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Ethnography: A Synopsis

From G. Scott & R. Garner (2013). *Doing Qualitative Research*. Boston: Pearson, pp.111-124.

OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we provide an informal introduction to **ethnography**, a complex and multifaceted methodology, largely but not exclusively qualitative in nature, with a long and rich history in the social and behavioral sciences. Ethnography is a *scientific and artistic* approach to studying human societies, and it resembles the ordinary person's self-reflexive and systematic approaches to learning about the world around them, particularly when confronted with a new cultural experience. Following the informal introduction, we present some of the core elements of the "ethnographic imagination" (Willis 2000), the specific tenets that distinguish this logic of inquiry from others discussed in this book.

AN EXAMPLE—IN SEARCH OF RESPECT: SELLING CRACK IN EL BARRIO

Philippe Bourgeois lived for three and a half years in East Harlem in order to document and understand the local microcosm of crack users and dealers who live in a poor and marginalized community. In his book *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, Bourgeois boils down hours of interviews and observations into a multi-dimensional and complex portrait of men and women coping with desperate conditions. Violence, incarceration, misogyny, heartbreak, hopes, and betrayals are elements of the story, not only in the narratives about individuals but also in the depiction of a culture as a whole.

Bourgeois didn't just drop into the neighborhood for a few days to interview passersby or take a peek into bars and crack houses, and then return quickly to a safe, orderly middle-class world. He immersed himself (and his wife and child) for a long time in the "other country" at the end of a short subway ride. His conclusions are based on months of fieldwork, reported in extensive quotes from interviews and conversations with people he came to know well, and documented by descriptions of recurrent actions and situations that he saw and recorded. The story he tells does not have a Hollywood ending nor does it offer simple conclusions and

optimistic “problem-solving” interventions. He probes “the human condition” in one specific context, writing a dialogue between the voices of the people he met and his own understanding of their conditions.

Another edgy, high-risk ethnography is Greg Scott’s “It’s a Sucker’s Outfit: How Urban Gangs Enable and Impede the Reintegration of Ex-Convicts” (2004). Scott not only describes the setting, actions, and words of the participants in a vivid and carefully documented way; he also systematically relates his data to an analysis of incarceration and the gang as an organization. Few social scientists are as prepared to take risks as Bourgeois and Scott, but ethnography is always a powerful, intense, and time-consuming design. Understanding the culture of others requires preparation, systematic ways of recording and producing data, reflexive choices in the writing, and a sociological imagination to create a coherent, insightful account.

AN EXAMPLE—LIQUIDATED: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF WALL STREET

Only a few miles away from the fieldwork site where Bourgeois lived—a short ride on the New York subway—Karen Ho found a job in investment banking and entered the world of Wall Street as an ethnographer to capture its corporate culture, a system of values and behaviors based on a sustaining belief in smartness, exploitive hours of detail-oriented work for the young analysts, absolute job insecurity, and the worldview that risk, impermanence, and the single-minded pursuit of money should become the sole principles of global society. Like Bourgeois, Ho immersed herself with no holds barred in an extreme setting (Ho 2009).

ETHNOGRAPHY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

In some sense, everyone is an ethnographer. Even the most ordinary life ushers in a parade of ethnographic projects. As we encounter new and sometimes strange situations, we adopt an ethnographer mind-set and course of action, although we rarely think of ourselves as ethnographers. Our most ethnographic endeavors stem from major transitions or dislocations, such as changing residence, traveling, starting a new job, being hospitalized for a long period, beginning a residential drug or alcohol treatment, moving in with a lover or spouse or stranger, or getting folded into a new circle of friends. At these junctures, we adopt the ways and means of the “professional stranger”; we approach life as an ethnographer approaches a research setting. But what does this mean?

Literally, “ethnography” means “writing people” (graph = to write/depict; ethno = people). This definition is dense with meaning and implications. Ethnography is the art and craft of writing people. Performing ethnography successfully at the professional level demands a combination of science, artistic sensibility, and vocational skill and training. It is part science, part aesthetic creation, and part craft. In this chapter and in Part III “Focus on Ethnography,” we offer insight into a complex methodology with a long and storied history in the social and behavioral sciences.

Professional Strangeness

Ethnographers set out to study culture. More specifically, they seek to systematically investigate and then accurately represent (through their prose and/or pictures and/or films, etc.) the culture with an **emic**, or “inside-out” perspective. This contrasts with other forms of doing sociological research on groups or communities or organizations, where the researcher obviously assumes an “outside-in” (**etic**) vista and represents the issue or group from an outsider’s perspective.

Ethnographers strive to understand a given culture on its own terms, and on the terms of the people who occupy it, dwell within it, and produce and reproduce it on a daily basis. They “write people” from a perspective as observers who participate to some extent in the lives of the people about whom they write.

The discipline of anthropology gave rise to ethnographic research but does not enjoy a monopoly of this versatile methodology. In classic anthropological studies, the ethnographer examined a primitive tribe in a foreign country, a tribe marked by sociocultural and geographic isolation (an erstwhile “fact” debated hotly in retrospect). Such “pristine” and self-contained cultures hardly exist these days, if they ever really did, and ethnographic studies in sociology are increasingly domestic. Contemporary ethnographers are just as likely to be studying “cultures within cultures” as they are to be studying indigenous cultures in some other land. Today, ethnographers come from many different disciplinary backgrounds—sociology, anthropology, economics, medicine, law, communications, international studies, American studies, and private-sphere commercial domains such as marketing/advertising and new product research and development. Although each discipline has its own standards and conventions for doing this kind of research, they share a common concern for “the cultural.”

The ethnographer begins her study (which may mark a new phase of her life or serve as a rite of passage) when she assumes the status of a “professional stranger” (Agar 1986). Over the course of her time in an unfamiliar place, she gradually develops an insider’s perspective. Hardly ever does the ethnographer “go native,” or become a full-fledged member of whichever society she’s studying. Instead, she retains “critical distance,” which ebbs and flows depending upon time and circumstance. In fact, it’s almost impossible for the researcher to “go native.” This contrasts with the popular ethnographies we all perform as we encounter life-changing transitions. Most of us want to become a full-fledged member of the culture and society into which we have moved intentionally.

Solving Puzzles in Reverse

Ethnography at the professional and lay levels revolves around solving the problem of culture. Think of culture as a completed jigsaw puzzle bearing an illustration of some sort. Let’s assume this particular jigsaw puzzle has 10,000 pieces; it’s complicated. But unlike a real puzzle, the picture we are striving to assemble is not shown on the box. As in everyday life, you must begin to assemble the puzzle, piece by piece, through trial and error, and as you slowly develop some idea of what the big picture looks like, you begin making decisions about how to put it together. However, culture is more complicated than a static illustration. Each of the 10,000 individual pieces continually changes its shape, and the total number of pieces keeps changing—increasing and decreasing without warning. And even more problematic is that the ultimate illustration also keeps changing because in the end the illustration you create is but one of many that could have been created.

In your daily life you don’t think about the culture in which you live. Nor do you spend much time trying to visualize the culture *in toto*, writ large. That’s because you don’t have to. One of the greatest privileges in life, arguably, is the freedom from having to figure out what your culture consists of, what it “looks like,” and how to operate fluently within it. Familiarity breeds “functional ignorance” in many respects. The more familiar with your culture you become, the less you will notice or see it, and the less capable of explaining it you will be. Ignorance of one’s own culture is a grand luxury, for it derives from many years’ worth of assimilated, embodied, rarely-if-ever challenged knowledge about oneself and one’s place in the world.

When you find yourself in a new and foreign situation, you experience not only fear, trepidation, and anxiety but also a sense of excitement and thrill, and these contradictory feelings

result from your being culturally disembodied. You have yet to embody the knowledge and skill necessary to function as a competent cultural actor. In short, you're an alien. Every day ushers in numerous problems that need solving. Because you have spent so many years participating and observing your own life, you know what many of these "problems" will be: feeling "at home" in your new residence; moving through the new neighborhood in which you now live; obtaining a sufficient supply of satisfactory-tasting food; getting to work or school; meeting and greeting strangers and then negotiating your way into more intense relations with them (e.g., friendship). During these moments in your life you pay very close attention to the little things—to the things people do, the words they say, the gestures they make, and how they carry themselves in public. You study the environment around you, and you try to make sense of things—you try to discern patterns in how people behave as individuals and in groups.

You do all of this in an effort to figure out what's going on, to estimate what all of these details add up to, how they are a product of and also express the "bigger picture" of life in your new community. If, say, you're living and going to school in a new city or town, you cannot get to know the entire community, the whole place. So you focus your efforts of knowing on the immediate circumstances, contexts, and problems. A relatively narrow frame of reference guides what you do, where you go, decisions you make, actions you take or don't take, and so forth. Your hope is that by becoming acclimated to this small sector of the larger community, you will become a competent member of the broader setting/scene/population as well. And if you competently master the local lived experience, chances are you will succeed in the eyes of the "host" society of which the local scene is one of many parts.

At some point down the road the adventure will end. You may well still be living in this place that used to seem foreign to you, but to some extent the thrill (and the need for) of concerted discovery is gone. You no longer tap into that higher level of consciousness that reflects on the rationale or strategy behind your actions or the actions of others. Rather than asking "how do I live here" while simultaneously living there, you simply live. Living in this once-foreign place has become second nature to you. As a member of the scene, even if some or many still consider you to be an outsider of sorts, you embody the practices, values, and expressions of the setting—you fit in. No longer do you think about daily life as a series of puzzles. Moreover, it's very likely that you have come to believe that how you now do things is the *only* way you could be doing them. But that isn't true.

Over time, you have participated observantly in your own life; you necessarily have been immersed in your own life (this may seem obvious, but it's not), and you have sought answers to pressing questions about your navigation through the world. Through trial and error, you have developed solutions to a good many of the problems you face. And the solutions have synched so well with the lives of others with whom you must interact that they have come to seem "natural." But they are anything but natural. You have developed them through social, economic, political, and cultural interaction with others. In short, you have constructed your life ethnographically. You have written yourself.

One of sociology's greatest thinkers, Everett Hughes, wrote extensively about the similarities between ethnography and everyday life. For him, the two orientations had more in common than not. In both domains one's success boils down to the capacity to assimilate information and move forward by advancing educated guesses regarding what to do next. Just as learning to live successfully and happily isn't easy, neither is learning to ethnography:

The problem of learning to be a field observer is like the problem of learning to live in society. It is the problem of making enough good guesses from previous experience so

that one can get into a social situation in which to get more knowledge and experience to enable him to make more good guesses to get into a better situation, ad infinitum. (Everett Hughes in Junker 1960: xiii)

The point here is that ethnography is something we do every day. But our lay version is less systematic, more taken-for-granted, and less reflexive (or critically contemplated) than the professional version. Producing a good ethnography means learning the art and craft of knowing, thinking about the logic of reaching conclusions about culture, and familiarizing yourself with practices that will help you observe and write about culture.

ETHNOGRAPHY: A LOGIC OF KNOWING

Michael Agar (2006), a long-time ethnographer whose work we highly recommend you to read (particularly *The Professional Stranger*, 1996), puts it best: “Ethnography names an *epistemology*—a way of knowing and a kind of knowledge that results—rather than a recipe or a particular focus” (2006: 57).

Ethnography is a design, an overall plan for understanding how a group exists. It generally calls for the adoption of multiple methods and then bringing the resulting data to bear on a question about a particular group’s culture. Ethnography is a way of combining and using various methods, both quantitative and qualitative, and so in a strict sense, it is neither a quantitative nor a qualitative method; in any case, the guiding principle is that the ethnographic project strives to answer questions about how a group of people gets along in the world. And you, the ethnographer, assumed the responsibility of depicting how the group exists.

The Culture Question: “How?” *i.e., process more so than outcomes.*

“How” is arguably one of the main focal points of ethnography. It may well be *the* central question. As we’ve said already, we’re talking about the study of culture. But what is culture? This is another taken-for-granted, oft-tossed about term whose actual meaning we rarely make explicit enough for agreement on what we’re discussing. While hundreds of definitions exist, we’re going to adopt a relatively simple one for the purposes of this chapter: Culture consists of a given group’s members’ relatively well-shared, acquired *knowledge* for the purpose of organizing behavior and also interpreting the behavior of others (on a small or very large scale). In essence, culture is a shared way of understanding the world and taking action within it. And it’s always *relatively* well-shared, meaning that not everyone complies with the dominant culture’s rules and forms, and most people don’t conform *all* the time. But most of us comply most of the time, but to what are we complying? Figuring out the “what” is essential: “What comprises the culture I’m studying?” But to get to the “what?” question, you’ve gotta deal with the “how”: “*How* did this culture arise and *how* do its members keep reproducing, if continually changing, it?”

At any given moment, we exist amidst a bramble of rules governing our behaviors, our actions, prescribing what we can and should do and think, and proscribing the transgressive behaviors whose carrying out we generally resist no matter how strong the urge. Some of the rules into whose province we were born are formal and official; they are laws. Most of the rules, however, are less formal and often not even spoken aloud; they are **mores**, also known as customs or conventions. Rules and knowledge are often *embodied*, experienced as ways of moving, sensing, and acting in the material world, not formed explicitly into words and ideas.

At the group- or community-level, we refer to the body of mores as “norms,” patterns of expected behavior. And we generally agree on, or at least recognize and to some degree assimilate, the informal code of behavior, and it’s quite obvious when someone breaks the code. Every behavior, or every action, gives shape and reinforcement to these norms, mores, and laws. They act on us, and our resulting actions act back on them ... in many ways, we are the law, and the law is us. No matter how much we like to think or tell ourselves (or others) that we are original, unique, one-of-a-kind, the fact is that we are very much alike in nearly every respect (physiologically and socially). Our behavior takes on ritualistic qualities, not necessarily in the spiritual sense, but in that our behaviors are predictable and patterned and derive in part from a commitment to conformity.

EXAMPLE—ACCOMPLISHED INTERACTION: To summarize by way of illustration, let’s take up the issue of noninteraction (as inspired by the work of Goffman, Blumer, Hughes, et al.). In most locations across North America, people commit informally and implicitly, without ever really discussing it, to avoid interacting with each other in certain venues: waiting room at the doctor’s office, bus stop, train, car, elevator, and so on. These places all have one thing in common: They are way stations—transitional settings—places we occupy *en route* to a final destination. There’s no rule against talking in these places (for the most part), and there’s no law against it. And neither parents nor teachers ever tell children, “Don’t talk to others when you’re in the following locations” Curiously enough, though, nearly all of us subscribe to a deep and abiding commitment to noninteraction. We accomplish mutual avoidance in such settings. We don’t think much about our accomplished noninteraction until someone breaks the rule—for example, a fellow passenger begins chatting us up, or a nervous fellow patient tries to initiate extended, meaningful conversation as we wait miserably to see the doctor.

Remember, sociology is the study of people doing things, and/or *not* doing things, together. Consistently avoiding interaction in certain specific places is something that we do, and we do it together, and our doing of it derives from a mutual commitment to uncodified rules and a reciprocal trust that we’ll abide by the same unofficial code of conduct. Though perhaps trivial, this example illustrates culture—the shared ways of understanding the world and organizing our actions in it. And it offers some insight into the most important, or least most pervasive, rules and boundaries that govern behavior—the norms, mores, and customs about which we rarely speak or even think. Finally, accomplished noninteraction, as a cultural phenomenon, tells us a great deal about the ritualized quality of our public behavior.

Culture as Process and Structure in Context

Culture is a process. It’s also a structure. And, more important in terms of discussing ethnography, it is an outcome, an effect, a derivative; it is, in short, a result of human activity, both cooperation and conflict. Too often, sociologists (and journalists alike) talk about culture as though “it” causes things to happen. Culture doesn’t make things happen. Rather, “it” flows from humans’ attempts to adapt to their environment, to the social system in which they find themselves, to the political structures shaping their “placement” in the hierarchy of material or symbolic wealth (the economy). We develop patterns of behavior, ways of being and doing, and they have a particular substance and style. Writ large, these patterns of activity and styles of doing and ways of thinking comprise culture.

Ethnographers generally set out to understand culture as a problem to be solved, a puzzle to be understood, an enigma to be contemplated, dissected, and explained. In a word (and often-used

word, in fact), we “problematize” culture. How does this particular culture come about? How can we explain its emergence? What are its various parts? How do they work together, or not work together? What sustains this culture? How did this or that given culture dissolve or expand or otherwise change?

But ethnography doesn’t always involve such big questions as these. Often it’s just not feasible to study or explain an entire culture. And so we pose midrange questions. Rather than trying to explain, for instance, the entire culture of homeless or precariously housed people or the culture of substance abusers throughout the United States, the ethnographer begins with a local context and a local group, defined by its participants or by outsiders. Generalizations begin to flow from the intense study of the local group in its local context.

This is exactly what James Spradley (1970) does in the classic ethnography (and a leading study in urban sociology) titled *You Owe Yourself a Drunk*. Spradley examines closely how the culture of drunks in Seattle is sustained, shaped, and generally affected by the community’s “legitimate” institutions such as law enforcement, business, and political governance. One of his many findings was that the very institutions hell-bent on remedying the problems related to public drunkenness and vagrancy were the core factors responsible for sustaining these “problems.” Spradley’s “field” was defined and delimited by his concern for the points of contact between the culture of drunks and the institutional structures and policy enactments of the social control organizations in the community.

Depth versus Breadth

Ethnographic logic also emphasizes depth over breadth. Earlier in this book, we argued that the primary difference between quantitative and qualitative research lies in their respective approaches to the creation of knowledge concerning some aspect of social life. Quantitative researchers generally examine only a handful of variables but a great number of cases. Their research questions lead them to administer surveys, for instance, wherein they ask a small number of questions to a large number of people. Then they analyze the responses and try to explain variance. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, ask questions that demand deeper investigation. The answers to their research questions tend to involve a large number of factors, which means they can focus only on a relatively small number of cases. Ethnographers, much like qualitative researchers, also work with a small number of cases (sometimes only one case) and a huge number of variables (although many of them prefer not to use the term “variable,” which sounds too much like traditional quantitative research). These variables include all the characteristics of the social context and all the social forces that operate within it. Ethnography is the study of a single culture or the comparative study of several cultures. In both cases, however, one examines many situations, individual experiences, and factors (or “variables”) within each culture in order to develop a *holistic*, comprehensive understanding of how the culture operates.

A holistic approach requires the ethnographer to study cultural processes *in situ*, or in the natural setting of the people who occupy the culture. This approach differs markedly from typical quantitative (and many qualitative) studies, wherein the researcher first identifies a phenomenon or problem (as social science tends to be obsessed with *problems and pathologies*) and then *isolates* it, extracts the problem from the conditions that produced it, attempting to quantify or qualify the problem, and finally attempts to examine recurrences of the problem throughout a population, with a focus on explaining how the problem’s distribution varies. Ethnography focuses on cultural processes *in context* and attempts to explain how cultures operate, how they produce their own problems and solutions, how they relate to other cultures (whether hostile or

friendly), and so forth. Occasionally ethnographers will isolate a particular instance and build an ethnographic study around it, but this is relatively rare. In general, the ethnographer goes for depth and complexity, and ultimately attempts to understand culture itself as “the problem”—which is to say that the ethnographer asks the question, “What gave rise to this culture, and how did it become what it is?”

Falsification

Counterintuitively, perhaps, the ethnographer achieves the ability to tell a holistic story about a culture by continually attempting to undermine the story while she tries to assemble it. Falsification is the heart of ethnographic logic. The ethnographer must continually attempt to falsify every emergent conclusion she reaches. Here, we encourage you to refer back to the “falsification principle” presented in our discussion of qualitative methodology’s relationship to the traditionally accepted doctrine of the scientific method. This operation is like trying to make a puzzle piece fit into a spot and setting it aside if it is not a good fit, to continue our puzzle analogy; if it is not a good fit, we do not insist on cutting or bending it to force it into place.

Ethnography’s focus on falsification is influenced by the work of Karl Popper (1963), who believed it is the basis of all scientific inquiry. But ethnography presents real problems to the process of falsification because we don’t use the methods of the natural sciences and the quantitative social sciences such as probability sampling, double-blind testing, and tests of statistical significance. In ethnography, we are constantly tempted to create data that support our initial conjectures.

Regarding ethnography’s near-obsession with falsification, Michael Agar (2006: 103) writes,

Ethnographers, by and large, suffer from a disease called “chronic Popperism,” if I can refer tongue in cheek to the writings of philosopher Karl Popper (1963). We keep looking for evidence that what we think is going on in fact is not. We are ambulatory falsification machines. And the falsification we seek relies heavily, though not exclusively, on questions about meaning and context. (2006: 103)

Rather than assuming you’re right, even at the outset, assume that you are wrong about the reason you’re seeing, what you’re seeing, or hearing what you’re hearing.

When I (Scott) first began working with street addicts (heroin and crack cocaine), I assumed that I could attract them to my interviews with any incentive payment (honorarium) of \$10 or more. But I was wrong. Many local addicts chose not to agree to be interviewed. They were in the same economic situation as those who agreed to the interview, and their drug-addiction levels were roughly the same. So what gives? Why did some participate, while others did not?

The answers are many, but one of the most powerful explanatory factors was their relative connectedness to non-drug-using family members. No matter how badly they needed the incentive payment, they would often decline the interview out of fear that their family might read about them in my published ethnography. This obviously contravened my assumptions about their level of economic need, which was intertwined with my assumption that they couldn’t care less about what others thought of them. After all, they were street junkies—how much worse could their social situations get. But many of them had too much pride and too much personal capital at stake to participate in my work.

Chronic Popperism is the science of ethnography, and it's an element that clearly distinguishes ethnography from journalism. Journalists don't spend a year, or often even a month, trying to figure out how they're wrong about the conclusion they've reached concerning the relationship between X and Y; instead, journalists often collect anecdotal information (which is *not* data, even in the plural), draw conclusions that they consciously or subconsciously believe will appeal to their editors (whose audience ultimately consists of those who provide the revenue stream—the advertisers), and then seek out confirmatory evidence.

Once they've submitted their "copy" (the story), someone called a "fact checker" goes through the material, follows up with sources to check the accuracy of quotes, consults authoritative texts to verify dates and other factual aspects of the piece, and so forth. But the "fact checker" checks "the facts"; they don't check the interpretation, and they *certainly* don't go looking for contravening facts! In news organizations, there's usually no one who holds the responsibility of challenging the story, providing alternative and competing explanations or narratives. Once copy is submitted, everyone's mission becomes one of confirming and ensuring the narrative's publication.

As ethnographers, we're looking out for *disconfirming* evidence, but with an eye toward developing an explanation for how certain events fit a certain pattern, and how many other events don't fit the pattern, and finally, why some events fit the pattern and many other events don't. Out of all this, we hope to develop a relatively coherent, holistic account of the culture we're studying and of the specific events, occasions, rituals, and interactions we've chosen to focus on in our study.

A word of caution: Doing ethnography can drive you crazy. With its commitment to holism and context (everything is connected with everything else) and its compulsive falsification attempts, the life of an ethnographer can be maddening. Michael Agar calls it "heartbreak of the holistic mind" (2006: 120).

Questioning Reality

Notwithstanding the ethnographer's fascination with complexity, holism, contingency, context, situatedness, and interminable interconnectedness, the methodology's logic calls for simple, though not simplistic, explanation. Ethnography entails questioning "reality," repeatedly and critically. What everyone assumes to be real by their implicit collective agreement not to question it is exactly what the ethnographer sets to question. Through chronic Popperism, the ethnographer arrives at an answer—not inductively or deductively, but abductively.

Abductive logic (discussed in detail in a later chapter) means openness to both **deduction** and **induction** (the traditional logics of social inquiry) and above all, an openness to imaginative leaps. But in the end, the ethnographer strives to articulate the most economical, parsimonious explanation possible, one that identifies the culture itself as problematic ("How is this culture possible, and how does it work?") and offers the simplest possible explanatory framework. It integrates the view from the inside with the view from the outside, making sense of why insiders see the world as they claim to do.

As John Dewey (1938/1998) wrote, "Reality is what we choose not to question at the moment." That's the ethnographer's focus—everything that cultural insiders do not question. And once asked, the question cannot be answered by insiders alone, for they rarely appreciate the fact of having a culture. This is true for almost everyone. Can you tell me what your culture consists of, exactly? How is your behavior an expression/product and producer of that culture?

You see how difficult it really is. You must offer your own explanation, one that accounts for what insiders know but one that goes beyond their knowledge. But it should not be overly complex. Again, we're striving to meet the criteria of "good science."

Parsimony and Ockham's Razor

"Good science" also means following the premise of Ockham's razor: The theory that you ultimately set forth should make as few assumptions as possible and the assumptions it does include should relate directly to the observed events. The simpler the explanatory framework, the easier it will be to test, and then to build upon—and if necessary, to discard. At the end, your theoretical base will enjoy a foundation comprised of very few core explanatory factors, but they will be intertwined with each other in infinitely complex ways. Hence, you need to develop parsimonious postulates easily tested through observation.

The World in a Grain of Sand

Using this phrase, borrowed from William Blake's poem, as a touchstone, we conclude this chapter by emphasizing again ethnography's concern with understanding thoroughly the local, the particular, and the seemingly inconsequential. Life, death, the gods, and the devil are all in the details (to modify an old adage). But although ethnography requires deep, long-term, always taxing immersion, it's critical that the ethnographer learn how to successfully step back from the details and employ abductive logic. Many an ethnography has gotten lost in the middle of a field study, so caught up in participating in the culture that the ethnographer never finishes the study, fails to answer the research question, and so the job never gets done.

Ethnography Holds Up a Mirror

Seeing the world in a grain of sand means performing an ethnographic study that says something important about the culture under study. But ethnography also tells the outside world something about itself. A great ethnography is a looking-glass experience for the readers. What appears at first glance to be entirely foreign, exotic maybe, turns out to be a study that says something about the "normal" world in which the published ethnography circulates. If an ethnographer can achieve this "natural generalizability," then she has accomplished a great deal. A good ethnography of a "foreign," "exotic," or "outsider" culture reveals our own lives and culture to us.

The ethnographer, whether doing a community-oriented study or a problem-centered study, always has a "problem" (not in the sense of a social problem, but an intellectual puzzle): how to explain something, how to make sense of patterns, how to accurately convey "what's really going on." Later in this book, we present several chapters on the specific techniques that comprise "doing ethnography." The endeavor may seem awfully mysterious at this point, and to some extent there is a bit of mystery in this science, as in all sciences, even physics. Science and mystery go hand in hand. As Albert Einstein (2011) remarked, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed." Ethnography is the science of mystery and of mystification. Indeed, one might say that ethnography is the science of demystification done all-too-often mysteriously. In this book, we hope to unravel some of this mystery of doing ethnography.

BOX 7.1 Ethnography and Journalism

Many professions (and professionals) focus on writing people. Take journalism, for instance, a field we've already invoked in this discussion. For hundreds of years, professional writers have investigated the lives of humans, individuals and groups, and then rendered those lives (in varying degrees of detail and accuracy) in public forums. They identify an issue or problem with broad public appeal or relevance. Background, or archival, research furnishes knowledge they will need in order to gain entry to the community and to ask the right questions. Then they go out and try to find informants, spokespersons, people whose lives bear directly on the issue at hand. The journalist often attempts to build a trust-laden relationship with informants so that they will share with the writer sensitive information and insight into how their lives bear on the issue, and how the issue affects their lives.

Just like the ethnographer, the investigator strives to craft a *representation* of the group or culture on which she has chosen to focus. But journalists work under several constraints. They need to find "the hook" or angle that makes the story "newsworthy." To be newsworthy the angle must be salient to a very wide audience, consisting not only of highly educated, highly literate readers but also to less educated folks, especially those whose lives might be directly affected by the events. And the angle must enjoy a *du jour* quality. Journalists work under much more intense time pressures than ethnographers. News editors (print, broadcast, and Web) always ask their reporters the question "Why now?" and insist on getting the story out quickly. If the journalist cannot explain the angle in one or two sentences and/or convince the editor of its salience and timeliness, then the story doesn't get off the ground, and the journalist never even makes the first phone call.

Journalists developed standards of evidence and ethics, standards that became part of the

profession by the early twentieth century, largely to shield them from World War I government propaganda and the emerging advertising and public relations industry (Schudson 1978). Professional bodies, such as the International Federation of Journalists, promulgate rules to guide journalists who report "the news." Although many codes exist, they generally share a concern for these common tenets of journalistic reporting: objectivity, truthfulness, fairness, impartiality, accuracy, and public accountability.¹

THE SCHOOL OF NEW JOURNALISM.

In the 1950s, journalism spawned subfields bearing a striking resemblance to ethnography, particularly a branch that came to be known as "New Journalism" (also termed as "creative nonfiction" and "literary journalism"). Norman Mailer's highly controversial 1957 portrait of the hipster as "The White Negro" sparked a journalistic movement that wove together orthodox journalism's commitment to fact and chronology, literature, creative writing's devotion to the crafting of lyrical prose, and ethnography's obsession with "thick description" of people, places, things, and events.

With the publication of Truman Capote's book-length account of the murder of a family in rural Kansas and the execution of the murderers (*In Cold Blood*, a title that refers to execution as well as murder), the "New Journalism" genre achieved prominence. Tom Wolfe's later work on hot rod culture, Hunter Thompson's dogged reporting on the 1972 campaign trail, and Joan Didion's essays on emerging lifestyles and culture (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 1969) knotted this new strand of journalism firmly into the history of American prose. As the war in Vietnam escalated, the New Journalists focused on the war and became more intense in their critique of U.S. policies.

(continued)

¹ We strongly recommend that you read Jay Rosen's compelling dissection of "objectivity" in journalism, which he treats as a form of "persuasion," a system of "signs" that journalists employ to convince readers that their report is "true" in some transcendent way, a way that extends above and beyond the particulars of the moment, the daily grind of the writers' and readers' lives. Capital "T" Truth. Here's where you can find Rosen's piece: http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2010/07/07/obj_persuasion.html

(continued)

The New Journalists differed fairly dramatically from their more orthodox counterparts working in newsrooms and broadcast stations around the world. The New Journalists rejected the principle of "objectivity," arguing that in practice this fundamental tenet meant a bland, uncritical reporting of interviews conducted on all sides of an issue, a refusal to engage on any issue, and consequently a (partially unintentional) complicity in promoting the frames and agenda of powerful elites. The New Journalists insisted that "objectivity" stems from being *involved in*, not detached from, the action, the scene, the lives of the people about whom you're writing. Reporting the truth required stating their own point of view. They also eschewed the formalistic and staid aesthetic of most journalistic prose. Rather, they wrote lengthy accounts bursting at the seams with singing, lively, lyrical prose.

If you read books like Thompson's *Hell's Angels* or Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, you'll find a very different kind of writing from the increasingly standardized prose of newspaper stories. In contrast to the rather predictable sentence structure and tepid description of the standard news story, the New Journalists' report unfolds in scenes with full dialogue captured, or re-created; they don't rely on decontextualized, practically disembodied quotes from bystanders with a second- or even third-hand account of what went down. Re-created dialogue is central to the New Journalists' writing tool-kit. At the same time, though, the stories are self-consciously just that—stories. They are far less concerned with "facts" and far more concerned with conveying the "vibe," the essence of the moment as they experienced it, the expression of the writer's "interiority," for New Journalism balks at the factual, acknowledging that what is "fact" is always under contest, forever in flux, and perpetually unsteady.

The New Journalist strives to construct a *believable* (if self-referential) story, whether or not she gets the "facts" right.

The New Journalists developed the stories; they wrote people. Developing the stories meant immersing themselves, sometimes for long periods, in the situations that intrigued them. But they upheld the journalistic virtues of *experiential* accuracy (as opposed to factual accuracy), fairness, and

public accountability. But impartiality, they argued, is unattainable—undesirable even. Why would anyone want to be impartial toward important, newsworthy events and people? After all, partiality—taking a perspective—is a product and producer of passion, and the best-told stories are those told passionately about passionate experiences.

Much like ethnographers, the New Journalists paid close attention to "status details," the features of the environment, the characteristics and mannerisms of the "characters" in the stories, the little things that add up to a way of life for a person. The opening sentence of *On Boxing*, by Joyce Carol Oates, illustrates the New Journalists' belief in the adage "the devil's in the details":

The young welterweights are surely conscious of the chorus of jeers, boos, and catcalls in this great cavernous space reaching up into the cheap twenty-dollar seats in the balconies amid the constant milling of people in the aisles, the commingled smells of hotdogs, beer, cigarette and cigar smoke, hair oil.

In a pattern familiar to qualitative researchers, the New Journalists move back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, the details and the generalizations about the bigger scene of which a given moment or event is but a part. Later in the same essay, Oates pulls focus and brings the reader to a higher level of analysis, as she shares some of her inferences concerning the sport, art, and craft of boxing:

To enter the ring near-naked and to risk one's life is to make of one's audience voyeurs of a kind: boxing is so intimate. It is to ease out of sanity's consciousness and into another, difficult to name. It is to risk, and sometimes to realize, the agony of which "agon" (Greek, "contest") is the root.

Tom Wolfe, one of this genre's founders, once remarked that the only way to figure out how people see themselves is by scrutinizing the minutiae of their surroundings. In this way, he said, we can perform a "social autopsy" of a given character in a story. The New Journalists' social

autopsy looks a great deal like the social autopsy method we describe in a later chapter.

THE JOURNALIST AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER.

The journalist and the ethnographer work in similar ways, especially if we're talking about the New Journalists and the investigative journalists who produce multivolume series. But there are some important differences between journalistic work and ethnographic inquiry.

First, there are differences in the *time frame*. Ethnographers tend to cultivate their "stories" and do their investigative work and their writing over a much longer period of time. While the journalist may consider two or three months to be a huge commitment for a single story, it's not unusual for ethnographers to spend two to three years in the field and another two to three years writing up their experiences and findings.

Second, journalists and ethnographers differ with respect to theory. By name and usually by conscious practice, ethnographers work within the social sciences. And while they argue strenuously over the politics, significance, purpose, and practice of ethnography, there is general consensus that ethnography is more than storytelling.

Third, ethnographers are more interested in *generalizing their findings*. Beyond a commitment to accuracy or "truth" in ethnographic representation-making, the ethnographer strives to say something about the so-called "human condition." The specific "case" at hand is certainly important and valuable in its own right; but the ethnographer's real interest lies in examining and relating

the case in ways that help readers better understand the world in general, or at least some aspect of the more general world. Scott's (2009) **ethnographilm** *The Family at 1312*, for instance, ostensibly focuses on a "fictive kinship" system developed and perpetuated by crack smokers, prostitutes, and drug dealers. In dissecting this so-called pseudo-family, Scott's film holds up a mirror in which the viewer can see some of the fundamental dynamics that operate in the majority of the "normal" families in contemporary America.

Fourth, ethnographers and journalists impose very *different narrative structures* on their writing. Journalists like to organize their stories around conflicts, people dramatically taking opposing sides on an issue, or heroic struggles against the odds. Ethnographers do not look for or find this narrative structure in their observations of cultures in context. Nor do they organize their data to fit familiar plotlines like the quest or the Hollywood ending. Most published ethnographies don't hang on a narrative arc, nor do their writers concern themselves with presenting a coherent plotline, although they try to write in a vivid, readable way and to present their "research subjects" as real and complete human beings, not cardboard cutouts representing concepts. The plot of an ethnography, however, typically emerges not from the events and lives within the culture under scrutiny; rather, the plot consists of the *unfolding of the argument* presented by the ethnographer. And the argument generally derives from the application of the ethnographer's conceptual and analytic frame to the evidence she produces as a result of long-term interactions with the culture she has chosen to study. *The narrative structure of the ethnography is its rhetorical unfolding.*

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have provided an informal introduction to the art and science called "ethnography." At this point, you should have a pretty good grasp on how ethnography compares with the kind of inquiry in which we engage when we find ourselves in new and strange situations of everyday life. We examined the building blocks of ethnography's "logic of inquiry," its focus on cultures, its attention to context, and its concern with falsifiability in a process that does not conform exactly to the scientific method practiced in the natural sciences. We also elucidated some of the similarities and differences between ethnography and journalism, its closest "ally" in the professions that involve writing about people.

Exercises

1. Go spend a half a day in a place you've never been. It should be somewhere local, but easy to get to and safe to visit. It might be a part of town you've never visited before, a neighborhood that you know has a different way of life than your own. Before you leave, sit down and think about how you're going to become "fluent" in the ways and means of that area's culture. Write out a plan of attack. Then go forth. Keep good notes during your visit. When you return, write up your experiences. As you write, however, try to avoid falling into the trap of comparing everything you experienced to the things you already know and are comfortable with in your own culture. Evaluate the experience on its own terms, not in relation to your biography.
2. Explain how ethnography is different from how we usually come to know about a new situation or culture in daily life.
3. Explain the differences and similarities between ethnography and journalism. (Read one of the books of New Journalism mentioned in the chapter or an essay in a magazine like *Rolling Stone*.)
4. Search through published editions of a major newspaper or news magazine. Find a piece of "investigative" journalism that strikes a chord with you. Read it carefully. Now explain how the piece resembles ethnography and also how it falls short of being "truly ethnographic."
5. Identify a simple norm or custom and transgress it in a nonthreatening way in a public place. For example, wear a belt or tie wrapped around your head, or a bit more daringly, put a pair of clean underpants on your head as headgear. Observe how others react and try it out in various venues—class, a ball game, family dinner. What do you learn about rules, norms, customs, transgressions, and sanctions? (Based on a classroom performance by Noel Barker.)
6. The next time you find yourself in a relaxed, informal environment/situation with friends, family, or even your romantic partner, construct your presentation of self using a more formal structural system. For instance, when having dinner with your significant other, treat the whole interaction as an economy. When he asks you to bring him something, do it but at the same time hand him a handwritten invoice charging for your time. Basically, your goal is to turn every interaction into an economic exchange. Write up the experience. This exercise should tell you a great deal about the "culture" of your community of friends, of you and your partner's relationship, and of your family. By invoking the principles of a very different, perhaps even antagonistic, cultural system (e.g., the economy), you can really get a sense of the underlying principles of the culture you currently occupy, produce, and reproduce.

Key Terms

abductive logic 119
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