

Methods of Discovery: A Guide to Research Writing

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Chapter 10: Ethnographic Research

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Defining Ethnography and Culture

This chapter is dedicated to ethnographic research. Ethnography is the study of cultures through close observation, reading, and interpretation. Ethnographic researchers work “in the field,” in the culture which they are studying. The activities they conduct are also often called fieldwork. Ethnographic researchers learn how to recognize traits that make up a culture and how to describe it to others. As a research method, ethnography is used in many disciplines, among them anthropology, political and social studies, education, and others. Because ethnography is the study of cultures, before going any further, it is important to define the word “culture.”

Exploration Activity: Defining Culture

Working in a small group or with the rest of the class, brainstorm a list of definitions of the word “culture.” Keep in mind that to ethnographers, this term encompasses much more than the “high culture” of museums, concert halls, and libraries.

After completing your list, share your definitions with your classmates. Also, compare your lists with the definitions offered by expert-ethnographers below.

As you worked on this activity, you probably noticed that the word culture is rather difficult to define. In his 1985 work *Mirror for Man: The Relation of Anthropology to Modern Life*, anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn offers the following definitions of culture.

1. The total way of life of a people
2. The social legacy the individual acquires from his group
3. A way of thinking, feeling, and believing
4. An abstraction from behavior
5. A theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave
6. A storehouse of pooled learning
7. Learned behavior
8. A set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men
9. A behavioral map, sieve, or matrix

In his 1973 text *The Interpretation of Cultures*, another prominent anthropologist and ethnographer Clifford Geertz wrote that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun... I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after. . . .” (4-5).

There are several important terms in both Kluckhohn's and Geertz's definitions of culture that would help us better understand the purposes, nature, and methods of ethnographic research. Firstly, all the definitions of culture speak of it as a social phenomenon. Kluckhohn calls it a "total way of life of a people" and a "storehouse of pooled learning." Presumably the learning is pooled from all the members of a given society or culture. Geertz talks of humans as being "suspended in webs of significance," not independent but tied to their environments. Secondly, cultures are distinguished by patterns that repeat themselves. These patterns can be noticed, studied, and explained. The job of an ethnographer is to find, record, and interpret such patterns.

Notice that the definitions of the word "culture" offered above encompass the complete scope of human activity. Culture is not just the behavior and habits "of high society," or of "cultured people." It is not only the ability to appreciate art, music, and fine literature, although people who can do that also belong to particular cultures, and those cultures can be studied by ethnographers.

Ethnographers define the word "culture" in broader terms, as a patterned behavior or way of life of a group of people. Some of the elements of culture then are the common habits, customs, traditions, histories, and geographies—everything that connects the members of the culture together and defines them. In his 1958 essay "Culture is Ordinary", author Raymond Williams developed a definition of what he called "ordinary culture."

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes, and meanings, so that work, observation and communication are possible. Then, second, but equal in importance, is the testing of these in experience, the making of new observations, comparisons, and meanings. A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life--the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning--the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. (6).

Williams' definition of culture confirms what we have already seen---that the most important and interesting elements of a culture for an ethnographer are patterns of behavior and function of the people who comprise the culture under investigation. According to Williams, the "ordinary processes of human societies" taken, studied, and explained in their totality give us an understanding of a given culture.

Exploration Activity: Subcultures To Which You Belong.

Working either on your own or with a partner make a list of subcultures to which you belong. Because the scope of ethnographic research includes both “high” and “ordinary” cultures, include both types in your list. It may be useful to begin this activity by thinking about the groups and communities, both formal and informal, to which you belong. Consider such factors as national and cultural, and local origin, ethnicity, language and dialect, social class, interests and hobbies, profession, family status and values, and so on.

Share the results of your brainstorming with the rest of the class.

Ethnographic Research is Qualitative

As a writer of school research papers, you may be used to conducting quantitative research. Quantitative research seeks to obtain data which are applicable to large populations, and a broad spectrum of projects and situations, It also often seeks to obtain results that can be repeated in other situations.

For example, researchers deciding to conduct a national poll designed to predict the results of a presidential election, they will use statistical methods to come up with numbers and other data capable of predicting the election results nationwide. Quantitative research seeks to create sets of data which can be used to explain and interpret large-scale phenomena and patterns and which does that through numbers or some other quantifiable means.

By contrast, qualitative research has a different purpose. As its name suggests, qualitative research is interested in conducting in-depth studies of smaller populations and groups. They do not seek to obtain data that can be applied across the board, instead trying to find out as much as possible about a smaller sample or a smaller phenomenon. Qualitative researchers do not use statistics. Instead, they observe, conduct interviews and surveys.

Ethnographic research is qualitative. Ethnographers do not apply the results of their studies of one particular culture to other cultures. They do not apply statistical methods of quantification to the results of their research. They are more interested in descriptions than in statistics.

Why is it important to understand the difference between these two kinds of research? There are at least two reasons. Firstly, writers who are used to producing traditional research papers with their almost-universal insistence on “objectivity” and broad applicability of results may wonder about the reliability of qualitative research. After all, they may think, what good is a research methods, if it does not allow us to apply the results of research to other situations and other populations, and if it cannot be replicated? This is a matter of purpose with which research is conducted. If, for example, as in the instance described earlier, the purpose of a research project is to find out what the population of a whole country thinks about an issue, then quantitative research methods will work well. If, on the other hand, the purpose of the researcher is to conduct an in-depth study of a culture, qualitative research will suite than purpose better. Secondly, beginning ethnographers need to understand that, when conducting ethnographic research, it is often more important to go for depth than for breadth in their investigation. They need not worry that their results would not be applicable to other cultures

and other research situations because they do not have to be. The goal of an ethnographer is to create a deep and credible snapshot of a culture that he or she is studying. The results of this investigation may inform and be cited by other researchers, but it will not be directly applicable to other cultures and other research projects.

Ethnographic Research is Subjective

One of the main tasks of an ethnographer is to learn to discern the unusual in the usual. Experienced ethnographers realize that what seems mundane and ordinary to them many look strange and unusual to others. According to ethnographers Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, "when someone says "that's really weird" or "aren't they strange", a fieldworker hears these comments as signals for investigation." (2001, 6).

If this is the case, then the interpretation of a culture is necessarily biased and subjective. When we step into a new culture, we bring with us our previous experiences, preconceptions, and ideas. An objective observation devoid of the observer's pre-existing attitudes, is simply impossible. But that is not a problem for ethnographers. Instead, it is an opportunity because ethnographers benefit from being involved with the cultures they are studying. They know those cultures well and are therefore able to convey their meanings to others. Being an insider of a culture, a participant-observer often allows ethnographers to uncover hidden meanings that are not immediately visible or accessible to outsiders.

Consider the following example. In his 1977 work entitled "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," Geertz describes how, while studying cock fighting in Bali, the author and his wife had to escape a police raid at one of the cock fighting rings. Geertz writes,

"On the established anthropological principle, When in Rome, my wife and I decided, only slightly less instantaneously than everyone else, that the thing to do was run too. We ran down the main street.... About halfway down another fugitive ducked suddenly into a compound—his own, it turned out—and we, seeing nothing ahead of us but rice fields, open country, and a very high volcano, followed him. As the three of us came tumbling into the courtyard, his wife, who had apparently been through this sort of thing before, whipped out a table, a tablecloth, three chairs, and three cups of tea, and we all, without any explicit communication whatsoever, sat down, commenced to sip tea, and sought to compose ourselves (307)."

The remarkable feature of this passage is the presence of the researcher in the midst of the events he is studying and his ability to write about the events from not from the point of view of a detached observer, but as a participant. Geertz and his wife go to see an outlawed cockfight, are chased by police, and end up in a local's backyard sipping tea and pretending that they had not broken the law. It is true that, as a European researcher, Geertz is not writing about a culture that is "his." At the same time, having participated in the same activities as the Balinese whom he came to observe regularly partake in, he began to gain the status of an insider. That status, in turn, gave him larger access to the culture and more authority to write about it.

The ethnographer is always present in the research he or she conducts and the texts he or

she creates. It is not only normal but also customary and necessary for ethnographers to “write themselves” into their texts by providing narratives and descriptions of their own role in the project and of their reactions to the cultures which they observe and try to understand. In his 1988 book *Works and Lives: The Ethnographer as Author*, Clifford Geertz explains:

"The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, one way or another, truly “been there.” And that, persuading us that the offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in (4-5)."

Ethnography is then a rhetorical act, and the ethnographer must not only collect credible research data, but also write about them credibly and persuasively.

Learning to Ask Ethnographic Questions

It is important for every researcher to learn to ask the kinds of research questions that will help him or her succeed in the research project. Ethnographic research is no exception. Ethnographic research questions must be such that will enable you to not only observe the culture you are studying, but also to discern and understand the patterns of behavior and function in that culture. In other words, it is not sufficient for an ethnographer to record what he or she sees. In addition, ethnographic researcher must construct the research questions which would allow him or her to explain or interpret the culture he or she is studying.

Ethnographic questions, are different from those asked by new media reporters who are sent to the scene of an event to observe and record it. According to Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater:

“An ethnographer and a journalist may both gather information about the same event but write up their accounts very differently. A standard daily newspaper reporter, for example, conducts research in an attempt to be objective: to give the who, what, where, when, and why of an event for a readership that expects facts without too much interpretation. As a fieldworker, your purpose is to collect and consider multiple sources of information, not facts alone, to convey the perspective of the people about the culture you study” (1997, 13-14)."

As an ethnographer, you are, of course, interested not only in the facts but also in what those facts mean and how they might help you to explain the culture you are studying. Therefore, you will need to create the kinds of research questions which would answer not only what is happening in front of your eyes but also why it is happening and what its significance is for the culture you are investigating. You also need to ask the kinds of questions that would help you discern patterns in the events or behaviors you observe, you make connections between people, incidents, and events.

In order to create such questions, consider the following guidelines:

- Once you have observed and recorded the “facts” pertaining to your culture, consider using methods other than observation. You may, for instance collect artifacts that would help you explain what you saw. Or, you may decide to conduct interviews with the participants of the events you have been observing.
- Ask yourself what the events or behaviors you have observed means for the culture. What is their significance for the members of the culture and how it might be different from you or your readers ascribe to these events. If there is such a difference, what would you do as a researcher and a writer to explain the events or behavior to outsiders?
- Ask yourself about your subjective responses and reactions to what you are observing. How do your existing experiences, ideas, biases, and cultural affiliations contribute to your understanding of the culture you are studying?

Ethnographic Research Methods

Observing

Throughout this chapter, I have mentioned the word “observation” many times. Indeed, observing the culture is an excellent method of studying it. Observation is one of the main research methods available to ethnographers. The way in which you plan and conduct your ethnographic observation is determined by your overall goals as an ethnographer, which is not only to notice interesting features of the culture you are studying, but also to discern patterns among those events and to explain those patterns and their significance to your readers. In planning and conducting your observations, follow the following guidelines:

- Ask for permission to observe. Your research subjects must be aware of the fact that they are being observed. Not only is this a sound practice or ethical research, but it will also help you later on to approach the members of the culture you are studying with interview and survey requests, if you need them.
- Let your subjects know that you are there, and then be as unobtrusive as possible. If you need to talk to any of the members of the culture you are studying, you can ask for an interview later.
- Keep careful notes. Record events, language and other interactions between the people you are observing as well as their surroundings.

As I mentioned before, it is important to realize that, while observing, you may or may not be able to detach yourself completely from the events or people around you. As you saw in the excerpt from Clifford Geertz’s study of Balinese cock-fighting which I quoted above, ethnographers often become willing or unwilling participants in the cultures they study. While something as dramatic as what happened to Geertz in the passage I have quoted earlier, may not happen to you during your research, if you become an unwilling (or willing) participant of the events, know that this is a part of being an ethnographer.

Interviewing

In addition to observing the cultures they study, ethnographers conduct interviews with the members of that culture. Interviewing your research subjects allows you to obtain an in-depth perspective of their culture that is hardly possible through observation alone. If you consider interviewing someone for your ethnographic project, keep in mind the following considerations:

In designing the interview, always keep your purpose in mind. As author Ben Rafoth (2001) reminds us, "The first step in getting someone to tell you something you are interested in hearing is to tell them exactly why you want to interview them. When you explain a clear purpose, the purpose you are interviewing understands what they need to talk about to satisfy you. Without this sense of purpose, they don't know whether you want to hear facts, stories, advice, complaints, or whatever" (83). In other words, it is not good enough to begin the interview with someone only with a vague idea about what you are interested in. If you go into an interview without a clear purpose, both you and your interviewee are likely to leave the session dissatisfied, frustrated, and wondering why you had wasted time on the interview at all.

Next, allow plenty of time for contacting the person who interests you and scheduling the meeting. People who have interesting things to say usually have busy schedules and cannot be expected to give interviews on a short notice. Sometimes, you may be able to squeeze a short interview in during your ethnographic observation session, but if you want a longer, more structured interview session with someone, plan ahead and contact them with the interview request sooner rather than later.

It is also important to present yourself as a friendly, interested, and enthusiastic interlocutor. If you arrive at the interview disinterested, distracted, and unorganized, your interviewee may wonder whether you really need the interview and whether he or she should waste time with you.

Whenever possible, learn as much background information about the subject of your interview as possible. Of course, when interviewing someone, you are looking for new knowledge, and one of the reasons why you have asked this person for an interview is because he or she has the information or opinions that you don't have. At the same time, remember that every interview is a conversation, and it helps if both sides at least have the common knowledge of the basics of the subject of this conversation.

Design and ask the right questions. When interviewing someone, it is generally better to have more open-ended questions. An open-ended question is one that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Remember that successful interviewers encourage their interlocutors to speak as much as possible, and open-ended questions help them achieve that goal. Rafoth cites writer Robert Weiss recommends that interviewers allow their subjects to develop their answers in such a way that gives the interview additional depth. Here are some of Weiss's suggestions designed to help interviewers help their subjects develop their answers further.

- Extending questions: "What led to that? "How did that start?"
- Filling in detail: "Could you 'walk me through the event?"
- Identifying key actors and agents: "Who else was involved?"
- Inner events, "How did that make you feel?" (Rafoth 83)

If the interview is taking an unexpected, but interesting direction, allow your interviewee to lead you. You cannot always predict what interesting or useful information your interlocutor

may want to share with you during the interview. While it is important to keep in mind the your interview's overall purpose and try to accomplish it, allowing your subject to tell you something unplanned for will probably make the result deeper and more interesting.

Collecting and Reading Cultural Artifacts

Another research technique designed to help ethnographers study cultures is the collection of artifacts (objects) that might help them understand that culture and explain it to their readers. In deciding which artifacts to collect and what to do with them, you should, first of all, be guided by the idea that artifacts are texts that can and should be read together with other research data. The meaning of cultural artifacts within the culture which you are studying contributes to the meaning of the culture overall. As Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1007) argue,

Objects, then, are readable texts. As you read an object, your position as researcher affects your reading just as it affects the way you read a field site. You can investigate the surface details of an object, research its history, or learn about people's rules and rituals for using and making the object. Researchers—folklorists and anthropologists—use the term material culture to refer to those objects, personal artifacts loaded with meanings and history that people mark as special: tools, musical instruments, foods, toys, jewelry, ceremonial objects, and clothes (78).

A successful ethnographic researchers, then, would not just collect these objects and describe them in the project, but also try to figure out what the mean for the people of the culture he or she is trying to understand and how that meaning may help them shape their texts that they offer to the readers. Because objects are texts, they hardly possess meanings of their own. Your task as a researcher is to make that meaning by actively reading an artifact.

As you think about collecting cultural artifacts for your ethnographic projects, consider the following guidelines:

- While observing a culture and talking to its members, pay attention to the items around you and to what the people in the culture do with those items. Pay attention to the items that seem important, useful, or indispensable to the members of the culture.
- Begin by noticing the appearance, size, texture, and other visible qualities of the artifact.
- Talk to the members of the culture you are studying to learn about the artifact's purpose, history, peculiar features, and so on.
- Notice ways in which the artifact is being used by the members of the culture
- Compare your observations of the object with the descriptions and remarks you hear from the members of the culture
- Think about the artifact metaphorically or symbolically. Behind its physical reality, what can the artifact symbolize or stand for in the culture that you are studying? Thinking about artifacts in this way will help you to go beyond simply describing them and into making conclusions and generalizations about the artifacts' meaning for the culture you are studying.

Conducting Secondary Research

Such primary research methods as interviewing, observing, and reading of cultural artifacts are central to ethnography. It may be tempting to think of ethnography depends exclusively on primary sources and methods. That is not the case, however, as ethnographers usually use a variety of secondary sources, both print and electronic ones, in their work.

Using secondary sources allows you to add texture to your work. Secondary research helps ethnographers to broaden their work by explaining the cultures they study in larger historical, geographical, and political contexts. Studying a culture through observations and interviews is an interesting and useful endeavor capable of teaching you and your readers a lot. But, like any writing that neglects secondary sources, such research provides you only with one perspective of your subject. Throughout this book, I have been arguing about the importance of research for all writing, and writing based on ethnographic research is no exception. Adding secondary research to your primary source investigation will allow both you and your readers to gain another perspective about your subject. Consider using the following type of secondary research sources for your ethnographic projects:

- Any theoretical, historical, or cultural studies devoted to the subject of your investigation.
- Any studies of the cultural artifacts that you have collected as a part of your project.
- Other ethnographic accounts of the culture you are studying.
- Texts produced by the culture you are studying. Sources of this type will particularly help you to understand the discourse of the culture you are studying.
- These sources can be of many types: books, journal and magazine articles, websites, and so on.

Of course, all sources, both primary and secondary, will have to be properly cited and documented in your text.

Writing Activity: Finding Useful Secondary Sources for Ethnographic Projects

Carefully read through your research notes or the research portfolio in progress. Note instances where secondary research may help you learn more about the culture you are studying. Focus on the following:

People. If the focus of your investigation is the people of the culture, what can you learn about them from secondary research? Remember that as members of the culture, they represent patterns of behavior, histories, geographies, and social connections. What books, journal articles, or Internet sites are available to help you take your investigation of the culture beyond your research site? After finding some of these possible sources (in your research, follow the advice you find in other chapters of this book), compare what you have learned from primary research with the knowledge your secondary sources have to offer.

Places. What secondary research can you conduct of the history and geography of the places you are studying? For example, if you are studying a local community, what written documents about that community exist which might help you learn about it from a perspective other than your own? Also remember that, as an ethnographer, you are interested in cultural and behavioral patterns. Therefore, a part of your task in any project is

to show how a small group of people or a small place that you study can be seen as a part of a larger trend or force. Studying secondary sources in order to find out what other writers have said about your research site or similar sites elsewhere will help you accomplish that.

Cultural artifacts. It is likely that any cultural artifacts worth studying as part of your ethnographic research has complex and, sometimes, controversial past and present. Look for secondary sources that would help you to illuminate that history. Pay attention to the way in which different writers and researchers speak of the artifact's origins, rise to prominence, its current importance to the culture, controversies surrounding it, and so on.

After conducting some secondary source searches, enter the information that you have gathered into your research journal and into your portfolio.

Finding Research Sites

The following is a list of ethnographic research sites that my students in a recent class on ethnography chose for their projects:

- A barber shop
- A small beach community which used to be a fishing village and is now a vacation spot
- A practice facility of a college football team
- Backstage of an opera company
- A tanning salon
- A homeless shelter
- A Baptist church

There is great variety in this list. The guiding principle in choosing an ethnographic research site, and thus the topic for your paper is whether the site and the people who inhabit her can be called a culture. The question is, of course, how do we know whether a place or a community could be called a culture. To answer it, we can apply one or several definitions of culture that I have listed in the beginning of the chapter.

Writing Activity: Finding Ethnographic Research Sites

By now, you are ready to begin selecting a research site for your ethnographic project. The following activity should help you do so. Working on your own (or, with a partner, if you are about to begin a collaborative ethnographic project). You also probably have some ideas about the sites you would like to study. Answering the following questions about the proposed site of your research will help.

1. Your objective is to find a culture to study. Apply the nine definitions of culture listed earlier in this chapter to the site you are proposing to study.
2. Do the people who work, live, or act on the site display discernible patterns of behavior or language use?
3. Do they have common traits, features, or habits?
4. Do they use common artifacts with common or symbolic purposes?
5. Do they have a common language or discourse which they use to function within their

group?

6. Have they developed a pattern of interaction with the world outside of their group?

Answering these questions will not only help you select the topic for your research and writing, but will also be a good invention activity which will help you to begin the project. Some places to look for research sites and project topics are your campus, your local community, or your hometown, if, in the course of the project, you will have enough time to visit and observe it.

A word of caution: although you may be able to find some excellent research sites on your college campus, it is often a good idea to go off campus and explore new sites. In ethnographic research, this is known as “making the familiar strange and the strange familiar” (Sunstein and Chiseri Strater 1997, 8). As a member of the campus community yourself, you may not notice what is unusual or strange about that community, what may surprise, puzzle, or intrigue outsiders. You probably have been a member of the college campus community (or any of its subgroups) for a long time—something that allows you to see its daily life as “normal” and “usual.” If this is the case, then, chances are, that, when writing about it, you will not be able to go much farther than describing what you see. You will have a hard time explaining how what you see constitutes a culture and what the essence of that culture is. If you do not do that, your project will not be successful.

In order to succeed in a situation like that one, you will need to learn to “make the familiar strange” (Sunstein, Chiseri-Strater 1997, 8). As an ethnographer, you have to remember constantly that what seems ordinary to you may seem extraordinary to the people outside of the culture. And you should work to notice, record, and explain such extraordinary features of the culture that you study. For instance, if you are studying a campus group or site, focus on its features that might seem unusual and extraordinary to outsiders.

Gaining Access to the Site

After selecting an ethnographic research site, it is important to gain access to it properly. This means not only being physically present at the site, but also making sure that all the people involved know that you are at the site to conduct research. Ethnographic research is a collaborative endeavor because without the consent of the members of the culture that interests you, your project would not be possible. Obtaining such consent is crucial. Announcing and explaining your purposes and intentions to everyone you observe, interview, or survey will permit you to have access to the members of the culture you research. It will also make you a credible and ethical researcher, one that cares about the needs and feelings of the people who agree to work with you. In order to gain access to an ethnographic research site, follow these principles:

Contact the members of the community or culture you plan to study well in advance. If possible, go to the site in person and talk to the people involved. If gaining access to the site depends on obtaining permission from a person who is in charge, identify and contact that person first. For instance, in order to gain access to a football practice facility, one writer had to clear it with the team’s head coach first. Be sure to contact and explain your project to everyone else involved later on.

If you live far from the site and a personal visit is not possible, start with a phone call, a letter, or e-mail. When talking or writing to the members of the culture you are about to study, introduce yourself and explain the project in as much detail as possible. State your goals, research methods, and the outcomes you hope to receive.

Explain how talking to certain people and observing certain things within the culture will help you achieve your goals. Some people may ask for written documents explaining the project, in which case it is your duty to provide such documents. If you plan to interview several people or survey a large population, each person needs to be told about the project and asked for consent.

Check your college or university requirements for human subject research. Some institutions require researchers to obtain human subject release form even if those researchers are not conducting medical or psychological studies.

Arrive at your observation and interview appointments in plenty of time and prepared. Introduce yourself to everyone involved and explain why you are there and what you will be doing. Before taking notes or recording conversations, be sure to state your intentions and ask for permission. As a researcher, you want to capture the culture and the people you are interested in their most natural states, doing what they would normally be doing. Therefore, it is important to put the participants of your study at ease.

If you have the opportunity to participate in the activities you study, it is OK to do so. But be aware that participants and observers have different perspective on the same events. Therefore, if possible, try to study the same aspects of the culture both as a neutral observer and as a participant.

After finishing the first session, review your notes and recordings and schedule return visits to the site if necessary.

After completing the project, thank the people who helped you carry it out.

Keeping Field Research Notes and Journal

Ethnographers use a variety of research methods and techniques. Ethnographic projects, especially longer ones, can yield lots of material, of which you, as the researcher, will then need to make sense and out of which you will have to create the paper. It is likely that in the course of your project, you will observe the culture you are studying, interview its members, and collect cultural artifacts. It is important that, in the course of the project, you keep careful notes of everything you see and do. Later on, you will be able to use those notes in order to describe and interpret the culture you have studied to your readers.

In a way, your research journal will become the center of gravity of your whole project or projects. Here are some things that can go into your researcher's journal:

- Observations and reflections on them
- Interview questions, answers, and reflections
- Descriptions of cultural artifacts and their readings
- Research questions
- Notes to self to follow up on something or to ask more questions
- Research leads and ideas
- Reflections on what is and is not working in the project
- Summaries and reflections on secondary research you are using in your project

- Meta-cognitive reflections of what you are learning about your research and yourself as a reader, writer, and learner during your research

It is therefore important to keep careful notes of all you do. One way of doing that is by starting and keeping an ethnographer's journal, in which you would record all your observations and interviews, and reflect upon them. There are several techniques to field note taking. As an ethnographer, you can use a modified version of the double-entry journal that I described in the chapter of this book dedicated to academic research and writing. After dividing the page of a notebook in half, in the left-hand side column, record your observations of a culture or its components, and in the right-hand side column, record your reflections, explanations, and questions about it. While working on the double-entry journal, remember that your research data will not speak for itself and that you will need to create a meaning out of it for yourself and for your readers. Therefore, in your notes, I encourage you to reflect and speculate on the meanings of what you observe or what your interview subjects are telling you, think of how what you observe makes you feel, and so on. If you are working with cultural artifacts, write down not only their physical descriptions, but also reflect on their meaning for the culture you are studying.

Start an ethnographic journal early on in the semester and keep it throughout the term. Record everything you do during all the ethnographic projects you undertake during the term. If later on in the term, you want to reflect on your progress as an ethnographic researcher, your journal will help you to do just that.

The Research Portfolio

Writing portfolios generally have two purposes: to showcase your best work to your readers and to help you reflect on your own progress as a researcher and a writer. The first purpose of the portfolio can be fulfilled only if the second one is. Both goals are equally important, and an ethnographic research portfolio will help you accomplish them. Your research portfolio should contain the following items:

- Finished drafts of your writings.
- All rough and other preliminary drafts.
- Excerpts from and reflections on the readings that you complete during the course of the project.
- If possible, cultural artifacts and your reflections on their meaning to the culture you are studying.
- Reflective pieces on your research projects.

It is absolutely essential that you start the research portfolio early on in the term and add to it as you progress through the research projects. As you work, keep everything and do not throw anything away. Notes, summaries of and thoughts about peer workshops, interview questions, should all go into the portfolio. Later on in the semester, when you prepare the final version of your research portfolio to be submitted to your instructor or shared with your classmates, you will get the opportunity to look through the contents and decide what should stay and what should be omitted. It is important to think about the research portfolio as an aid in conducting research and writing about it. A researcher's portfolio is almost always a work in progress, helping you to learn not only about the subject of your research, but also about your own writing and research processes, their strengths and weaknesses. For more information about research portfolios see Chapter Ten.

From Research to Writing: Activities and Projects

In this section of the chapter, you are offered several ethnographic research activities and projects. Depending on the structure of your class, these activities may be completed either as individual projects or combined into a larger ethnographic research project. Principles of good research and writing discussed throughout this book apply to ethnographies. As you research and write, remember that composing is a recursive process, that drafting and revising are indispensable parts of it, and that writers continuously seek feedback from others as they compose and revise.

Thick Description

A thick description is an ethnographic technique which allows a researcher to create an "observation in context." Given that ethnographic research seeks to establish and explain patterns of behavior, one of the ethnographer's tasks is to provide a context for what is being observed. For instance, in the ethnographical study of Balinese cock-fighting which we have discussed earlier, the author Clifford Geertz does not just describe what he sees before, during, and after the cock fights, but also attempts to place his observations into a larger context of Balinese history, culture, and social mores.

Or, to consider an example that may be closer to home for most of us, take the sororities and fraternities on your college campus. No doubt, they represent a distinct subculture, with its own explicit and implicit rules, rituals, and conventions. These rules and rituals is what separate the members of these organizations from non-members. An ethnographer attempting to study sorority and fraternity life on a college campus in the US would be interested in doing much more than simply going to a couple of Greek life functions and reporting what he or she saw. Instead, such a researcher would be interested in placing his or her observations in a historical, cultural, theoretical, and social context. In order to explain the significance of the culture of sororities and fraternities, the researcher will need to consider the "social webs" (Geertz 1973, 4-5) that are woven around the events and rituals of a sorority or fraternity, the reasons for which these organizations are the way they are, and what they stand for.

For your think description, work with a culture that you would like to study. After working in the field and observing the site for some time, write a two-to-three page thick description of the culture. Be sure to include not only the observations of concrete events, people, and conversations, but also to mention what cultural, historical, and social contexts these events are happening in. For this purpose, you may need to consult secondary sources

Interview

The purpose of an ethnographic project is to gain an in-depth understanding of a culture by interviewing one or several of its members. For this project, you may either choose a new

topic, or follow up on the same topic that you have researched in previous projects. Follow the guidelines for interviewing discussed earlier in this chapter. The core research method for this project will be interviewing, but you may also supplement it with observations, secondary research, and surveys.

Conclusions

Ethnographic research allows you to get “up close and personal” with cultures. It places researchers at the heart of the investigations, often allowing them to participate in the very culture they study. Such an active role gives writers valuable insights into their subject, which usually cannot be achieved simply by studying books, journal articles, and websites.

The range of subjects for ethnographic research is unlimited. You can study the mundane or the exotic, the ordinary or the extraordinary. You can make an ethnographic research project out of a weekly visit to a city market, as the author of the paper above did. Or, you can go to the Amazon and study the cultures of the local peoples. The possibilities are endless.

Ethnography allows us to gain new knowledge about the communities and places we live in, the people we know, and to share that new knowledge with others. Because ethnography allows for the subjectivity of the writer, it places the author in a unique position where expression of emotions, and descriptive writing are encouraged, not discouraged. At its best, the writing that comes out of ethnographic projects is energetic, moving, and intellectually and emotionally stimulating. Give ethnography a try.

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