

Raymond Madden

2nd Edition

BEING ETHNOGRAPHIC

A Guide to the Theory and
Practice of Ethnography



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CONTENTS

Preface to the Second Edition	ix
About the Author	xi
Introduction	1
PART I KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMES	13
1 'Definitions', Methods and Applications	15
Characterising ethnography	15
Reflexivity	20
Intersubjectivity	23
Methods	26
Practical and conceptual origins	29
Applications and ethics	33
Summary	34
Questions	35
Suggested readings	36
Being Ethnographic	36
2 Ethnographic Fields: Home and Away	37
Making place: What is an ethnographic field?	37
Some favourite fields	39
Ethnography at home	44
Multisited and un-sited ethnography	52
Summary	52
Questions	53
Suggested readings	54
Being Ethnographic	54

PART II DOING ETHNOGRAPHY	55
3 Talking to People: Negotiations, Conversations and Interviews	57
Negotiation	57
Conversation	62
Interviewing	65
Summary	72
Questions	73
Suggested readings	74
Being Ethnographic	74
4 Being with People: Participation	75
Immersion ethnography	76
Step-in-step-out ethnography	78
Embodiment and the ethnographer	81
The ethical participant	86
Summary	91
Questions	92
Suggested readings	92
Being Ethnographic	93
5 Looking at People: Observations and Images	95
The ethnographic gaze	96
The systematic eye	100
Visual ethnography	105
Seeing is believing	109
Summary	110
Questions	111
Suggested readings	112
Being Ethnographic	112
PART III INSCRIPTION	113
6 Description: Writing 'Down' Fieldnotes	115
Writing 'down'	116
The systematic hand	120
What goes into notebooks	127
Fieldnotes in applied ethnographic settings	131
Summary	134
Questions	134
Suggested readings	135
Being Ethnographic	135

7 Analysis to Interpretation: Writing ‘Out’ Data	137
Organising primary data	137
Organising secondary data	146
Writing ‘out’ data	149
Summary	151
Questions	152
Suggested readings	153
Being Ethnographic	153
8 Interpretation to Story: Writing ‘Up’ Ethnography	155
The storied reality	155
Author and audience	157
Writing as the continuation of interpretation	158
Structure in an ethnographic story	159
Style in ethnographic writing	165
Summary	169
Questions	170
Suggested readings	171
Being Ethnographic	171
PART IV EXPANDING ETHNOGRAPHY	173
9 Conclusion: Ethnographic Horizons	175
Review	175
Cyber ethnography	179
Non-human ethnography	184
Summary	190
Last word	191
Questions	192
Suggested readings	192
Being Ethnographic	193
References	195
Index	203

PART ONE

KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMES



ONE

'DEFINITIONS', METHODS AND APPLICATIONS

CHAPTER CONTENTS

Characterising ethnography	15
Reflexivity	20
Intersubjectivity	23
Methods	26
Practical and conceptual origins	29
Applications and ethics	33
Summary	34
Questions	35
Suggested readings	36
Being Ethnographic	36

CHARACTERISING ETHNOGRAPHY

A quick perusal of texts dedicated to ethnographic methods will turn up a large variety of 'definitions' of the practice. As mentioned in the introduction, ethnography is not the sort of endeavour that readily submits to a neat and bounded definition – the humans that do ethnography and the humans that are the subject of ethnographic

research are too complicated and ‘messy’ to allow ethnography to be understood in neat and simple terms. Ethnography as we know it today has its origins in British social anthropology, American cultural anthropology and the qualitative sociology of the Chicago School (O’Reilly, 2009: 3). This shared ancestral heritage allows us to identify some common aspects of ethnographic practice and some mutually valued characteristics to find a basis for what we can agree is good ethnographic practice. This book provides an introduction to the practice and the production of ethnography, and how these aspects overlap in all sorts of ways, but it will begin by focussing on the practical side of the ethnographic endeavour, namely, what characterises the ‘doing’ of ethnography and what intellectual and theoretical forces have shaped this practice.

Writing about people

The term ‘ethnography’ comes from Greek and broadly means ‘writing about people’, but has a narrower meaning of writing about particular groups of people, that is to say ethnically, culturally or socially defined groups. An ethnographic text is an interpretive and explanatory story about a group of people and their sociality, culture and behaviours, but it is not a fictional account; it is a narrative based on systematically gathered and analysed data. A great deal of practical work and planning goes into producing ethnographic texts and rendering them as reliable as possible. As such, ethnography is not just an act of writing; ethnography is a practice (framed by a methodology) *and* the textual product of that practice. It is the doing of social research and the final product that comes from writing up that research.

Being with people

Ethnography is a qualitative social science practice that seeks to understand human groups (or societies, or cultures, or institutions) by having the researcher in the same social space as the participants in the study. Ethnography is typically face-to-face, direct research. It is a practice which values the idea that to know other humans the ethnographer must do as others do, live with others, eat, work and experience the same daily patterns as others. This approach is called participant observation, and it has been a fundamental aspect of ethnographic research over the last century. In some cases, definitions of ethnography simply equate it with participant observation. We will be working up a much broader understanding of ethnography than this singular methodological definition, but participant observation remains at the core of all reasonable understandings of ethnography. Intimate contact with participants raises issues of obligation, reciprocity, trust and the formation of friendships. And these human relationships impose serious responsibilities on ethnographers. Rapport building is crucial

to the ethnographic process and it can take some time to establish – one can't afford to rush things, be too pushy and risk being alienated by one's participant group; it is a 'gradual building up of trust' (O'Reilly, 2009: 175).

Ethnographers study people in typical circumstances, where people interact with each other in routine or even ritualised ways, but in ways that are typical of that situation. The ethnographer does not usually seek to distort or manage the natural setting of their research, or ask people to do things they normally wouldn't do in any given circumstance. Therefore, a key distinction between ethnography and laboratory or clinic based methods is that ethnographers cannot control, and do not want to control, what happens in their field situation. Unlike laboratory based experiments where the total environment is controlled (at least as far as a set of known variables), ethnographers are both observers and participants in an open experimental field (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999a: 2).

Ethnography was once seen as a long-term commitment where researchers sometimes lived with communities for years, with a 12–18 month stay typical. These ethnographies were often attempts to holistically describe the socio-cultural life of a particular community, group or institution (O'Reilly, 2009: 99). Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*, for example, dedicated chapters to the large sociological categories of primary production, ecology, time and space, the political system, the lineage system, and the age set system in compiling his holistic ethnographic account of a Nilotic people (1940). Nowadays, while long-term, single-site projects are still undertaken, many ethnographic projects are conducted over much shorter periods of time and may be multisited and/or focus on a particular aspect or element of a society or culture. Funding constraints, and time pressures in universities that have curtailed the length of doctoral and masters research, mean it is no longer always possible to spend the amount of time living in communities that was once typical. The admirable goal of holistic description that was once part and parcel of ethnography is not always attainable, nor is it desirable in some cases. Nevertheless, what both long-term and short-term ethnography share is that these studies seek to build theories of culture and society, theories of human behaviour and attitudes, and to appreciate what it means to be human in particular social and cultural contexts.

Theorising about people

Ethnography is not description for description's sake, it is description and analysis coming together to answer questions and build theories, which in turn can respond to future ethnographic issues and generate future ethnographic theories. This theory generating characteristic of ethnography is important, and there are two perspectives to consider in the way ethnographers build their theories of the human condition.

Ethnographers attempt to marry narrow and broad approaches to theory building by combining inductive and deductive perspectives. Inductive theory building can be described as ‘bottom up’ theory based on the observations and interactions ethnographers have in the field and the hypothesising this encounter creates. It is particular theorising. Deductive theory can be described as ‘top down’, or general, or grand theory, that is to say, the theories that ethnographers acquire in educational institutions and against which they test the particular theories they generate from fieldwork (after LeCompte and Schensul, 1999a: 8).

The task for ethnographers is to tell their explanatory stories in such a way as to find a middle road between the inductive and the deductive, between particular, bottom-up theory and general, top-down theory. This process is called recursive or grounded analysis, and it is undertaken in order to find an explanatory framework between the particular and the general. However, the recursive or grounding process is not an ‘end of project’ task; ethnographic research constantly ‘moves back and forwards between inductive analysis to deductive analysis’ (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999a: 15). These processes happen simultaneously; ethnographers are always inductively hypothesising from their specific situations outwards, while at the same time applying more general deductive processes to their particular ethnographic situation (see Glaser and Strauss [1967] and O’Reilly [2009] for more discussion of grounded theory).

Theory is a term that causes a lot of needless anxiety in the social sciences, but theory can simply be seen as a thinking tool we use in our attempts to explain human behaviour. Theory in the social sciences isn’t necessarily definitive or certain in the way we have ‘theory-as-law’ in the natural sciences (for example, Boyle’s Law of Gases or Newton’s Law of Gravity). Theory should not be treated as a rule to which we find people to tightly conform; it is a guide to help us understand why humans do and think the things they do.

TOP TIP 1.1

Theory is our tool to master; it should not master us. Use it to guide and improve your understanding of your research subject, but make sure to keep your eyes open to exceptions and circumstances that might not fit neatly into your original theory.

Ethnographers should use theory to improve understandings, to solve problems, to build more complex stories and to generate new questions. With this in mind, one of the reasons we seek to mesh inductive and deductive theory is not just to find

stability or conformity between theoretical levels, but to find challenges, exceptions and problems from our inductive, bottom-up standpoint that cause us to reconsider and refine our deductive, top-down perspectives. This critical and transformative relationship of the ethnographic particular to general bodies of anthropological, sociological and other social science knowledge remains one of the most persuasive arguments for the ongoing importance of ethnographic research. In other words, practice is good for theory, and *vice versa*.

The ethnographer's body

Ethnographers have enthusiastically engaged with embodiment as an issue, indeed there has been something of a 'somatic turn' in ethnography (Monaghan, 2006: 238). As LeCompte and Schensul say, the participant observer is the primary 'tool' of ethnography (1999a: 1). The ethnographer's body, and the sensations it records, are part of the ethnographic script. We use our eyes and ears in systematic, targeted observations, and of course we use our hands to record our perceptions during fieldwork and during writing up and reflection; as Coffey says, 'fieldwork is necessarily an embodied activity' (1999: 59). We build up embodied knowledge by training our bodies to do things our participants do; we attempt to acquire another's 'habitus' and we train our bodies to fit into the field (Coffey, 1999: 65). But we also bring a 'habitus', which is to say, a generative embodied history (Bourdieu, 1990), to bear on our fieldwork. One of the challenges for the ethnographer's body is to find some resolution between their and the 'other's' somatic way of being in the world (there will be more on this issue in Chapter 4).

Participant observation might sound like an oxymoron (how does one observe while participating?), but it isn't – participant observation is a whole of body experience that has us observing with our eyes as we participate, but we also 'observe' with all our senses. Touch, smell, taste, sound and sight come together to form the framework for memories, jottings and consolidated notes that form the evidentiary basis of ethnographic writing. Good ethnographers will use their whole body as an organic recording device. The challenge for ethnography is to adequately record these senses as data and then to be able to stand back from the bodily experience and analyse, interpret and draw conclusions from these ethnographic experiences.

Insider and outsider

Another key characteristic of ethnography is that it attempts to find a relationship between 'emic' and 'etic' understandings of human behaviour. An emic perspective

is one which reflects the insiders' or research participants' point of view, whereas an etic perspective is one which echoes the outsiders' or researchers' point of view (the terms etic and emic are taken from the linguistic terms phonemic and phonetic). This positionality in some ways resonates with attempts to marry inductive and deductive theories, yet it is not a neat analogy. Finding a relationship between emic and etic perspectives is not simply a matter of balance, but rather these two ways of seeing are synthesised to explain particular human phenomena against a broader canvas. Many characterisations of ethnography will stress the emic or insider perspective over the etic, and see fieldwork as a narrow endeavour that seeks the 'folk' or 'native' or 'insider' point of view. However characterising ethnography as fieldwork designed to elicit an emic point of view is but part of the story; there's more to consider. The act of cultural translation, be it across perceived cultural gaps or some other communication divide, relies on the ethnographer never losing sight of their own etic perspective and the driving questions that brought them to the field in the first place. Proper ethnographic reflexivity requires that we must not forget that we will always maintain some sense of the 'outsider' despite the fact we may be or become very familiar with the people we choose to study. Thorough, resolved ethnographic accounts make sense of both the emic and the etic of their given situations. Reflexivity has a central role to play in this resolution process.

REFLEXIVITY

The terms reflexive, reflexivity, and reflexiveness have been used in a variety of disciplines to describe the capacity of language and thought – of any system of signification – to turn or bend back upon itself, to become an object to itself, and to refer to itself. Whether we are discussing things grammatical or cognitive, what is meant is a reflex action or process linking self and other, subject and object. (Babcock, 1980: 2)

The idea of the ethnographer being the central research tool raises questions about the 'scientific' or objectivity claims that ethnographer's might like to make of their research, and also raises the issue of subjectivity being a component of the ethnographic research and writing experience. Claims to 'scientific' validity in ethnography are made on the basis of the rigour with which ethnographic methods are framed and assessed, but if the ethnographer is both a method (tool) and methodological assessor, we need to assess validity in ethnography with an eye on the ethnographer's influence on the research process. Let's, therefore, turn to the theme of methodological reflexivity and look at the role of the ethnographer.

I began my doctoral research in my home town with the assumption that a reflexive element would be evident in my ethnography because I was working in such a familiar social and geographical landscape to which I had already formed all sorts of subjective attachments. Subjectivity and reflexivity are not the same thing, but the subjective nature of my engagement led me to reflect a lot on my role and gave rise to a strong reflexive element in my research. However, the subjective and reflexive elements were in the end not a problem to be overcome; rather they were a productive force I had to learn to confront. It has been said that 'when anthropologists talk about reflexivity, either they do not know what they are talking about or they are talking about something other than what they seem to be talking about' (Watson, 1987: 29). There is more than a grain of truth to this statement. So often one will see reflexivity being treated as a marginal note in ethnographic writing; it is an issue that is paid lip service without being more properly discussed in terms of how it informs particular projects (a notable exception is Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Watson argues that 'reflexivity is a pervasive and ineluctable feature of all accounts; it is not something to be remedied; it is not a *special* problem of anthropology at home' (1987: 30). I concur with this point of view and given in this text I am suggesting that reflexivity is central to ethnographic research, I should expand on how I see reflexivity working in ethnography. I argue that if we embrace the methodologically productive aspects of reflexivity then we can go beyond 'merely managing' reflexivity to a proper engagement with it. As an act of engagement let's critically discuss George Marcus's analysis of ethnographic reflexivity.

In *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (1998), Marcus identifies four forms of reflexivity operating in the social sciences: (1) the 'basic' or 'null' form, (2) 'sociological reflexivity', (3) 'anthropological reflexivity' and (4) 'feminist reflexivity'. Marcus writes:

The null form of reflexivity is the self critique, the personal quest, playing on the subjective, the experimental, and the idea of empathy. (1998: 193)

When I first entertained the idea of a reflexive element in my ethnography, this 'null form' was pretty much the model I had in mind. Yet I soon discovered that this approach in itself is not methodological, rather it is more aligned to post-fieldwork musing and 'navel gazing'. Marcus goes on to say that while we should take this form seriously the most likely outcome from such a reflexive approach is an 'introspective voice' that doesn't 'challenge the paradigm of ethnographic research' (1998: 193). I see a more important problem here; a 'null form' of reflexivity does not tell us anything about the people who are the subjects of the research.

The second form of reflexivity Marcus describes is Bourdieu's 'sociological reflexivity', which is:

... tied to the commitment to sustain objectivity, the distance and abstraction of theoretical discourse, and empiricism as distinct historical contributions of sociology (and a related social theory) as a discipline. With such a commitment, ethnography retains its identity as a method and reflexivity becomes valuable only in methodological terms as a research tool. (1998: 194)

Marcus is critical of this approach to reflexivity, and suggests it has a 'very restricted function' and little potential to 'alter the forms taken by past sociological (and ethnographic) practice' (1998: 195–6). I, however, see a lot to commend in Bourdieu's construction: most obviously it is an understanding of reflexivity that stresses its methodological value and the potential for such an approach to dissolve the putatively oppositional relationship between the subjective and the objective, the emic and the etic, the inductive and the deductive. Bourdieu's reflexivity conjures up the potential for reflexivity to help create a resolved ethnographic account (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, and also Whyte, 1993: 280–3).

The next two forms Marcus deals with are 'anthropological reflexivity' and 'feminist reflexivity', which are both characterised as dedicated to understanding the politics of 'positionality'. Anthropological and feminist reflexivity, argues Marcus, allow us to see that any one representation of an 'other' is just that; only one way of seeing things. This attitude comes from the idea that truth is partial, not absolute. Through anthropological reflexivity we are able to 'forgo nostalgic ideas of discovery' and appreciate 'the complex ways that diverse representations have constituted anthropology's subject matter' (1998: 197). Feminist reflexivity argues for partial truths that help to more faithfully represent the real world than totalising representations, and as such create a reflexive form of objectivity (echoing, curiously, Bourdieu's sociological reflexivity). The distinction Marcus draws between anthropological and feminist reflexivity amounts to an acknowledgement of, and engagement with, different positionalities. However, what Marcus is talking about in relation to both anthropological and feminist reflexivity might usefully be described as 'personal–political reflexivity'.

In my case, a critical appreciation of positionality is a tool with which to check my ethnographic baggage for presumption and prejudice; to remind myself I bring just one perspective to ethnography and that perspective is informed by my own upbringing, education and history. Ethnographers, just like the groups they study, come with histories and socialisation, and the influence of these elements in ethnographic research needs to be properly understood. So, putting to one side the null form of introspective reflexivity, this leaves us with a bipartite construction: a methodologically focussed sociological reflexivity and a personal–political reflexivity that has developed from anthropology and feminism. These two forms are not stand-alone

entities however; their influence overlaps, with each waxing and waning dependent on the context and the nature of the interaction. In my own work I engage in reflections on the subjective and objective elements of my methodological approach, I reflect on the politics of location and on the influence my social and historical identity has on the creation of the text, and I do all these things simultaneously. Such reflexivity is simply an essential part of managing the influence of 'me' on the research and representations of 'them'.

TOP TIP 1.2

Don't save reflection until the end of your project – continually reflecting on your research topic, question and methodology will give you a better chance of spotting influences external factors and possible biases may have on the way you conduct and present your research.

The overall point I want to make about reflexivity in ethnography is that despite the strict meaning of the term, reflexivity is not really about 'you, the ethnographer'; it's still about 'them, the participants'. The point of getting to know 'you, the ethnographer' better, getting to know the way you influence your research, is to create a more reliable portrait, argument or theory about 'them, the participants'. Subjectivity is therefore not a problem for a putatively objective ethnography if it is dealt with rigorously. Turning one's gaze away from the obvious influence of subjectivity in ethnography is simply ignoring the elephant in the corner. With this in mind, one can see why I am attracted to a reflexivity that enhances the methodological strength of a project (in the fashion of Bourdieu) and one that interrogates the influence of the subjectivity and positionality of the author on the creation of the text (in the fashion of anthropology and feminism). What this amounts to is an acknowledgement that reflexivity is not for the marginalia of ethnography. Acknowledging the fact that the ethnographer is the primary tool of research and an active participant in the ethnographic field also means that properly confronting the influence of the ethnographer on research and representation is an unavoidable precondition of a reliable ethnographic account.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The ability of ethnography to deliver a storied reality relies in large part on the communicative trust developed between ethnographers and their participants and interlocutors; it lies in the quality of the intersubjective exchange. Communicative

intersubjective ‘trust’ is both the paragon quality one wants in ethnographic social exchange (Eipper, 1996) and the most ill-defined and difficult to ascertain. So much ethnographic authority is underpinned by the hope that ethnographers have understood the people they work with in their terms and can faithfully re-present and interpret that worldview. The anxious importance of this trust game is brought into sharp relief by the horror felt for ethnographic fraud (for example see de Mille [2000, 2001] on Carlos Castaneda). Michael Jackson in his *Minima Ethnographica* (1998) discusses the intersubjective turn in anthropology, and puts forward a relational view of the self and subjectivity. The self, subjectivity and identity are, he suggests, ‘mutually arising’, a product of a Bakhtinian dialogue (1998: 6–7). This is not to ‘intend any erasure of the notion of self as an intentional agent’ (1998: 6), rather to stress that ‘human consciousness is never isomorphic with the things on which it fastens, the objects it makes its own, and the selves which it constructs’ (1998: 6). Self thus inexorably fastens onto the other, and the subject onto the intersubject, but this is by no means a seamless and unambiguous coherence. Indeed, Jackson has catalogued seven types of intersubjective ambiguity, noting that ‘intersubjectivity is steeped in paradox and ambiguity’ (Jackson, 1998: 8) (see also Madden, 2014).

To paraphrase Jackson, firstly ‘intersubjectivity is the site of constructive, deconstructive and reconstructive interaction – it moves continually between positive and negative poles’. Secondly, ‘being is never limited to human being ... intersubjectivity includes persons, ancestors, spirits, collective representations and material things’. Thirdly, ‘drawing on Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, no matter how great the social inequality self and other are beholden on each for mutual recognition’. Fourthly, ‘while the elementary structure of intersubjectivity may be dyadic, it is usually mediated by something outside itself, e.g. a shared idea, a common goal’. In the fifth instance, ‘intersubjectivity is shaped by habitual taken-for-granted dispositions as much as it is shaped by conscious intentions and worldviews’. Sixth, ‘intersubjectivity reflects the instability of human consciousness – oscillating from the retracted secure self, through fulfilment in being with another, to being overwhelmed by another’. And finally seventh, ‘drawing on Merleau-Ponty, there is the problem of knowledge – how can I speak of an “I” other than my own, how can empathy, transference, or analogy bridge the gap between me and you?’ (after Jackson, 1998: 8–10; see also Madden, 2014).

This set of propositions adequately reflects the complicated exchanges that characterise the intersubjective moment and in this series of points are nested some essentials; intersubjectivity is not a stable condition (because ‘selves’ are not stable), it is not limited to humans (Irvine, 2004a, 2007; Taylor, N., 2007), it requires an act of (sometimes asymmetrical) recognition, it infers an object or external reference beyond the intersubjective, it is mediated by agency and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977),

it covers the spectrum from 'buffered' to 'porous' selves (Taylor, C., 2007: 37–41), it anxiously interrogates the knowledge gap between 'I' and 'You', and it is ultimately a very tricky business. Therefore, in addition to paying attention to systems and art, the success of ethnography lies in overcoming, to a sufficient extent, the pitfalls, the indeterminacies and ambiguities of intersubjectivity to produce faithful accounts of interlocutors and research participants (however familiar or exotic those subjects might be) (Madden, 2014).

Social science and validity

The influence of subjectivity on ethnography and the lack of control over field settings are the sorts of conditions that are mentioned when some people make the claim that ethnography is not 'scientific' or 'reliable'. This sort of charge unsettles a lot of ethnographers and also points to a certain anxiety that has dogged ethnography and qualitative social science research more broadly – how do we make claims to validity in relation to ethnographic research? The concerns of positivists or 'quants' about the validity of qualitative ethnographic data are not concerns this text shares to any great extent (after Crang and Cook, 2007). It doesn't really matter if we have a view of ethnography as more or less 'scientific' or more or less 'artful'. Again, most reasonable understandings of ethnography tend to emphasise some combination of science and humanities in the genealogy of the ethnographic endeavour (see Brewer, 2000: 1, 27–38). The expanding appeal of ethnography to a range of social science disciplines beyond anthropology and sociology, and the manner in which these disciplines have taken up ethnography, have only reinforced this view of ethnography. What ethnography needs to work towards is: (1) validity, reliability and veracity built upon the construction of thoughtful and appropriate methodologies; (2) the systematic gathering of data; (3) the systematic interrogation of that data; and (4) the thoughtful, indeed artful, presentation of the material as an ethnographic story. If all these steps are followed then ethnography need not worry itself with narrow 'scientific' assessments of validity. What is needed is a more broadly 'social scientific' assessment of the validity of ethnographic research, one that pays attention to the fact the social sciences are in fact a child of the natural sciences *and* humanities (this intellectual genealogy is discussed in further detail when we look at ethnographic methodologies later in this chapter, see Figure 1.1).

The issue of validity in ethnography can be further reduced to a simple set of propositions: (1) an ethnography which is not informed by scientific principles (like systematic data collection, analysis and presentation) is not good ethnography, it's more like fiction; and (2) an ethnography that is not informed by the art of prose

writing, argument, rhetoric, persuasion and narrative, is not ethnography, it's just data. So, we do require a systematised and disciplined approach to produce good ethnography, to validate the application of our ethnographic methods, to substantiate the interpretation of our ethnographic data and the representation of ethnographic situations. But this prescriptive framework still leaves much room for the inventive, the imaginative and the experimental; all things that have the potential to make doing and reading ethnography something fundamentally educational and transformative. There is no need for conflict between science and art, between fact and story. A brief discussion of the relationship between methods and methodologies will help fortify this point.

METHODS

What are methods?

Firstly, a method is just a tool. These tools (participant observation, interviewing, recording, surveying, etc.) will be discussed in turn as we work through this text.

Let's step back a bit by looking at the broad field of the social sciences. As Brewer notes, the social sciences is an inheritor of the older philosophical and intellectual traditions that study human beings and the natural world, and it modelled itself in some ways on both the humanities and the natural science traditions, taking aspects from both to construct the meta-discipline of the social sciences and the pendant disciplines of anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and so on (2000: 1). Brewer suggests one can see this inheritance as a case of the social sciences taking methods from the natural sciences and a subject matter (humans) from the humanities, and while things are clearly more complicated than this, it's a very useful point to consider when we try to understand the anxiety about validity and science in ethnography. Methods:

... are merely technical rules which lay down the procedures for how reliable and objective knowledge can be obtained. ... Thus, they lay down the procedures for constructing a hypothesis (methods of research enquiry), for designing a questionnaire, conducting an interview, or doing participant observation (methods of data collection), or for working out some statistical formulae etc. (methods of data analysis). (Brewer, 2000: 2)

Importantly, Brewer highlights that methods are not just a matter of data collection; they are also tools that get employed in research planning, analysis and interpretation. We should add to this that the manner in which we treat text and acquire our writing also has methodological implications; style, voice and character in writing can

impact upon the reception of ethnographic accounts. *Writing is a method* and therefore an element of a thorough discussion on methodology.

What is a methodology?

Firstly, a methodology is simply a justification of the use of a particular set of methods (a toolkit). Methods are what tools you use; a methodology is an explanation of why you use those tools.

This distinction between methods and methodology is straightforward, but nevertheless, one can read countless methodology sections from ethnographies and find they basically list the tools the ethnographer used to gather the data, and not much more. So an ethnographer may report that they spent 12 months in a particular village, were engaged in participant observation for the entirety of their stay, but also conducted 50 informal interviews, took a household census, took hundreds of photographs and gathered genealogical information from all the households in their field site. The proper methodological dimensions of such an ethnographic account should also discuss *why* the data gathering (and analysis and interpretation) was undertaken in this manner. In other words what are the philosophical and intellectual foundations of this particular ethnographic practice? What is the value of being in this place for 12 months? Is there something about the cycle of life in this setting that requires the ethnographer to commit to a 12 month stay in order to properly comprehend the life of this village? Why do informal interviews in this setting? What is it about the local cultural and social mores that make informal approaches to data gathering more successful than, say, formal questionnaires?

There is a tendency in the qualitative social sciences for ethnography and participant observation to be put forward as an unqualified good. But rigorous methodological discussion should challenge this presumptive good, for while we ethnographers will form intense attachment to the idea that we have the best of ways to know fellow humans (what could be a more powerful way to know others than actively being in their social lives?), ethnography, nevertheless, is not for every human situation and is not beyond critique (Hammersley, 1992). An important part of getting beyond ethnography's anxiety about validity is for ethnographers to outline clearly why they did what they did when they did it; a case of 'data transparency'.

TOP TIP 1.3

Show your work! Once you have determined an appropriate and ethical methodology, taking the time to outline it clearly will help eliminate concerns that your methods aren't valid.

Again, a serious acknowledgement of the role of the ethnographer (not just reflexivity for the sake of it) gives methodological fortification to a project and puts debates about objectivism and subjectivism in their proper place, that is to say, they are not opposing elements that need to conquer each other; they are partners in any good ethnographic account. An ethnographer being transparent about the way they acquire data, and their reasons for dealing with data in the way they have, can only add to the task of forming a credible ethnographic story.

Figure 1.1 schematically represents the ethnographic endeavour from the genesis of its ideas (intellectual and philosophical ancestors) through its divisions and disciplines (which will have their own clusters of theories and important intellectual antecedents), to the way we do ethnography, and then to the manner in which we write up or represent the product of our practice; from thought to practice and back to thought again. It is on this journey that ethnographers deal with their role in the process, and the manner in which they go about their work. A sound methodology is one way to help make the journey unfold in such a way as to produce a ‘social-scientifically’ valid outcome.

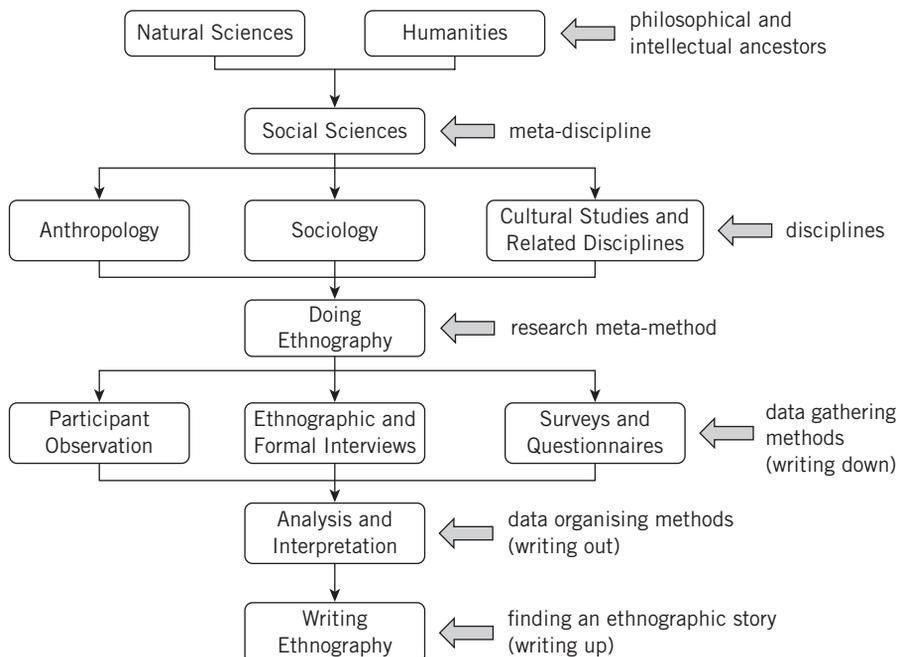


Figure 1.1 Ethnography – from thought to practice to thought

PRACTICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ORIGINS

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dingy which has brought you sails away out of sight. (Malinowski, 1961[1922]: 4)

Talk of intellectual inheritance behoves us to turn to the people and concepts that created ethnography as we know it today. Ethnography did not emerge in an instant or from the activities of just one person; it was a way of studying humans that was emerging in several contexts in Europe and the United States in the early years of the twentieth century. Ethnography as we know it today developed at a time when there was a shift from a monolithic view of culture and civilisation to the idea of cultural pluralism, and social and cultural relativity. Cultural relativist approaches recognise that distinct groups of humans have their own worldviews and cultural logic, and it is the ethnographer's job to penetrate and understand these particular worldviews. In line with this, in the early 1900s American cultural anthropology began to promulgate ideas of cultural pluralism and cultural relativity. This focus on relativist culture has come to dominate ethnography in an unparalleled way. Yet, culture and cross-cultural understanding is by no means a simple matter:

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is partly so because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought. (Williams, 1988: 87)

Writing on the emergence of the culture concept in anthropology, Friedman also mentions that the 'concept of culture has a long and confusing history':

In ... early anthropology it was associated with the entire repertoire of a 'people', usually very closely associated, that is, [with] a 'people's' defining characteristics. This included everything from technology to religion. In other words culture was simply what was distinctive about others. (1994: 67)

This 'differential culture' model was lodged as a central concept in American anthropology by Franz Boas and in this process the concept of culture was transformed from a monolithic idea that was synonymous with 'high culture' or 'civilisation' to a plural concept related to 'tradition' (Kahn, 1989; 1991). That is, American cultural anthropology set up the conceptual frame which suggests that the important thing about cultures is what separates and distinguishes them, and not what they share.

Boas propagated this pluralistic concept of culture as a ‘counterweight to “race”’, as another way to explain human variation and discrete human divisions without recourse to the odious imaginings of nineteenth-century evolutionism (Kahn, 1989; 1991). In this regard, it was a welcome and well-intentioned paradigm shift. However, it would be unfair to characterise Boas and his heirs as naïvely representing cultures as discrete, separable wholes. They in fact spoke often of cultures borrowing elements from each other (Sahlins, 1999). The point is, nevertheless, that Boas and his intellectual heirs did not intend to critically engage the ‘space’ of cultural overlap. Being cultural relativists, they were really concerned with the spaces containing difference (Stocking, 1968: 199–200; 1974: 17). Here we can see one of the generative factors that created the discrete ethnographic ‘field’ that was a characteristic of much early twentieth-century ethnography.

Early twentieth-century British social anthropology, while ostensibly concerned with the social and not the cultural, nevertheless also had the examination of difference as its reason for being (Friedman, 1994: 68–9). Holistic studies of the differing social, economic, political and cosmological aspects of discrete societies were a feature of the emerging structural–functionalist British ethnography which believed that to understand a society you needed to unlock its underlying and unique features. Thus, in both the American and British traditions, radical alterity was the fetish and the focus; this difference was situated in ‘other’ cultures and societies. The fundamental concept here is *essentialism* in the sense that each culture was defined as possessing a discrete essence (Friedman, 1994: 73).

Malinowski

If the British structural–functionalist tradition of this time saw discrete social structures with their own behavioural and structural logics as the primary target of ethnographic study, then Bronislaw Malinowski is undoubtedly the key figure in this tradition. Malinowski is consistently referred to as the ‘grandfather’ of ethnography, and sections of his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1961[1922]) are often cited in ethnography textbooks as foundational moments in the practice (see O’Reilly, 2005: 8–18, for example). It is worth us having a quick look at this material in order to make two points about the influence of Malinowski and to understand why he looms large in the ethnographic pantheon.

The first thing we can say about Malinowski is that he was systematic in laying out his preferred methods for collecting ethnographic data, and the philosophy behind his approach, such that sections of *Argonauts* have become a baseline ethnographic manifesto or charter for how and why we should conduct our ethnographic research. Malinowski knew that a methodology section was more than list of ‘tools’ used; it was an argument for the use of those tools. The second point to examine in relation

to Malinowski is that ethnography has been a remarkably durable and consistent way of studying humans for nearly a century. This methodological durability from Malinowski's time to now is noteworthy.

The overall purpose of *Argonauts* was to explain the fabled 'Kula Ring', a trade and social network that united islands in the Trobriand Archipelago of eastern Papua New Guinea. In the system described by Malinowski, shell necklaces were traded in a clockwise direction across the archipelago, while shell armbands were traded in an anti-clockwise direction. This trade, or more properly, ceremonial exchange (the shell items did not have a use-value outside this exchange) reinforced social ties and marked status and authority across the dispersed island group. However, the section of *Argonauts* that concerns us here is the introduction, 'The subject, method and scope of this inquiry' (1961[1922]: 1–25). Malinowski begins the introduction by reinforcing the scientific nature of his enquiry. He writes:

Before proceeding to the account of the Kula, it would be well to give a description of the methods used in the collecting of the ethnographic material. The results of scientific research in any branch of learning ought to be presented in a manner absolutely candid and above board. (1961[1922]: 2)

This is a call for 'data transparency', so that the reader can judge the ethnographic evidence on its merits, and is typical of this time period where the desire to be firmly scientific in doing ethnography was pervasive. In addition to the 'candid' presentation of data, Malinowski goes on to make the following point about the necessity to know the role of the ethnographer:

It would be easy to quote works of high repute ... in which wholesale generalisations are laid down before us, and we are not informed at all by what actual experiences the writers have reached their conclusion. No special chapter or paragraph is devoted to describing to us the conditions under which observations were made and information collected. I consider only such ethnographic sources are of unquestionable scientific value, in which we can clearly draw a line between, on the one hand, the results of direct observation and of native statements and interpretations, and on the other, the inferences of the author, based on his common sense and psychological insight. (1961[1922]: 3)

Here we have an early recognition of the importance of gaining both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives in ethnography, long before these terms were to become fashionable. Like the relativists of early American cultural anthropology, Malinowski is interested in the worldviews of discrete human groups and how these are to be translated by 'scientific' ethnographers. The translation of this ethnographic material means systematically gathering it in the 'tribal' realm and taking it off to the 'scribal' realm for expert translation. Malinowski rightly identifies this as a tricky business:

In ethnography, the distance is often enormous between the brute material of information – as it is presented to the student in his own observations, in native statement, in the kaleidoscope of tribal life – and the final authoritative presentation of the results. The ethnographer has to traverse this distance in the laborious years between the moment when he sets foot upon a native beach, and makes his first attempts to get in touch with the natives, and the time he writes down the final version of his results. (1961[1922]: 3–4)

But perhaps sitting above all the concerns about science, data, the role of the ethnographer and insider and outsider perspectives, is the concern from Malinowski that ethnographers find appropriate fields to ply their trade. As I have already said, in ethnography's early days this field was constructed around the notion of difference such that geographic isolation from western influences, cultural 'purity' and exoticism were seen as characteristic of 'good conditions of work':

Indeed, in my first piece of Ethnographic research ... it was not until I was alone in the district that I began to make some headway; and, at any rate, I found out where lay the secret of effective field-work. What is then this ethnographer's magic, by which he is able to evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of tribal life? As usual success can only be obtained by a patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well known scientific principles and not by the discovery of some marvellous short-cut leading to the desired result without effort or trouble. The principles of method can be grouped under three main headings; first of all, naturally, the student must possess real scientific aims, and know the values and criteria of modern ethnography. Secondly, he ought to put himself in good conditions of work, that is, in the main, to live without other white men, right among the natives. Finally, he has to apply a number of special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence. (Malinowski, 1961[1922]: 6)

While, in this evermore connected and diffuse global world system ethnographers no longer fetishise isolation, 'purity' and exoticism with the zeal of earlier ethnographers, and talk of scientific aims is somewhat tempered by scepticism about the 'truth' claims of science, this list of attributes laid out by Malinowski has strong continuities with today's practice. Disciplined scientific aims, undertaking ethnography in situ with the participants and applying appropriate methods to the gathering, analysis and interpretation of ethnographic data are still core values of ethnography today. The more things change the more they stay the same.

To reiterate, this particular origin story of ethnography shows us that, methodologically speaking, in terms of the way we practise ethnography, very little has changed in the last 100 years. Of course, theoretical and epistemological paradigms have risen and fallen, intellectual currents have come and gone, the influence of universities and other research centres producing and defining ethnography has waxed and waned,

and yet ethnography retains its value to social scientists through the very strengths that Malinowski identified way back in his Trobriand days (O'Reilly, 2009: 143). Being with people (or more precisely, being ethnographic with people), in their time and space, in all their strangeness and in their mundane and quotidian flow, is still one of the most valued ways to build a qualitative understanding of the particulars and generalities of the human condition.

This is rather remarkable, given that 'theory' in the social sciences does not emulate the 'test of proof' definition of natural science theories, and that social science theories have come and gone with regularity for the last 100 years. One could be excused for expecting that ethnographic methodology would also have changed frequently. While ethnography is not a solution to understanding all human conditions, there still remains a strong adherence to the belief that we gain valuable insights and knowledge from being with others. While this doesn't necessarily sound critical and scientific, it is *sensible*. We all know that a close and deep experience with some 'other' (regardless of their relative strangeness or familiarity) can be a transforming experience. The 'other' can take the tourist to the extremes of romanticism or ethnocentrism, the 'other' can jade the journalist or appal the international business traveller, and with the right critical tools at our disposal, the 'other' can teach the systematic ethnographer in a way that is hard to match. This is not to say that ethnography is *better* than other social science approaches to constructing knowledge, but the durability of Malinowski's broad approach to ethnographic work suggests that ethnography has created knowledge in a manner that generations of ethnographers see as sufficiently important and reliable to persevere with. Indeed Malinowski might be rather surprised to see that ethnography has not only continued in a form he would recognise, but that it has expanded its application well beyond the anthropological domain.

APPLICATIONS AND ETHICS

Ethnography is employed in countless social and cultural contexts, and is only limited in its application by the desire to understand relationships between humans in particular social and cultural settings. However, ethnographic research is often directed towards solving very particular social problems faced by a community or group of people or institution – this is 'applied ethnographic research' (applied anthropology or applied sociology). Applied ethnographic research is concerned with understanding socio-cultural problems and using these understandings to bring about positive change in communities, institutions or groups. It is by its very nature interventionist, and as such raises questions about a basic ethnographic ethics dictum, 'first, do no harm'. I will not pursue an examination of applied ethnographic domains in this book, but I do want to raise the point that the things that make ethnography valuable to the social scientist are the very same aspects that can render it as a negative experience for the participants in

ethnographic research. It's worth noting that the value ethnographers place on systematically gathering detailed and extensive qualitative data can leave ethnography open to the charge of 'spying'. Indeed, ethnography has been used to gather military and other intelligence on populations and this has happened right from the outset of ethnographic research (see Price, 2000; Kürti et al., 2005). Ethnographic information about humans can be interesting and educative, but also sensitive and potentially dangerous; there is a constant need for ethnographers to manage the ethics of gathering and representing ethnographic information (see Murphy and Dingwall in Atkinson et al., 2007: 339–51).

Ethics – everywhere, every time

At every phase of ethnographic research there is an ethical backdrop. In designing research, ethnographers need to make ethical decisions about its structure, in conducting research ethnographers will make ethical decision after ethical decision as they negotiate the field situation, and as they analyse and write up their data ethnographers will make ethical decisions about what material to include or exclude, and about the evolving issues of privacy and confidentiality that arise in the writing process. Even after ethnographers have departed the field they will have ethical issues to consider about the nature of their departure and ongoing association with their participant group. Ethnographers never really leave a long-term field experience – they probably haven't done their job as a participant observer if they are able to completely sever ties after 12 months or more of living with a group of people. The pervasiveness of ethical issues in ethnographic research means that at all stages ethnographers need to be aware of the range of possible consequences of their actions. This issue is perhaps at its most pointed in the act of participant observation, when ethnographers are with participants in their everyday lives, and as such we will devote more to this issue in Chapter 4. While ethnographers can only act in the present, making decisions on the basis of what is going on around them, they must also have an eye on the past and the future in relation to their involvement. The use of ethnography for questionable purposes has a long history. We need to critically examine this history in order to minimise the potential for it to happen in the future.

SUMMARY

Ethnography is a direct, qualitative social science research practice that involves ethnographers doing fieldwork with human groups, societies or cultures, experiencing the daily ebb and flow of life of a participant group. Ethnography is also a form of non-fiction writing that is based on systematically gathered data from fieldwork and

other relevant secondary sources. From the combination of research and writing ethnographers build theories about the human condition.

By undertaking participant observation ethnographers are both guiding research and a tool of the research. Ethnography is a whole of body experience. Because of this, it is important for ethnographers to be reflexive; to understand and manage their influence on the research process. A methodologically reflexive ethnography allows for the dissolution of the putative opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, and can help to resolve the apparent contradiction of participant observation.

Ethnographers employ methods in the manner of tools, yet need to be able to explain why they prefer one particular toolkit over another. A strong philosophical and intellectual justification of one's methods defines a good ethnographic methodology.

Ethnography has well and truly 'escaped' from anthropology and qualitative sociology, and is finding favour in many areas, and yet there is remarkable methodological continuity in ethnography from the time of Malinowski and Boas to the present day.

Ethnography doesn't have an ethical element – ethnography is an ethical commitment from the very outset, and through all phases of ethnographic research and writing. All ethnographers must deal with the responsibilities and obligations that go with forming close human contacts and contracts.

QUESTIONS

Ethnography has been characterised in a reasonably straightforward manner in this chapter in line with the idea that such a complicated subject matter (the human condition) and the variety of histories and experiences individual ethnographers bring to their research will mean that any rule-bound definition of ethnography is unlikely to reflect the diverse reality of practice. Nevertheless, we can still talk of core values in the ethnographic approach. What attributes do you think are essential to ethnography? Is it necessary to do participant observation to be a 'proper' ethnographer?

Isn't it a common-sense proposition that being with people is the best way to understand them? Why do we need to devote effort to building up a justificatory methodology every time we do ethnographic research?

What has reflexivity got to do with improving the validity of ethnographic research? Isn't the acknowledgement that there is a subjective element in ethnography tantamount to saying ethnography is more of an art than it is a science?

What is Bronislaw Malinowski's ethnographic legacy? Why is he seen as the grandfather of ethnographic research? What are the key contributions of Franz Boas to the way we construct ethnographic research?

What do you understand intersubjectivity to mean? What about it is considered central to ethnographic research?

How do national anthropological and sociological associations (such as the American Anthropological Association or the United Kingdom's Association of Social Anthropologists) deal with the tension between universal human rights and cultural relativism?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Bernard's *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods* (2006) and LeCompte et al.'s *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews and Questionnaires* (1999) provide in-depth characterisations of ethnography and ethnographic methods that will assist in your own understanding of ethnography. Brewer's *Ethnography* (2000, especially Chapter 2) provides a useful expansion on our discussion of the methodological and intellectual heritage that informs ethnography and will aid this debate. *The Handbook of Ethnography* (Atkinson et al., 2007) and *The Sage Handbook of Fieldwork* (Hobbs and Wright, 2006) both provide an informative selection of articles on ethnography and fieldwork. See Marcus's *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (1998, Chapter 8) for an expanded discussion of reflexivity. O'Reilly's *Ethnographic Methods* (2005) and Stocking's *The Shaping of American Anthropology* (1974) are useful in addressing the question related to Malinowski and Boas. O'Reilly's *Key Concepts in Ethnography* (2009) provides a series of short, no-nonsense entries on most of the main issues in ethnography. For those of a more sociological persuasion, Alan Bryman's *Ethnography* (2001) is worth a read. To understand more about conducting ethical long-term, participant observation ethnographies, David Calvey's *Covert Research: The Art, Politics and Ethics of Undercover Fieldwork* (2017) gives insight into executing fair and valid covert research. Visit the internet pages of some national anthropological and sociological associations and examine their ethics charters or statements. There are also a range of online journals dedicated to ethnography (such as *Ethnography* or the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, both SAGE) that can provide a wealth of resources. For an introduction to why ethnography is being put in the foreground and why it is socially important, see either Adams (2013) *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina* or www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/16mlCRBLD67XtL4hlMMHdF7/ethnography-what-is-it-and-why-do-we-need-it.

BEING ETHNOGRAPHIC

It is significant that the histories of human and natural sciences have combined to form the social sciences. Knowing your past can help you to move forward!