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17

ETHNOGRAPHY AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Chapter outline

- The origins of ethnography
- Guidelines for fieldwork
- Gathering data: participative observation and field notes
- Gathering data: interviewing
- Gathering data: digital media
- Ethical principles in ethnography
- The ethnographic self
- Feminist ethnography
- Critical ethnography
- Sculpting the truth in ethnographic accounts
- Recording the miracle

Keywords

- Ethnography
- Participant observation
- Fieldwork
- Reflexivity
- Natural settings

- Postmodernism
- Feminist ethnography
- Critical ethnography
- Positionalities

Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Describe the origins of ethnography as a data gathering method.
- Distinguish between ethnography and structured observational methods.
- Outline the circumstances when ethnography is the most appropriate approach.
- Plan and conduct ethnographic fieldwork, selecting the field, gaining access, building rapport and getting out.
- Conduct ethnographic research ethically.
- Handle identity and know when and how to weave 'the self' into ethnographic accounts.
- Write an ethnographic account that is authentic and credible.

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

Ethnography is a qualitative research method that seeks to understand cultural phenomena that reflect the knowledge and meanings that guide the life of cultural groups within their own environment. While the origins of ethnography lie in the socio-cultural anthropology of the nineteenth century, it is now widely used in sociology, communications studies, educational and medical research, and history – subjects where the intention is to study people, ethnic groups and cultures. However, ethnography remains a contested and, in the view of Jordan and Yeomans (1995), an often loosely used term. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 1) see ethnography as:

> … a particular method or sets of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions….

For Willis and Trondman (2000: 5) it is

> ... a family of methods involving sustained social contact with agents, and richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience.

Ethnographers, then, as participant observers, look at and record people's way of life and take an **emic** (folk or inside) and **etic** (analytic or outside) approach to describing communities and cultures. The research is carried out in natural settings and is sympathetic to those settings. Traditionally those involved in ethnographic research spend long periods of time in the place of study, and are able to produce thick written cultural descriptions that communicate the information found in the field, or, in the words of Fetterman (2010: 1) 'a credible, rigorous and authentic story'. While in the past, ethnographers may have travelled to distant places to study 'exotic' tribes or groups, contemporary ethnography can concern itself with more mundane locations such as shopping malls, libraries, parks, workplaces, households, communities, cities and even information systems and cyberspace.

Image 17.1 The old and the new – both are legitimate sites for ethnography

Ethnographic accounts seek to be both descriptive and interpretive. Description is important because a high level of detail is essential. Interpretation is equally important because the ethnographer must determine the significance of what he or she observes. Ethnographic research typically employs three kinds of data collection methods: observation, interviews and documents, often employing all three methods in a single study. These in turn produce three kinds of data: quotations, descriptions and excerpts of documents. The aim of ethnographic research is to produce narrative descriptions that help to tell ‘the story’ (Hammersley, 1990). Ethnographic methods can help in the development of constructs, themes or variables, but ethnography is also used to test theory. Indeed no study, ethnographic or otherwise, can be conducted without recourse to theory whether scholarly or personal (Fetterman, 2010).

ETHNOGRAPHY OR OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH

One of the key decisions at an early stage is the extent to which the researcher is going to be a participant in the study, which can vary from complete immersion alongside those being observed, or complete detachment (or at least an attempt at detachment) with the role of spectator. Participation helps the researcher to develop an insider’s perspective on what is happening. However, the researcher must also observe what is happening (whilst reflecting on their own involvement and biases). The key to ethnographic research, then, is skilfully combining the role of participant and observer.

THE ORIGINS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

ETHNOGRAPHY

The origins of ethnography are often attributed to the pioneering fieldwork of Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. Published in 1914, in his seminal work, *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski devotes a whole section of the book to explaining the process of gathering data through meticulously documented observations and interviews. He explained that, to have a thorough understanding of a different culture, anthropologists must have daily contact with their informants and become immersed in the culture which they are studying. The goal, then, was to understand the 'native's point of view'. To achieve this, not only must the anthropologist collect data, there needs to be an emphasis on interpretation. The link between data collection and the writing of ethnographic monographs is meticulous field notes. According to Roldan (2002), Malinowski increased the validity of his ethnography by including in the text fieldwork data, information about the research process and theoretical assumptions.

Although its origins lie in the field of anthropology, ethnography was soon taken up by sociologists, a move pioneered by the Chicago School at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. The primary assumption for the Chicago School was that qualitative methodologies, especially those used in naturalistic observation (such as ethnography), were best suited for the study of urban, social phenomena. It was through the Chicago School that ethnography and symbolic interactionism became closely associated. The phrase symbolic interactionism was first coined in 1937 by Blumer (1969), although the approach to social analysis is largely credited to the work of George Hubert Mead during his time at the University of Chicago. Blumer (1969) argued that, in essence, humans act towards things (including fellow humans) according to subjectively attributed meanings which are interpreted reflexively and subjectively. The combination of ethnography and symbolic interactionism led to the writing of several classic texts such as W.F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943) and E. Goffman's *Asylums* (1961). Ironically, the teaching of fieldwork methods at the University of Chicago was limited, with ways of organizing ethnographic research being largely acquired 'on the hoof' (Shaffir, 1999).

In recent years, ethnography has witnessed great diversification with different approaches being adopted, guided by different epistemological concerns and ethnographic practice, including long-term in-depth studies, through to condensed fieldwork, consultancy work or participation in political struggles (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). There has also been a growing application of ethnography beyond anthropology and sociology into applied fields such as education, health and social policy. Sometimes associated with these more applied forms of ethnography have been moves towards collaborative research, stemming not just from a desire for engagement with practice, but also from an epistemological concern that ethnography has privileged the researcher – as the implied Narrator – over the Other, the object of the ethnographer's gaze. Hence, the accounts produced by researchers are viewed as constructions that reflect the presuppositions and the socio-historical conditions in which they were produced. Under the influence of various forms of antirealism such as constructivism (Guba, 1990) or poststructuralism (Denzin, 1990; Lather, 1991), claims for ethnographic accounts have become more sceptical. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, a postmodern turn in anthropology challenged anthropologists to question their own assumptions and write more reflexively. An example here is auto-ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997) which has been encouraged by postmodern theory to draw out the narrative of participant observation and relationships in the field through personal stories (of the researcher) as a reliable mode of expressing findings from the field (Coffey, 1999) and as a credible, adjunct data source (Possick, 2009).

Anderson (1999: 456), however, is sceptical of what he terms the nihilist excesses of the postmodern turn, its hyper-reflexivity, and its 'clever, self-absorbed and evasive writing', serving to undermine empirical ethnographic work. He does, though, claim that some of its more positive insights will eventually be absorbed into what he calls analytic ethnography, an empirical approach linked to ethnomethodological traditions. He is also optimistic about the future of ethnography, pointing to the growth of ethnographic research in the 1990s, within a broader range of academic disciplines. Hence, it is possible, for the first time, to talk about educational ethnography, medical ethnography, policy-oriented ethnography and even performance ethnography. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) also talk about the flowering of ethnographic ‘moments’ through which US social science has passed or is passing. Anderson (1999), however, sees this less as a succession of movements, but more of a diversification of ethnography. Indeed, ethnography remains a highly complex and contentious discursive field (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994) at the ‘intersections of communication, culture and identity’ (Berry, 2011: 169).

GUIDELINES FOR FIELDWORK

It is fieldwork that is the most defining characteristic of ethnographic research (Fetterman, 2010). While classic ethnography could involve from six months to two years or more in the field, modern ethnography can involve studies where the researcher visits a site for, say, a two-week period every few months or so during a study lasting two or three years. Fieldwork involves an outsider angling for insider knowledge. Hence, fieldworkers ride the lines between and across multiple boundaries, with the result that the journey can be emotionally uncomfortable or in the words of Irwin (2006: 160) ‘exceedingly edgy’. Doing fieldwork involves a number of stages including deciding what field or context in which to conduct the research, getting access and gaining acceptance within the field, conducting the fieldwork itself and leaving the field (getting out) in as ethical and acceptable a way as possible.

TOP TIP 17.1

If ethnographic studies can involve immersion in the field for long periods, even several years, you need to think carefully before you embark on this type of research. It might be appropriate, say, for someone undertaking research as part of their employment, or as part of a doctorate. Indeed, as we shall see in some of the case studies that follow, some have been implemented as part of a PhD. However, for those studying, say, at Masters level the long periods required would normally rule out this kind of research undertaking.

Selecting the field

The nature of the setting chosen for the study may be decided before the research problem has been fully resolved. In some studies, however, the collection of ethnographic data may itself help in the definition of the research problem. Data collection and analysis may also lead to the identification of new themes that require different and additional sites for study. Settings contain cases for study but the two are not necessarily synonymous. Hence, cases may be studied in a particular setting, but researchers may have to study aspects of a case across multiple settings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). For example, youth gangs could be studied in street settings, but a study might also need to explore their links with other outside groupings such as social workers and the police. How and why cases are chosen (sampled) will be determined by the kinds of criteria discussed in Chapter 9. So, given the qualitative and intensive nature of most ethnographic research, and the use of only a few sites, sampling design will be mostly based upon typical sites (Schneider, 2006a).

As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out, sampling decisions must also be taken within cases, particularly in relation to time, people and context. For time sampling, it is obvious that the researcher cannot be in the field for 24 hours a day; so some choices have to be made in terms of when to enter the field. In a factory setting, for example, this could be sampling during day shifts, evening shifts and night shifts. Time phases are also an issue. Schneider (2006a) recommends that, for applied ethnographic studies (for example, studies that evaluate projects or programmes) observations should continue through at least one cycle related to the research problem. So, a study of the effects of government funding on agency programmes might observe the impact through a complete budget year. Sampling within a case (for example a study within an organization) will also involve selecting among people, which could involve ensuring different categories, based on gender, race, educational qualifications or social class, were all represented in the study. Within a setting, people may act differently according to the context. So, for example, within the setting of a university, students may act differently depending on whether they are attending a lecture, studying in the library or socializing with friends. Sampling design, then, will have to take this into account.

Gaining access

Central to gaining access to a site is the attitude of gatekeepers who can help or hinder the research depending upon their views as to the validity of the research and its impact on the welfare of people they work with. Reeves (2010) distinguishes between formal and informal gatekeepers. In her study of sex offenders within a probation hostel, the main formal gatekeeper was the hostel manager and his immediate line manager within the Probation Service. As Reeves (2010) notes, she was fortunate in that she was able to make initial contact through a friend (her informal contact) who had worked with this manager. Duke (2002) supports this view, asserting that gaining access to sites is much easier when personal contacts can smooth the path and where the researcher is known to have some knowledge or experience of the area. Zaman (2008) for example, relates how he decided to undertake his research at the teaching hospital where he trained as a physician, using his identity as an ex-student to gain access. However, even once access has been negotiated, further informal gatekeepers also need to be approached before site members will fully participate in a study (Reeves, 2010).

It will certainly be easier to gain entry if the researcher has empathy with those being studied. This does not mean necessarily agreeing or disagreeing with them, but it does mean avoiding the adoption of judgemental attitudes. Patton (2002) suggests that a reciprocity model of gaining entry is valuable, where both researcher and participants come to see mutual advantages emerging from the observational process. This, of course, may be a pious hope. As Hall (2000) points out, especially when working with disadvantaged groups (for example street gangs), an outsider’s curiosity might be construed as objectionable and patronizing – the first few weeks of fieldwork can sometimes be a miserable experience for the researcher.

The issue of gender may be significant to gaining access. Gurney (2002) comments that being a female researcher in a male-dominated environment may aid not only formal but also informal access as women are regarded as ‘warmer’ and less threatening than men. Hence, gatekeepers may not demand the same level of assurances from women researchers prior to granting formal access. Conversely, women may find entry problematic because of a perceived lack of professionalism or credibility (Gurney, 2002). However, as Mulhall (2003) asserts, an effort can be made to rectify this position by dressing for the occasion, and deferring (within limits) to the authority and cultural expectations of gatekeepers.

TOP TIP 17.2

Negotiating access may take longer than you anticipate. As part of your research planning, make sure that you give yourself sufficient 'lead time' in setting up your observation.

Gaining informed consent

Informing people in the research setting of what you are doing, and eliciting their consent, is seen as good practice by most researchers. Diener and Crandall (1978) suggest that fully informed consent should include:

- Describing the overall purpose of the research.
- Telling the participants about their role in the study.
- Stating why they have been chosen.
- Explaining the procedures, including the amount of time required.
- Clearly stating the risks and discomforts.
- Stating that the participants may withdraw at any time.

OBTAINING INFORMED CONSENT

As we saw in Chapter 15 (recall Figure 15.1), getting participants to sign a consent form is also prudent. This, of course, implies that covert observation cannot be undertaken. Bailey (2007) argues that achieving a cooperative relationship with a group more than compensates for what is lost through reactivity (between researcher and those being researched). However, the impact of the researcher's presence and interactions needs to be reflected in field notes and analysis. Note that even after permission has been granted it can be withdrawn at any time and that this must be respected. Of course, there are often circumstances when informed consent is simply impractical. Burgess (1984) notes that in research in public settings (sports events, parents' evenings, church services, etc.) access cannot be negotiated with every participant.

Becoming invisible

The researcher may become 'invisible' due to the length of time they are involved in the project, by immersing themselves into the norms and behaviours of the group being studied, or simply by hiding the fact that they are researchers. Young researchers, for example, would have greater success in integrating themselves as workers/researchers in a fast food retail outlet than, say, researching the activities of a rambling club where membership tends to be much older. As Berg (2006) points out, however, there are reasons why invisibility is a danger. If, for example, you go 'undercover' to research, say, criminal activities within an organization, you need to ensure that you do not become implicated yourself! On the whole, though, invisibility means that participants cease to be consciously aware of the researcher's presence, and therefore act more naturally.

Building rapport

Rapport is concerned with 'getting there' and 'being there' and is often associated with themes such as empathy, immersion, participation, friendship, honesty, collaboration, trust and loyalty (Springwood and King, 2001). In the field, researchers seek to develop close interpersonal relationships with key informants based upon mutual respect and shared understandings. Berger (2001), for example, describes how she shared her personal stories with those engaged in her fieldwork studies, generating relationship formation and exchange between them. However, while this may appear simple at a surface level, in practice the achievement of rapport may be challenged where researchers find themselves having to hide their identities, or where their views and values clash with those they are researching. Westmarland (2001) for example, reports on her ethnographic study of the police where she witnessed a number of examples of police violence against an attempted suicide victim, a drug addict and others. As Reeves (2010) notes, while the researcher may be anxious to establish and maintain rapport in order to generate good quality data, respondents do not have these concerns. Hence, in her study of convicted criminals living in a probation hostel, even though respondents were comfortable with her presence, they continued to tell her half-truths, lies and stories in order to give her an image they wanted to portray. Achieving rapport then, does not necessarily lead to honest responses.

Handling identity – reflexive positioning

In undertaking participant observation one of the challenges is to maintain a balance between 'insider' and 'outsider' status. To gain a deep understanding of people's lives it is essential that the researcher gets not only physically but also emotionally close to them – but how then does the researcher maintain a professional 'distance'? Achieving this is often affected by issues such as the gender, race, social class and the education of the researcher compared to that of the people being researched. Burgess (1984) also adds that age can sometimes be an issue – is it practical for researchers of more advanced years to observe youth gangs, for example? As one set of researchers put it:

> The more one is like the participants in terms of culture, gender, race, socio-economic class and so on, the more it is assumed that access will be granted, meanings shared, and validity of findings assured. (Merriam et al., 2001: 406)

To remain an 'outsider' would be to fail to gain the kind of rapport that is needed to make this method a success. The participant observer, in a sense, needs to be both inside and outside the setting. Indeed, Merriam et al. (2001) argue that the boundaries between the two positions are not simple or clearly delineated. Being inside or outside is relative to a whole host of cultural and social characteristics and is a position that can shift over time. According to Hall (2000), the best the ethnographer can achieve is to negotiate a position in which one is in some way 'at home' and considered as 'one of us' without becoming completely immersed.

Positioning is a concept used in the analysis of narratives that allows researchers to explore how people make sense of themselves and construct their own identities (Possick, 2009). Using processes such as self-reflection, self-criticism and agency, participants can choose a position among the variety of positions available and/or generate new positions by performing narratives with the audience. One position is that of the autobiographical, an approach that seeks to acknowledge the effects of the researcher's personal and intellectual biography on all stages of research through the process of reflexivity (Hugill, 2012; Mickelson, 2011). According to Possick (2009) while many researchers engage in reflection, much remains unpublished or separate from the main data analysis. In cases of research on sensitive topics, where there are strong emotional reactions and ethical dangers, this self-censorship is particularly glaring. Possick (2009) urges that auto-biographical elements be included in the foreground of research not the background. This, then, is one aspect of positioning. The personal account includes thoughts and feelings about the informants, the physical elements in the field, relevant autobiographical events and a variety of 'unstructured musings about the research experience' (Possick, 2009: 862).

Getting out

While ethnographers have written quite extensively on entering a field of study and on developing rapport with participants, less is known about leaving the field (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). When to leave may have been planned early on in the project or it might result from the 'Things to do' portion of field notes getting ever smaller, or when fewer insights are emerging. Leaving the field of observation involves both the physical and emotional disengagement of the researcher. This is particularly the case if the observation has been conducted over a lengthy period of time and the researcher has developed empathy and commitment to the inhabitants. Prior to disengagement, the researcher should warn the community of members that this exit is imminent. The withdrawal is probably best handled in a series of stages. Rock (2001) agrees that quitting the field is never easy. Ethnographic research involves 'emotional enmeshment' (Possick, 2009: 868). For one thing, the researcher will have invested a considerable portion of themselves cultivating relationships and even friendships but these are now to be shed.

> The ethnographer who courted others, who had seemingly limitless time to listen, is now revealed as a person who can no longer be bothered and is in a hurry to be off. (Rock, 2001: 36)

To make matters worse, the ethnographer is off to expose what has been learned to the whole world. No wonder people can feel *used*. In leaving the field, you might like to consider paying attention to the following elements:

- Make the fact that you will leave the field explicit at the start (that is, your project has a finite length)
- Indicate the date of your leaving several weeks before the event so there are no surprises
- Remind respondents of your leaving date several days before it arrives
- Hold a leaving 'event' to celebrate the project (but also remind others of your imminent departure)
- Organize emotional support for yourself (see next)

TOP TIP 17.3

GRAY ON INSIDER PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

If undertaking insider participant research (especially if it is covert), consider using either your supervisor or another confidante as an adviser or 'critical friend'. Use this person to discuss any problems you may be having, particularly in maintaining your sense of detachment and objectivity. You may also want to discuss any issues or incidents that raise ethical considerations.

CASE STUDY 17.1

Ethnography, reciprocity and getting too close?

Ortiz (2004) describes an ethnographic study in which he researched the isolated world of the wives of professional athletes using sequential interviewing, participant observation, personal documents and print media accounts. He travelled thousands of miles across the USA during the process. As a result

> I necessarily minimized involvement in other areas of my personal life. As a result, their world was my world for more than three years. (p. 470)

His impression management style was one of 'muted masculinity', offered in direct contrast to the hegemonic masculinity so common in the sports world. Hence, he became regarded as a man of a 'different kind' by many of the women whose lives were socially isolated. The establishment of reciprocity in his collaborative relationship with the women included babysitting, hanging curtains, running errands, shopping with them and even house-hunting. Over time, this closeness generated data that included secrets, gossip and occupationally relevant information (about their husbands).

Through sequential interviewing, critical topics were constantly emerging, but each new tantalizing piece of information became critical data that he felt he had to follow up with more interviews. Thus he got himself into an endless cycle of compulsive data collection. Even when he terminated a relationship he agreed to keep in touch with the respondent. He discovered, however, that staying in touch served to open up a Pandora's box of new information. The therapeutic nature of the interview sessions also seemed to act as an added incentive for the wives to stay in touch with the researcher. Hence, although he knew he needed to make an effort to distance himself 'constant reminders of the wives and their marriages continued to pull me back into their isolated world' (Ortiz, 2004: 479). He finally arrived at a point where he began to feel emotionally exhausted and trapped and terminated contact. Although this process left him with feelings of guilt, he concludes that 'going native' is not always a mistake, especially if collaborative relationships are mutually beneficial.

ACTIVITY 17.1

How does Ortiz (2004) justify his 'compulsive data collection'? Can/should the researcher be both an ethnographer and an informal therapist? What steps should be taken to maintain ethical boundaries?

The field as a construction

In the previous section we explored fieldwork from a practical perspective, the researcher simply entering the field with an 'open mind', similar to Glaser and Strauss's (1968) notion of fieldwork as a 'clean slate' where the researcher is free of prior experience. However, as Funder (2005) warns, this notion ignores the degree to which we are socialized and institutionalized into adopting ways of structuring and labelling the world we explore. For example, talking about the field of environment and development, we talk of *sustainable* resource management practices and *unsustainable*, so establishing categories of people who live sustainably or unsustainably.

> This framing of the world through our pre-conceived ontologies often takes place through dichotomies: When addressing the environment and development problems, we frequently

> approach the world as divided into the poor and the wealthy, the rural and the urban, the community and the state, the traditional and modern, the natural and the degraded. Although we may attempt to overcome some such dualisms, they are powerful notions that to a large extent provide our only means of negotiating the world. (Funder, 2005: 2)

This Western pattern of knowledge production now permeates Asian societies as well where, in some ways, Western science came to structure and to some extent even create Asian societies, through the process of giving names to (classifying) ethnic groups, and by drawing maps (creating national boundaries). In terms of knowledge, 'modern' methods of resource management (i.e. Western) were privileged above 'traditional' methods. Funder (2005) describes his ethnographic study of a coastal zone management project in Thailand where he first sought to identify community members to interview, dividing them into 'participants' and 'non-participants' and subsequently developing new categories of 'fishermen' and 'non-fishermen', 'Buddhist' and 'Muslim' households. He reflects that this categorization rested on his own embedded notion of communities as essentially heterogeneous, stratified entities, steeped in struggles over control of natural resources. However, this underlying conflict perspective was one into which he had been socialized through many years of interaction with teachers and peers at his 'left-leaning' university. Similarly, Brunt (2001) raises problematically the notion of community. Communities consist of people who consider themselves to be part of the same history or destiny, but this notion is based on symbols and attitudes, not necessarily concrete urban neighbourhoods or villages. Hence, ethnographers should not necessarily go off in search of a physical community. People have multiple identities and may regard themselves as members of multiple communities irrespective of where they work or live.

GATHERING DATA: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND FIELD NOTES

Participant observation involves not only gaining access to the field and building rapport, it also means producing written accounts and descriptions of what was observed. A vital stage in this process is the production of field notes, that is, writings that are produced in close proximity to the field. Proximity may mean geographical closeness, but more important is temporal proximity, the fact that field notes are written more or less *contemporaneously* with the events, experiences and interactions they describe (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2001). As representations of what they purport to represent, field notes are necessarily *selective*. The ethnographer writes about what he or she thinks is important, omitting what appears to be less significant. Hence, field notes are never a complete record of what happened (Atkinson, 1992). As Emerson et al. (2001) comment, there are considerable differences between what different ethnographers write about and the role of field notes in their research. For some ethnographers, field notes both record what they observe and also record their own actions, questions and reflections. Others, however, keep a distinct separation between field notes as recordings (data) and their own reactions and interpretations.

FIELD NOTES

Emerson et al. (2001) distinguish between several types of field notes that vary in their purpose and detail. *Mental notes*, for example, are a conscious attempt to recall features such as the physical character of a place, who said what to whom, who moved to where (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). These may lead to *jotted notes*, the commitment to writing key words and phrases overheard while the ethnographer is in or at least very close to the field. These jotted notes may be used later as memory joggers when it comes to constructing a more detailed account. The timing and openness of making jotted notes will depend on the relationship between the researcher and his or her subjects. Fieldworkers may need to be sensitive when it comes to jotting down notes on issues that subjects might regard as confidential or embarrassing.

An important and contested issue is the place of the ethnographer's personal feelings within field notes. In the past, ethnographers have tended to confine descriptions of their personal feelings, reactions and anxieties to personal journals and diaries (see below). From the 1960s, however, most sociological ethnographers have supported the inclusion of personal accounts within core field notes (Emerson et al., 2001). Recording one's emotions during a research project enables the ethnographer to read through field notes and to identify any biases and prejudices that may have crept in, as well as noticing changing views and perspectives over time (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). At its most extreme form, in auto-ethnography, the researcher seeks to integrate their private and social experiences through personal introspection, their own 'lived emotional experience' of events and interactions (Ellis, 1991: 25). It is a form of ethnography where the researcher radically alters their positioning by becoming a research subject (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Before their use in the report writing process, field notes need to be revised and edited, partly to ensure that extraneous elements are excluded and also that anonymity of those within the account is preserved. But they are also edited to ensure that they are more comprehensible to a wider audience (particularly when field notes are later incorporated into finished texts). Hence, context and background may be added to events (Emerson et al., 2001). Other ethnographers, however, prefer to retain the sanctity of the original field notes and will therefore avoid or minimize these editorial changes. Ethnographers, then, integrate field notes into finished accounts in different ways. What Emerson et al. (2001) call an excerpt strategy, field notes are separated from commentary and interpretation by indenting or using italics; field notes, then, are offered as fragments of 'evidence' composed close to the events themselves. An alternative approach is to weave together the field notes and the interpretation, what Emerson et al. (2001) call an integrative strategy. In this style, field notes and ideas merge into a flowing prose written with 'a single authorial voice' (Emerson et al., 2001: 364). This voice, however, is not uniform. It contains within it the multiple voices of local people and the divergent views arising from their different roles and positions.

Diaries are similar to field notes, but are, naturally, structured by date and can be in a written format or oral (audio recorded). In written format they may include words but also photographs or diagrams. As Hall (2008) points out, there is no standard format for diaries. They can be used by the researcher to record events as well as their own personal reflections, or given to respondents to log events in their lives. For example, a diary could be given to a newly qualified teacher so they can keep a record of their feelings, critical incidents and introspective reflections on their own experience as they develop their professional practice (Bailey, 1983). Given that such diaries will be read by others (for example fellow practitioners or researchers) it is important ethically that this lack of privacy is made explicit at the start (Hall, 2008). The following case study provides an example of an ethnographic diary kept by a researcher investigating opportunities for the Irish dairy industry in Indonesia and Vietnam by undertaking visits to people's homes. Note both the diary entries and also the analytic 'insights' as well as the impact that photographs add to the piece.

ACTIVITY 17.2

Examine Case Study 17.2. Imagine the diary without the presence of the photograph, then ask yourself what the photograph adds to the account. Does the use of photographs add further ethical issues to ethnographic reporting?

CASE STUDY 17.2

Example of an ethnographic diary

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	*Wednesday March 21 – Jakarta* Home Visit 1 - Sifa Age 12 After a hair raising 45 minute journey by Ojek through the streets and side streets of Jakarta we arrive at our first home visit in the West of the city. Sifa is a 12-year-old school girl who lives with her family (Mum, Dad and two siblings). It soon becomes apparent that neither Mum and Dad are home but this is just a typical day. Sifa comes home from school everyday around 12.30 and is the head of the household while her parents are at work. Her own day started at 5.30am with morning prayers and she was in school from 6.30am. The first thing that you notice about Sifa's home is how little furniture there is – in fact there is virtually none. In the main living room we sit on the floor with Sifa and discuss her day and what she typically eats. Stay Slim Surprisingly, for a girl who is so slight, Sifa reveals one of her main dietary concerns is not to put on weight! She wants to stay slim and this does influence her attitude to dairy foods. Sifa tries not to drink too much milk because "milk makes you fat". Despite Sifa's weight concerns she does tell us one of her favourite snacks in school is Nestle's Bear Brand. A milk drink that Sifa regularly drinks to give her energy.
	INSIGHT *Female teenagers in Indonesia are very weight conscious and believe milk is fattening. Female teenagers believe one of the main benefits of dairy products is that they 'fill you up' and give you energy during what are very long days.*
The report in its entirety can be viewed at: http://www.bordbia.ie/eventsnews/ConferencePresentations/2012/DairyIndustrySeminar/Ethnographic%20Visits%20Diary%20Report%20-%20Rory%20McDonnell,%20Bord%20Bia.pdf	

Figure 17.1

Source: King, H. (2012) *Indonesia and Vietnam: An Ethnographic Study Exploring the Consumer Landscape and Opportunities for the Irish Dairy Industry*. Bord Bia: Dublin.

GATHERING DATA: INTERVIEWING

Ethnographic interviewing can be distinguished from other forms of interviewing in that it encourages interviewees to shape the questions being asked and possibly even the focus of the study, resulting in data being a co-production between interviewer and interviewee (Heyl, 2001). Rubin and Rubin (2005: 4) refer to this as a conversation in which the interviewer gently guides a ‘conversational partner’. The key is a concern with the meanings of actions and events to the interview subjects themselves. Kvale (1996) offers two alternative metaphors of the research interviewer: one as a *miner* and the other as a *traveller*. The miner gathers up objective data that are ‘out there’ ready to be discovered and culled. For the traveller, the interview is a journey from which stories will emerge, stemming from conversations the researcher will have along the way. The route may be planned ahead of time, but it will inevitably take unexpected twists and turns. What the traveller elicits in new knowledge depends on his/her ability to connect with people and to build relationships.

The origins of ethnographic interviewing go back to the Chicago School of sociology in the 1920s and the 1930s and particularly to the work of Robert Park and his call for graduate students to get out into the city and ‘get the seat of your pants dirty in real research’ (Bulmer, 1984: 97). What researchers need to know is what goes on behind the faces of other human beings, the personal secrets that the researcher has to discover to understand the world in which people live. The Chicago School’s pioneering of informal interviews and observational techniques stood in sharp contrast to the large scale standard surveys being used by sociologists at the time (Heyl, 2001). Life history fits within this tradition because of its focus on the meanings the interviewees give to their life experiences and circumstances. The data that emerge can be analysed only by paying attention to *what* is said, *how* it is said and by showing ways in which the how and why are interrelated (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

Following what became known as the linguistic, postmodern turn in the 1980s and 1990s, many feminists and multicultural researchers found ethnographic interviewing particularly attractive because they allowed for the gathering of data in relationships based upon empathy and egalitarianism (Stacey, 1988), providing opportunities to hear people’s

Image 17.3 Data gathering in the field

> ideas, memories and interpretations in their own words, to hear differences among people and the meanings they construct, and to forge connection over time to the interviewees. (Heyl, 2001: 374)

Fine (1994) takes this a stage further, suggesting that researchers and informants should take time to check out what is, and is not, happening between them including whose story is being told and with what interpretation. As we will note in Case Study 17.5 however, Stacey's personal experiences have led her to call into question this equality, given the researcher's freedom to exit the world they are researching.

So, what does all this mean in practice? In conducting ethnographic interviewing Heyl (2001) recommends that the interviewer should:

ETHICS, INTERVIEWS, FIELD NOTES

- Listen well and respectfully, developing an ethical engagement with participants
- Acquire a self-awareness of his/her own role in the construction of meaning within the interview process
- Be aware of the ways in which both the ongoing relationship and broader social contexts affect participants, the interview process and potential outcomes
- Recognize that what emerges from the interview process is only partial knowledge

GATHERING DATA: DIGITAL MEDIA

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

So far we have looked at quite traditional approaches of gathering data in ethnography – observation and interviews – but, of course, we now have at our disposal advanced, technological media that are ideal for data collection and interacting with social worlds. These include media for capturing images such as digital cameras and video recorders, and include the use of smart phones since these also contain digital recording facilities. Proponents of visual-based methods argue that complex experiences cannot be captured by textual interpretations alone (Pink, 2006) and help to provide a comprehensive and enriching exploration of the social worlds of both researcher and participants (Lenette and Boddy, 2013). Ruby (2007) describes an ethnographic study of Oak Park, an upper-middle class suburb of Chicago renowned for its success in creating and maintaining diversity. Rather than produce a book, Ruby created an interactive and nonlinear work with video clips, still photographs and text, and in one case, a 30-minute video on DVD. The work was reflexive in that the subject of his research was his hometown.

ON THE WEB 17.1

To see the Chicago ethnographic study go to the following link and type Oak Park in the search box.

http://www.der.org/

At the Documentary Educational Resources you will also see many other examples of ethnographic film making and recording.

However, it is not just ethnographers who make use of digital media. For example, giving participants digital cameras to take photographs of their daily working lives, Warren (2012) describes how people are able to document, through this visual medium, 'how people work here' – what is referred to as 'photo voice'. The researcher then discusses the photographs with the participant. Ethnographic research does only use digital media to record the field, digital media are themselves becoming a field of study. In other words, ethnographers have become increasingly interested in digital media such as blogs, internet forums and social media sites and the ways in which people use and interact through and within them (McKie and Ryan, 2012).

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnographic research faces particular challenges when it comes to conducting research ethically. As Chapter 4 sought to demonstrate, the benefits of research should outweigh the potential harm. Yet, as Murphy and Dingwall (2001) point out, one of the difficulties in ethnography is that risks are likely to be indirect and also open to interpretation. Research participants may experience anxiety, stress, damage to self-esteem and feelings of guilt or a loss of friendship when ethnographers withdraw from a study (as Case Study 17.3, below, shows). One of the most significant differences between ethnography and, say, risk in pure science, is temporal positioning. In experimental science, the risk of harm is largely concentrated in the experiment itself. In ethnography, however, the greatest risk arises at the time of publication (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Research participants may feel wounded or offended by published ethnographic material, often in ways that were unanticipated by the ethnographer (Ellis, 1995). Ethnography has particular problems when it comes to guaranteeing anonymity. As Murphy and Dingwall (2001) state, ethnographic studies often involve a single setting or a very small number of settings; field notes and interview transcripts invariably record sufficient detail to make participants identifiable.

INFORMED CONSENT: IRB

While IRBs are almost without exception strict when it comes to the need for the signing of consent forms, in ethnographic studies this is not always feasible, since researchers have no control over who enters the field of observation. This is further complicated by the emergent nature of ethnographic research design where the objectives and subjects of the research may not be fully formed at the start. Fassin (2006) is critical of the role of IRBs and particularly their regulation of ethnographic research, claiming that their rules are more applicable to biomedical experiments than to social science. According to Fassin (2006), their restrictions reduce the quality of research and hence the potential of research for social utility. For example, in researching people dying of AIDS in a South African hospital, discussing the purpose of his research with someone lying on a stretcher did not seem feasible, let alone humane. Although Ellis (2007) agrees that the rules of IRBs are helpful, she is critical, arguing that their rules are grounded on the premise that research is being done on strangers. This is often not the case in ethnography. The following case study reveals a poignant story of how the publication of a researcher's book led to anger and rupture between her and the community she was reporting.

CASE STUDY 17.3

Challenges in ethnographic research

Carolyn Ellis relates her experiences in conducting an ethnographic study in a place she calls Fishneck, a small US community about 10 miles from the nearest town and a world she describes as one of oyster shells, fish plants, trailers, crab pots, extended families, reported violence and speech that combines a rural dialect and old English provincialisms. On many visits from 1972 up until 1986 she spent much of her time with one extended family – two parents and 13 children and their immediate families and in-laws. She was honest with them that she was a researcher, but over time this was largely forgotten by the community. As Ellis (1995: 71) comments: ‘Who thought about research when there were funerals to go to, floods to escape, killings to be straightened out, sick babies to tend, welfare checks that didn’t arrive on time, and doctors (always doctors) to visit?’ She saw herself as a ‘realist’ ethnographer, seeking to describe the community ‘as it was’. In doing so, she kept out of the story, especially events that might reflect badly on herself such as practices that allowed her to get a ‘scoop’ while pretending to maintain distance. When her book, *Fisher Folk* (1986) was published, she didn’t acknowledge to the Fishneckers that there was a book coming out and gave little thought to the Fishneckers responding to it. In this she was entirely wrong.

Ellis was not the only person researching Fishneck. Another was a sociologist from a nearby college who she calls Professor Jack. Three years after its publication, she is told that Professor Jack has got hold of a copy of her book, hated it, and had read portions of it to Fishneckers who themselves were angry about its contents (and with Ellis). She decided to make a return visit, and was shocked by her reception. There are accusations that she made a million dollars from the book (in fact she made nothing), and despite using pseudonyms, people were able to identify each other. As one person comments: ‘That was a lot of nonsense you wrote. I know you was writin’ ‘bout me’. Flicking through the book, Ellis reflected, shamefully, that she had written about under-age sexual impropriety and portrayed their ignorance of contraception and their lack of literacy. Some people now refused to talk to her, regarding their friendship as over.

Ellis reflected on her return to the field and was able to make three recommendations for ethnographers:

- Researchers should put more of themselves into the research, showing themselves in dialogue and tell more stories about their experiences in the community. This would counter the tendency of social researchers to privilege what they say about others over what others say about themselves.
- Researchers should pay more attention to emotional responses of themselves and those they research while they are in field settings and while they write.
- Researchers should take care when using grounded theory to force data into patterns that may not be there. Although the patterns that emerged had explanatory value, they presented life as lived more simply than day-to-day experiences warranted.

Ellis concludes by seeing the emerging narrative as not one of difference between researcher and her subjects, but one of connectedness between Fishneckers and herself. Indeed, having friends helped ward off feelings of being ‘the lone fieldworker in a distant land’ (Ellis, 2007: 9). She believes that this might help her to call on the ethics of care, empathy, personal relationships and community and to embrace personal accountability to assess her knowledge claims. The problem was not one of being a friend. It was not living up to the obligations of friendship (Ellis, 2007).

Source: Adapted from Ellis: 1995, 2007

ACTIVITY 17.3

Following reflections on her experience, to what extent would it be accurate to call Ellis a 'realist' ethnographer? What are the implications of this discussion for the ethics of ethnographic practice?

TOP TIP 17.4

If conducting research which has to be approved by an IRB, be aware that ethnographic research may prove a challenge in terms of getting ethical approval. Be cautious about making assurances of gaining consent and achieving reciprocity as these might prove difficult to keep.

Issues of power also come into play. Some postmodernists, for example, have rejected the researcher's right to interpret experience other than their own – hence, the growth of auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography, however, does not escape ethical problems since it presents the actions of others from the author's perspective. Ellis (2007) also points out that when writing about oneself, we also write about others and so run the risk of these people becoming recognizable to readers. Murphy and Dingwall (2001) ask: what is the basis of the auto-ethnographer's authority to represent others, and should the permission of these others be sought? A number of practical steps are suggested that may increase the likelihood that ethnographic research will adhere to ethical codes, namely:

- Remove identifying information about respondents at the earliest opportunity
- Use pseudonyms for respondents (recognizing that for small scale communities or settings, these may not be effective)
- Reduce or eliminate non-relevant details about the setting and individuals (to reduce the danger of anonymity being breached)
- Consider undertaking ethnographical research in collaboration with research subjects
- Separate out the data from the researcher's interpretations so that the nature of this interpretation is open to scrutiny by others
- Consider putting more of the researcher's own presence into the research, including own emotional responses (i.e., the ethnographic self)

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SELF

Conventional ethnography has emphasized the *other* lives that are being observed, analysed or produced (Coffey, 1999), the ethnographer serving as a biographer of others. However, the ethnographer is simultaneously involved in biographical work of their own because they are part of, and interacting with, the field setting. Hence, it is important to recognize the reflexive nature of social research, that is, we are part of the social world that we study (Allen, 1997). As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out, this is not a methodological commitment – it is an existential fact. So, rather than attempting to eliminate the effects of the researcher, we should set about understanding them. Fieldwork, then, cannot be accomplished without attention to the roles of the researcher including their social roles and relationships and how the identity of the researcher is constructed and recast during the course of the fieldwork (Coffey, 1999). The self is not so much complete and rounded as partial and multiple which has implications for how the self interconnects with others in the field. In the end, the choice is probably not between immersion or not, but a recognition that the self is the product of sets of complex negotiations, influenced by social norms and expectations of others in the field.

Shaffir (1999) criticizes the formulaic accounts of field research prior to the 1970s with ethnographers subsequently starting to deviate from the stance that the researcher can adopt a value-free position. The façade, no matter how neatly construed, prevents the researcher from examining his or her own cultural assumptions and also from analysing the personal experiences that inevitably shape research processes and outcomes. Hence, researchers began to pay attention to their own social and emotional experiences including

> the anxieties and frustrations, the exhilaration and pride in achievement, as well as the disappointments and failures. Such disclosures would provide a richer and more detailed insight into the world of research. (Shaffir, 1999: 680)

Yet the degree to which the researcher places him or herself within the ethnographic 'story' is open to debate. Furthermore, while some support the value of immersion within the field, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) sound a note of caution, arguing for the importance of intellectual distance in order for the researcher to conduct analytical work. But openness and honesty and worthy goals are not necessarily easy to achieve as Case Study 17.4 shows.

CASE STUDY 17.4

The challenges of 'getting in'

Shaffir (1999) relates how ethnographic research requires some measure of role playing and acting involving the presentation of particular images of one's self. This kind of self-presentation cannot be calculated completely in advance but often evolves during the research process. Shaffir describes his ethnographic study among a group of Hasidim Jews. He was honest in telling them that he was a sociologist and did not pretend that he wanted to become a Hasid. However, he gradually discovered that deception was nonetheless inherent in the ethnographic encounter. For example, he began to wear the black felt yarmulke (skullcap) and donned tefillin (small leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah) when attending morning prayer services. But this was not complete dissimulation because he genuinely found himself being drawn to this community, impressed by their warmth and friendliness. So he was not a completely calculating observer. He was that and more – his self-presentation being influenced by both academic and personal considerations. Yet he was always an outsider, and recognized by the community as one. It is important to recognize that there is a boundary which it is not possible (despite sometimes personal wishes) to cross. Whereas previously he thought of this barrier as reflecting his lack of research skills, he has now come to accept it.

Source: Adapted from Shaffir, 1999

ACTIVITY 17.4

Shaffir reflects on his self-identity within his chosen setting. How much of these reflections do you think should go into his ethnographic account?

FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY

Feminist ethnography is one of the feminist research methodologies (recall Chapter 2) and is, in fact, considered by some to be particularly appropriate to feminist research (Klein, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Feminist research is research carried out *for* women (Webb, 1993), to confront women's oppression, which can only be addressed if power differentials between researchers and the researched are broken down. What makes ethnography feminist is its explicit concern with reflexivity and the social positioning of the researcher in relation to research subjects. Reflexivity and self-examination are both important values in feminist research (Huisman, 2008; McNamara, 2009), as is the idea of reciprocity – researchers and participants are equal and both should benefit from the research. However, there are a wide range of perspectives within feminist methodology as well as tensions and divisions. As Williams (1993) warns, feminist ethnography is diverse in respect of both topic and method, indicating ontological and epistemological differences.