, and cultural practices, an ethnographer studies real people doing what they do to meet the everyday demands with which they are confronted. That is to say, ethnographers collect data in natural settings. Basic to the fieldwork approach is the belief that what individuals believe, understand, and act upon cannot be detached from their context. Fieldwork provides the opportunity to take into account individuals' beliefs and actions, or what anthropologists call their everyday practices, within the context in which they are enacted.

The ethnographer then, must be a keen surveyor and interpreter of culture from the "**emic**," or the insider's view of reality. Yet because seeing is always filtered through our own ideas, capturing the insider's perspective is neither straightforward nor easy. We bring our cultural selves with us wherever we go, and even with the best of intentions, an ethnographer can never see life completely through another person's eyes. In a similar fashion, the ethnographer is never able to completely write him or herself out of the ethnography. As the anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano (1977) asserts, "however objective they may seem, there is an autobiographical dimension to all ethnographies" (p. 72).

To further complicate matters, an "**etic**," or the outsider's perspective, is also fundamental to ethnographic research. Returning to the writing of David Fetterman (1989), "an etic perspective is the external, social scientific perspective on reality" (p. 32). The ethnographer's task, then, is not only to include insiders' meanings, but to translate them into concepts comprehensible to individuals outside the society. This balance between insider and outsider perspectives places special demands on the researcher. The ethnographer must remain open and nonjudgmental about the actions and beliefs of the social group under study, while making these understandings and practices intelligible to outsiders.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is cultural interpretation?
2. What do the terms "etic" and "emic" mean?
3. Why are both "etic" and "emic" perspectives fundamental to ethnographic research?
4. Why and where do ethnographers engage in fieldwork?

Ethnography Is Descriptive

How, then, is ethnographic research conducted? Ethnography begins with what the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski described as a "**foreshadowed problem**," that is, with a problem or topic of interest. Foreshadowed problems are generated from all sorts of places: established theories, a personal need to explain a particular phenomenon, an unanticipated outcome or set of outcomes, or even a chance encounter. Although ethnographers are encouraged to identify problems that focus their research, they must also remain open to the unexpected. As Malinowski wrote (1922, p. 9), "Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker."

But because they reflect the study's conceptual and theoretical grounding, foreshadowed problems can feel vague and abstract. **Research questions**, however, are based on foreshadowed problems, but are written to guide the ethnographer through the research process (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993). For example, an ethnographer interested in gender might ask, "How is masculinity constructed among a group of Spanish males living in the same town?" An educational ethnographer, on the other hand, might ask, "What are the attitudes of a particular group of children towards schoolwork?" Anthropological studies can also help identify the kinds of questions ethnographers ask.

In collecting data for their classic text *The Navaho*, Clyde Kluckhorn and Dorothea Leighton (1947) wanted to know what "aspects of Navaho culture [*sic*] . . . bear most immediately upon the government's capacity to help The People strike a working balance between human needs and fluctuating resources" (p. xix). Margaret Mead (1928) went to Samoa to answer questions about "coming of age in Samoa." She wanted to learn whether "the disturbances which vex our adolescents [were] due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?" (p. 11). *Boys in White* (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss,

1992) was driven by the question of what medical school does "to medical students other than giving them a technical education" (p. 17). As Howard Becker and colleagues explained, "Our original focus, then, was on the medical school as an organization in which the student acquired some basic perspectives on his later activity as a doctor" (p. 18). What's important to note here is that each of these examples sets out to describe a particular set of circumstances, rather than fashion a cause-and-effect explanation of their foreshadowed problem. According to Margaret LeCompte, Judith Preissle, and Renata Tesch (1993), "Ethnography always is descriptive; it also involves the study of an interplay among empirical variables as they occur naturally, rather than as they may be manipulated or arranged in advance by an investigator. The naturalistic setting both facilitates on-the-spot and holistic analysis of causes and processes and precludes precise control of so-called extraneous factors" (p. 39).

Ethnographic Methods

What do ethnographers do during their time in the field? They gather information by watching and talking with people, and by reading available reports and records. **Observation** is a main tool in an ethnographer's toolbox, and ethnographers spend a good deal of their time in the field observing, either as nonparticipant or participant observers. **Participant observers** take part in whatever is going on in the site in order to better understand the insider, or emic experience. The Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), for example, the first and perhaps the most famous participant observer, spent three years in a small village with the Triobriand Islanders, watching and talking with men as they constructed canoes, tilled their horticultural plots, and traded kula shells with neighboring islanders. In an effort to better understand the role of social structure in creating conformity in institutional environments, sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) worked in a mental hospital providing care for and talking with patients. William F. Whyte (1981), who titled his autobiography *Participant Observer* (Whyte, 1994), studied the life of urban young men in Cornerville, an Italian neighborhood in Boston. He spent three years with the neighborhood's gangs on street corners, in the local bowling alley, and in rent strike demonstrations. In my own research (Riemer, 2001) on welfare-to-work transitions, I worked alongside new workers packing science kits for area schools and piling boxes on skids. In a nursing home, I helped the nursing assistants. I was studying by wheeling elderly residents to and from lunch, making their beds, and listening to their stories. But I could not legally fill prescriptions at a pharmacy, nor did I have the woodworking skills to assist in building stairs in a custom wood shop. In those sites I was a **nonparticipant observer**, trying to watch unobtrusively while technicians filled prescriptions and woodworkers shaped wood into custom-built spiral staircases.

Participant and nonparticipant observation are at two ends of a continuum, and most ethnographers engage in a mix of participant and nonparticipant observation, depending upon the context and circumstances. But regardless of level of participation, "the most important element of fieldwork," as ethnographer David Fetterman (1989) wrote, "is being there—to observe, to ask seemingly stupid yet insightful questions, and to write down what is seen and heard" (p. 19).

Life histories and other kinds of in-depth interviews are also part of an ethnographer's field work. "Ethnographers use interviews to help classify and organize an individual's perception of reality" (Fetterman, 1989, p. 50). However, **ethnographic interviews** are less formal and less interviewer-driven than traditional interview formats. As anthropologist Michael Agar (1980) wrote, in an informal interview "everything is negotiable. The informants can criticize a question, correct it, point out that it is sensitive, or answer in any way they want to" (p. 90). In fact, the best ethnographic interview is more like a conversation than a traditional interview. The ethnographer probes, reacts, questions, responds, expresses surprise, and discloses. "The field researcher, then, regards the interview as a lengthy conversation. The way the researcher probes for detail, for clarity or explanation, and his gestures which signal normal surprise and even disbelief, provide him with the means for shaping an interview in this way" (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, p. 72). This informality doesn't mean ethnographers don't prepare for interviews. Ethnographers plan questions and develop interview protocols to ensure that the interview flows and questions aren't forgotten. The interview, itself, however, does not necessarily follow a preset format or linear line of questioning (Ellen, 1984). It is guided instead by the talk itself, by what gets said, and what is left unsaid.

In addition to observation and interviews, ethnographers also collect and examine **site documents** for information related to their research questions. The term document refers here not only to public and private texts, but to photographs, videos, and film as well. In his classic study of a school principal, Harry Wolcott (1978) examined the contents of the school's *Teacher Handbook*, documented the type and frequency of materials distributed by the school's office staff, perused the school's bulletin boards, and reviewed letters and memos written by the principal. In his study of school and community in small-town America, Alan Peshkin (1978) had access to diaries in which students responded to teacher prompts, such as "Today I was thinking about . . ." (p. 151). According to Peshkin, the diaries became an important data source on students' conversations, private thoughts, and feelings about after-school jobs and future possibilities. In my current research, an examination of literacy practices in Botswana, I look at both public and private text, and pay special attention to the printed material that men and women encounter on a daily basis. I visited libraries and shops where I counted numbers and kinds of books. I scanned daily and weekly newspapers, attended church services to observe how text is used in Christian rituals, conducted a house-to-house survey on text ownership, and interviewed participants of the government's literacy program on their literacy needs. In Gaborone, Botswana's capital, I listened to men and women talk about the text they encountered in their work as security guards, domestic help, and laborers in wholesale outlets. "After I got a job I got the idea of coming here [to a literacy class], because there's too much documentation," a security guard in Gaborone explained. A warehouse worker offered, "Signing the [pay]check, I could only put a cross. There's still some difficulty. I can scribble my name on paper." Men and women in rural villages, however, talked about enrolling in literacy classes so they could read letters from family members working in the mines or as domestics in South Africa, decipher prices of items in shops, and sign for government farming subsidies and identity documents. Because these texts,

whether personal, public, or housed in a library's archives, are reflections of shared practice, societal norms, and public relationships, they are potentially rich sources of data.

Data Collection

Ethnography is notoriously eclectic in its employment of multiple methods of data collection, and ethnographers will typically observe, conduct interviews, and scrutinize relevant archives and artifacts during a single research effort. In ethnographic research, data collection is tailored to meet the information needs of each study; the ethnographer determines the information required to address the study's research questions, and designs a mix of techniques to elicit that information. In his study of Harlem drug dealers, for example, Philippe Bourgois (1995, p. 13) "spent hundreds of nights on the street and in crackhouses observing dealers and addicts . . . regularly tape recorded their conversations and life histories, . . . visited their families, attending parties and intimate reunions, interviewed and in many cases befriended, the spouses, lovers, siblings, mothers, grandmothers, and when possible, the fathers and stepfathers of the crack dealers, [and] spent time in the larger community interviewing local politicians and attending institutional meetings" (p. 13). Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart (1990) followed twenty-three young women through their first three semesters at two colleges, designed and administered a survey to a random sample of young women at both colleges, and conducted follow-up interviews by phone two and four years later with the twenty-three focus women.

This diversity of research methods also allows the ethnographer to **triangulate**, or cross-check, the accuracy of collected data and analytic statements. "Just as a surveyor locates points on a map by triangulating on several sites, so an ethnographer pinpoints the accuracy of conclusions drawn by triangulating with several sources of data" (LeCompte et al., 1993, p. 48). Merely watching an event, or simply talking with individuals at the scene, does not provide checks for either researcher or participant bias. Analyzing data from multiple sources, collected by diverse methods, and supported by a range of theories, allows the ethnographer to make comparisons, verify emergent assertions, and convey a sense of trustworthiness to the reader.

Given the range of activities inherent in collecting data, ethnographic fieldwork is time intensive. In order to gain the perspective of a community's members, an ethnographer lives in the community for an extended period of time. I spent three years, for instance, in Botswana during my most recent investigations of literacy. In fact, ever since the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was sequestered while collecting data in the Triobrand Islands during World War I, one year, or a **full cycle of activities**, has been considered the minimum duration for fieldwork. Although ethnography is time and labor intensive, most ethnographers actually have difficulty leaving the field. In deciding when sufficient data has been collected, ethnographers are guided by what David Fetterman calls the **law of diminishing returns**. "The law of diminishing returns can determine that it is time for the ethnographer to leave the field. When the same specific pattern of behavior emerges over and over again, the fieldworker should move on to a new topic for observation and detailed exploration. Similarly, when the general

picture reaffirms itself over and over again, it is probably time to wrap things up and return home" (Fetterman, 1997, p. 20).

Risks of Ethnography Research

As this section suggests, a common outcome of fieldwork is the development of close relationships between the ethnographer and individuals in the field. Living and working with people over long periods of time can foster intimate bonds that come with the obligations of friendship. Ethnographers can develop particularly close ties with their **key informants**, those individuals who take on the role of sponsor and gatekeeper, introducing the ethnographer to other members of the community, and sharing their own insider information about the setting. Key informants are those special individuals who like to talk, who know the setting, and who understand the ethnographer's mission.

In his ethnography *Street Corner Society*, William F. Whyte (1981) writes about one of the most famous relationships between ethnographer and key informant, that between himself and his friend Doc. Introduced to each other by a social worker at a local settlement house, Doc became Whyte's guide, advisor, and mentor. Upon their first meeting, Doc offered, "Well any nights you want to see anything, I'll take you around. I can take you to the joints—gambling joints—I can take you to the street corners. Just remember that you're my friend. That's all they need to know. I know these places, and, if I tell them that you're my friend, nobody will bother you. You just tell me what you want to see, and we'll arrange it." As Whyte explained, their relationship quickly evolved from informant to collaborator. "My relationship with Doc changed rapidly in this early Cornerville period. At first he was simply a key informant—and also my sponsor. As we spent more time together, I ceased to treat him as a passive informant. I discussed with him quite frankly what I was trying to do, what problems were puzzling me, and so on. Much of our time was spent in this discussion of ideas and observations, so that Doc became, in a very real sense, a collaborator in the research" (p. 28).

Informants can also place themselves at risk by disclosing information about their private lives. In my research on welfare-to-work transitions, I was particularly concerned about the risk new employees might incur in talking with me about their work. Most of these men and women occupied low-wage, low-status jobs, and they often reminded me of their precariousness in the workplace. In order to avoid any risk of their losing their jobs I maintained their anonymity and recorded our conversations in my own shorthand rather than audiotaping. I also transcribed my notes into text format and returned them to the men and women for their review, modification, and feedback. I honored any objections they voiced about the transcripts and removed any passages they found distressing. My situation, however, was nowhere as serious as that of the anthropologist Edward Bruner, who was collecting data in a village in Sumatra when civil war ignited in the region. Bruner (2004) writes, "Villagers in Sumatra, for example, welcomed my wife and me, and adopted us into their kinship system, but no one could have predicted that a civil war between pro- and anti-American forces would subsequently develop in the region. It created a situation where our very presence in their village, as Americans, placed them in grave physical danger. The greatest risk to them was us just being there, irrespective of informed consent or research protocols" (p. 2).

Unlike researchers who only know their respondents through surveys, telephone conversations, or as numbers in statistical runs, ethnographers enter **interdependent relationships** with their informants. As Edward Bruner asserts (2004), "When you live for long periods intertwined with others, immersed in their lifeways, it is hard to separate yourself from them. Research is no longer something out there, separate from self, apart from life" (p. 1). Given these personal relationships, ethnographers have a distinctive obligation to the people they are studying. They abide by a **code of ethics** developed and advanced by the American Anthropological Society (1998) and honored by institutional review boards. These guidelines include gaining **informed consent** from anyone who participates in the research; individuals must not only agree to participate, but must fully understand the purposes of the research and the implications of their participation. In addition, the ethnographer must assure the **confidentiality** of all research participants, and guarantee that they will be neither harmed nor exploited by their participation. The need to protect research participants is so critical that all ethnographers, even students conducting ethnographic research for a class, must abide by this code of conduct.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is an example of a "foreshadowed problem" that interests you?
2. What do ethnographers do in the field?
3. How does participant observation differ from non-participant observation?
4. How do ethnographic interviews differ from other interviews?
5. What are the risks to participants and researchers during ethnographic work?
6. How might information gained from archives complement that obtained by observation and interviews?
7. What is the importance of a key informant?

Ethnographic Data Analysis

Ethnography is local by nature; that is, the ethnographer collects data necessary to describe and interpret local practices. The focus may be site-specific, as in a classroom, a school, a village, or a training program, or multisited (Marcus, 1998), as in a dynastic fortune, a legal network, the emerging middle class, or as in my current research, literacy practices across geographic distances and ethnic groups. But whether single- or multisited, the research remains local, and in all cases, has a particular focus. In fact ethnographers avoid terms like "typical" or "representative" when describing their findings, and are justly cautious about sweeping statements that go beyond what their data can support. Rather than generalizing from a particular case, ethnographers position themselves as producers and disseminators of information, and leave the reader to apply the research findings as appropriate.

Because ethnographic research is local, its focus is deep, rather than broad. This capacity to delve deeply into a particular site or issue allows for another fundamental aspect of ethnographic research, what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) called "**thick description**" (p. 6). By "thick," Geertz was referring to description that includes

all possible meanings of an event, including meanings conferred by members of the culture itself. He illustrated the concept of "thick description" with the example of "the wink of any eye." Geertz contrasts the actions of three boys, each blinking his right eye. One boy is winking, one boy's eye is twitching, and the third is parodying a wink. According to Geertz, ethnography differentiates a wink from a twitch from a parody of a wink by its capacity "to capture the thick description of cultural categories." An ethnographer's job is "to capture" the thick description of an event, experience, or scene—that is, to write a description that is layered, rich, and contextual.

But an ethnography is not simply descriptive; it also situates insider beliefs and practices within a larger theoretical context. In this linking of the local to the theoretical, "the aim . . . is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse" (Geertz, 1973, p. 14). In other words, says Geertz, an ethnographer's task is to generate **theory**. But what is theory? According to educational anthropologists Margaret LeCompte, Judith Preissle, and Renata Tesch (1993), "theories are statements about how things are connected. Their purpose is to explain why things happen as they do" (p. 118). For example, in his book, *God's Choice*, Alan Peshkin (1986) argues that the Christian fundamentalist school he studied embodied a contradiction inherent in a pluralist society. The school, wrote Peshkin, benefits from the country's "tradition of religious liberty, which is a cornerstone of American pluralism" (p. 293). At the same time, the school itself does not support pluralism; its fundamental theology promotes inflexibility rather than tolerance and absolute belief over debate and compromise. He encapsulated his theory in the following: "The existence of fundamentalist Christian schools creates a paradox of pluralism in the United States. Paradoxes of pluralism testify to our ideological health" (p. 298). Peshkin deals in **mid-level theorizing**, which speaks to "general areas of human experience, makes statements which apply to this kind of experience in a variety of settings, and often utilizes an explicit empirical data base as its foundation" (LeCompte et al., 1993, p. 134).

Bronislaw Malinowski, on the other hand, dealt in the **"Big T" theory**. During his fieldwork among the Triobriand Islanders, Malinowski developed a theory of social interaction that he named "functionalism" (1922). Particularly interested in the islanders' kula ring exchange, a systematic exchange of prized kula shells across islands, Malinowski argued that the kula shells were not nearly as valuable to the islanders as the kula partnerships that developed through the exchange. The development of these partnerships ensured peaceful contact and communication across the islands. At the same time, they reinforced status distinctions, as traditional chiefs controlled the most valuable shell resources and organized the island-to-island expeditions. Drawing on the kula exchange, Malinowski argued that each aspect of the culture played a role in fulfilling the biological and psychological needs of the society's members. In other words, social institutions and social relations had particular functions that together formed a stable, enduring system.

These theories, Malinowski's functionalism and Peshkin's paradox of pluralism, for instance, originated out of data collected in the field and began to form when the ethnographers were in the field. Unlike researchers who set out to prove or disprove a predetermined hypothesis, the ethnographer begins with data, looks for patterns and regularities, formulates tentative hypotheses for further investigation, and finally

develops some general conclusions or theories. The analytic process moves from the bottom up, from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. This movement, from data to theory, has been dubbed "**grounded theory**" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1), and has been defined as "the discovery of theory from data." In ethnographic research, then, generating theory begins in the field; field notes are collected, written (or typed) up, and immediately become the ethnographer's focus of analysis.

Writing Up Field Notes

The timely write-up of field notes is essential, but for ethnographers, it is neither a quick nor a pleasant task. As anthropologist Annette Lareau explained,

> *I made one very serious mistake in the field; I fell behind in writing up my field notes. Writing up field notes immediately is one of the sacred obligations of field work. Yet workers I have known well all confessed that they fell behind in their field notes at one time or another. Researchers are human—we get sick; we have an extra glass of wine; we get into fights with our spouses; we have papers to grade, due the next day; or we simply don't feel like writing up field notes immediately after an interview or a participant-observation session. On top of that, at least for me, writing field notes is both boring and painful: boring, because it repeats a lot of what you just did and it takes a long time to write a detailed description of a fifteen-minute encounter/observation; painful, because it forces you to confront unpleasant things, including lack of acceptance, foolish mistakes in the field, ambiguity about the intellectual question, missed opportunities in the field, and gaping holes in the data. (Lareau, 2000, p. 216)*

Writing up field notes as soon as possible after collecting data is indeed "essential," but in truth my sentiments mirror those of Lareau. I also find the write-up of field notes to be a time-consuming and tedious process. But like it or not, avoidance is impossible. New researchers talk about the promise of voice translation machines, but for now, sitting at a computer, expanding field notes from elaborated "scratch notes" to richly detailed narratives, continues to be a fundamental part of field work.

This process is one in which I engaged during my examination of individuals' welfare to work transitions. Over my two years in the field, I came to know 162 employees in four companies, 52 training and workplace supervisors, 12 trainees, and 18 administrators at the city and state levels. My discussions with these men and women, my observations, and the other data collection strategies produced piles of field notes that I transcribed, **coded** according to categories that emerged as I examined the data, and sorted by these codes to detect **emerging themes**. I constituted and reconstituted the categories to accommodate new sources of data and divergent experiences and meanings. The process was like making a jigsaw puzzle without a predetermined frame, adding pieces to create an image, and rearranging pieces to accommodate the additions. I spent an entire winter reading everything I could find about poverty and welfare, human capital, stratification and reproduction, the construction of identity, and structure, agency, and resistance, in order to know how to talk about the images that began to form. My process was consistent with ethnographer David Fetterman's description of analysis (1997): "Ethnographers look for patterns of thought and behavior. Patterns are a form of

ethnographic reliability. . . . The ethnographer begins with a mass of undifferentiated ideas and behavior, and then collects pieces of information, comparing, contrasting, and sorting gross categories and minutiae until a discernible thought or behavior becomes identifiable. Next the ethnographer must listen and observe, and then compare his or her observations with this poorly defined model" (p. 96). For ethnographers, then, developing theory involves an analysis process that is open-ended and exploratory, and at times, daunting and unsettling.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Identify a phenomenon that can be characterized with thick description. What are the multiple explanations that might be developed?
2. How do ethnographers analyze the data they've collected?
3. How does "grounded theory" differ from hypothesis-driven research?
4. Why are ethnographers loathe to generalize from their findings?

Writing Up Ethnography Research

Ethnography has always been conducted in natural settings, but over time the focus of ethnographic research has shifted and expanded. Ethnographic research was originally a form of **salvage anthropology**; its aim was to record the exotica of rapidly vanishing societies. These first-generation ethnographies were compilations of societies' cultural components, and included information on kinship, social control, economic and property relations, religion and ritual. The goal of the research was twofold: to document the ways of life in rapidly vanishing societies, and to discover cultural patterns that were similar across societies. Over time, specialized subfields developed, and ethnographers began to restrict their focus. Examining specific institutions in order "to get at the whole through one of its parts" (Clifford, 1988, p. 31), researchers focused specifically on archaeology, art, childhood and socialization, development and change, ecology, production and exchange systems, ethnic identities, family and kinship, gender and difference, systems of health and healing, biological inheritance, power and social control, religion and belief systems, or visual representations (Coleman & Simpson, 1998).

These early ethnographers wrote in a style they termed **ethnographic realism**, which was characterized in part by the use of the ethnographic present. Writing in present tense was seen as more authentic; it put the reader in a role of observer viewing an ongoing event. Note the difference, for example, in "The boy played with the dog," and "The boy plays with his dog." In the first example, the boy, whether real or not, has finished playing with the dog and has perhaps moved on to other activities. The scene is finished, and the reader cannot return to observe the action. In the second case, however, the action is not complete; the boy may be playing with his dog all day today. If we went to the location, we might very well see the boy as he plays with his dog. The effect is more immediate. It brings the reader into the action; it places the reader in the scene.

But in addition to writing in the ethnographic present, other narrative techniques were employed, at times deliberately and at others simply procedurally to give the reader a sense, as anthropologist James Clifford (1983) wrote, that "you are there, because

I was there" (p. 118). In order to establish "**experiential authority**" (Clifford, 1988, p. 35), for instance, the teller was positioned as an anonymous, omnipresent narrator; after all, who could question the authenticity of an account if the narrator was so godlike in his telling? Other conventions believed to authenticate the ethnographer's account included a comprehensive description of the culture under study, profiles of composite rather than actual individuals, and oversimplification in place of the complexity and variability of real life. As George Marcus and Dick Cushman (1982) wrote, "what gives the ethnographer authority and the text a pervasive sense of concrete reality is the writer's claim to represent a world as only one who has known it first-hand can" (p. 29).

However, in the 1960s and 1970s, a shift from ritual to **everyday practice** altered both ethnography's focus and writing style. As defined by anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1984), everyday practice is "the little routines people enact, again and again, in working, eating, sleeping, and relaxing, as well as the little scenarios of etiquette they play out again and again in social interaction" (p. 154). In privileging practice over ritual, the focus of ethnographic research has expanded to include not only "the sublime and the beautiful," to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson (1837), but also the mundane and the secular. This stance on culture begins, argues Michel de Certeau (2002), the author of the groundbreaking *The Practice of Everyday Life*, "when the ordinary man *becomes* the narrator, when it is he who defines the (common) place of discourse and the (anonymous) space of its development" (p. 5).

Problems of Representation

At the same time, critiques of ethnography as ahistorical and apolitical began to surface, and the assumed authority of both the ethnographer and ethnographic realism were accused of being imperialist and patronizing (Asad, 1973; Clifford, 1988; Marcus & Fischer, 1999; Said, 1979). In response to these alarms, ethnographers began to address what George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1999, p. 34) called the "**crisis of representation**," that is, they scrutinized how "others" are represented in ethnographic texts. Described as "methodological self-consciousness and a concern for reflexivity" (van Maanen, 1995, p. 8), the soul searching that ensued resulted in a range of experimental texts, including critical ethnographies, auto-ethnographies, and other versions of what George Marcus (1998) named "messy texts." In order to make the behind-the-scenes of the ethnography more apparent, some ethnographers, Paul Rabinow (1977) and Jean-Paul Dumont (1978) being the most noted, wrote personal accounts of the trials and tribulations of their fieldwork experiences. In an attempt to lend credibility to the ethnographer's interpretation, others, including Paul Willis (1977), June Nash (1979), and Doug Foley (1990), wrote about the culture they studied, whether it be marginal youth, a Bolivian mining town, or a small southwestern town, within a historic, economic, and political context (even though the described context was most often outside the awareness of group members themselves).

Other ethnographers crafted their stories using the **multiple voices** of their informants rather than with the researcher's single voice. In an effort to create space for the voices of both the researcher and the researched, for example, Patti Lather and Chris Smithies (1997) wove voices of women affected with HIV/AIDS into their narrative

Troubling the Angels. In a similar approach, Ruth Behar framed the personal account of Esperanza Hernandez, an indigenous Mexican street peddler, with her own feminist interpretation of ethnicity and Latina identity. "Se lleva una historia muy grande, compadre, (I carry a heavy history)," explained Esperanza in Behar's *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (2003, p. xi).

Another response to this crisis of representation has been the emergence of texts that are loosely named **auto-ethnographies**. The term auto-ethnography is actually comprised of two distinct strands, "the study of one's own people or group" and "autobiographical accounts presented as ethnographies of the self" (Wolcott, 1999, p. 173). The essays in Deborah Reed-Danahay's edited text, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (1997), for instance, all examine issues of voice, representation, and power, but take a range of forms, from witness narratives, autobiography, and biographies to self-reflexive accounts and life histories. Alternatively, in his *Poker Faces: The Life and Work of Professional Card Players*, David Hayano (1982) documents the culture and social organization of "the cardroom and its players" from his own vantage point as poker player. He asserts that participant observation was essential to his research, because "an insider's view of the work of professional poker players could only be accomplished by prolonged immersion and, most important, *by being a player* [*sic*]" (p. 155). As Deborah Reed-Danahay writes (1997), "We are in the midst of a renewed interest in personal narrative, in life history, and in autobiography among anthropologists" (p. 1).

These changes in ethnographic writing did not evolve on their own; they were shaped by the changes that accompanied the breakup of European colonial empires. As distinctions blurred between civilized and savage, modern and traditional, and first and third worlds, and the subjects of ethnographic research became readers of ethnographic research, ethnography's responsibility in creating exoticized images of non-Western peoples both became apparent and was made problematic. The alternative forms of ethnographic writing described previously were part of larger attempts to shift relationships between the researcher and the researched, powerful and powerless, voiced and voiceless, and to depict more thoughtfully the messiness of our world. In these messy texts, the researcher has become an actor in the story, informants have become coauthors, stories are not necessarily told in a linear fashion, and history, culture, and economics are irrevocably interlinked. According to anthropologist John van Maanen (1995), "such writings often offer a passionate, emotional voice of a positioned and explicitly judgmental fieldworker and thus obliterate the customary and, ordinarily, rather mannerly distinction between the researcher and the researched" (pp. 9–10).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why did ethnographic realism become the preferred writing style for pre–World War II ethnographers?
2. What does the term "crisis of representation" mean to you?
3. Have you ever encountered a "messy text?" What did it look like? If not, what do you envision a "messy text" to be?
4. How did the breakup of colonial empires affect ethnographic research?

READING ETHNOGRAPHY

When writing, ethnographers generally engage in a process that begins with a prewriting phase of organizing and planning and moves to drafting and revising. The reporting generally centers around a problem that is addressed by studying "things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). Evidence is collected in fieldwork and presented as a series of interwoven stories of the ethnographer, the field, the people in the site, and the research process itself. A good ethnography puts the reader in the setting, surrounded by its language, its smells, its sights, and its people, complete with their viewpoints and understandings. As anthropologist James Peacock (1986) wrote, "Ethnography is unlike literature and like science in that it endeavors to describe real people systemically and accurately, but it resembles literature in that it weaves facts into a form that highlights patterns and principles. . . . Ethnography can never describe with complete objectivity, producing a set of facts that are completely true; but through its portrayals and interpretations it can communicate human truths" (pp. 83–84).

What Should a Reader Do?

But let's switch perspectives for a moment, and focus on how to read the text an ethnographer writes. Based on my reading, and bits and pieces I've picked up along the way, I can offer a few tips to make the reading more productive. Reading an article, of course, is different from reading a full ethnographic text, because the article, like a slice of pie, is only one piece of the ethnographic research. For both, focus on the opening statements, the introduction of the article or the preface of the book. Look for information on the research project itself and on the intentions and experience of the author. Your aim here is to simply develop a preliminary understanding of the relationship between this piece and the researcher's broader agenda. Continue reading through the article or book; as you read look for the argument the author is attempting to make. The argument may be specific to the setting, or may have theoretical significance that extends beyond this particular case. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What did the ethnographer research and why?
- What argument is offered, and is adequate evidence, in the form of direct quotes or stories (vignettes, scenarios), for example, presented?
- Where is the ethnographer visible in the ethnography, and does the presence of the researcher intrude on or support the argument?

Jot down or mark key passages and new terms in the ethnography, and make sure you and the author share definitions. As you read, engage the author in a mental conversation, ask questions, pose alternative explanations, clarify the ambiguous, and pay attention to the presence of the author in the text. As anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) wrote, "the ethnographer has a professional and a moral obligation to get the 'facts' as accurately as possible. This is not even debatable. But all facts are necessarily selected and interpreted from the moment we decide to count one thing, and ignore another, or attend this ritual but not another, so that anthropological understanding is necessarily partial" (p. 23).

Practice Your Reading Skills

Practice your skills as a reader of ethnography by reading the following article. "Connecting and Reconnecting to Work: Low-Income Mothers' Participation in Publicly Funded Training Programs" is drawn from my own ethnographic research (Riemer, 2004) on men and women who moved from welfare recipient to full-time worker. In conducting the research, I collected data in four companies that had collaborated with the state's Department of Public Welfare and local adult education initiatives to hire and train men and women on welfare. The article is a slice of the larger research initiative, and describes one of the four companies, a long-term health care facility name Church Hall.

Read the article, keeping the earlier suggestions in mind. As you are reading, also check for **validity** by asking the following questions:

- Is there strong agreement between the research question, ethnography as a research mechanism, and the research findings?
- How were the location, the sample, setting, and subject identified?
- How did the author collect data and analyze the data?
- Where is the researcher in the text?
- What does the author conclude, and is adequate evidence provided?

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I introduced ethnography as a research method, discussed ethnographers' beliefs about knowledge, culture, and methodology, and described ethnographers' toolbox of methods. As explained, ethnography, the research methodology of anthropologists, is the study of a particular cultural group or phenomenon. Fieldwork is a fundamental part of that study, and for anthropologists, ethnographic fieldwork involves documenting people's beliefs and practices through observation, interviews, and the review of relevant records and reports. The goal of ethnographic research is to understand a way of life from the insider's, or *emic*, perspective, and to provide a description that is *etic*, or comprehensible to individuals outside the society. Ethnography, as anthropologist James Spradley (1979) wrote, is a research methodology that helps us understand "how other people see their experience" (p. iv). To accomplish that goal, Spradley continues, "rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*" (p. 3).

KEY TERMS

auto-ethnography
Big "T" theory
code of ethics
coding
confidentiality
crisis of representation
cultural interpretation
emerging themes
emic
ethnographic interviews

ethnographic realism
ethnography
etic
everyday practice
experiential authority
fieldwork
foreshadowed problem
full cycle of activities
grounded theory
informed consent
interdependent relationship
key informants
law of diminishing returns
mid-level theorizing
multiple voices
nonparticipant observer
observation
participant observer
research questions
salvage anthropology
site documents
theory
thick description
triangulate
validity

FURTHER READINGS AND RESOURCES

Suggested Ethnography Article

Riemer, F. (2004). Connecting and reconnecting to work: Low-income mother's participation, past and present, in publicly funded training programs. In V. Polakow, S. Butler, L. Deprez, & P. Kahn (Eds.), *Shut out: Low-income women and higher education in post welfare America*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Suggested Readings

Becker, G. (1998) *Tricks of the trade: How to think about our research while you're doing it*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

A particularly clear, concise guide to doing research in a range of settings.

Clifford, J. (n.d.) *The problem of ethnographic representation*. Retrieved April 20, 2004, from http://home.pacbell.net/nicnic/ethnographic.html.

A concise article that provides a clear overview of the difficulties ethnographers encounter in representing the experiences of the peoples they study.

Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany, NY: University of SUNY Press.

An excellent example of a critical ethnography, this text examines the forces at play in students' dropping out of high school, and the ways that administrators, teachers, and the students themselves understand what it means to drop out of school.

Hall, K. D. (2002). *Lives in translation: Sikh youth as British citizens*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

An ethnography that expands the boundaries of the school by revealing the in- and out-of-school experiences of young Sikhs in northern England and the ways they negotiate race, class, and caste inequality.

Nespor, J. (1997). *Tangled up in school: Politics, space, and signs in educational process*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in an urban elementary school, this book expands the definition of school by situating it as part of a broader network of parental concerns, school district politics, university and government agendas, and identity politics.

Rabinow, P. (1977). *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

A personal account of the experience of fieldwork that reveals the complexities of life in the field.

Spradley, J., & McCurdy, D. W. (1972). *The cultural experience: Ethnography in complex society*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.

A step-by-step guide to conducting ethnographic research that includes ethnographies conducted in a range of familiar settings.

Journals

American Anthropologist

www.aaanet.org/aa/index.htm

Publishes articles that add to, integrate, synthesize, and interpret anthropological knowledge; commentaries and essays on issues of importance to the discipline; and reviews of books, films, sound recordings, and exhibits.

Anthropology & Education Quarterly

www.aaanet.org/cae/AEQ.html

A peer-reviewed journal that publishes scholarship on schooling in social and cultural context and on human learning both inside and outside of schools.

Anthropology Quarterly

www.jstor.org/journals/00035491.html

A peer-reviewed journal that publishes outstanding, original, data-driven articles that advance ethnography and anthropological theory.

Ethnography

www.sagepub.com/journalsProdDesc.nav?prodId = Journal200906

An international, interdisciplinary forum for the ethnographic study of social and cultural change.

Ethnography and Education

www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/17457823.asp

An international, peer-reviewed journal that publishes articles illuminating educational practices through empirical methodologies, which prioritize the experiences and perspectives of those involved.

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography

www.sagepub.com/journalsProdDesc.nav?prodId = Journal200975

An international and interdisciplinary forum for research using ethnographic methods to examine human behavior in natural settings.

ENDNOTES

1. Emic is from the word "phonemic."
2. Etic is from the word "phonetic."
3. The volume of existing text differs across cultures, and although little text is found in societies that are predominately nonliterate, schools and other social agencies are rich depositories of written text.
4. After Whyte left the field, however, the relationship became more complicated and far less intimate. They fell out of touch, and as Whyte (1996) confessed, "there seemed to be a growing problem between us that led to an estrangement I still do not fully understand" (p. 63). Whyte offered several possibilities for this "estrangement," including Doc's possible embarrassment over Whyte's findings, Doc's resentment

over Whyte's proceeds from the book, or Doc's departure from street corner life to paid production work. Whatever the reason or reasons, the shift from informant to collaborator to distant acquaintance was awkward and somewhat sad, but not uncommon.

5. A few ethnographers (Firestone, 1993; Peacock, 1986; Street, 1984; Whyte, 1994) argue that although their focus may not be typical, some aspects of every case are. As Wolcott (2001) writes, "Each case is unique, yet not so unique that we cannot learn from it and apply its lessons more generally" (p. 175).