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Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes,  
2nd edition.

Chicago: U Chicago P, 2011.

## 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 the lives of others. In so doing, the researcher creates an accumulating written record of these observations and experiences. These two interconnected activities comprise the core of ethnographic research: firsthand participation in some initially unfamiliar social world and the production of written accounts of that world that draw upon such participation.

However, ethnographers differ in how they see the primary benefits of participant observation and in how they go about representing in written form what they have seen and experienced in the field. How we understand and present processes of writing and analyzing ethnographic fieldnotes in this and subsequent chapters reflects our distinctive theoretical orienta-

tions to these differences. Here, we want to present briefly our core theoretical assumptions and commitments; we will further specify and elaborate these assumptions and commitments as we address the processes of writing and analyzing fieldnotes in subsequent chapters.

We approach ethnography as a way to understand and describe social worlds, drawing upon the theoretical traditions of symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology. Common to both these traditions is the view that social worlds are interpreted worlds: "Social reality is an interpreted world, not a literal world, always under symbolic construction" (Altheide and Johnson 1994:489). These social worlds also are created and sustained in and through interaction with others, when interpretations of meanings are central processes. Symbolic interaction, insisting "that human action takes place always in a situation that confronts the actor and that the actor acts on the basis of *defining this situation* that confronts him" (Blumer 1997:4), focuses on "the activities of people in face-to-face relations" as these affect and relate to definitions of the situation (Rock 2001:26). The result is a distinctive concern with *process*, with sequences of interaction and interpretation that render meanings and outcomes both unpredictable and emergent. Ethnomethodology, inspired, in part, by Schutz's (1962, 1964) analyses of the taken-for-granted meanings and assumptions that make interaction possible, can be understood as proposing, in effect, "that society consists of the ceaseless, ever-unfolding transactions through which members engage one another and the objects, topics, and concerns that they find relevant" (Pollner and Emerson 2001:120). Such transactions depend and draw upon a number of "generic processes and practices," including unarticulated "background understandings," a variety of distinctive "interpretive practices," and members' processes of "practical reasoning" (Pollner and Emerson 2001:122). These general emphases on interpretation and interaction, on the social construction and understandings of meaning in different groups and situations, underlie our approaches to ethnographic participation, description and inscription, and the specific implications we draw from these processes for writing fieldnotes.<sup>1</sup>

## 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 others' lives in order to observe and understand them. But given our emphasis on interpretation, 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 and to experience events and meanings in ways that approximate *members' experiences*.<sup>2</sup> 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 activities they are seeking to understand (Diamond 1992; Lynch 1985; Wacquant 2004) 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 might 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.

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.<sup>3</sup> No field researcher can be a completely neutral, detached observer, who is outside and independent of the observed phenomena (Emerson and Pollner 2001). 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). But, 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, often 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> But "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 might provide 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 they reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place. For example, in a village where social relations depend heavily on kinship ties, people might adopt a fieldworker into a family and assign her a kinship term that then designates her rights and responsibilities toward others. Hence, rather than detracting from what the fieldworker can learn, firsthand relations with those studied might provide clues to understanding the more subtle, implicit underlying assumptions that are often not readily accessible through observation or interview methods alone.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, rather than viewing reactivity as a defect to be carefully controlled or eliminated, the ethnographer needs to become sensitive to, and perceptive about, 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 mar-

ginal observer roles that have long held sway as the implicit ideal in field research. Many contemporary ethnographers assume highly participatory roles (Adler and Adler 1987) 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 engages in local activities and is socialized to, and acquires empathy for, local ways of acting and feeling.

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

Yet, even with intensive participation, the ethnographer never becomes a member in the same sense that those who are "naturally" in the setting are members. 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, rather, as objects of possible research interest and 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.<sup>7</sup>

## THE COMPLEXITIES OF DESCRIPTION

In writing about one's experiences and observations deriving from intense and involved participation, the ethnographer creates *descriptive* fieldnotes. But writing descriptive accounts of experiences and observations is not simply a process of accurately capturing as closely as possible observed reality, of "putting into words" overheard talk and witnessed activities. To view the writing of descriptions as essentially 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 similar or even the same situations and events are both possible and valuable.

Consider, for example, the following descriptions of express checkout lines in three Los Angeles supermarkets, each written by a different student researcher. 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 checkout counter and players in the lines—checkers, baggers, other shoppers—and of at least some of the grocery items being handled; and all attend closely to some minute details of behavior in express lines. Yet, each of these descriptions is written from a different point of view; each shapes and presents what happens on the express line in different ways. In part, differences arise because the researchers observed different people and occasions; but differences also reflect both distinctive orientations and positionings taken by the observers, different ways of presenting the observer’s self in “writing the other” (Warren 2000), and different writing choices in creating and framing different kinds of “stories” in representing what they observed happening.

#### 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 in 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 woman and three men in front of her in line.] . . . 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 another’s than they did about body location).

This account gives a central place to the cashier, first providing a description of her physical appearance and apparel, then offering a summary of her procedure for handling customers. It also focuses on the close sequencing of purchase encounters, noting that the pink-shirted man has moved into position to be the “next served”—within a foot of the woman in front of him—even before she had received her change. Indeed, this description highlights *spatial* aspects of the grocery line, contrasting in an aside the care taken to separate grocery items and the seeming disregard of personal space as one shopper moves in to succeed an about-to-depart one.

In contrast, in the following excerpt, the observer focuses on her own position and experience in line, highlighting her own social and interactional concerns in relating to those immediately in front of and behind her.

#### 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 Gewürztraminer, 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 [in the ten-items-or-less line]. 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.

This observer describes on a moment-by-moment basis placing her groceries on the checkout counter and signaling their separation from those of the

person in front of her and then from those of the person behind her. This style of description highlights her own thoughts and feelings as she engages in these routine activities; thus, while she treats space as an issue, she does so by noting its implications for self and feelings (e.g., avoiding "a large expansive move across the items that weren't mine").

In the third excerpt, the writer shifts focus from self to others, highlighting the actions of one particularly outgoing character that transforms the express line into a minicommunity:

#### 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."

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.

In these notes, the observer picks up on and accents the informal talk among customers waiting in the line. He spotlights one particularly outgoing character who comments to a store employee on the meaning of an abandoned shopping cart, expresses sympathy to the man in front of him for having to wait so long just to buy a loaf of bread (a move that this customer, in turn, uses to make a direct but careful criticism of the cashier's speed), and then chats with the cashier. He represents this express line as a place of ongoing exchanges between those in line, which draw in a passing store employee and culminate in interactions between this character and the checker and the bagger.

Writing fieldnote descriptions, then, is not a matter of passively copying down "facts" about "what happened." Rather, these descriptive accounts select and emphasize different features and actions while ignoring and marginalizing others. Some fieldworkers habitually attend to aspects of people and situations that others do not, closely describing dress, or hair, or demeanor, or speech hesitations that others ignore or recount in less detail. In this way, descriptions differ in what their creators note and write down as "significant," and, more implicitly, in what they note but ignore as "not significant" and in what other possibly significant things they may have missed altogether. But differences between fieldnote descriptions result not simply from different ways of selecting or filtering observed and experienced events; different fieldnote accounts also invoke and rely on different lenses to interpret, frame, and represent these matters. Descriptive fieldnotes, in this sense, are products of active processes of interpretation and sense-making that frame or structure not only what is written but also how it is written. Description, then, relies on interpretive/constructive processes that can give different fieldnotes distinctive shapes and feel.

Inevitably, then, *fieldnote descriptions of even the "same event," let alone the same kind of event, will differ, depending upon the choices, positioning, personal sensitivities, and interactional concerns of the observers.* By way of example, consider the following fieldnote accounts of initial portions of an intake in-

interview with a client named Emily, a Ugandan woman with a seven-year-old child, who sought a restraining order against her husband, written by two student interns who were working together in a domestic violence legal aid clinic helping people fill out applications for temporary restraining orders.<sup>8</sup> In this interview, the first intern elicited and entered on a computer form a court-required narrative "declaration" detailing a recent "specific incident of abuse"; the second acted as a novice/observer sitting beside and providing emotional support to the client.

#### CB's Account

[Paul, a more experienced staff member, tells Emily:] You indicated on your intake form that the most recent abuse was on April 1. Why don't you tell Caitlin what happened on that day? Emily says, He says I owe him money for our marriage, that my family never paid the dowry. Paul presses, but what happened on this day? He called me "bitch," she says, and "whore." I type these two words. She continues, he had a bottle in his hand and was trying to hit me, but my brother and his friend grabbed his arm and took the bottle from him. As she says this, she raises her arm up as if there is a bottle in it, and then acts out the part of her husband by raising her arms up and flailing them. I ask, a glass bottle or a plastic bottle? Emily stutters, "G-g-glass." (It seems like she has to think back to the incident to remember more clearly.) I write, "RP [respondent] was trying to strike me with a glass bottle, but my brother grabbed hold of his arm and took the bottle away."

Emily continues, they took him away in a car and locked me in the house. Paul asks, what provoked this incident? Emily says, I told him I don't want marriage anymore, and he go berserk. Paul clarifies, so you told him you did not want the marriage to continue, and that made him angry? Emily agrees. She says that she went to the police two days later, and they gave her an emergency protective order, which Paul asks to see. He looks at it with squinted eyes (the paper does not look like what we usually see), and all of a sudden, they open up again. You were in Uganda at this time? he asks. Yes, Emily replies. Our families were together to try to make good our marriage.

#### NL's Account

We are ready for the declaration. Caitlin asks E how long she has been married to RP. We were together for 9 years, she says in a low voice, but married for 4. Caitlin then asks her to tell us about her most recent incident of abuse which according to the paperwork she filled out occurred on April 1st. He tried to hit me she said. Paul then says, right with a bottle like you told me outside. What happened? Her voice gets loud again as she says that her family thought that she and RP should talk about their marriage at their house (at this point I am thinking that she is talking about her house in Cali-

fornia). Paul asks, whose family and friends were there? Were they yours, his, or both? She quickly responds, His friends. Paul asks, so your friends weren't there. She pauses for a brief second and says my friends. Paul asks, so both your friends were there? She nods. Looking at Caitlin, then back at Paul, she tells us that RP got angry when she asked for a divorce. He tried to hit her with a glass bottle. She grabs my arm and looks straight at me as she tells me that "brothers" grab his arms, hold him down, and take him away in his car. "Whose brother?" asks Paul. She says that it was her brother and his friend. They locked me in the house so that RP wouldn't hurt me, she says as she gently grabs my hand once more.

She pulls out a form from her pile of papers, and looks at it, saying that the police gave it to her two days later. What is it? Paul asks. She looks at it for a few seconds, and I look at it from over her shoulder. I look back at Paul and ask him if it is an emergency protective order. She looks up and says, Yes that's what it is! A—A—She motions her hand in my direction as she tries to find the word that I had said. Paul looks at it and says that it is like a Ugandan equivalent to an emergency protective order (now I understand that this incident occurred in Uganda).

These excerpts include many common features. Both accounts make clear that the incident arose from family differences over the client's marriage, that she reported her husband as trying to hit her with a glass bottle, that her brother and a friend restrained him from doing so, and that she went to the police and obtained an emergency protective order. In addition, both accounts reveal that staff had initially assumed that these events took place in California but changed their interpretation upon realizing the police restraining order had been issued in Uganda.

But the descriptions also differ on a number of counts. First, there are differences in the substance of what gets included in each account. For example, CB reports Emily's complaint that "he called me 'bitch' and 'whore'" and that this incident was provoked when "I told him I don't want marriage anymore, and he go berserk." While NL mentions neither of these incidents, she reports that the husband was restrained and taken away by both her brother and his friend and that she was locked in the house to protect her from her enraged husband. Second, there are differences in detail and meaning in what is reported about specific topics. For example, CB indirectly quotes Emily as saying, "He says I owe him money for our marriage, that my family never paid the dowry"; NL does not indicate this specific complaint but, rather, indirectly quotes Emily as saying, "Her family thought that she and RP should talk about their marriage at their house." Third, the accounts reflect different decisions about whether to simply report what was deter-



mined to be a "fact" or a specific "outcome" or to detail the processes of questioning and answering through which that "fact" or "outcome" was decided. CB, for example, highlights the specific moment of understanding by reporting Paul's question about the emergency protection order, "You were in Uganda at the time?" NL, in contrast, recounts this process in detail, describing the client and her own initial uncertainty about just what this piece of paper is, a similar query from Paul ("what is it?"), his conclusion that "it is like a Ugandan equivalent to an emergency protective order," and her own realization that this whole incident "occurred in Uganda."

While many descriptive writing choices are conscious and deliberate, others reflect more subtle, implicit processes of researcher involvement in, and orientation to, ongoing scenes and interaction. Here, CB was responsible for turning the client's words into a legally adequate account for purposes of the declaration; her descriptions show an orientation toward content and narrative coherence, and she notes at several points her decisions about what to enter on the computer ("bitch," "whore"; "RP was trying to strike me with a glass bottle, but my brother grabbed hold of his arm and took the bottle away"). NL, in contrast, had no formal responsibilities for conducting the interview and becomes involved as a sympathetic supporter; her notes seem attuned the client's emotions ("low voice") and bodily movements (handling the emergency protection paper), and she reports two particularly stressful moments in the interaction when the client "gently grabs" her arm or hand. While both researchers were present at the "same event," each participated in a different fashion, and these different modes of involvement lead to subtle, but significant, differences in how they wrote about what occurred.

### INSCRIBING EXPERIENCED/OBSERVED REALITIES

Descriptive fieldnotes, then, 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 inscriptions and can be reconsulted."

As inscriptions, fieldnotes are products of, and reflect conventions for, *transforming* witnessed events, persons, and places into words on paper.

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* events in particular ways, "missing" other ways that such 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 prefixed questions, often reducing these lived experiences 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. This means that 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 audio and/or video 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). Yet 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 decisions 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.<sup>9</sup> In sum, even those means

of recording that researchers claim as being 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 fieldnotes 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 or even the only access. 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, and 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."<sup>11</sup>

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. The ethnographer writes particular fieldnotes in ways that are not predetermined or prespecified; hence, fieldnotes are not collections or samples 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 interpretive-interactionist 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 processes; (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; and (4) such fieldnotes should detail the social and interactional processes that make up people's everyday lives and activities.

### *Connecting "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 the interactions and relations with others that comprise these methods; *what* the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with *how* she finds it out (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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, rather, 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 that focus on others' behavior without systematic regard for what such behavior means to those engaged in it, we see ethnographic fieldnotes as a distinctive method for uncovering and depicting local interpretations or indigenous meanings. Ultimately, the participating ethnographer seeks to get close to those studied in order to understand and write about what their experiences and activities *mean to them*.<sup>14</sup>

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 1998) that seek to let members "speak in their own voices," can avoid researcher mediation in its entirety. But even in these in-

stances, researchers continue to select what to observe, to pose questions, or to frame the nature and purpose of the interview more generally, in ways that 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*. In part, such documentation limits distortions of memory loss in recalling more distant events. But furthermore, continuing time in the field tends to dilute the insights generated by 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, rather, in a constant, continuing process in which she builds new insight and understanding upon prior insights and understandings. Researchers should document how these emergent processes and stages unfold 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 luminous images (Katz 2001c, 2002) 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, discipline, and theoretical concerns. 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 (Emerson 2009). 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 also 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, and 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 sees and understands 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 participating and writing but also discount the latter as a central component of fieldwork. "Doing" and "writing" should not be seen as separate and distinct activities, but, rather, as dialectically related, interdependent, and mutually constitutive 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 about how to characterize that writing and its relationship 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. Richardson (1990), Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), and other sociologists describe the core of ethnographic writing as "narrating." And Clifford (1986) and Marcus (1986) use the more abstract term "textualization" to refer to the generic processes whereby ethnography "translates experience into text" (Clifford 1986:115).

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 that distorts the actual experience of the interaction. 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 that 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, and 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 and, yet, differ from them in important ways. 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 that the ethnographer makes and the stories that 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.

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### In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes

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Ethnographers ultimately produce a 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.