

**Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes – Robert M. Emerson**  
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## **Chapter 1: Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research**

Ethnographic field research involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives. Carrying out such research involves two distinct activities. First, the ethnographer enters into a social setting and gets to know the people involved in it; usually, the setting is not previously known in an intimate way. The ethnographer participates in the daily routines of this setting, develops ongoing relations with the people in it, and observes all the while what is going on. Indeed, the term "participant-observation" is often used to characterize this basic research approach. But, second, the ethnographer writes down in regular, systematic ways what she observes and learns while participating in the daily rounds of life of others. Thus the researcher creates an accumulating written record of these observations and experiences. These two interconnected activities comprise the core of ethnographic research: Firsthand participation in some initially unfamiliar social world and the production of written accounts of that world by drawing upon such participation. In the following sections we examine in detail each of these activities and then trace out their implications for writing fieldnotes.

### **ETHNOGRAPHIC PARTICIPATION**

Ethnographers are committed to going out and getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people. "Getting close" minimally requires physical and social proximity to the daily rounds of people's lives and activities; the field researcher must be able to take up positions in the midst of the key sites and scenes of other's lives in order to observe and understand them. But getting close has another, far more significant component: The ethnographer seeks a deeper immersion in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. With immersion, the field researcher sees from the inside how people lead their lives, how they carry out their daily rounds of activities, what they find meaningful, and how they do so. In this way immersion gives the fieldworker access to the fluidity of others' lives and enhances his sensitivity to interaction and process.

Furthermore, immersion enables the fieldworker to directly and forcibly experience for herself both the ordinary routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives, and the constraints and pressures to which such living is subject. Goffman (1989:125) in particular insists that field research involves "subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation." Immersion in ethnographic research, then, involves both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that give rise to them.

Clearly, ethnographic immersion precludes conducting field research as a detached, passive observer; the field researcher can only get close to the lives of those studied by actively participating in their day-to-day affairs. Such participation, moreover, inevitably entails some degree of resocialization. Sharing everyday life with a group of people, the field researcher comes "to enter into the matrix of meanings of the researched, to participate in their system of organized activities, and to feel subject to their code of moral regulation" (Wax 1980:272-73). In participating as fully and humanly as possible in another way of life, the ethnographer learns what is required to become a member of that world, to experience events and meanings in ways that approximate members' experiences. Indeed, some ethnographers seek to do field research by doing and becoming—to the extent possible—whatever it is they are interested in learning about. Ethnographers, for example, have become skilled at work activities they are seeking to understand (Diamond 1993; Lynch 1985) or in good faith have joined churches or religious groups (Jules-Rosette 1975; Rochford 1985) on the grounds that by becoming members they gain fuller insight and understanding into these groups and their activities. Or villagers may assign an ethnographer a role, such as sister or mother in an extended family, which obligates her to participate and resocialize herself to meet local expectations (Fretz n.d.).

In learning about others through active participation in their lives and activities, the fieldworker cannot and should not attempt to be a fly on the Wall. No field researcher can be a completely neutral, detached observer, outside and independent of the observed phenomena (Pollner and Emerson 1988). Rather, as the ethnographer engages in the lives and concerns of those studied, his perspective "is intertwined with the phenomenon which does not have

objective characteristics independent of the observer's perspective and methods" (Mishler 1979: 10). The ethnographer cannot take in everything; rather, he will, in conjunction with those in the setting, develop certain perspectives by engaging in some activities and relationships rather than others. Moreover, it will often be the case that relationships with those under study follow political fault lines in the setting, exposing the ethnographer selectively to varying priorities and points of view. As a result, the task of the ethnographer is not to determine "the truth" but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives.

Furthermore, the ethnographer's presence in a setting inevitably has implications and consequences for what is taking place, since the fieldworker must necessarily interact with and hence have some impact on those studied. "Consequential presence:" often linked to reactive effects (that is, the effects of the ethnographer's participation on how members may talk and behave), should not be seen as "contaminating" what is observed and learned. Rather, these effects are the very source of that learning and observation (Clarke 1975:99). Relationships between the field researcher and people in the setting do not so much disrupt or alter ongoing patterns of social interaction as reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place. For example, in a village based on kinship ties, people may adopt a fieldworker into a family and assign her a kinship term which then designates her rights and responsibilities toward others. Rather than detracting from what the fieldworker can learn, first-hand relations with those studied may provide clues to understanding the more subtle, implicit underlying assumptions that are often not readily accessible through observation or interview methods alone. Consequently, rather than viewing reactivity as a defect to be carefully controlled or eliminated in entirety, the ethnographer needs to become sensitive to and perceptive of how she is seen and treated by others.

To appreciate the unavoidable consequences of one's own presence strips any special merit from the highly detached, "unobtrusive," and marginal observer roles that have long held sway as the implicit ideal in field research. Many contemporary ethnographers advocate highly participatory roles (Adler, Adler, and Rochford 1986) in which the researcher actually performs the activities that are central to the lives of those studied. In this view, assuming real responsibility for actually carrying out core functions and tasks, as in service learning internships, provides special opportunities to get close to, participate in, and experience life in previously unknown settings. The intern with real work responsibilities or the researcher participating in village life actively engage in local activities and are socialized to and acquire empathy for local ways of acting and feeling.

Finally, close, continuing participation in the lives of others encourages appreciation of social life as constituted by ongoing, fluid processes. Through participation, the field researcher sees first-hand and up close how people grapple with uncertainty and confusion, how meanings emerge through talk and collective action, how understandings and interpretations change over time. In all these ways, the fieldworker's closeness to others' daily lives and activities heightens sensitivity to social life as process.

## INSCRIBING EXPERIENCED/OBSERVED REALITIES

Even with intensive resocialization, the ethnographer never becomes a member in the same sense that those "naturally" in the setting are members. The fieldworker plans on leaving the setting after a relatively brief stay, and his experience of local life is colored by this transience. As a result "the participation that the fieldworker gives is neither as committed nor as constrained as the native's" (Karp and Kendall 1982:257). Furthermore, the fieldworker orients to many local events not as "real life" but as objects of possible research interest, as events that he may choose to write down and preserve in fieldnotes. In these ways, research and writing commitments qualify ethnographic immersion, making the field researcher at least something of an outsider and, at an extreme, a cultural alien .

Fieldnotes are accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner. But writing descriptive accounts of experiences and observations is not as straightforward and transparent a process as it might initially appear. For writing description is not merely a matter of accurately capturing as closely as possible observed reality, of "putting into words" overheard talk and witnessed activities. To view the writing of descriptions simply as a matter of producing texts that correspond accurately to what has been observed is to assume that there is but one "best" description of any particular event. But in fact, there is no one "natural" or "correct" way to write about what one observes. Rather, because descriptions involve issues of perception and interpretation, different descriptions of "the same" situations and events are possible.

Consider, for example, the following descriptions of moving through express checkout lines in three different Los Angeles supermarkets, written by three student researchers. These descriptions share a number of common

features: all describe events from the point of view of shoppers/observers moving through express checkout lines; all provide physical descriptions of the other major players in the lines - the checker, other shoppers - and of at least some of the items they are purchasing; and all attend closely to some minute details of behavior in express lines. Yet each of these fieldnote accounts takes a different tack in describing a supermarket express line. Each selects and emphasizes certain features and actions, ignoring and marginalizing others. Furthermore, these descriptions are written from different points of view, and they shape and present what happened on the express lines in different ways - in part because the researchers observe different people and occasions, but also in part because they make different writing choices:

### **Mayfair Market Express Line**

There were four people in line with their purchases separated by an approx. 18" rectangular black rubber bar. I put my frozen bags down on the "lazy susan linoleum conveyor belt" and I reached on top of the cash register to retrieve one of the black bars to separate my items. The cashier was in her mid thirties, approx., about 5'2" dark skinned woman with curly dark brown hair. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but recognized some accent to her speech. She was in a white blouse, short sleeved, with a maroon shoulder to mid thigh apron. She had a loose maroon bow tie, not like a man's bow tie, more hangie and fluffy. Her name tag on her left chest side had red writing that said "Candy" on it.

[Describes the first two men at the front of the line.] The woman behind him was dark skinned with straight dark brown hair cut in a page boy. She was wearing a teal blue v-neck knit sweater with black leggings. In her section was juice, a can of pineapple juice, and a six-pack of V-8 tomato juice. The guy in front of me had a pink polo shirt on and tan shorts. He was about 6'2", slender, tan with blond short hair with a gold 18 gauge hoop in his left ear (I thought he was gay). In his triangle of space he had packaged carrots, a gallon of whole milk, and a package of porkchops.

Candy spent very little time with each person, she gave all a hello, and then told them the amount, money was offered, and change was handed back onto a shelf that was in front of the customer whose turn it was. Before Candy had given the dark-haired woman her change back, I noticed that the man in the pink shirt had moved into her spatial "customer" territory, probably within a foot of her, and in the position that the others had taken when it was their turn, in front of the "check writing" shelf. (I thought it was interesting that the people seemed more concerned about the proper separation of their food from one another's than they did about body location.) ...

As I walk up to the shelf (where it all seems to happen), I say "Hi", and Candy says "Hi" back as she scans my groceries with the price scanner...

This observer describes the line spatially in terms of individual people (particularly physical appearance and apparel) and their groceries as laid out before being rung up ("in his triangle of space he had . . ."). Indeed, this account notes as an aside the contrast between the care taken to separate grocery items and the seeming disregard of physical space that occurs at the "check writing shelf" as one shopper is about to move on and the next-in-line to move in.

### **Ralph's Express Line, Easter Morning**

I headed east to the checkout stands with my romaine lettuce, to garnish the rice salad I was bringing to brunch, and my bottle of Gewurtztraminer, my new favorite wine, which I had to chill in the next half hour. As I approached the stands, I realized that the 10-items-or-less-cash-only line would be my best choice. I noticed that Boland was behind the counter at the register-he's always very friendly to me - "Hey, how you doing?"

I got behind the woman who was already there. She had left one of the rubber separator bars behind the things she was going to buy, one of the few personal friendly moves one can make in this highly routinized queue. I appreciated this, and would have thanked her (by smiling, probably), but she was already looking ahead, I suppose in anticipation of checking out. I put my wine and lettuce down. There was already someone behind me. I wanted to show them the courtesy of putting down a rubber separator bar for them too. I waited until the food in front of mine was moved up enough for me to take the bar, which was at the front of the place where the bars are (is there a word for that? bar bin?), so that I wouldn't have to make a large, expansive move across the items that were't mine, drawing attention to myself I waited, and then, finally, the bar was in sight. I took it, and then put it behind my items, looking at the woman behind me and smiling at her as I did so. She looked pleased, and a bit surprised, and I was glad to have been able to do this small favor. She was a pretty blonde woman, and was buying a bottle of champagne (maybe also for Easter brunch?). She was wearing what looked like an Easter dress - it was cotton, and pretty and flowery. She looked youngish. Maybe about my age. She was quite tall for a woman, maybe 5'10" or so.

The woman in front of me didn't take long at all. I've learned quite well how to wait in queues and not be too impatient. Boland, the checker, saw me, and said, "Hi! How's it going?" or something like that....

This observer describes moving through the line as she experienced the process on a moment by moment basis, framing her accounts of others' behaviors as she received, understood, and reacted to them. This style of description gives the reader unique access to the observer's thoughts and emotions; for example, while space is an issue, it is framed in terms not of distance but of its implications for self and feelings (e.g., avoiding "a large expansive move across the items that were't mine").

In the next excerpt, the writer shifts his focus from self to others:

## Boy's Market Express Line

... I picked a long line. Even though the store was quiet, the express line was long. A lot of people had made small purchases today. I was behind a man with just a loaf of bread. There was a cart to the side of him, just sitting there, and I thought someone abandoned it (it had a few items in it). A minute later a man came up and "claimed" it by taking hold of it. He didn't really try to assert that he was back in line-apparently he'd stepped away to get something he'd forgotten-but he wasn't getting behind me either. I felt the need to ask him if he was on line, so I wouldn't cut him off. He said yes, and I tried to move behind him - we were sort of side by side - and he said, "That's okay. I know where you are."

An old woman was behind me now. She had her groceries in one of those carts that old people tend to use to wheel their groceries home. She was thumbing through the National Enquirer, and was clutching a coupon in her hand. She scanned a few pages of the paper, and then put it back in the rack. I looked ahead at the person whose groceries were being checked out-she was staring at the price for each item as it came up on the register.

At this point the guy who I'd spoken to earlier, the guy who was right in front of me, showed a look of surprise and moved past me, over to an abandoned cart at the end of the aisle. He was looking at what was in it, picking up the few items with interest, and then put them back. I thought he'd seen something else he wanted or had forgotten. He came back over to his cart, but then a supermarket employee walked by, and he called out to the man, walking over to the cart and pointing at it, "Do you get many items like this left behind;," The employee hesitated, not seeming to understand the question, and said no. The guy on line said, "See what's here? This is formula [cans of baby formula]. That's poor people's food. And see this [a copper pot scrubber]? They use that to smoke crack." The employee looked surprised. The guy says, "I was just wondering. That's very indicative of this area." The employee: "I live here and I didn't know that." The guy: "Didn't you watch Channel 28 last night?" Employee: "No." Guy: "They had a report about inner city problems." Employee, walking away as he talks: "I only watch National Geographic, the MacNeil-Lehrer Hour, and NPR." He continues away...

Meanwhile the man with the bread has paid. As he waits momentarily for his change, the "guy" says, "Long wait for a loaf of bread:" Man says, "Yeah:" and then adds, jokingly (and looking at the cashier as he says it, as if to gauge his reaction), "these cashiers are slow." The cashier does not appear to hear this. Man with bread leaves, guy in front of me is being checked out now. He says to the cashier, "What's the matter, end of your shift? No sense of humor left?" Cashier says, "No. I'm tired:" Guy: "I hear you." Guy then says to the bagger: "Can I have paper and plastic please, Jacob" (he emphasizes the use of the baggees name)? Jacob complies, but shows no other sign that he's heard the man. Guy is waiting for transaction to be completed. He's sitting on the railing, and he is singing the words to the Muzak tune that's playing. Something by Peabo Bryson. Guy's transaction is done. He says thank you to the bagger, and the bagger tells him to have a good day.

Cashier says, "How are you doing?" to me....

In these notes the observer initially writes himself into a prominent role in the line, but then he moves himself offstage by spotlighting another character who says and does a number of flamboyant things as he waits and then gets checked out. This express line becomes a mini-community, first marked by ongoing exchanges between those in line, then drawing in a passing store employee, and culminating in interactions between this character and the checker and bagger.

Writing fieldnote descriptions, then, is not so much a matter of passively copying down "facts" about "what happened" Rather, such writing involves active processes of interpretation and sense-making: noting and writing down some things as "significant:" noting but ignoring others as "not significant and even missing other possibly significant things altogether. As a result, similar (even the "same") events can be described for different purposes, with different sensitivities and concerns.

In this respect, it is important to recognize that fieldnotes involve *inscriptions* of social life and social discourse. Such inscriptions inevitably *reduce* the welter and confusion of the social world to written words that can be reviewed, studied, and thought about time and time again. As Geertz (1973:19) has characterized this core ethnographic process: "The ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; *he writes it down*. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscription and can be reconsulted."

As inscriptions, fieldnotes are products of and reflect conventions for *transforming* witnessed events, persons, and places into words on paper. In part, this transformation involves inevitable processes of selection; the ethnographer writes about certain things and thereby necessarily "leaves out" others. But more significantly, descriptive fieldnotes also inevitably *present or frame* objects in particular ways, "missing" other ways that events might have been presented or framed. And these presentations reflect and incorporate sensitivities, meanings, and understandings the field researcher has gleaned from having been close to and participated in the described events.

There are other ways of reducing social discourse to written form. Survey questionnaires, for example, record "responses" to pre-fixed questions, sometimes reducing these answers to numbers, sometimes preserving something of the respondents' own words. Audio and video recordings, which seemingly catch and preserve almost everything occurring within an interaction, actually capture but a slice of ongoing social life. What is recorded in the first place depends upon when, where, and how the equipment is positioned and activated, what it can pick up

mechanically, and how those who are recorded react to its presence. Further reduction occurs with the representation of a recorded slice of embodied discourse as sequential lines of text in a "transcript, " For while talk in social settings is a "multichanneled event," writing "is linear in nature, and can handle only one channel at a time, so must pick and choose among the cues available for representation" (Walker 1986:211). A transcript thus selects particular dimensions and contents of discourse for inclusion while ignoring others, for example, nonverbal cues to local meanings such as eye gaze, gesture, and posture. Researchers studying oral performances spend considerable effort in developing a notational system to document the verbal and at least some of the nonverbal communication; the quality of the transcribed "folklore text" is critical as it "represents the performance in another medium" (Fine 1984:3). The transcript is never a "verbatim" rendering of discourse, because it "represents ... an analytic interpretation and selection" (Psathas and Anderson 1990:75) of speech and action. That is, a transcript is the product of a transcriber's ongoing interpretive and analytic decisions about a variety of problematic matters: how to transform naturally occurring speech into specific words (in the face of natural speech elisions); how to determine when to punctuate to indicate a completed phrase or sentence (given the common lack of clear-cut endings in ordinary speech); deciding whether or not to try to represent such matters as spaces and silences, overlapped speech and sounds, pace stresses and volume, and inaudible or incomprehensible sounds or words.' In sum, even those means of recording that researchers claim come the closest to realizing an "objective mirroring" necessarily make reductions in the lived complexity of social life similar in principle to those made in writing fieldnotes.

Given the reductionism of any method of inscription, choice of method reflects researchers' deeper assumptions about social life and how to understand it. Fieldwork and ultimately the fieldnote are predicated on a view of social life as continuously created through people's efforts to find and confer meaning on their own and others' actions. Within this perspective, the interview and the recording have their uses. To the extent that participants are willing and able to describe these features of social life, an interview may prove a valuable tool. Similarly, a video recording provides a valuable record of words actually uttered and gestures actually made. But the ethos of fieldwork holds that in order to fully understand and appreciate action from the perspective of participants, one must get close to and participate in a wide cross-section of their everyday activities over an extended period of time. Ethnography, as Van Maanen (1988:ix) insists, is "the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others." Fieldnotes are distinctively a method for capturing and preserving the insights and understandings stimulated by these close and long-term experiences. Thus fieldnotes inscribe the sometimes inchoate understandings and insights the fieldworker acquires by intimately immersing herself in another world, by observing in the midst of mundane activities and jarring crises, by directly running up against the contingencies and constraints of the everyday life of another people. Indeed, it is exactly this deep immersion - and the sense of place that such immersion assumes and strengthens-that enables the ethnographer to inscribe the detailed, context-sensitive, and locally informed fieldnotes that Geertz (1973) terms "thick description."

This experiential character of fieldnotes is also reflected in changes in their content and concerns over time. Fieldnotes grow through gradual accretion, adding one day's writing to the next's. The ethnographer writes particular fieldnotes in ways that are not pre-determined or pre-specified; hence fieldnotes are not collections or samples in the way that audio recordings can be, i.e., decided in advance according to set criteria. Choosing what to write down is not a process of sampling according to some fixed-in-advance principle. Rather it is both intuitive, reflecting the ethnographer's changing sense of what might possibly be made interesting or important to future readers, and empathetic, reflecting the ethnographer's sense of what is interesting or important to the people he is observing.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING FIELDNOTES

We draw four implications from our understanding of ethnography as the inscription of participatory experience: (1) What is observed and ultimately treated as "data" or "findings" is inseparable from the observational process. (2) In writing fieldnotes, the field researcher should give special attention to the indigenous meanings and concerns of the people studied. (3) Contemporaneously written fieldnotes are an essential grounding and resource for writing broader, more coherent accounts of others' lives and concerns. (4) Such fieldnotes should detail the social and interactional processes that make up people's everyday lives and activities.

### ***Inseparability of "Methods" and "Findings"***

Modes of participating in and finding out about the daily lives of others make up key parts of ethnographic methods. These "methods" determine what the field researcher sees, experiences, and learns. But if substance ("data", "findings", "facts") are products of the methods used, substance cannot be considered independently of method; what the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with how she finds it out. As a result, these methods should not be ignored. Rather, they should comprise an important part of written fieldnotes. It thus becomes critical for the ethnographer to document her own activities, circumstances, and emotional responses as these factors shape the process of observing and recording, others' lives."

From this point of view, the very distinction between fieldnote "data" and "personal reactions", between "fieldnote records" and "diaries" or "journals" (Sanjek 1990c), is deeply misleading. Of course, the ethnographer can separate what he says and does from what he observes others saying and doing, treating the latter as if it were unaffected by the former. But such a separation distorts processes of inquiry and the meaning of field "data" in several significant ways. First, this separation treats data as "objective information" that has a fixed meaning independent of how that information was elicited or established and by whom. In this way the ethnographer's own actions, including his "personal" feelings and reactions, are viewed as independent of and unrelated to the events and happenings involving others that constitute "findings" or "observations" when written down in fieldnotes. Second, this separation assumes that "subjective" reactions and perceptions can and should be controlled by being segregated from "objective", impersonal records. And finally, such control is thought to be essential because personal and emotional experiences are devalued, comprising "contaminants" of objective data rather than avenues of insight into significant processes in the setting.

Linking method and substance in fieldnotes has a number of advantages: it encourages recognizing "findings" not as absolute and invariant but as contingent upon the circumstances of their "discovery" by the ethnographer. Moreover, the ethnographer is prevented, or at least discouraged, from too readily taking, one person's version of what happened or what is important as the "complete" or "correct" version of these matters. Rather, "what happened" is one account, made by a particular person to a specific other at a particular time and place for particular purposes. In all these ways, linking method and substance builds sensitivity to the multiple, situational realities of those studied into the core of fieldwork practice.

### ***The Pursuit of Indigenous Meanings***

In contrast to styles of field research which focus on others' behavior without systematic regard for what such behavior means to those engaged in it, we see ethnography as committed to uncovering and depicting indigenous meanings. The object of participation is ultimately to get close to those studied as a way of understanding what their experiences and activities *mean to them*.

Ethnographers should attempt to write fieldnotes in ways that capture and preserve indigenous meanings. To do so, they must learn to recognize and limit reliance upon preconceptions about members' lives and activities. They must become responsive to what others are concerned about, in their own terms. But while fieldnotes are about others, their concerns and doings gleaned through empathetic immersion, they necessarily reflect and convey the ethnographer's understanding of these concerns and doings. Thus, fieldnotes are written accounts that filter members' experiences and concerns through the person and perspectives of the ethnographer; fieldnotes provide the ethnographer's, not the members', accounts of the latter's experiences, meanings, and concerns.

It might initially appear that forms of ethnography concerned with "polyvocality" (Clifford and Marcus 1986:15), or oral histories and feminist ethnographies (Stacey 1991) which seek to let members "speak in their own voices," can avoid researcher mediation in its entirety. But even in these instances, researchers continue to select what to observe, to pose questions, or to frame the nature and purpose of the interview more generally, in ways which cannot avoid mediating effects (see Mills 1990).

### ***Writing Fieldnotes Contemporaneously***

In contrast to views holding that fieldnotes are crutches at best and blinders at worst, we see fieldnotes as providing the primary means for deeper appreciation of how field researchers come to grasp and interpret the actions and concerns of others. In this respect, fieldnotes offer subtle and complex understandings of these others' lives, routines, and meanings.

As argued earlier, the field researcher comes to understand others' ways by becoming part of their lives and by learning to interpret and experience events much as they do. It is critical to document closely these subtle processes of learning and resocialization *as they occur*; continuing time in the field tends to dilute the insights generated by initial contact with an unknown way of life. Long-term participation dissolves the initial perceptions that arise in adapting to and discovering what is significant to others; it blunts early sensitivities to subtle patterns and underlying tensions. In short, the field researcher does not learn about the concerns and meanings of others all at once, but in a constant, continuing process in which she builds new insight and understanding upon prior insights and understandings. Researchers should document these emergent processes and stages rather than attempt to reconstruct them at a later point in light of some final, ultimate interpretation of their meaning and import. Fieldnotes provide a distinctive resource for preserving experience close to the moment of occurrence and, hence, for deepening reflection upon and understanding of those experiences.

Similar considerations hold when examining the ethnographer's "findings" about those studied and their routine activities. Producing a record of these activities as close to their occurrence as possible preserves their idiosyncratic, contingent character in the face of the homogenizing tendencies of retrospective recall. In immediately written fieldnotes, distinctive qualities and features are sharply drawn and will elicit vivid memories and images when the ethnographer rereads notes for coding and analysis. Furthermore, the distinctive and unique features of such fieldnotes, brought forward into the final analysis, create texture and variation, avoiding the flatness that comes from generality.

### ***The Importance of Interactional Detail***

Field researchers seek to get close to others in order to understand their ways of life. To preserve and convey that closeness, they must describe situations and events of interest in detail. Of course, there can never be absolute standards for determining when there is "enough detail." How closely one should look and describe depends upon what is "of interest" and this varies by situation and by the researcher's personality, orientation, and discipline. Nonetheless, most ethnographers attend to observed events in an intimate or "Microscopic" manner (Geertz 1973:20-23) and in writing fieldnotes seek to recount "what happened" in fine detail.

Beyond this general "microscopic" commitment, however, our specifically interactionist approach leads us to urge writers to value close, detailed reports of interaction. First, interactional detail helps one become sensitive to, trace, and analyze the interconnections between methods and substance. Since the fieldworker discovers things about others by interacting with them, it is important to observe and minutely record the sequences and conditions marking such interactions. Second, in preserving the details of interaction, the researcher is better able to identify and follow processes in witnessed events and hence to develop and sustain processual interpretations of happenings in the field. Field research, we maintain, is particularly suited to documenting social life as process, as emergent meanings established in and through social interaction (Blumer 1969). Attending to the details of interaction enhances the possibilities for the researcher to see beyond fixed, static entities, to grasp the active "doing" of social life. Writing fieldnotes as soon and as fully as possible after events of interest have occurred encourages detailed descriptions of the processes of interaction through which members of social settings create and sustain specific, local social realities.

### **REFLECTIONS: WRITING FIELDNOTES AND ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE**

Ethnography is an active enterprise. Its activity incorporates dual impulses. On the one hand, the ethnographer must make her way into new worlds and new relationships. On the other hand, she must learn how to represent in written form what she has come to see and understand as the result of these experiences.

It is easy to draw a sharp contrast between these activities, between doing fieldwork and writing fieldnotes. After all, while in the field, ethnographers must frequently choose between "join(ing) conversations in unfamiliar places" (Lederman 1990:72) and withdrawing to some more private place to write about these conversations and witnessed events. By locating "real ethnography" in the time spent talking with and listening to those studied, many ethnographers not only polarize but also discount writing notes as a central component of fieldwork. "Doing" and "writing" should not be seen as separate and distinct activities, but as dialectically related and interdependent activities. Writing accounts of what happened during face-to-face encounters with others in the field is very much part of the doing of ethnography; as Geertz emphasizes, "the ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; he writes it down" (1973:19). This process of inscribing, of writing fieldnotes, helps the field researcher to understand what he

has been observing in the first place and, thus, enables him to participate in new ways, to hear with greater acuteness, and to observe with a new lens.

While ethnographers increasingly recognize the centrality of writing to their craft, they frequently differ on how to characterize that writing and its relation to ethnographic research. Some anthropologists have criticized Geertz's notion of "inscription" as too mechanical and simplistic, as ignoring that the ethnographer writes not about a "passing event" but rather about "already formulated, fixed discourse or lore"; hence, inscription should more aptly be termed "transcription" (Clifford 1990:57). "Inscription" has also been criticized as being too enmeshed in the assumptions of "salvage ethnography," which date back to Franz Boas's efforts to "write down" oral cultures before they and their languages and customs disappeared (Clifford 1986:113). Indeed, ethnographers have suggested a number of alternative ways of characterizing ethnographic writing. Anthropologists frequently use "translation" (or "cultural translation") to conceptualize writing a version of one culture that will make it comprehensible to readers living in another. Clifford (1986) and Marcus (1986) use the more abstract term "textualization" to refer to the generic processes whereby an ethnography "translates experience into text" (Clifford 1986:115). And sociologists, notably Richardson (1990), describe the core of ethnographic writing as "narrating."

In general, however, these approaches conflate writing final ethnographies with writing ethnographic fieldnotes; thus, they fail to adequately illuminate the key processes and features of producing fieldnotes. Yet, each approach has implications for such contemporaneous writing about events witnessed in the field. First translation entails reconfiguring one set of concepts and terms into another; that is, the ethnographer searches for comparable concepts and analogous terms. In a sense, while writing fieldnotes an ethnographer is always interpreting and translating into text what she sees, even when writing notes for herself. Of course, in composing the final ethnography, the writer not only translates concepts but also a whole way of life for a future audience who may not be familiar with the world she describes. Second, narrating often aptly characterizes the process of writing a day's experiences into a fieldnote entry. However, not all life experiences are well represented as cohesive stories: a narrative could push open-ended or disjointed interactions into a coherent, interconnected sequence. Thus, while many fieldnotes tell about the day in a storytelling mode, recounting what happened in a chronological order, most entries lack any overall structure which ties the day's events into a story line with a point. As a result, the storytelling of fieldnotes is generally fragmented and episodic. Finally, textualization clearly focuses on the broader transformation of experience into text, not only in final ethnographies, but especially so in writing fieldnotes. Indeed, such transformation first occurs in the preliminary and varied writings in the field. Moreover, these fieldnotes often prefigure the final texts!

In sum, the fluid, open-ended processes of writing fieldnotes resonate with the imagery of all these approaches. Never a simple matter of inscribing the world, fieldnotes do more than record observations. In a fundamental sense, they constitute a way of life through the very writing choices the ethnographer makes and the stories she tells; for, through her writing she conveys her understandings and insights to future readers unacquainted with these lives, people, and events. In writing a fieldnote, then, the ethnographer does not simply put happenings into words. Rather, such writing is an interpretive process: it is the very first act of textualizing. Indeed, this often "invisible" work - *writing ethnographic fieldnotes* - is the primordial textualization that creates a world on the page and ultimately shapes the final ethnographic, published text.

## **Chapter 2: In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes**

Ethnographers ultimately produce some sort of written account of what they have seen, heard, and experienced in the field. But different ethnographers, and the same ethnographer at different times, turn experience and observation into written texts in different ways. Some maximize their immersion in local activities and their experience of others' lives, deliberately suspending concern with the task of producing written records of these events. Here the field researcher decides where to go, what to look at, what to ask and say, so as to experience fully another way of life and its concerns. She attends to events with little or no orientation to "writing it down" or even to "observing" in a detached fashion. Indeed, an ethnographer living in rather than simply regularly visiting a field setting, particularly in non-Western cultures where language and daily routines are unfamiliar, may have no choice but to participate fully and to suspend immediate concerns with writing. A female ethnographer studying local women in Africa, for example, may find herself helping to prepare greens and care for children, leaving no time to produce many written notes. Yet in the process of that involvement she may most clearly learn how women simultaneously work together, socialize, and care for children. Only in subsequent reflection might she fully notice the subtle changes in herself as she learned to do and see these activities as the women do.



Field researchers using this style value relating naturally to those encountered in the field; they focus their efforts on figuring out - holistically and intuitively - what these people are up to. Any anticipation of writing fieldnotes is postponed (and in extreme cases, minimized or avoided altogether) as diluting the experiential insights and intuitions that immersion in another social world can provide. Only at some later point does the ethnographer turn to the task of recalling and examining her experiences in order to write them down.

But the ethnographer may also participate in ongoing events in ways that directly and immediately involve inscription. Here the field worker is concerned with "getting into place" to observe interesting, significant events in order to produce a detailed written record of them. As a result, participation in naturally occurring events may come to be explicitly oriented toward writing fieldnotes. At an extreme, the field worker may self-consciously look for events that should be written down for research purposes; he may position himself in these unfolding events to be able to observe and write; and he may explicitly orient to events in terms of "what is important to remember so that I can write it down later."

Both modes of participation have strengths and drawbacks. The former allows an intense immersion in daily rhythms and ordinary concerns, increasing openness to others' ways of life. The latter can produce a more detailed, closer-to-the-moment record of that life. In practice, most field researchers employ both styles at one time or another, now participating without thought about writing up what is happening, now focusing closely on events in order to write about them. Indeed, the fieldworker may experience a shift from one mode to another as events unfold in the field. Caught in some social moment, for example, the field researcher may come to see deep theoretical relevance in a mundane experience or practice. Conversely, a researcher in the midst of observing in a more detached, writing-oriented mode may suddenly be drawn directly into the center of aCtiVity.2

In both styles, the ethnographer writes fieldnotes more or less contemporaneously with the experience and observation of events of interest, in the spirit of the ethnographer who commented, "Anthropologists are those who write things down at the end of the day" (Jackson 1990b: 15). In the experiential style, writing may be put off for hours or even days, until the field researcher withdraws from the field and, relying solely on memory, sits down at pad or computer to reconstruct important events.' In the participating-to-write style, writing - or an orientation to writing - begins earlier, when the researcher is still in the field, perhaps in the immediate presence of talk and action that will be inscribed. The ethnographer may not only make mental notes or "headnotes" to include certain events in full fieldnotes, but he may also write down, in the form of jottings or scratch notes, abbreviated words and phrases to use later to construct full fieldnotes.

Furthermore, in both styles field researchers are deeply concerned about the quality of the relationships they develop with the people they seek to know and understand. In valuing more natural, open experience of others' worlds and activities, field researchers seek to keep writing from intruding into and affecting these relationships. They do so not only to avoid distancing themselves from the ongoing experience of another world, but also because writing and research commitments more generally may engender feelings of betraying those with whom one has lived and shared intimacies. Ethnographers who participate in order to write, in contrast, pursue and proclaim research interests more openly as an element in their relationships with those studied. But these field researchers too experience moments of anguish, of uncertainty about whether to include intimate or humiliating incidents in their fieldnotes. Moreover, they often become very sensitive to the ways in which the stance and act of writing are very visible to and can influence the quality of their relationships with those studied.

In the remainder of this chapter we focus on a participating-in-order-to-write fieldwork style which confronts writing issues directly and immediately in the field. This style brings to the fore the interconnections between writing, participating, and observing as a means of understanding another way of life: this approach focuses on learning how to look in order to write, while it also recognizes that looking is itself shaped and constrained by a sense of what and how to write. In examining these issues, we initially consider choices confronting field researchers in deciding how, where, and when to make jottings in field settings. Next we offer suggestions on what to observe when participating with an eye to writing fieldnotes. We then present illustrations of actual jottings made in different field settings and discuss a number of considerations that might guide the process of making jottings.

## MAKING JOTTINGS: HOW, WHERE, AND WHEN

In attending to ongoing scenes, events, and interactions, field researchers take mental note of certain details and impressions. For the most part these impressions remain "headnotes" only. In some instances, the field researcher

makes a brief written record of these impressions by jotting down key words and phrases. Jottings translate to-be-remembered observations into writing on paper as quickly rendered scribbles about actions and dialogue. A word or two written at the moment or soon afterwards will jog the memory later in the day and enable the fieldworker to catch significant actions and to construct evocative descriptions of the scene. Or, more extensive jottings may record an ongoing dialogue or a set of responses to questions. Particularly when learning a new language, the ethnographer should jot key expressions and terms.

Through trial and error field researchers evolve distinctive practical styles for writing jottings. An initial choice involves the selection of writing materials. Many fieldworkers use small notepads that fit easily in pocket or purse. Others prefer even less obtrusive materials, using folded sheets of paper, to record jottings about different topics on specific sides. Writers also frequently develop idiosyncratic preferences for particular types of pens or pencils.

Field researchers actually write jottings in different ways. It is time consuming and cumbersome to write out every word fully, and many fieldworkers develop their own private systems of symbols and abbreviations. Some even learn a formal transcribing system such as shorthand or speedwriting. These procedures not only facilitate getting words on a page more quickly; they also make jotted notes incomprehensible to those onlookers who ask to see them and hence provide a means for protecting the confidentiality of these writings.

Field researchers must also decide when, where, and how to write jottings. Far from simply mundane matters, such decisions can have tremendous import for relations with those in the field. The researcher works hard to establish close ties with participants so that she may be included in activities that are central to their lives. In the midst of such activities, however, she may experience deep ambivalence: on the one hand, she may wish to preserve the immediacy of the moment by jotting down words as they are spoken and details of scenes as they are enacted; on the other hand, she may feel that taking out a note pad and writing jottings will ruin the moment and plant seeds of distrust. Participants may now see her as someone whose primary interest lies in discovering their secrets and turning their most intimate and cherished experiences into objects of scientific inquiry.

Nearly all ethnographers feel torn at times between their research commitments and their desire to engage authentically those people whose worlds they have entered. Attempting to resolve these thorny relational and moral issues, many researchers hold that conducting any aspect of the research without the full and explicit knowledge and consent of those studied violates ethical standards. In this view, local assistants must be understood as collaborators who actively work with the researcher to tell the outside world about their lives and culture. Such mutual collaboration requires that the researcher ask permission to write about events and also respect people's desire not to reveal aspects of their lives.

Other field researchers feel less strictly bound to seek permission to conduct research or to tell participants about their intention to record events and experiences. Some justify this stance by insisting that the field researcher has no special obligations to disclose his intentions; all social life involves elements of dissembling, as no one ever fully reveals all his deeper purposes and private activities. Other researchers point out that jottings and fieldnotes written for oneself as one's own record will do no direct harm to others. This approach, of course, puts off grappling with the tough moral and personal issues until facing subsequent decisions about whether to publish or otherwise make these writings available to others. Finally, some advocate withholding knowledge of their research purposes from local people on the grounds that the information gained will serve the greater good. Researchers, for example, can only describe and publicize the conditions under which undocumented factory workers or the elderly in nursing homes live if they withhold their intentions from the powerful who control access to such settings.

Many beginning researchers, wanting to avoid open violations of trust and possibly awkward or tense encounters, are tempted to use covert procedures and to try to conceal the fact that they are conducting research or to wait until they leave the field to jot notes. While these decisions involve both the researcher's conscience and pragmatic considerations, we recommend as a general policy that the fieldworker inform people in the setting of the research, especially those with whom he has established some form of personal relationship. In addition to making these relations more direct and honest, openness avoids the risks and likely sense of betrayal that might follow from discovery of what the researcher has actually been up to. Concerns about the consequences—both discovery and ongoing inauthenticity—of even this small secret about research plans may mount and plague the fieldworker as time goes on and relations deepen.

Of course, strained relations and ethical dilemmas are not completely avoided by informing others of one's research purposes. While participants may have consented to the research, they might not know exactly what the research involves or what the researcher will do to carry it out. They might realize that the fieldworker is writing fieldnotes at the end of the day, but they become used to his presence and "forget" that this writing is going on. Furthermore,

marginal and transient members of the setting may not be aware of his research identity and purposes despite conscientious efforts to inform them.

By carrying out fieldwork in an overt manner, the researcher gains flexibility in when, where, and how to write jottings. In many field situations it may be feasible to jot notes openly. In so doing the fieldworker should act with sensitivity, trying to avoid detracting from or interfering with the ordinary relations and goings-on in the field. If possible, the fieldworker should start open jottings early on in contacts with those studied. If one establishes a "note-taker" role, jotting notes comes to be part of what people expect from the fieldworker. Here it helps to offer initial explanations of the need to take notes; an ethnographer can stress the importance of accuracy, of getting down exactly what was said. People often understand that such activities are required of students and, therefore, tolerate and accommodate the needs of researchers who, they believe, want to faithfully represent what goes on. When learning a new language in another culture, the field researcher can explain that she is writing down local terms in order to remember them. By saying the word as she writes, people might offer new terms and become further interested in teaching her.

Although taking down jottings may at first seem odd or awkward, after a time it often becomes a normal and expected part of what the fieldworker does. In the following excerpt from a Housing and Urban Development [HUD] office, the office manager and a worker jokingly enlist the fieldworker as audience for a self-parody of wanting to "help" clients:

Later I'm in Jean's office and Ramon comes up and waxes melodramatic. Take this down, he says. Jean motions for me to write, so I pull out my notepad. "I only regret that I have but eight hours to devote to saving" . . . He begins to sing "Impossible Dream" in his thick, goofy Brooklyn accent. . . . "Feel free to join in!" he says....

Here, the ethnographer and his note-taking provide resources for a spontaneous humorous performance.'

Yet even when some people become familiar with open writing in their presence, others may become upset when the researcher pulls out his pad and begins to write down their words and actions. Ethnographers may try to avoid the likely challenges and facilitate open, extensive notetaking by positioning themselves on the margins of interaction. Even then, they may still encounter questions, as reflected in the following comment by a field researcher observing divorce mediation sessions:

I tried to take notes that were as complete as possible during the session. My sitting behind the client had probably more to do with wanting to get a lot of written notes as unobtrusively as possible as with any more worthy methodological reason. While taking copious amounts of notes (approximately 50 pages per session) did not seem to bother the clients, a few mediators became quite defensive about it. One mediator wanted to know how I "decided what to write down and what not to write down." At staff meetings this same mediator would sit next to me and try to glance over to see what I had written in my notebook.

Given the delicacy of this and similar situations, fieldworkers must constantly rely upon interactional skills and tact to judge whether or not taking jottings in the moment is appropriate.

Furthermore, in becoming accustomed to open jotting, people may develop definite expectations about what events and topics should be recorded. People may question why the fieldworker is or is not taking note of particular events, and they may feel slighted if she fails to make jottings on what they are doing or see as important. Consider the following exchange, again described by the field researcher studying divorce mediation, which occurred as she openly took notes while interviewing a mediator about a session just completed:

On one occasion when finishing up a debriefing, . . . [the mediator] began to apply some eye make-up while I was finishing writing down some observations. She flashed me a mock disgusted look and said, "Are you writing this down too!" indicating the activity with her eye pencil.

Open jotting, then, has to be carefully calibrated to the unfolding context of the ongoing interaction.

Open jottings not only may strain relations with those who notice the writing; jottings can also distract the ethnographer from paying close attention to talk and activities occurring in the setting. A field researcher will inevitably miss fleeting expressions, subtle movements, and even key content in interactions if his nose is in his notepad. Taking open jottings is not always advisable for other reasons as well. In some settings the fieldworker's participation in ongoing interaction may be so involving as to preclude taking breaks to write down jottings; in such instances, he may have to rely more upon memory, focusing on incidents and key phrases that will later trigger a fuller recollection of the event or scene. For example, in a setting where only a few people write and do so only on

rare occasions, an ethnographer who writes instead of participating in an all-night village dance may be perceived as failing to maintain social relationships, a serious offense in a close-knit village.

As a result of these problems, even ethnographers who usually write open jottings may at other times make jottings privately, out of sight of those studied. Waiting until just after a scene, incident, or conversation has occurred, the ethnographer can then go to a private place to jot down a memorable phrase. Here it is often useful for the fieldworker to adopt the ways members of the setting themselves use to take "time out" or "get away." Fieldworkers have reported retreating to private places such as a bathroom (Cahill 1985), deserted lunchroom, stairwell, or supply closet to record such covert jottings. Depending upon circumstances, the fieldworker can visit such places periodically, as often as every half hour or so, or immediately after a particularly important incident. Other researchers avoid all overt writing in the field setting; but immediately upon leaving the field, they pull out a notebook to jot down reminders of the key incidents, words, or reactions they wish to include in full fieldnotes. This procedure allows the fieldworker to signal items that she does not want to forget without being seen as intrusive.

An ethnographer may write jottings in ways intermediate between open and hidden styles, especially when note-taking becomes a part of her task or role. Those in the field may or may not know explicitly that the fieldworker is writing jottings for research purposes. In one instance, for example, a student in a law office who was asked to take notes during client interviews used the assignment as an opportunity to take down research jottings. This student reported that while she did not make explicit when she wrote jottings, both the attorney and clients knew of her research. Though many activities do not so easily lend themselves to writing jottings, fieldworkers can find other naturally occurring means to incorporate jottings. For example, fieldworkers often learn about settings by becoming members. For the fieldworker who assumes the role of a novice, the notes which as a beginner he is permitted or even expected to write may become the jottings for his first fieldnotes.

Strategies for how, where, and when to jot notes change with time spent in the field and with the different relationships formed between fieldworker and people in the setting. Even after the ethnographer has established strong personal ties, situations might arise in fieldwork when visibly recording anything will be taken as inappropriate or out of place; in these situations, taking out a notebook would generate deep discomfort to both fieldworker and other people in the setting. One student ethnographer studying a campus bookstore who had grown quite friendly with bookstore workers - with whom she had spoken openly about her study - nonetheless reported the following incident:

One of the younger cashiers came up to me after having seen me during two of my last observation sessions. She approached me tentatively with a question about me being a "spy" from the other campus bookstore or possibly from the administration. Trying to ease the situation with a joke, I told her I was only being a spy for sociology's sake, but she didn't understand the joke, and it only made the situation worse.

Sometimes people may be uncomfortable with a jotting researcher because they have had little experience with writing as a part of everyday life. Especially in oral cultures, watching and writing about people may seem like a strange activity indeed. In other instances, people have unpleasant associations with writing and find jottings intrusive and potentially dangerous. On one occasion an elder in a Zambian village became very hesitant to continue speaking after the ethnographer jotted down his name on a scrap of paper, simply to remember it. She later learned that government officials in colonial times used to come by and record names for tax purposes and to enlist people into government work projects.

Finally, even with permission to write openly, the tactful fieldworker will want to remain sensitive to and avoid jotting down matters which participants regard as secret, embarrassing, too revealing, or which puts them in any danger. In other instances, the people themselves may not object and in fact urge the researcher to take notes about sensitive matters. Even though she thinks they may be embarrassing or bring them harm if they were to be made public, the researcher might take jottings but then later decide not to use them in any final writing.

All in all, it is a defining moment in field relations when an ethnographer takes out a pad and begins to write down what people are saying and doing in the presence of those very people. Therefore, fieldworkers take very different approaches to jottings, their strategies both shaping and being shaped by their setting and by their relationships. Hence, decisions about when and how to take jottings must be considered in the context of the broader set of relations with those in the setting. In some situations and relations, taking open jottings is clearly not advisable. In others, fieldworkers decide to take jottings but must devise their own unique means to avoid or minimize awkward interactions that may arise as a result. When deciding when and where to jot, it is rarely helpful or possible to specify in advance one "best way." Here, as in other aspects of fieldwork, a good rule of thumb is to remain open and flexible, ready to alter an approach if it adversely affects people.

## PARTICIPATING IN ORDER TO WRITE

Deciding whether or not to make jottings presupposes some sense for what to observe and write about in the first place. But in the flux of their field settings, beginning students are often hesitant and uncertain about what they should pay attention to as potential issues for writing. We have found a number of procedures to be helpful in advising students how initially to look-in-order-to-write.

First, ethnographers should take note of their initial impressions. These impressions may include those things available to the senses - the tastes, smells, and sounds of the physical environment, the look and feel of the locale and the people in it. Such impressions may include details about the physical setting, including size, space, noise, colors, equipment, and movement, or about people in the setting, such as number, gender, race, appearance, dress, movement, comportment, and feeling tone. Recording these impressions provides a way to get started in a setting that may seem overwhelming. Entering another culture where both language and customs are incomprehensible may present particular challenges in this regard. Still, the ethnographer can begin to assimilate strange sights and sounds through writing about them.

Furthermore, this record preserves these initial and often insightful impressions, for observers tend to lose sensitivity for unique qualities of a setting as these become commonplace. Researchers who are familiar with the setting they study, perhaps already having a place in that setting as workers or residents, have lost direct access to these first impressions. However, such fieldworkers can indirectly seek to recall their own first impressions by watching any newcomers to the setting, paying special attention to how they learn, adapt, and react.

Second, field researchers can focus on observing key events or incidents. Fieldworkers may at first have to rely on their own experience and intuition to select noteworthy incidents out of the flow of ongoing activity. Here, for example, the fieldworker may look closely at something that surprises or runs counter to her expectations, again paying attention to incidents, feeling tones, impressions, and interactions, both verbal and nonverbal.

Similarly, field researchers may use their own personal experience of events that please, shock, or even anger them to identify matters worth writing about. A fieldworker's strong reaction to a particular event may well signal that others in the setting react similarly. Or a fieldworker may experience deeply contradictory emotions-for example, simultaneously feeling deep sympathy and repulsion for what he observes in the field. These feelings may also reflect contradictory pressures experienced by those in the setting.

To use personal reactions effectively, however, requires care and reflection. Many beginning ethnographers take note of such experiences, but tend to judge the actions of people in the setting, for better or worse, by their own rather than the others' standards and values. Prejudging incidents in outsiders' terms makes it difficult to cultivate empathetic understanding and to discover what import local people give to them (see chapter 5). The field researcher should be alive to the possibility that local people, especially those with very different cultures, may respond to events in sharply contrasting ways. For example, an ethnographer in a Chokwe village may react with alarm to an unconscious man drugged by an herbal drink in a trial-for-sorcery court, only to realize that others are laughing at the spectacle because they know he will soon regain consciousness.

Yet fieldworkers should not go to the other extreme and attempt to manage strong personal reactions by denial or simply by omitting them from fieldnotes. Rather, we recommend that the ethnographer register her feelings, then step back and use this experience to increase sensitivity to the experiences of others in the setting. Are others in the setting similarly surprised, shocked, pleased, or angered by an event? If so, under what conditions do these reactions occur, and how did those affected cope with the incidents and persons involved? Whether an ethnographer is working in a foreign or familiar culture, she needs to avoid assuming that others respond as she does. Third, field researchers should move beyond their personal reactions to an open sensitivity to what those in the setting experience and react to as "significant" or "important." The sorts of actions, interactions, and events that catch the attention of people habitually in the setting may provide clues to these concerns. The field researcher watches for the sorts of things that are meaningful to those studied. Specifically: What do they stop and watch? What do they talk and gossip about? What produces strong emotional responses for them? "Troubles" or "problems" often generate deep concern and feelings. What kinds occur in the setting? How do people in the setting understand, interpret, and deal with such troubles or problems? Such "incidents" and "troubles" should move the field researcher to jot down "who did what" and "how others reacted." Since a researcher in an unfamiliar setting often pays close attention to others' actions in order to imitate and participate, she can augment her learning by

writing down what others do and how they respond. A follow-up strategy that we strongly recommend is to talk to those involved and those witnessing the incident about their impressions.

In this way, the field researcher attends not only to the activities local people engage in but also to the particular meanings they attribute to these activities. She seeks and discerns local knowledge and meanings, not so much by directly asking actors what matters to them, but more indirectly and inferentially by looking for the perspectives and concerns embedded and expressed in naturally occurring interaction. A field researcher, for example, might give close attention to evaluations and distinctions made by members in the course of their daily activities. By way of illustration, those in a work setting may regularly contrast "good" workers and "bad" workers. By noting such distinctions, the researcher learns something about what matters to those in the setting. In addition, by attending closely to how, in conversation, people apply these distinctions to particular workers, the fieldworker may learn how these reputations become resources used to find meaning.

In this sense, the ethnographer is concerned not with members' indigenous meanings simply as static categories but with how members of settings invoke those meanings in specific relations and interactions. This requires, then, not just that the ethnographer describe interactions, but that she consistently attend to "when, where, and according to whom" in shaping all fieldnote descriptions. Those in different institutional positions (e.g., supervisors and workers, staff and clients), for example, may evaluate different workers as "good" (or "bad") and may do so by invoking different evaluative criteria. Indigenous meanings, then, rarely hold across the board but rather reflect particular positions and practical concerns that need to be captured in writing fieldnotes.

When first venturing into a setting, field researchers should "cast their nets" broadly; they should observe with an eye to writing about a range of incidents and interactions. Yet forays into a setting must not be viewed as discrete, isolated occasions that have little or no bearing on what will be noted the next time. Rather, observing and writing about certain kinds of events foreshadow what will be noticed and described next. Identifying one incident as noteworthy should lead to considering what other incidents are similar and hence worth noting. As fieldwork progresses and becomes more focused on a set of issues, fieldworkers often selfconsciously collect a series of incidents and interactions of the "same type" and look for regularities or patterns in them.

Even when looking for additional examples of a similar event, the field researcher is open to and indeed searches for different forms of that event, for variations from or exceptions to an emerging pattern. Beginning field researchers are often discouraged by such discoveries, fearing that exceptions to a pattern they have noted will cast doubt upon their understanding of the setting. This need not be the case, although noting differences and variations should prod the field researcher to change, elaborate, or deepen her earlier understanding of the setting. The field researcher, for example, may want to consider and explore possible causes or conditions that would account for difference or variation: Are the different actions the result of the preferences and temperaments of those involved or of their different understandings of the situation because they have different positions in the local context? Or the ethnographer may begin to question how she decided similarity and difference in the first place, perhaps coming to see how an event that initially appeared to be different is actually similar on a deeper level. In these ways, exploring what at least initially seem to be differences and variations will lead to richer, more textured descriptions and encourage more subtle, grounded analyses in a final ethnography (see chapter 7).

In summary, ethnographic attention involves balancing two different orientations. Especially on first entering the field, the researcher identifies significant characteristics gleaned from her first impressions and personal reactions. With greater participation in some local social world, however, the ethnographer becomes more sensitive to the concerns and perspectives of those in the setting. She increasingly appreciates how people have already predescribed their world in their own terms for their/own purposes and projects. A sensitive ethnographer draws upon her own reactions to identify issues of possible importance to people in the setting but privileges their "insider" descriptions and categories over her own "outsider" views.

## TWO ILLUSTRATIONS OF JOTTINGS

In order to convey how field researchers actually write and use jottings, we provide two illustrations. Both focus on scenes, observed actions, and dialogue rather than on evaluation or psychological interpretation. The two researchers approach interaction in their settings in very different ways, noting different sensory and interpretive details.

*"they're not very good"*

The following jotted notes focus on meeting a would-be promoter of Spanish-language rock music in a club:

Jorge = at table            doesn't introduce me to anyone  
now only speaks in Spanish  
chit chat - who's playing  
"they're not very good" - apology

These jottings preserve a number of incidents in the club, including where Jorge is seated and the fact that he has switched to Spanish after having previously spoken English. A general sequence of events is laid out: Jorge does not introduce the observer, who has come in his company; there is general conversation ("chit chat"); someone (not specified here) asks "who's playing" (presumably the name of the band is given, but is mentally marked as easily remembered and not recorded); someone (not the field worker!) makes an evaluative comment about the band, and the observer notes her sense that this remark was an "apology" (for having brought her to this club), thus providing interactional context for interpreting its import.

*"you can call his doctor"*

The following jottings concern a woman who is seeking a temporary restraining order against her two landlords, one of whom is not present in the courtroom. The landlord who is present disputes the woman's testimony that the missing landlord is "well enough to walk" and hence could have come to court:

you can call his doctor at UCLA and  
he can verify all this  
I just don't call people on the  
telephone - courts don't operate that way –  
it has to be on paper or  
(in person)

These jottings represent a fragment of dialogue between the landlord defendant (the first two lines) and the judge (the last four lines; see chapter 3 for the full fieldnote written from this jotting). The jotting reflects an interest in the judge's insistence on legal procedure: he as judge ("courts") will not independently investigate litigants' claims; rather, litigants are responsible for presenting any evidence in the courtroom. Note that only spoken words are recorded; specific speakers are not indicated but can be identified by content or from memory. The words represent direct quotes, written down as accurately as possible when spoken; an exception occurs in the last line, where the observer missed the judge's exact words ending this sentence (because of jotting down the preceding dialogue) and inserted a paraphrase "in person" (indicated by parentheses).

#### JOTTINGS AS MNEMONIC DEVICES: WHAT WORDS AND PHRASES?

Each of the jottings in the previous illustrations is "a mnemonic word or phrase [written] to fix an observation or to recall what someone has just said" (Clifford 1990:5 1). As preludes to full written notes, jottings capture bits of talk and action from which the fieldworker can begin to sketch social scenes, recurring incidents, local expressions and terms, members distinctions and accounts, dialogue among those present, and his own conversations.

Making jottings, however, is not only a writing activity; it is also a mind-set. Learning to jot down details which remain sharp and which easily transform into vivid descriptions on the page results, in part, from envisioning scenes as written. Writing jottings that evoke memories requires learning what can be written about and how. We have found the following recommendations helpful for making jottings useful for producing vivid, evocatively descriptive fieldnotes.

First, jot down details of what you sense are key components of observed scenes or interactions. Field researchers record immediate fragments of action and talk to serve as focal points for later writing accounts of these events in as much detail as can be remembered. The field researcher studying Spanish rock music, for example, jotted that the promoter she accompanied to a club "now only speaks in Spanish" while he had spoken English in their prior,

less public contacts. She also wrote down a key direct quote - "they're not very good" - along with the term "apology" to remind her of the context and meaning of this remark.

Second, avoid making statements characterizing what people do that rely on generalizations. Many novice field researchers initially tend to jot down impressionistic, opinionated words which lend themselves better to writing evaluative summaries than to composing detailed, textured descriptions. For example, it is problematic for a field researcher to characterize the way someone works as "inefficient." Such cryptic, evaluative jottings are likely to evoke only a vague memory when the fieldworker later on attempts to write a full description of the social scene. Such jottings also convey nothing of how people in the setting experience and evaluate worker performance. Similarly, jottings that a probation officer "lectures about school" and that a youth is "very compliant-always agrees" during a probation interview are overly generalized; such summary statements are not helpful for writing close descriptions of how probation officer and youth actually talked and acted during a particular encounter.

Third, jot down concrete sensory details about actions and talk. Field researchers note concrete details of everyday life which show rather than tell about people's behavior (see chapter 4). By incorporating such details, jottings may provide records of actual words, phrases, or dialogue that the field researcher wants to preserve in as accurate a form as possible. It is not enough, for example, to characterize an emotional outburst simply as "angry words." Rather the ethnographer should jot the actually spoken words, along with sensual details such as gestures and facial expressions suggesting that the speaker's emotional experience involved "anger." Jotting these words should evoke recall not only of the details about what happened but also of the specific circumstances or context involved: who was present, what they said or did, what occurred immediately before and after, etc. In this way jottings may be used to reconstruct the actual order or sequence of talk, topics, or actions on some particular occasion.

Beginning ethnographers sometimes attempt to identify motives or internal states when recording observed actions. Having witnessed an angry exchange, for example, one is often tempted to focus on the source or reason for this emotional outburst, typically by imputing motive (e.g., some underlying feeling such as "insecurity") to one or both of the parties involved. Such psychologized explanations, however, highlight only one of a number of possible internal states that may accompany or contribute to the observed actions. Anger could, for example, result from frustration, fatigue, the playing out of some local power struggle, or other hidden factors; the ethnographer who simply witnesses a scene has no way of knowing which factors are involved."

Field researchers do not ignore emotions; they may well note feelings such as anger, sadness, joy, pleasure, disgust, loneliness, but they do so as such emotions are expressed and attended to by those in the setting. For example, in describing the emotional consequences of routinely "having to say no" to clients coming to a HUD office in desperate need of housing, an ethnographer wrote the following:

Laura to me, slouched down on her desk, head in hands: "Sometimes I just don't feel like helping people, you know? You have to say no so often. That's a big part of this program. It gets to you psychologically. (How?) I didn't study psychology, but it affects you" (rolling her eyes).

Here the ethnographer writes not to explain why this HUD worker experienced or reported these emotions (although she herself points to a feature of her work - "You have to say no so often"), but to highlight how she expressed her feelings. He does so not only by direct quotation in her own words but also by providing vivid details of her body posture ("slouched," "head in hands") and by noting her accenting eye movements.

When witnessing social scenes, then, the ethnographer's task is to use his own sensibilities to learn how others understand and evaluate what happened, how they assess internal states and determine psychological motivation. Useful jottings should correspondingly reflect and further this process of writing textured, detailed descriptions of interactions rather than of individual motivation.

Fourth, jot down sensory details which you could easily forget but which you deem to be key observations about the scene. Jottings are devices intended to encourage the recall of scenes and events in the construction of some broader, fuller fieldnote account. Since jottings must later jog the memory, each field researcher must learn which kinds of details they best remember and make jottings about those features and qualities they easily forget. Thus, fieldworkers come to develop their own jotting styles reflecting their distinctive recall propensities, whether visual, kinetic, or auditory. Some focus on trying to capture evocative pieces of broader scenes, while some jot down almost exclusively dialogue; others record nonverbal expression of voice, gesture, movement; still others note visual details of color and shape. Through trial and error, field researchers learn what most helps them to recall field experiences once they sit down to write up full notes.



Jottings may serve more generally to remind the ethnographer of what was happening at a particular time, in this sense providing a marker around which to collect other remembered incidents. For example, one field researcher teaching in a Headstart Program described a series of incidents that occurred while supervising children playing in a sandbox. Included in her jottings but not in her full fieldnotes was the phrase, "Three new bags of sand were delivered to the sandbox." In discussing this scratch note later she commented: "I don't think it is so important as I would want to include it in my notes because I think it is just - I wrote it down to remind me more what the day was like, what was happening."

Fifth, jottings can be used to signal general impressions and feelings, even if the fieldworker is unsure of their significance at the moment. In some cases, the ethnographer may have only a vague intuitive sense about how or why something may be important. Such feelings might signal a key element that in the future could enable the field researcher to see how incidents "fit together" in meaningful patterns. For example, at another point the ethnographer in the Headstart Program made a jotting about a student, "Nicole showing trust in me," which she decided not to write up in her full notes: "It was just an overall feeling I had throughout the day; ... at that point when I wrote the jottings I couldn't remember an exact incident." But this jotting served as a mental note, subsequently stimulating her to appreciate (and record) the following incident as a revealing example of "children trusting teachers":

At one point, Nicole got on the swings without her shoes on and asked me for a push. I told her that I would push her after she went and put her shoes on. Nicole paused and looked at me. I repeated my statement, telling her that I would save her swing for her while she was gone. Nicole then got off of the swing and put her shoes on. When she came back to the swing, I praised her listening skills and gave her a hug. I then gave her a push. I found this incident to be a significant accomplishment for Nicole, as usually she doesn't listen to the teachers."

Having thought about whether or not to write this jotting up as full notes made this student sensitive to the issue of "trust." The jotting later acted as a stimulus to observe and write up a "concrete event" involving such "trust." In summary, by participating in a setting with an eye to making jottings, an ethnographer experiences events as potential subjects for writing. Like any other writer, an ethnographer learns to recognize potential writing material and to see and hear it in terms of written descriptions. Learning to observe in order to make jottings thus is keyed to both the scene and to the page. Ethnographers learn to experience through the senses in anticipation of writing: to remember dialogue and movement like an actor; to see colors, shapes, textures, and spatial relations as a painter or photographer; and to sense moods, rhythms, and tone of voice like a poet. Details experienced through the senses turn into jottings with active rather than passive verbs, sensory rather than analytic adjectives, and verbatim rather than summarized dialogue.

## REFLECTIONS: WRITING AND ETHNOGRAPHIC MARGINALITY

While a primary goal of ethnography is immersion in the life-worlds and everyday experiences of a group of people, the ethnographer inevitably remains in significant ways an outsider to the worlds of those studied. Immersion is not merging; the field researcher who seeks to "get close to" others usually does not become one of these others but rather continues to be a researcher interested in and pursuing research issues, albeit in close proximity to the ordinary exigencies of life that these others experience and react to (see Bittner 1988; Emerson 1987). The ethnographer, then, stays at least a partial stranger to the worlds of the studied, despite sharing in many aspects of their daily lives. The student-ethnographer working in a bookstore noted that the pull toward involvement as an insider was particularly strong and the researcher's stance difficult to maintain:

There were times when I wanted to be free to listen to other individuals talk or to watch their activities, but friends and acquaintances were so "distracting" coming up and wanting to talk that I wasn't able to. Also, there was this concern on my part that, as I got to know some of the staff people better, their qualities as human beings would become so endearing that I was afraid that I would lose my sociological perspective-I didn't want to feel like in studying them, I was exploiting them.

Field researchers respond to these tensions in a variety of ways. Some try to maintain a detached, observational attitude even toward people whom they like and respect, seeking to keep research commitments somewhat separate from personal attachments. Others find themselves unable to sustain an invariably watching, distancing stance toward people they are drawn to and toward events which compellingly involve them. These ethnographers then take time out, either implicitly or self-consciously, by not observing and/or writing fieldnotes about selected portions of their field experience while continuing to do so about other portions. And finally, some ethnographers

may decide that the relationships they have formed in the field are more valuable and enduring than any research product, and eventually they come to abandon entirely the project as research activity.

But the ethnographer remains a stranger as long as, and to the extent that, she retains commitment to the exogenous project of studying or understanding the lives of others - as opposed to the indigenous project of simply living a life in one way or another. When living in a village on a long-term basis, the ethnographer may feel drawn into daily, intimate relations as a neighbor or perhaps even as a part of a family. On these occasions she may participate "naturally" - without a writing orientation or analytic reflection - in ongoing social life. But on other occasions, she participates in local scenes in ways directed toward making observations and collecting data. Here her actions incorporate an underlying commitment to write down and ultimately transform into "data" the stuff and nuances of that life. In this way, efforts to observe in order to write about shared experiences and witnessed events induce a distinctive ethnographic stance. In this sense, we can suggest that the ethnographer's strangeness is created and maintained exactly by writing fieldnotes; such notes reflect and realize this socially close but experientially separate stance.

This ethnographic marginality is often manifested interactionally when the fieldworker ceases simply doing what other people are doing and begins openly writing about these doings. In this sense, overtly writing jottings; is a critical, consequential ethnographic activity, publicly proclaiming and reaffirming fieldworkers' research commitments and hence their status as outsiders, as persons in the setting who have clearly delineated tasks and purposes that differ from those of members. Writing down jottings not only reminds ethnographers of their marginal social standing in settings but creates it as well, increasing immediate feelings of isolation and alienation.

It should come as no surprise, then, that many ethnographers, both students and experienced practitioners, feel deeply ambivalent about jottings. Jottings interfere with their interactions with people in the field; they create difficulties in interacting with others while at the same time observing and writing down what is happening. Indeed, students who come back from the field without jottings usually report that taking jottings on the spot would have made others uncomfortable. These students, then, directly experience the distracting, alienating consequences of jotting notes.

Most ethnographers, however, try to balance and juggle these tendencies, sometimes participating without immediate thought about writing down what is occurring, sometimes temporarily withdrawing to some private place to write covert jottings, at other times visibly jotting notes. Several practical writing conflicts arise from these opposing pressures. The inclination to experience daily events either as a "natural" participant or as a researcher shows up in writing as shifts in point of view as well as in varying kinds of details considered significant for inscription. Even where and when to jot notes depends on the person's involvement at a particular moment as a participant or observer. Whether a researcher - neighbor in the village and researcher-as-intern on a job, the tension between the present-oriented day-to-day role and the future-oriented ethnographer identity appears in the practical choices in writing both jottings and more complete notes.

In sum, in most social settings writing down what is taking place as it occurs is a strange, marginalizing activity, marking the writer as an observer rather than as a full, ordinary participant. But independently of the reactions of others, participating in order to write leads one to assume the mind-set of an observer, a mind-set in which one constantly steps outside of scenes and events to assess their "write-able" qualities. It may be for this reason that some ethnographers try to put writing out of mind entirely by opting for the more fully experiential style of fieldwork. But this strategy puts off rather than avoids the marginalizing consequences of writing, for lived experience must eventually be turned into observations and reduced to textual form.

## **Chapter Six: Processing Fieldnotes: Coding and Memoing**

At some point - after weeks or perhaps months of writing notes - the ethnographer needs to draw back from the field, to cease actively writing notes. He must shift gears and turn to the written record he has produced with an eye to transforming this collection of materials into writings that speak to wider, outside audiences. Efforts to analyze now become intense, concentrated, and comprehensive: the fieldworker begins to sift systematically through the many pages of fieldnote accounts of discrete and often loosely related incidents and happenings, looking to identify threads that can be woven together to tell a story (or a number of stories) about the observed social world. The ultimate goal is to produce a coherent, focused analysis of some aspect of the social life that has been observed