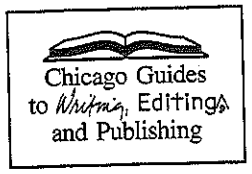

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chapter one

Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research

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

Ethnographic Participation

Ethnographers are committed to going out and getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people. "Getting close" minimally requires physical and social proximity to the daily rounds of people's lives

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

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

Clearly, ethnographic immersion precludes conducting field research as a detached, passive observer; the field researcher can only get close to the lives of those studied by actively participating in their day-to-day affairs. Such participation, moreover, inevitably entails some degree of *resocialization*. Sharing everyday life with a group of people, the field researcher comes "to enter into the matrix of meanings of the researched, to participate in their system of organized activities, and to feel subject to their code of moral regulation" (Wax 1980:272–73). In participating as fully and humanly as possible in another way of life, the ethnographer learns what is required to become a member of that world, to experience events and meanings in ways that approximate *members' experiences*.[1] Indeed, some ethnographers seek to do field research by doing and becoming—to the extent possible—whatever it is they are interested in learning about. Ethnographers, for example, have become skilled at work activities they are seeking to understand (Diamond 1993; Lynch 1985) or in good faith have joined churches or religious groups (Jules-Rosette 1975; Rochford 1985) on the grounds that by becoming members they gain fuller

insight and understanding into these groups and their activities. Or villagers may assign an ethnographer a role, such as sister or mother in an extended family, which obligates her to participate and resocialize herself to meet local expectations (Fretz n.d.).

In learning about others through active participation in their lives and activities, the fieldworker cannot and should not attempt to be a fly on the wall.[2] No field researcher can be a completely neutral, detached observer, outside and independent of the observed phenomena (Pollner and Emerson 1988). Rather, as the ethnographer engages in the lives and concerns of those studied, his perspective "is intertwined with the phenomenon which does not have objective characteristics independent of the observer's perspective and methods" (Mishler 1979:10). The ethnographer cannot take in everything; rather, he will, in conjunction with those in the setting, develop certain perspectives by engaging in some activities and relationships rather than others. Moreover, it will often be the case that relationships with those under study follow political fault lines in the setting, exposing the ethnographer selectively to varying priorities and points of view. As a result, the task of the ethnographer is not to determine "the truth" but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives.[3]

Furthermore, the ethnographer's presence in a setting inevitably has implications and consequences for what is taking place, since the fieldworker must necessarily interact with and hence have some impact on those studied.[4] "Consequential presence," often linked to *reactive effects* (that is, the effects of the ethnographer's participation on how members may talk and behave), should not be seen as "contaminating" what is observed and learned. Rather, these effects are the very source of that learning and observation (Clarke 1975:99). Relationships between the field researcher and people in the setting do not so much disrupt or alter ongoing patterns of social interaction as reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place. For example, in a village based on kinship ties, people may adopt a fieldworker into a family and assign her a kinship term which then designates her rights and responsibilities toward others. Rather than detracting from what the fieldworker can learn, first-hand relations with those studied may provide clues to understanding the more subtle, implicit underlying assumptions that are often not readily accessible through observation or interview methods alone.[5] Consequently, rather than viewing reactivity as a defect to be carefully controlled or elminated in entirety, the ethnographer needs to

become sensitive to and perceptive of how she is seen and treated by others.

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

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

Inscribing Experienced/Observed Realities

Even with intensive resocialization, the ethnographer never becomes a member in the same sense that those "naturally" in the setting are members.[6] The fieldworker plans on leaving the setting after a relatively brief stay, and his experience of local life is colored by this transience. As a result "the participation that the fieldworker gives is neither as committed nor as constrained as the native's" (Karp and Kendall 1982:257). Furthermore, the fieldworker orients to many local events not as "real life" but as objects of possible research interest, as events that he may choose to write down and preserve in fieldnotes. In these ways, research and writing commitments qualify ethnographic immersion, making the field researcher at least something of an outsider and, at an extreme, a cultural alien.[7]

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

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

Mayfair Market Express Line

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

[Describes the first two men at the front of the line.] The woman behind him was dark skinned with straight dark brown hair cut in a page boy. She was wearing a teal blue v-neck knit sweater with black leggings. In her section was juice, a

can of pineapple juice, and a six-pack of V-8 tomato juice. The guy in front of me had a pink polo shirt on and tan shorts. He was about 6′2″, slender, tan with blond short hair with a gold 18 gauge hoop in his left ear (I thought he was gay). In his triangle of space he had packaged carrots, a gallon of whole milk, and a package of porkchops.

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

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

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

Ralph's Express Line, Easter Morning

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

I got behind the woman who was already there. She had left one of the rubber separator bars behind the things she was going to buy, one of the few personal friendly moves one can make in this highly routinized queue. I appreciated this, and would have thanked her (by smiling, probably), but she was already looking ahead, I suppose in anticipation of checking out. I put my wine and lettuce down. There was already someone behind me. I wanted to show them the courtesy of putting down a rubber separator bar for them too. I waited until the food in front of mine was moved up enough for me to take the bar, which was at the front of the place where the bars are (is there a word for that? bar bin?), so that I wouldn't have to make a large, expansive move across the items that weren't mine, drawing attention to myself. I waited, and then, finally, the bar was in sight. I took it, and then put it behind my items, looking at the woman behind me and smiling at her as I did so. She looked pleased, and a bit surprised, and I was glad to have been

able to do this small favor. She was a pretty blonde woman, and was buying a bottle of champagne (maybe also for Easter brunch?). She was wearing what looked like an Easter dress—it was cotton, and pretty and flowery. She looked youngish. Maybe about my age. She was quite tall for a woman, maybe 5′10″ or so.

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

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

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

Boy's Market Express Line

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

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

At this point the guy who I'd spoken to earlier, the guy who was right in front of me, showed a look of surprise and moved past me, over to an abandoned cart at the end of the aisle. He was looking at what was in it, picking up the few items with interest, and then put them back. I thought he'd seen something else he wanted or had forgotten. He came back over to his cart, but then a supermarket employee walked by, and he called out to the man, walking over to the cart and pointing at it, "Do you get many items like this left behind?" The employee hesitated, not seeming to understand the question, and said no. The guy on line said, "See what's here? This is formula [cans of baby formula]. That's poor people's food. And see this [a copper pot scrubber]? They use that to smoke crack." The

employee looked surprised. The guy says, "I was just wondering. That's very indicative of this area." The employee: "I live here and I didn't know that." The guy: "Didn't you watch Channel 28 last night?" Employee: "No." Guy: "They had a report about inner city problems." Employee, walking away as he talks: "I only watch National Geographic, the MacNeil-Lehrer Hour, and NPR." He continues away. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscription and can be reconsulted."

As inscriptions, fieldnotes are products of and reflect conventions for *transforming* witnessed events, persons, and places into words on paper.[8] In part, this transformation involves inevitable processes of *selection;* the ethnographer writes about certain things and thereby necessarily "leaves out" others. But more significantly, descriptive fieldnotes also inevitably *present or frame* objects in particular ways, "missing" other ways that events might have been presented or framed. And these presentations reflect and incorporate sensitivities, meanings, and understandings the field researcher has gleaned from having been close to and participated in the described events.

There are other ways of reducing social discourse to written form. Survey questionnaires, for example, record "responses" to pre-fixed questions, sometimes reducing these answers to numbers, sometimes preserving something of the respondents' own words. Audio and video recordings, which seemingly catch and preserve almost everything occurring within an interaction, actually capture but a slice of ongoing social life. What is recorded in the first place depends upon when, where, and how the equipment is positioned and activated, what it can pick up mechanically, and how those who are recorded react to its presence. Further reduction occurs with the representation of a recorded slice of embodied discourse as sequential lines of text in a "transcript." For while talk in social settings is a "multichanneled event," writing "is linear in nature, and can handle only one channel at a time, so must pick and choose among the cues available for representation" (Walker 1986:211). A transcript thus selects particular dimensions and contents of discourse for inclusion while ignoring others, for example, nonverbal cues to local meanings such as eye gaze, gesture, and posture. Researchers studying oral performances spend considerable effort in developing a notational system to document the verbal and at least some of the nonverbal communication; the quality of the transcribed "folklore text" is critical as it "represents the performance in another medium" (Fine 1984:3). The transcript is never a "verbatim" rendering of discourse, because it "represents . . . an analytic interpretation and selection" (Psathas and Anderson 1990:75) of speech and action. That is, a transcript is the product of a transcriber's ongoing interpretive and analytic decisons about a variety of problematic matters: how to transform naturally occurring speech into specific words (in the face of natural speech elisions); how to determine when to punctuate to indicate a completed phrase or sentence (given the

common lack of clear-cut endings in ordinary speech); deciding whether or not to try to represent such matters as spaces and silences, overlapped speech and sounds, pace stresses and volume, and inaudible or incomprehensible sounds or words.[9] In sum, even those means of recording that researchers claim come the closest to realizing an "objective mirroring" necessarily make reductions in the lived complexity of social life similar in principle to those made in writing fieldnotes.[10]

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

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

Implications for Writing Fieldnotes

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

Inseparability of "Methods" and "Findings"

Modes of participating in and finding out about the daily lives of others make up key parts of ethnographic methods. These "methods" determine what the field researcher sees, experiences, and learns. But if substance ("data," "findings," "facts") are products of the methods used, substance cannot be considered independently of method; *what* the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with *how* she finds it out. As a result, these methods should not be ignored. Rather, they should comprise an important part of written fieldnotes. It thus becomes critical for the ethnographer to document her own activities, circumstances, and emotional responses as these factors shape the process of observing and recording others' lives.[11]

From this point of view, the very distinction between fieldnote "data" and "personal reactions," between "fieldnote records" and "diaries" or "journals" (Sanjek 1990c), is deeply misleading. Of course, the ethnographer can separate what he says and does from what he observes others saying and doing, treating the latter as if it were unaffected by the former.[12] But such a separation distorts processes of inquiry and the meaning of field "data" in several significant ways. First, this separation treats data

as "objective information" that has a fixed meaning independent of *how* that information was elicited or established and by whom. In this way the ethnographer's own actions, including his "personal" feelings and reactions, are viewed as independent of and unrelated to the events and happenings involving others that constitute "findings" or "observations" when written down in fieldnotes. Second, this separation assumes that "subjective" reactions and perceptions can and should be controlled by being segregated from "objective," impersonal records. And finally, such control is thought to be essential because personal and emotional experiences are devalued, comprising "contaminants" of objective data rather than avenues of insight into significant processes in the setting.

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

The Pursuit of Indigenous Meanings

In contrast to styles of field research which focus on others' behavior without systematic regard for what such behavior means to those engaged in it, we see ethnography as committed to uncovering and depicting indigenous meanings. The object of participation is ultimately to get close to those studied as a way of understanding what their experiences and activities *mean to them.*[13]

Ethnographers should attempt to write fieldnotes in ways that capture and preserve indigenous meanings. To do so, they must learn to recognize and limit reliance upon preconceptions about members' lives and activities. They must become responsive to what others are concerned about, in their own terms. But while fieldnotes are about others, their concerns and doings gleaned through empathetic immersion, they necessarily reflect and convey the ethnographer's understanding of these concerns and

doings. Thus, fieldnotes are written accounts that filter members' experiences and concerns through the person and perspectives of the ethnographer; fieldnotes provide the ethnographer's, not the members', accounts of the latter's experiences, meanings, and concerns.

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

Writing Fieldnotes Contemporaneously

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

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

Similar considerations hold when examining the ethnographer's "findings" about those studied and their routine activities. Producing a

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

The Importance of Interactional Detail

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

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

Reflections: Writing Fieldnotes and Ethnographic Practice

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

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

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

cesses whereby an ethnography "translates experience into text" (Clifford 1986:115). And sociologists, notably Richardson (1990), describe the core of ethnographic writing as "narrating."

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

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

chapter two

In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes

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

Field researchers using this style value relating naturally to those encountered in the field; they focus their efforts on figuring out—holistically and intuitively—what these people are up to. Any anticipation of writing fieldnotes is postponed (and in extreme cases, minimized or