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## Writing Fieldnotes I: At the Desk, Creating Scenes on a Page

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After hours participating in, observing, and perhaps jotting notes about ongoing events in a social setting, most fieldworkers return to their desks and their computers to begin to write up their observations into full fieldnotes. At this point, writing becomes the explicit focus and primary activity of ethnography: Momentarily out of the field, the ethnographer settles at her desk, or other preferred spot, to write up a detailed entry of her day's experiences and observations that will preserve as much as possible what she noticed and now feels is significant. At first glance, such writing up might appear to be a straightforward process to the fieldworker. It might seem that with sufficient time and energy, she can simply record her observations with little attention to her writing process. While having enough time and energy to get her memories on the page is a dominant concern, we suggest that the fieldworker can benefit by considering several kinds of basic writing choices.

To view writing fieldnotes simply as a matter of putting on paper what field researchers have heard and seen suggests that it is a transparent process. In this view, ethnographers "mirror" observed reality in their notes; they aim to write without elaborate rhetoric, intricate metaphors, or complex, suspenseful narration. Writing a detailed entry, this view suggests, requires only a sharp memory and conscientious effort.

A contrasting view insists that all writing, even seemingly straightfor-

ward, descriptive writing, is a construction. Through his choice of words, sentence style, and methods of organization, a writer presents a version of the world. As a selective and creative activity, writing always functions more as a filter than a mirror reflecting the "reality" of events. Ethnographers, however, only gradually have deepened their awareness and appreciation of this view; they see how even "realist" ethnographies are constructions that rely upon a variety of stylistic conventions. Van Maanen (1988:47) draws ethnographers' attention to a shift from "studied neutrality" in writing to a construction through narrating conventions. He identified studied neutrality as a core convention in realist ethnography; through this convention, the narrator "poses as an impersonal conduit, who unlike missionaries, administrators, journalists, or unabashed members of the culture themselves, passes on more-or-less objective data in a measured intellectual style that is uncontaminated by personal bias, political goals, or moral judgment" (1988:47). The increasing awareness of writing as a construction, whether in realist or other styles, has led to closer examination of how ethnographers write.

While these analyses of ethnographic writing focus primarily on completed ethnographic texts, fieldnotes also draw on a variety of writing conventions. Ethnographers construct their fieldnote entries from selectively recalled and accented moments. Whether it be an incident, event, routine, interaction, or visual image, ethnographers recreate each moment from selected details and sequences that they remember or have jotted down: words, gestures, body movements, sounds, background setting, and so on. While writing, they further highlight certain actions and statements more than others in order to portray their sense of an experience. In other words, ethnographers create scenes on a page through highly selective and partial recountings of observed and re-evoked details. These scenes—that is, moments re-created on a page—represent ethnographers' perceptions and memories of slices of life, enhanced or blurred by their narrating and descriptive skills in writing. An ethnographer's style of writing (whether describing, recounting/narrating, or analyzing) inevitably draws on conventions in order to express and communicate intelligibly to readers, whether they be simply the ethnographer herself or others.

This chapter explores the relations between an ethnographer's attention to people's sayings and doings, processes for recalling these moments, and writing options for presenting and analyzing them. Of course, no writing techniques enable an ethnographer to write up life exactly as it happened or even precisely as she remembers it. At best, the ethnographer "re-cre-

ates" her memories as written scenes that authentically depict people's lives through selected, integrated details. But in mastering certain descriptive and narrating techniques, she can write up her notes more easily in that first dash of getting everything down; and she can depict more effectively those scenes that she intuitively selects as especially significant. Whether she writes up key scenes first or goes back to them to fill in details, more explicit awareness and exploration of writing strategies enables her to more vividly and fully create those scenes on the page.

In this chapter, we focus on how ethnographers go about the complex tasks of remembering, elaborating, filling in, and commenting upon fieldnotes in order to produce a full written account of witnessed scenes and events. We begin by discussing the process of writing up full fieldnotes as ethnographers move from the field to desk and turn their jottings into detailed entries. Next, we explain various writing strategies that ethnographers often draw on as they depict remembered slices of life in fieldnotes and organize them in sequences using conventions of narrating and describing. Although we discuss depicting and organizing strategies separately, in actual fieldnote writing, one does both at the same time. Finally, we discuss several analytic options for reflecting on fieldnotes through writing *asides* and/or more extended *commentaries* in the midst of or at the end of an entry. Whereas strategies for "getting the scene on the page" create a sense of immediacy that allows readers—whether self or others—to envision a social world, analytic strategies explore the ethnographer's understandings about that world but do not portray it. Thus, these strategies complement each other, assisting the ethnographer both to recall events and also to reflect on them.

Throughout the chapter, we make suggestions and offer examples in order to increase fieldworkers' awareness of their options for writing. For example, first-time fieldworkers typically have little difficulty in writing snippets about brief interactions; however, they are often uncertain about how to write about more complex, key scenes by sequencing interactions, creating characters, reporting dialogue, and contextualizing an action or incident with vivid, sensory details. Though we offer many concrete suggestions and examples, we do not attempt to prescribe a "correct" style or to cover all the writing options an ethnographer might use. Yet, we do suggest that one's writing style influences how one perceives what can be written. Learning to envision scenes as detailed writing on a page is as much a commitment to a lively style of writing as it is to an intellectual honesty in recording events fully and accurately.

## MOVING FROM FIELD TO DESK

In this section, we discuss several practical issues that surround the shift of context from the field to desk (or other preferred writing spot). Here we answer some of the novice ethnographer's most basic questions: How much time should one allow for writing fieldnotes? How long should one stay in the field before writing fieldnotes? What is the most effective timing for writing fieldnotes after returning from the field? What writing tools and equipment does one need? How does the goal of "getting it down on the page," quickly before forgetting, shape one's writing style?

Writing requires a block of concentrated time. Sometimes, incidents that span a few minutes can take the ethnographer several hours to write up; he tries to recall just who did and said what, in what order, and to put all that into words and coherent paragraphs. Indeed, an ethnographic maxim holds that every hour spent observing requires an additional hour to write up.

Over time, fieldworkers evolve a rhythm that balances time spent in the field and time writing notes. In some situations, the field researcher can put a cap on time devoted to observing in order to allow a substantial write-up period on leaving the field. Limiting time in the field in this way lessens the likelihood that the fieldworker will forget what happened or become overwhelmed by the prospect of hours of composing fieldnotes. We recommend that beginning ethnographers, when possible, leave the field after three to four hours in order to begin writing fieldnotes.

In other situations, the fieldworker might find it more difficult to withdraw for writing. Anthropologists working in other cultures generally spend whole days observing and devote evenings to writing. Field researchers who fill roles as regular workers must put in a full workday before leaving to write notes. In both cases, longer stretches of observation require larger blocks of write-up time and perhaps different strategies for making note writing more manageable. For example, once having described basic routines and daily rhythms in the first sets of notes, the ethnographer who spends hours in the field might focus subsequent notes on significant incidents that occurred throughout the day. At this stage, longer periods spent in the field might in fact prove advantageous, allowing greater opportunities for observing incidents of interest.

Alternatively, the field researcher with regular workday responsibilities might find it useful to designate certain hours for observing and taking jottings, giving priority to these observations in writing up full fieldnotes. Varying these designated observation periods allows exploration of different

patterns of activity throughout the day. Of course, while using this strategy, the fieldworker should still write notes on important incidents that occur at other times.

More crucial than how long the ethnographer spends in the field is the timing of writing up fieldnotes. Over time, people forget and simplify experience; notes composed several days after observation tend to be summarized and stripped of rich, nuanced detail. Hence, we strongly encourage researchers to sit down and write full fieldnotes as soon as possible after the day's (or night's) research is done. Writing fieldnotes *immediately* after leaving the setting produces fresher, more detailed recollections that harness the ethnographer's involvement with and excitement about the day's events. Indeed, writing notes immediately on leaving the field offers a way of releasing the weight of what the researcher has just experienced. It is easier to focus one's thoughts and energies on the taxing work of reviewing, remembering, and writing. In contrast, those who put off writing fieldnotes report that with the passage of time, the immediacy of lived experience fades, and writing fieldnotes becomes a burdensome, even dreaded, experience.

Often, however, it is impossible for an ethnographer to find time to write up notes immediately upon leaving the field. Long or late hours, for example, often leave him too tired to write notes. Under these circumstances, it is best to get a good night's sleep and turn to writing up first thing in the morning. Sometimes, even this rest is impossible: A village event might last through several days and nights, confronting the anthropological researcher with a choice between sleeping outside with the villagers or taking time out periodically to sleep and write notes.

When a researcher has been in the field for a long period and has limited time immediately afterward for writing full fieldnotes, she has several alternatives. First, she could make extensive, handwritten jottings about the day's events, relying on the details of these notes to postpone writing full fieldnotes, often for some time.<sup>1</sup> Second, she could dictate fieldnotes into a tape recorder. One can "talk fieldnotes" relatively quickly and can dictate while driving home from a field setting. But while dictation preserves vivid impressions and observations immediately on leaving the field, dictated notes eventually have to be transcribed, a time-consuming, expensive project. And in the meantime, the field researcher does not have ready access to these dictated notes for review or for planning her next steps in the field.

When writing immediately or soon after returning from the site, the fieldworker should go directly to computer or notebook, not talking with

intimates about what happened until full fieldnotes are completed. Such "what happened today" talk can rob note writing of its psychological immediacy and emotional release; writing the day's events becomes a stale recounting rather than a cathartic outpouring.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnographers use a variety of different means to write up full notes. While the typewriter provided the standard tool for many classic ethnographers, some handwrote their full notes on pads or in notebooks. Contemporary ethnographers strongly prefer a computer with a standard word-processing program. Typing notes with a word-processing program not only has the advantage of greater speed (slow typists will soon notice substantial gains in speed and accuracy) but also allows for the modification of words, phrases, and sentences in the midst of writing without producing messy, hard-to-read pages. Fieldnotes written on the computer are also easily reordered; it is possible, for example, to insert incidents or dialogue subsequently recalled at the appropriate place. Finally, composing with a word-processing program facilitates coding and sorting fieldnotes as one later turns to writing finished ethnographic accounts.

In sitting down at a desk or computer, the ethnographer's most urgent task or writing purpose is to record experiences while they are still fresh. Thus, ethnographers write hurriedly, dashing words "down on the page." Their notes read like an outpouring, not like polished, publishable excerpts. Knowing that a memorable event fades and gets confused with following ones as time passes, a fieldworker writes using whatever phrasing and organization seems most accessible, convenient, and doable at the time. He need not worry about being consistent, and he can shift from one style, one topic, or one thought to another as quickly as the fingers can type. In that initial writing, the field researcher concentrates on a remembered scene more than on words and sentences. If the ethnographer focuses too soon on wording, she will produce an "internal editor," distracting her attention from the evoked scene and stopping her outpouring of memory. The goal is to get as much down on paper in as much detail and as quickly as possible, holding off any evaluation and editing until later. But in this process, the ethnographer tries to strike a balance between describing fully and getting down the essentials of what happened. One student explains her struggle to describe an incident:

Here I'm going to stop and go back later because I know what I'm trying to say, but it isn't coming out. . . . So there's a little more to it than that, but I have to think about how to say it, so I'm just going to leave it. When I write my fieldnotes, I just try to get it all down, and I go back through and edit, take time

away from it and then come back and see if that's really what I meant to say or if I could say that in a better way, a clearer way.

Fieldworkers may write down all the words that come to mind and later choose a more evocative and appropriate phrasing. Many writers produce a first round quickly, knowing that they will make additions, polish wording, or reorganize paragraphs at some other time. Thus, in that first rush of writing, finding the absolutely best word or phrase to persuade a future audience should not be of such concern that it slows down the flow of getting words to paper.

Beginning ethnographers should not be surprised to experience ambivalence in writing fieldnotes. On the one hand, the outpouring of thoughts and impressions as the writer reviews and reexperiences the excitement and freshness of the day's events might bring expressive release and reflective insight. Having seen and heard intriguing, surprising things all day long, the fieldworker is finally able to sit down, think about, and relive events while transforming them into a permanent record. On the other hand, after a long, exciting, or draining stint in the field, a busy schedule might inhibit finding enough time to write up notes, turning the writing-up process into an intrusive, humdrum burden. This experience is more likely to occur after the ethnographer has spent weeks or months in the field; writing notes more selectively and/or focusing on new and unexpected developments not described in previous writings can provide some relief to these feelings.

## RECALLING IN ORDER TO WRITE

In sitting down to compose fieldnotes in a fluid, "get it down quickly" fashion, the fieldworker seeks to recall in as much detail as possible what he observed and experienced earlier that day. This process of recalling in order to write involves reimagining and replaying in one's mind scenes and events that marked the day, actively repicturing and reconstructing these witnessed events in order to get them down on a page. Sometimes replaying and reconstructing are keyed to jottings or lists of topics written earlier; at others, the ethnographer works only with "headnotes" and other memories to reconstruct detailed accounts of the day's events. In both cases, the descriptions that result must make sense as a logical, sensible series of incidents and experiences, even if only to an audience made up of the fieldworker himself.

Ethnographers often use a mix of standard practices for recalling the

day's events in order to organize and compose detailed, comprehensive fieldnotes. One strategy is to trace one's own activities and observations in chronological order, recalling noteworthy events in the sequence in which one observed and experienced them. Another strategy is to begin with some "high point" or an incident or event that stands out as particularly vivid or important, to detail that event as thoroughly as possible, and then to consider in some topical fashion other significant events, incidents, or exchanges. Or, the ethnographer can focus more systematically on incidents related to specific topics of interest in order to recall significant events. Often ethnographers combine or alternate between strategies, proceeding back and forth over time in stream-of-consciousness fashion.

As noted, ethnographers often compose full fieldnotes without any prior writings, working strictly from memory and the recollection of what was seen and heard in the field. In other cases, they can work from jottings made in the field or soon after. Some ethnographers also find it useful, on moving to the desk in preparation for writing, to write up a list of topics—brief references to key events that unfolded that day or to the sequence of action that marked a key incident—using the list to get started on and to organize notes on these events. In these later instances, the fieldworker fills in, extends, and integrates these abbreviated bits and pieces of information by visualizing and replaying the events, incidents, and experiences they refer to. Jottings and lists of topics, then, can anchor the writing process, providing links back to the field; the fieldworker simply turns to the start of that day's jottings or topics and moves through in the order recorded, filling in and making connections between segments on the basis of memory.

To explore the process of using memory and abbreviated writings to construct full fieldnotes, we consider how fieldworkers turn brief jottings into extended texts. Looking at the movement back and forth between jottings and the fuller, richer recollection of events in the final fieldnotes provides a grounded way of examining the generic processes of recalling in order to write. Here, we return to the two illustrations of jottings provided in chapter 2, examining how each was used to produce sets of full fieldnotes.

### 1. "Too Many Sexual References"

#### A. Jottings

Sexual Harassment

Andy—too many sexual references

PE frisbee game "This team has too many sausages"

Reynaldo—(Carlos—in jail for stealing bicycle, 18 yrs old) [circled]

Laura—Wants to propose sexual harassment forms

Thinking about detention for these students but already too much work for keeping track of tardies/truancies/tendencies

#### B. Full Fieldnotes

Next Laura goes off topic and mentions that some of the students keep making sexual comments that are "inappropriate." She says that Andy is particularly bad and recounts an instance where the class was out on the PE field and she split the class into teams for Ultimate Frisbee. I split the boys and girls evenly but you know how the girls tend to just switch teams so they can be together. Most of the boys ended up on one team, and the other team, the team with Andy, had a lot of boys. Andy says, "Jezz, this team has too many cocks!" right in front of me! Then Laura focuses on Reynaldo. Someone used lotion at my desk and it squirted out onto the table in front of my desk. Reynaldo comes in and says, Wow, somebody had an accident over here! Don't worry, Laura, I'll clean it up for you. And he did, he took some Kleenex and cleaned it up, but still, do you really think that it's appropriate to mention to me, someone in her 50s, that someone excreted ejaculatory fluid on my desk?! I mean, I'm in my 50s, I have three sons, and I have a Master's degree!

The other teachers nod their heads and agree this is wrong. Marie says, I feel exactly the same way. She wanted to say something else but Ms. Diaz interrupts her: The other day I was trying to teach Jerry something and he yelled at me, "Get off my nuts!" Can you believe that? The principal mentions, Oh yeah, I remember you came down to tell me about that. Laura then says, We need a system to control this. I think that we should type out a statement that shows exactly what they said and have the student who said it sign and date it. If they have three of those, we punish them somehow. The teachers debate the merits of this system and ask what kinds of punishment they could realistically enforce. Laura says they could give students detention. Rose says, Yeah, but look at how much paperwork we already have to do for the students who are already in detention, so you want to make more work in general for all of us? No, we can't give the students detention, it'd have to be something else. In the end, there is a consensus that this system is good but has kinks to work out. (The punishment of the students is contingent on the workload of the staff.)

Note the contrasts in content, texture, and comprehensibility between the initial jottings and the full fieldnotes. The fieldworker uses the references to Andy and Reynaldo to recollect and reconstruct the teacher's accounts of inappropriate "sexual references" recently made by each boy. Nothing is written here from the jotting about Carlos being in jail for stealing a bicycle; presumably one of the staff mentioned this as a side issue

in the midst of this talk. That these words were circled suggests that they have been included elsewhere in the notes, perhaps to document staff plans to dismiss students who were eighteen or older whom the school was not legally mandated to retain. The second paragraph fills in the discussion generated by Laura's proposal to create "sexual harassment forms" and to punish students who accumulate three such forms. Note that it is only here that the school staff use the term "sexual harassment," although the ethnographer has used this heading to mark and recall these exchanges in his jottings.

Furthermore, a discrepancy between the jottings and the full notes is evident: in the former, Andy is reported to have referred to "too many sausages," while in the full notes Laura quotes Andy as having said "too many cocks." The student ethnographer explained what happened here (personal communication): "Reynaldo told me Andy used the words 'too many cocks.' I got mixed up when creating the fieldnotes. It should have been Laura 'too many sausages' and Reynaldo 'too many cocks.'"<sup>3</sup>

## 2. "You Can Call His Doctor at UCLA"

### A. Jottings

[case number]

Snow, Marcia

Thomas

atty—AIDS Mike

Murphy

legal guardian

are you prepared to proceed against  
the one individual—(both)  
massive doses of chemother(apy)  
I don't think he's ever going to come in  
here

I know he's well enough to walk—  
came in (returned heater)—when?  
you can call his doctor at UCLA and  
he can verify all this

I just don't call people on the  
telephone—courts don't operate that way—it has to be on paper or (in  
person)

Mr. M returned my heaters—

was walking

Let me be clear

You don't want to proceed against  
only one of these individuals?

I want to proceed against (no, but)  
—if he is his guardian both—but

unravel it

Dept 10—J(u)dge Berkoff

Ms. S, hold on just a

### B. Full Fieldnotes

Marcia Snow has longish, curly, dark brown hair, in her 20s, dressed informally in blue blouse and pants. No wedding ring, but with a youngish looking guy with glasses. Robert Thomas is in his 40s, light brown hair, shaggy mustache, jacket with red-black checked lining.

Judge begins by asking RT if he has an atty; he does, but he is not here. He explains that his business partner, Mike Murphy, who is also named in the TRO, is not here today; he has AIDS and is very ill. "I'm his legal guardian," so I can represent his concerns. J asks MS: "Are you prepared to proceed against this one individual?" MS answers that she wants the order against both of them. RT then explains that MM has had AIDS for three years, has had "massive doses of chemotherapy," and adds: "I don't think he's ever going to come in here." J asks MS if from what she knows that MM is this sick. MS hesitates, then says: "I know he's well enough to walk." I saw him walking when he returned the heaters that they stole. J: When was this? (I can't hear her answer.) RT: He's had his AIDS for three years. He's very sick. "You can call his doctor at UCLA, and he can verify this." J: "I just don't call people on the telephone. Courts don't operate that way. It has to be on paper" or testified in person. RT repeats that MM is very ill, that he has to take care of him, and he is not getting better. But MS again counters this, saying again: "Mr. Murphy returned my heaters—he was walking then . . ."

J then looks to MS, asking: "Let me be clear—you don't want to proceed against only one of these individuals?" MS: "No, I want to proceed against both. But if he is his guardian," then I can go ahead today with it. J agrees to this, saying he will let another judge "unravel it," and assigns the case to Dept. 10, Judge Berkoff. MS and RT turn to leave, but J says: "Ms. Snow, hold on just a minute until the clerk has your file." MS waits briefly, then gets file and goes out with the guy with her.

Compared to the highly selected, partial, and abbreviated jottings, the full fieldnotes tell a coherent, step-by-step story of what was observed in the

courtroom. Most of this story consists of details that have been filled in from memory. The brief “background” of the case provided by the jottings, for example, has been fleshed out into relatively full descriptions of the two litigants (but not of the judge or other regular courtroom personnel). In addition, the notes tell a story about one specific topic—the problems arising from the absence of a codefendant, the questions the judge raises about this absence, and a sequence of responses to this problem by the petitioner and defendant. The story, however, is missing key elements (for example, the fact that this case involves a tenant-landlord dispute) and contains elements of unknown meaning (for example, Marcia’s comment about how the absent defendant “returned the heaters that they stole”).

Also consider the handling of direct quotations in moving from jottings to fieldnotes. Only those words actually taken down at the time are placed in quotes; a portion of the direct speech missed at the time is paraphrased outside the direct quotes. Thus, the jotted record of the judge’s remark, “it has to be on paper or (in person),” is written in fieldnote form as “‘It has to be on paper’ or testified in person.” As a general practice, speech not written down word for word at the time should either be presented as indirect quotation or paraphrased (see discussion of “dialogue” below).

Ethnographers rely upon key words and phrases from their jottings to jog their memories. But writing fieldnotes from jottings is not a straightforward remembering and filling in; rather, it is a much more active process of constructing relatively coherent sequences of action and evocations of scene and character (see below). In turning jottings and headnotes into full notes, the fieldworker is already engaged in a sort of preliminary analysis whereby she orders experience, both creating and discovering patterns of interaction. This process involves deciding not simply *what to include* but also *what to leave out*, both from remembered headnotes and from items included in jottings. Thus, in writing full fieldnotes, the ethnographer might clearly remember or have jottings about particular incidents or impressions but decide, for a variety of reasons, not to incorporate them into the notes. The material might seem to involve matters that are peripheral to major activities in the setting, activities that members appear to find insignificant, or that the ethnographer has no interest in.

However, in continuing to write up the day’s fieldnotes or at some later point in the fieldwork, the ethnographer might see significance in jottings or headnotes that initially seemed too unimportant or uninteresting to include in full fieldnotes. The student ethnographer who, in writing full notes, had initially passed over a jotting about the “delivery of three new

bags of sand” to the sandbox at a Headstart Program (chapter 2) saw relevance and meaning in this incident as she continued to write up and reflect on the day’s observations:

Now that I’m thinking back, when we got the sand, it was a really hot day so that actually that jotting did help me remember because it was so warm out that Karen, the teacher, said that the children could take their shoes off in the sandbox. This became a really tough rule to enforce because the children aren’t allowed to have shoes off anywhere else. They would just run out of the sandbox and go into the parking lot, and so it was a really tough rule to enforce. And I have an incident about that.

In the comments made here, the student comes to appreciate (and construct) a linkage between the three new bags of sand included in her jottings and what she sees as significant issues of rule enforcement and control in the setting; with this appreciation, she decides to incorporate the delivery of the sand as an incident in her notes. Moreover, this focus on enforcement and control leads her to review her memory for “relevant” events or “incidents”; here she recollects “an incident about that,” signaling her intent to write up this incident in her notes.

In light of the ways “significance” shifts and emerges in the course of writing notes and thinking about their import, we encourage students to write about as many of these “minor” events as possible, even if they seem insubstantial or only vaguely relevant at the moment. They might signal important processes relevant to other incidents or to emerging analytic themes in ways the ethnographer can only appreciate at some later point. Even when writing the story of one rather cohesive event, writers should include apparently tangential activities and comments, for they might turn out to provide key insights into the main action.

## WRITING DETAILED NOTES: DEPICTION OF SCENES

The ethnographer’s central purpose is to portray a social world and its people. But often beginning researchers produce fieldnotes lacking sufficient and lively detail. Through inadvertent summarizing and evaluative wording, a fieldworker fails to adequately describe what she has observed and experienced. The following strategies—description, dialogue, and characterization—enable a writer to coherently depict an observed moment through striking details. As is evident in several of the included excerpts,



ethnographers often merge several strategies. In this section, we explain and provide examples of these writing strategies; in the next section, we discuss various options for organizing a day's entry.

### *Description*

"Description" is a term used in more than one way. Thus far, we have referred to writing fieldnotes as descriptive writing in contrast to analytic argumentation.<sup>4</sup> Here, we refer more specifically to description as a means of picturing through concrete sensory details the basic scenes, settings, objects, people, and actions the fieldworker observed. In this sense, writing descriptive images is just one part of the ethnographer's storytelling about the day's events.

As a writing strategy, description calls for concrete details rather than abstract generalizations, for sensory imagery rather than evaluative labels, and for immediacy through details presented at close range. Goffman (1989:131) advises the fieldworker to write "lushly," making frequent use of adjectives and adverbs to convey details. For example, details present color, shape, and size to create visual images; other details of sound, timbre, loudness, and volume evoke auditory images; those details describing smell or fragrance recreate olfactory images; and details portraying gestures, movements, posture, and facial expression convey kinetic images. While visual images tend to predominate in many descriptions, ethnographers find that they often combine these various kinds of images in a complete description.

When describing a scene, the writer selects those details that most clearly and vividly create an image on the page; consequently, he succeeds best in describing when he selects details according to some purpose and from a definite point of view. For example, the writer acquires a clearer sense of what details to accent if he takes as his project describing, not the office setting in a general sense, but, rather, the office environment as a cluttered place to work, perhaps as seen from the perspective of a secretary who struggles with her boss's disorder every day. However, frequently the fieldworker sits down to write about a setting he does not yet understand. In fact, the beginning ethnographer often faces the dilemma of not knowing what counts as most important; under these circumstances, his purpose is simply to document the impression he has at that time. Wanting to recall the physical characteristics and the sensory impressions of his experience, a fieldworker often describes the setting and social situations, characters' appearances, and even some daily routines.

Ethnographers often select details to describe the ambience of a setting or environment that is important for understanding subsequent action. For example, during initial fieldwork in a village in southeastern Congo (formerly Zaire), an ethnographer might reflect on the spatial arrangement and social relations as she has observed them thus far. In her fieldnotes, she might describe how the houses all face toward an open, cleared area; that the village pavilion where men visit is situated in the center; that the women cook by wood fires in front of their houses, often carrying babies on their backs as they work and are assisted by younger girls; and that some men and boys sit under a tree in the yard near two other men weaving baskets. How she perceives these details and the way she frames them as contextualizing social interactions determines, in part, the details she selects to create this visual image of a small village in the late afternoon.

An ethnographer should also depict the appearance of characters who are part of described scenes in order to contextualize actions and talk. For example, in looking at how residents adapted to conditions in a psychiatric board-and-care home, Linda Shaw described someone who others living in the home thought was especially "crazy":

Robert and I were sitting by the commissary talking this afternoon when a new resident named Bruce passed by several times. He was a tall, extremely thin man with straggly, shoulder-length, graying hair and a long bushy beard. I had heard that he was only in his thirties, even though he looked prematurely aged in a way that reminded me of the sort of toll that harsh conditions exact from many street people. He wore a long, dirty, gray-brown overcoat with a rainbow sewn to the back near the shoulder over a pair of torn blue jeans and a white tee shirt with what looked like coffee stains down the front. Besides his disheveled appearance, Bruce seemed extremely agitated and restless as he paced from one end of the facility to the other. He walked with a loping gait, taking very long strides, head held bent to his chest and his face expressionless, as his arms swung limply through the air, making a wide arc, as though made of rubber. As Bruce passed by on one of these rounds, Robert remarked, "That guy's really crazy. Don't tell me he's going to be recycled into society."

Here the ethnographer provides a detailed description of a newcomer to the home, providing the context necessary to understand a resident's comment that this person was too crazy to ever live outside of the home. In fact, the final comment, "Don't tell me he's going to be recycled into society," serves as a punch line dramatically linking the observer's detailed description of the new resident with the perceptions and concerns of an established resident.



While describing appearance might initially seem easy, in fact, many observers have difficulty doing so in lively, engaging ways. Part of the problem derives from the fact that when we observe people whom we do not know personally, we initially see them in very stereotyped ways; we normally notice and describe strangers in terms of gender, age, or race, along with other qualities in their physical appearances.<sup>5</sup> Thus, beginning fieldworkers invariably identify characters by gender. They frequently add one or two visible features: “a young woman,” “a young guy in a floral shirt,” “two Latina women with a small child,” “a woman in her forties,” “a white male with brown/blond medium length hair.” Indeed, many fieldnotes present characters as *visual clichés*, relying on worn-out, frequently used details to describe others, often in ways that invoke common stereotypes: a middle-aged librarian is simplistically described as “a bald man wearing thick glasses,” a youth in a juvenile hall as having “slicked back hair,” a lawyer as “wearing a pin-striped suit” and “carrying a briefcase.” Such clichés not only make for boring writing but also, more dangerously, blind the writer to specific attributes of the person in front of him.

The description of a character’s appearance is frequently “categoric” and stereotyped for another reason as well: Fieldworkers rely upon these clichés not so much to convey another’s appearance to envisioned readers but to label (and thus provide clarity about) who is doing what within the fieldnote account. For example, a fieldworker used the phrase “the floral shirt guy” a number of times to specify which character he was talking about when he described the complicated comings and goings occurring in a Latino street scene. Thus, the initial description does not provide many details about this character’s appearance but merely tags him so that we can identify and follow him in the subsequent account.

However, the ethnographer must train herself both to notice more than these common indicators of general social categories and to capture distinctive qualities that will enable future readers (whether herself in rereading the notes or others who read excerpts) to envision more of what she saw and experienced. A *vivid image* based on actual observation depicts specific details about people and settings so that the image can be clearly visualized. For example, one fieldworker described a man in a skid row mission as “a man in the back who didn’t have any front teeth and so spoke with a lisp.” Another described a boy in a third-grade classroom as “wiggling his butt and distorting his face for attention” on entering the classroom late. Such images use details to paint more specific, lively portraits and avoid as much as possible vague, stereotypic features.

Ethnographers can also write more vivid descriptions by describing how characters dress. The following excerpt depicts a woman’s clothes through concrete and sensory imagery:

Today Molly, a white female, wore her African motif jacket. It had little squares on the front which contained red, yellow, green, and black colored prints of the African continent. Imposed on top was a gold lion of Judah (symbol of Ethiopian Royal Family). The sleeves were bright—red, yellow, and green striped. The jacket back had a picture of Bob Marley singing into a microphone. He is a black male with long black dreadlocks and a little beard. Written in red at the top was: “Rastafari.”

This description advances the ethnographer’s concern with ethnic identity and affiliation. The initial sentence, “Today Molly, a white female, wore her African motif jacket,” sets up an unexpected contrast: Molly is white, yet she wears an item of clothing that the researcher associates with African American culture. “African motif” directs attention to particular attributes of the jacket (colors, insignia, and symbols) and ignores other observable qualities of the jacket, for example, its material, texture, style, cleanliness, or origins. Consequently, this description frames the jacket as an object publicly announcing its wearer’s affiliation with African Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, rather than simply *telling* the reader what the ethnographer infers, this passage *shows* affiliation with African Americans in immediate detail through actions and imagery. Contrast this descriptive strategy with the following (hypothetical) abstract and evaluative depiction that generalizes, rather than specifies, details: “Today, Molly, a white girl, *assertively* wore her *bright* African jacket. She always *shows off* in these clothes and *struts* around pretending to act *like a black*.” Not only does this summary rely on a vague adjective (“bright”), but it also obscures the actions with evaluative adverbs and verbs (“assertively,” “struts,” and “shows off”) and categorizing labels (“like a black”).

Because an ethnographer wishes to depict a scene for a reader, he does not condense details, avoids evaluative adjectives and verbs, and never permits a label to stand for description. While all writing entails grouping and identifying details, the ethnographer resists the impulse to unself-consciously label others according to received categories from his own background. Nonetheless, it is not enough to avoid evaluative wording. In descriptions, the writer’s tone of voice unavoidably reflects his personal attitude toward the people described. A better-than-thou attitude or objectifying the other

(as odd, a foreigner, from a lower class, from a less civilized culture, from another ethnic group) always “shows” in subtle ways: Tone, like a slip of the tongue, appears in word choice, implicit comparisons, and even in rhythms as in the staccato of a curt dismissal. A self-reflective ethnographer should make his judgments explicit in written asides. But, the best antidote to these evaluative impulses is to keep in mind that the ethnographer’s task is to write descriptions that lead to empathetic understanding of the social worlds of others.

In addition to describing people, places, and things, an ethnographer might also depict a scene by including action. For example, she might portray a character’s talk, gesture, posture, and movement. In contrast to describing a person’s appearance, action sequences highlight a character’s agency to affect her world; a character acts within a situation in routine ways or in response to set conditions. The following fieldnote excerpt of a grocery stocker working in a nearly empty store reveals how sensory details about action can create a vivid description of a scene:

As I conclude my first “lap” [around the store] and begin my second, I find myself slowly making my way through the frozen food aisle when I come across a female “stocker.” She seems to be pretty young (college age) and is thin with dark, heavily lined eyes. Although her eyes are dark, the makeup is not to the point where she looks gothic. Her brown hair is pulled back in a loose bun, and she is in the process of restocking TV dinners into the freezer. She is like a robot: she seems to be in her own space as she opens the freezer door and props open the door using her body. She then grabs a few TV dinners from their original boxed container and sorts and loads them into the new and appropriate location within the freezer. As she turns around to reload, she fails to prop open the freezer door with something other than her body. This causes the door to involuntarily close when she shifts her body in order to grab more boxes. This action causes the freezer door to slam shut with a loud “snap” sound. As strange as it may seem, the sound that the door makes is almost as if the freezer is mocking the female stocker. But this does not seem to distress her as she turns around and repeats the whole process, again and again.

Here, the ethnographer sets the scene, using an evocative image (eyes are dark, but the makeup is not gothic-looking) to enable the reader to visualize the stocker’s appearance. Notice how she uses a familiar metaphor, for example “robot,” as a starting point to call up a visual image, but she avoids creating a stereotyped character by providing the details of actions to create

a fuller, in-depth picture of what the stocker is doing. She employs visual images of the stocker’s physical movement (using her body to keep the freezer door open), as well as auditory images (the freezer door slams shut with a loud “snap” sound), to give the door a human-like character (the ability to mock the stocker). Thus, she effectively portrays both the physical and emotional effort required to place the TV dinners in the freezer. When ethnographers occasionally use figurative language, such as this robot metaphor, they always should supplement the image with descriptive detail as this ethnographer does. Otherwise, later on when reading her fieldnotes, she might not remember why she chose this metaphor or what actions it represented.

### *Dialogue*

Ethnographers also reproduce dialogue—conversations that occur in their presence or that members report having had with others—as accurately as possible. They reproduce dialogue through direct and indirect quotation, through reported speech, and by paraphrasing. We hold that only those phrases actually quoted verbatim should be placed between quotation marks; all others should be recorded as indirect quotations or paraphrases.

The following example illustrates how direct quotation, indirect quotation, and reported speech work together to convey back-and-forth conversation:

For a minute or so before I left, I talked with Polly, the black woman who guards the front school entrance. As we were talking, a black girl, wearing dark blue sweats, walked by. Polly pointed to her. “Did you see that girl?” she asked me. I told her I had, and Polly confided that the girl had hassled her. Polly said the girl tried to leave school without permission and had started arguing. She said the principal had been walking by and he had tried to deal with the disturbance. And the girl had answered, “This is my school. You can’t control me!” and then she had called the principal a “white MF.” Polly told me, “It’s usually a black MF, but she changed it.” She said that girl had a “bad attitude” and shook her head.

Writing up this conversation as predominately indirect quotation preserves the back-and-forth flow of the spoken interaction. Interspersing quoted fragments livens up the dialogue and lends a sense of immediacy. By clearly marking the direct quotation, indirect quotation, and reported speech, we can see how they work together.

Direct: "Did you see that girl?"

Indirect: I told her I had . . .

Indirect: . . . and Polly confided that the girl had hassled her. Polly said that the girl tried to leave school without permission and had started arguing. She said the principal had been walking by and he had tried to deal with the disturbance.

Reported speech, direct: And the girl had answered, "This is my school. You can't control me!" and then she called the principal a "white MF."

Direct: "It's usually a black MF, but she changed it."

Indirect: She said that the girl has a

Direct: "bad attitude" . . .

Indirect quotation more closely approximates dialogue than paraphrasing does. Paraphrasing this conversation with Polly might have preserved the basic content. But in paraphrasing, a writer translates speech into her own words and too readily starts to summarize. For example, a paraphrase of the last portion of this excerpt might read: "The girl talked back to the principal and called him names. . . . She has some attitude problems." This paraphrasing obscures the flavor of chatting and offering confidences, and it fails to voice the student's remarks to the principal, which thus would have been unheard.

Clearly, this ethnographer has a lively style that moves easily because the fieldnote varies the phrasing and only uses "she said" as needed. In writing direct or indirect quotations, ethnographers do not need to repeat "she said that . . ." each time they introduce dialogue. Instead, one can keep the pace of the dialogue moving by immediately stating the verbatim-recalled wording or the approximately recalled phrase. For example, "Polly said that the girl had hassled her," could also be written as, "Polly replied, the girl hassled me," or, sometimes when it is clear who is speaking, simply as "the girl hassled me." Too many repetitions of "she said" or "he said" begin to echo and, thus, detract from the flow of the dialogue.

Members' own descriptions and "stories" of their experiences are invaluable indexes to their views and perceptions of the world (see chapter 5) and should be documented verbatim when possible. Writing this exchange as a "story" told verbatim to the fieldworker preserves two different kinds of information. First, it shows that "something happened" between a student, a guard, and the principal. Second, the account provides the guard's experience of that something. As the guard's story, this fieldnote conveys more about the teller and her concerns than it does about the girl and her trouble.

Writing up dialogue is more complicated than simply remembering talk

or replaying every word. People talk in spurts and fragments. They accentuate or even complete a phrase with a gesture, facial expression, or posture. They send complex messages through incongruent, seemingly contradictory and ironic verbal and nonverbal expression as in sarcasm or polite put-downs. Thus, ethnographers must record the meanings they infer from the bodily expression accompanying words—gesture, movement, facial expression, tone of voice. Furthermore, people do not take turns smoothly in conversations: They interrupt each other, overlap words, talk simultaneously, and respond with ongoing comments and murmurs. Such turn taking can be placed on a linear page by bracketing and overlapping speech.

Although accurately capturing dialogue in jottings and full fieldnotes requires considerable effort, ethnographers have a number of reasons for pepper their notes with verbatim quoted talk. Such dialogue conveys character traits, advances action, and provides clues to the speaker's social status, identity, personal style, and interests. Dialogue allows the field researcher to capture members' terms and expressions as they are actually used in specific situations. In addition, dialogue can point to key features of a cultural worldview. The following excerpt comes from a discussion in an African American history course:

Deston, a black male with Jheri curls, asked Ms. Dubois, "What's a sellout? I hear that if you talk to a white person—you sell out. If you go out with a white girl—you sell out." She replied that some people "take it to the extreme." She said that a sellout could even be a teacher or someone who works at McDonalds. Then she defined a sellout as "someone who is more concerned about making it . . . who has no racial loyalty, no allegiance to people."

The writer uses direct quotation to capture an ongoing exchange about racial identity and to retain a key member's term.

The use of indirect, along with direct, quotation also allows an ethnographer to represent the back-and-forth character of everyday interaction in accurate and effective ways. In the following excerpt from a swap meet, for example, directly quoting the actual negotiations over price highlights and focuses the reader's attention on this aspect of the interaction.

She (swap meet vendor) had many different items including a Sparkletts water dispenser, some big outdoor Christmas lighted decorations, a blanket, wooden shoes from China, salt and pepper shakers, a vacuum cleaner, mini wooden mantels, clothes, small pieces of furniture, and shoes. I see a beaded curtain jumbled up on the tarp and walk toward it. I point to it and ask the vendor how

much she wants for it. She takes a moment to think and then says, "Ummm, five dollars." She stands up slowly and walks over to it. She picks it up off the ground. She shows us that it is in good condition by holding it up high and letting all the bead strands hang down. "Will you take three?" I ask as I look it over. It has a fancy top that the beads hang off of. It is all one color—ivory or light brown. "How about four?" she says. "Alright, I'll take it," I say. She tells me that she will bag it up for me, and she turns around to get a plastic bag from the inside of the van. I rummage through my pockets looking for the one dollar bills. All I have left are three ones and a five. I hand her the five and she gives me the bag. She puts the five dollar bill into her fanny pack and withdraws a one dollar bill. She hands it to me and says thank you. I say thank you back and turn to leave.

In addition to contributing to a lively description of a scene at the swap meet, the presentation of dialogue furthers sensitivity to the interactional processes through which members construct meanings and local social worlds in such routine exchanges.

These issues and choices in writing dialogue become even more complex when the local language differs from the researcher's. How well the researcher knows the language certainly determines the extent of verbatim quoting. When the ethnographer hears slang, nonstandard English, or grammatically incorrect phrasing, she should resist correcting this wording but, instead, put such expressions in quotation marks. In addition, when a fieldworker does research in a second language, not only will she frequently miss what someone said because she did not understand a particular word, but she also will have difficulty capturing the verbatim flow of a dialogue even when she does understand. By working with a local assistant and checking to make sure she understands correctly what people are saying, she can compensate for some of her difficulty. Similar problems arise when working in English in a setting with much technical lingo or other in-group expressions such as slang. Unable to follow all the talk, the researcher paraphrases as much as she can and occasionally includes the snippets of verbatim talk she heard and remembered clearly.

In response to these language difficulties, many ethnographers supplement their fieldnotes by tape recordings. They might also make recordings in order to preserve as detailed a record of naturally occurring talk as possible so that they can pursue particular theoretical issues. For example, field researchers interested in recurrent patterns of interaction in institutional settings might make special efforts to tape-record at least some such en-

counters.' Still, most ethnographers do not regard recordings as their primary or exclusive form of data; rather, they use them as one way among others for closely examining the meaning events and experiences have for those studied.

By way of illustration, consider how Rachel Fretz worked with recordings of storytelling performances among the Chokwe people in Bandundu, Congo (formerly Zaire). She recorded and carefully transcribed all verbal expressions of both narrators and audience, since listeners actively participate in the storytelling session. The following is an excerpt from the beginning of one such performance; the narrator (N), a young man, performs to an audience (A) of women, men, and children one evening around the fire (Fretz 1995a).

N: Once upon a time, there were some young boys, myself and Fernando and Funga and Shamuna.

A: Is it a story with a good song?

N: They were four persons. They said, "Ah. Let's go hunting."

Pia they went everywhere. Pia they went everywhere.

A: Good.

N: They went this way and that way, this way and that way. No game. "Let's return. Let's go." They saw a large hut.

Inside there was a container with honey in it.

"My friends, this honey, mba, who put it here?"

He said, "Who?"

Another said, "Who?"

[Another said,] "Let's go. We can't eat this."

Then, *fwapu*, Funga came forward and said, "Ah! You're just troubled. Even though you're so hungry, you won't eat this honey?"

"Child. The man who put the honey here is not present. You see that this house was built with human ribs, and you decide to eat this honey?"

He [Funga] said, "Get out of here. I'll eat it. Go on ahead. Go now." He took some honey; he ate it.

"Shall we wait for him? We'll wait for him."

He came soon. "Let's go."

Liata, liata, liata, they walked along. "We're going a long way. We came from a great distance." They arrived and found, ah! *Kayanda* [my goodness], a large river.

"My friends, what is this?"

"My friends, such a large river. Where did it come from?"

He said, "Ah! Who can explain it?"

"We can't see its source or where it's going."

"Let's cross the river. I'll go first."

**First Singing**

N: Oh Papa. Eee, Papa, it's I who ate the honey.

A: This large river God created, I must cross it.

N: Papa! Eee, Papa, I'm going into the water.

A: This large river God created, I must cross it.

N: Papa! Eee, Papa, I didn't it.

A: This large river God created, I must cross it.

N: Papa! Eee, Papa, I'm crossing to the other side.

A: This large river God created, I must cross it.

Transcribing a performance involves catching all the teller's words and audience responses (often requiring the help of a native speaker) despite such interfering sounds as a dog barking and children crying. Accurate transcription also requires close attention to the rhythm and pauses in speaking so that the punctuation and line breaks reflect the storytelling style (cf. Hymes 1991; Tedlock 1983).

But transcribing and translating the tape is only one part of the ethnographer's efforts to learn about and understand storytelling performances. She also wrote extensive fieldnotes describing the situation and participants.<sup>8</sup> For example, she noted that the storytelling session took place by the fire in the chief's pavilion at an informal family gathering including the chief, his seven wives, and their children and grandchildren. She observed that the women participated primarily by singing the story-songs and by answering with exclamations and remarks. The ethnographer also recorded her conversations with these participants and the general comments Chokwe people offered about telling such stories, called *yishima*. She found out that in this performance, listeners know that the house-made-of-human-ribs probably belongs to a sorcerer, that eating his honey is dangerous because it will cast a spell over them, that the river that appeared from nowhere across their path had been created by the sorcerer, and that Funga who ate the honey most likely will drown as a consequence of not listening to his older brother. She learned that the recurring song, sung four times during the performance, created a tension between hope and panic about the consequences of eating the honey and between trusting that it was a natural river created by God ("This large river God created") and fearing that it was a sorcerer's invention ("Eee, Papa, it's I who ate the honey").

Thus, a transcription of recorded speech is not a straightforward and simple means of documenting an event. The ethnographer needs to observe and listen to more than the words; she needs to ask many follow-up ques-

tions and write down what she learns. As a result, much field research uses a variety of recording and encoding processes, combining fieldnotes with audio and video recording.<sup>9</sup>

**Characterization**

Ethnographers describe the persons they encounter through a strategy known as *characterization*. While a simple description of a person's dress and movements conveys some minimal sense of that individual, the writer more fully characterizes a human being through also showing how that person talks, acts, and relates to others. An ethnographer most effectively characterizes individuals in context as they go about their daily activities rather than by simply listing their characteristics. Telling about a person's traits never is as effective as *showing* how they act and live. This entails presenting characters as fully social beings through descriptions of dress, speech, gestures, and facial expressions, which allow the reader to infer traits. Traits and characteristics thus appear in and through interaction with others rather than by being presented as isolated qualities of individuals. Thus, characterization draws on a writer's skills in describing, reporting action, and presenting dialogue.

In the following set of fieldnotes, Linda Shaw describes an encounter with a couple living in the kitchen area of an apartment in a psychiatric board-and-care facility. The woman, in particular, emphasizes the efforts they have made to create a "normal" living environment and the futility they feel in doing so:<sup>10</sup>

I went with Terri and Jay today as they offered to show me the "apartment" they had created out of the small converted kitchen area that was their room. Terri escorted me from one space to another, taking great pride in showing me how they had made a bedroom area at one end, a living room next to it, and a kitchen area next to that. They had approximated an entire apartment in this tiny space, and she showed me features of each "room" in detail. The bed, they said, had a real mattress, not like the foam pads on all the other beds. There was a rug on the living room floor and a TV at the foot of the bed. Then Terri opened the cupboards. She pointed out the spice rack and counted each glass out loud. She took particular pride in the coffeepot she uses to fix Jay's morning coffee and a warmer oven where they sometimes heat take-out pizza.

Terri tried very hard to demonstrate all they had done to make their apartment like one that any married couple might have; yet, the harder she tried, the more apparent it became how different their lives really were. Terri spoke

of the futility she felt in spite of all these efforts: "All the noise, the screaming, the tension really bothers me. I'm married, and I can't even be a normal wife here. I want to get up in the morning, fix my husband breakfast—a cup of coffee, eggs, bacon, orange juice—before he goes to work, clean the house, take care of the kids and then fix him a nice dinner and drink or whatever he wants when he gets home. Here, I get up and can fix him a cup of instant coffee. You know, it's not as good to just pick up the apartment, but then there's nothing else to do."

Terri comes across as a fully human individual whose actions and talk reveal her character. She has done her best to create the normal way of life she wishes for but cannot sustain in this quasi-institutional setting. Through her actions and words, we see her struggle in vain to construct this private space as a refuge against the debilitating forces of institutional life.

Pressed to finish his notes, a writer might be tempted to characterize by using some convenient label ("a retarded person," "a homeless person," a black/white/Asian, etc.) rather than looking closely at that person's actual appearance and behavior. Such quick characterization, however, produces a stock character who, at best, comes across as less than fully human and, at worst, appears as a negative stereotype. For example, one student, in describing people in a shopping mall, characterized an older woman as a "senile bag lady" after noting that she muttered to herself while fumbling absentmindedly in a shabby, oversized purse. Such labeling sketches only a pale type and closes the writer's attention to other relevant details and actions.

While ethnographers try to avoid characterizing people by stock characters, they do include members' remarks and actions that stereotype or mock others. The following excerpt describes a student who mockingly acts out typical gestures and postures of a Latino "cholo" before some classmates:

As the white male and his friend walked away, he said "chale homes" [eh! homies] in a mock Spanish accent. Then he exaggerated his walking style: he stuck his shoes out diagonally, placed his arms at a curved popeye angle, and leaned back. . . . Someone watching said, "Look at you fools."

In this group of bantering young men, the white teenage male enacts a ludicrous caricature of a Latino "cholo." Ethnographers take care to distinguish members' characterizations from their own by providing details that clearly contextualize the talk and behavior as delivered from a member's point of view.

An ethnographer usually characterizes in detail those persons who act centrally in a scene. Although the full picture of any person develops through time in a series of fieldnotes, each description presents lively and significant details that show a primary character as completely as possible through appearance, body posture, gesture, words, and actions. In contrast, a peripheral figure might indeed be referred to simply with as few details as necessary for that person to be seen doing his small part in the scene.

A number of criteria shape the field researcher's decision about who is central and who is peripheral. First, the researcher's theoretical interests will focus his attention toward particular people. For example, the central characters in a study of teamwork among "support staff" in a courtroom were courtroom clerks and bailiffs rather than attorneys, witnesses, or the judge. Second, methodological strategies also focus the ethnographer's attention. For example, a strategy for depicting a social world by describing distinctive interactional patterns might shape his decision to focus on someone who presents a particularly vivid illustration of such a pattern. Finally, if members in a scene orient to a particular person, then a description that makes that person central to the scene is called for. Conversely, even those who are central figures in a setting might get slight attention from the field researcher if they are so treated by those in the scene. For example, in a scene focusing on students talking in the quad at lunchtime, the "principal walking across the courtyard and looking from side to side" might not be described in much more detail if no one seems to notice him.

As a practical matter, an individual already well known through previous entries does not need to have a full introduction each time he enters a scene. Even for a main character, one describes only those actions and traits relevant to the current interaction or those that were previously unnoted. But continuing contacts with people greatly expand the field researcher's resources for writing fuller, richer characterizations; greater familiarity enables the researcher to note and to write about qualities that are harder to detect. Yet many ethnographers tend to describe even main characters only upon first encountering them, leaving that first characterization unchanged despite coming to know more about that person. Hence, we suggest taking time as research progresses to periodically reflect on and try to capture on paper the appearance and feel of major characters, now known as persons with unique features and special qualities. Each entry is only a partial record, and as notes accumulate, fieldworkers notice that they have assembled enough observations to present some persons as full-fledged individuals ("rounded" characters), leaving others as less well-known figures



("flat" characters), and a few individuals as types such as a bus driver or a policeman ("stock" characters).

Fieldnotes should also include the ethnographer as a character in the interactions. The presence of the ethnographer who truly stands at the side watching might only be noted to identify the position from which the event is seen. But an ethnographer who directly participates in the action becomes a relevant character in the fieldnote, especially when a member clearly interacts with him. Indeed, a researcher might act as a central character in the incident in unanticipated ways. He might shift from his stance as an outside observer and become fully engaged in the interactions. In the following excerpt, students in a deaf-and-hard-of-hearing class encourage each other to speak while playing an educational game. The fieldworker, having had a stuttering problem all of his life, clearly empathizes with the students. Though essentially an outsider in the class, he becomes a pivotal figure at one juncture:

Lynn keeps on telling Caesar to say what the answers are by speaking (rather than through sign language). The teacher says, "Very good Lynn. . . . That's right, Caesar, you should try to speak what the answers are as well so that we can all understand you." Caesar looks over at me a little red in the face and looks down at his desk with a half smile. The teacher asks him (while pointing at me), "Are you afraid of speaking because he is here?" Lynn and Jackie and Caesar all seem to answer at once in sign that he is afraid of having me hear him speak. I tell Caesar, "You don't have to be afraid of what I think. I have a hard time speaking too."

Caesar seems interested by my statements and points a finger at me questioningly. The teacher says, "Yes, it's okay, you speak fine. You don't have to be afraid of what anybody thinks about you. Just say one sentence, and he'll tell you if he can understand you."

Caesar reluctantly says something and then looks at me, his head still slightly down and his face still red. A faint smile lines his lips as he waits for my answer. I had not understood a single word and was feeling desperate. What if they asked me to repeat what he had said? I reply, "Yes, that was fine. I understood you." The teacher quickly turns to Caesar and gives him the appropriate signs for my answer and goes directly into saying that he shouldn't be so intimidated by what other people think. Caesar looks at me and smiles. The game continues, and Caesar starts answering in both sign and speech. And I began to understand some of the things they were saying.

Clearly, this ethnographer's past experiences and presence played a central role in this scene, and his empathetic responses color the description in essential ways. Had he tried to write up these notes without including him-

self—his own interactions and feelings—the scene would have been deeply distorted.

When describing their own participation in scenes, field researchers generally write in the first person (see chapter 4). If this observer had described the scene in the third person, referring to himself by name, much of the impact would have been lost:

Caesar reluctantly says something and looks at Paul, his head still slightly down and his face still red. A faint smile lines his lips as he waits for his answer. . . . He replies, "Yes, that's fine. I understood you." The teacher quickly turns to Caesar and gives him the appropriate signs for Paul's answer and goes directly into saying that he shouldn't be so intimidated by what other people think. Caesar looks at Paul and smiles. The game continues, and Caesar starts answering in both sign and speech.

In the original segment, the writer carefully stuck to Caesar's observable behavior ("looks over at me with a red face" and "looks down at his desk with a half smile") and did not attribute nervousness. But in the third-person account, we miss an essential part of Caesar's struggle to speak. This struggle was conveyed through the ethnographer's empathetic and self-revealing comment, "I had not understood a single word . . .," and by his closing observation, "And I began to understand some of the things they were saying." Through the writer's careful attention to details of behavior and talk, as well as through his own revealed personal feelings, readers can sense the fear and later the relief in speaking and in being understood.

Finally, along with writing in the first person, we also recommend that ethnographers use active rather than passive verbs. Some researchers use passive verbs because they think that it makes their writing more objective (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 2008). Yet, ethnographers prefer active verbs to show how people act together to construct their social worlds (Becker 2007). Consider, for example, the loss of crucial detail about the unfolding interaction among actors in the classroom scene above had the ethnographer used passive rather than active verbs.

Something is said by Caesar to Paul, his head still slightly down and his face still red. His lips are lined with a faint smile as he waits for his answer. . . . He replies, "Yes, that's fine. I understood you." Caesar is given the appropriate signs and is told he shouldn't be so intimidated by what other people think. A smile is received by him. The game is continued, and answers are given in both sign and speech.

The use of passive verbs obscures the agency of those in the setting and the clarity of the moment-by-moment sense of who did what with/to whom that the ethnographer portrayed so effectively in the original excerpt. Hence, we recommend the use of active verbs to show more vividly, clearly, and directly who is engaged in an activity, the meanings that others in the setting give to it, and how they use meanings to shape subsequent interactions.

### NARRATING A DAY'S ENTRY: ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

When first returning from the field to her desk, an ethnographer, worried about getting everything down, writes spontaneously, hurriedly, and in fragments. But at the same time, in order to describe scenes and actions effectively, she needs to balance speed and clarity by organizing her writing into *units* that create coherence and mark beginnings and endings. While some ethnographers consider these units as descriptive writing (in contrast to analytic writing), we find it beneficial to discuss these units as narrating or recounting the day's experiences. By drawing on narrating conventions, ethnographers can sustain their memories by grouping and sequencing details and interactions into coherent units. When they remember observed interactions as a series of moments to be narrated, they can more easily sustain that memory as a perceived whole or unit.

Perhaps the most general unit of writing is simply the day's entry—the ethnographer's telling of the day's experiences and observations in the field. Seeking to document fully all remembered interactions with no specific point or theme in mind, the ethnographer relates his experiences in the field, implicitly drawing on narrating conventions. In this sense, the day's entry is an episodic tale with many segments—perhaps telling about an interaction, next transitioning to a different location, now sketching in the scene of the new context, then recounting another episode of action—on and on until finishing by returning from the field as the tale's ending. Within this overall narrative of the day's entry, the ethnographer might also create other tales that stand out as more focused sequences of interconnected actions and episodes (see chapter 4).

The most basic unit within the day's entry is the paragraph, used to coherently depict one brief moment or idea. By convention, a *paragraph* coheres because the writer's attention focuses on one idea or insight.<sup>11</sup> When he perceives some actions as a gestalt and concentrates on them, he writes about them in a paragraph. While continuing to write, he also shifts atten-

tion from one recalled moment to another, for example, from one person or activity to another within a classroom. These slight shifts are often indicated by paragraph breaks.

In narrating an entry, ethnographers work with a number of different organizing units that build on the paragraph. Sketches and episodes, which may be several paragraphs, create larger units of detailed scenes and interactions within that day's fieldnotes. In this way, the writer coherently sequences moments—those remembered interactions and specific contexts. Though these units or segments have no explicit connections between them, the ethnographer might write a few transitional sentences, briefly summarizing what happened in the interim or explaining that he shifted his focus to another activity or person to observe.

#### *Sketches*

In a sketch, the fieldworker, struck by a vivid sensory impression, *describes* a scene primarily through detailed imagery. Much as in a photograph, sequencing of actions does not dominate. Rather, the writer, as a more distanced observer looking out on a scene, describes what she senses, pausing for a moment in recounting the action to create a descriptive snapshot of a character or a setting. As a result, sketches might be short paragraphs or a few sentences within the overall narrative. Such static snapshots help orient the reader to the relevant details of the contexts in which actions take place.

While the term "sketch" employs a visual metaphor, this form of organizing writing need not rely only on visual details but can also incorporate auditory or kinetic details as well. For example, not appearance but the sense of smell might be the primary criterion for recalling and conveying the merits of a particular food. In describing people, settings, objects, and so forth, the writer must evoke all those senses that recall that moment as she perceived it. Often, the sense of vision dominates, however, simply because the fieldworker observes at a distance or aims to give a brief overview of the setting. It also dominates, in part, because the English language for vision is much more detailed and developed than it is for the other senses.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the ethnographic writer might have to expend special effort to evoke and write about nonvisual sensory images.

A sketch typically is a brief segment, which unifies descriptive details about a setting, an individual, or a single incident. Because it is primarily static, it lacks any sense of consequential action (of plot) and any full char-

acterization of people. Consider the following sketch of a Latino street market that presents a close-up picture of one particular character's momentary behavior at a stall with toys:

An older Latina woman is bent over looking at the toys on the ground. Behind her she holds two plastic bags of something, which she uses to balance as she leans over. She picks up several toys in succession from the ground, lifting them up several inches to turn them over and around in her hand, and then putting them down. After a minute, she straightens up and walks slowly away.

Organizing details into a sketch in this way permits the writer to give a quick sense of the setting by presenting a close-up picture of one particular character's engagement with it.

Often, sketches contextualize subsequent interactions, placing them into a larger framework of events or incidents and allow the reader to visualize more readily the setting or participants involved. On some occasions, however, these entries might stand as independent units of writing. In the following sketch, for example, an ethnographer describes the scene in a high school during an uneventful, uncrowded lunch hour in a way that documents how students group themselves:

Even though it was cold and windy, there were still about one hundred black students clustered in the central quad. On the far left, one short black male wearing a black starter jacket was bouncing a ball. Next to him, seven black females and two black males were sitting on a bench. Further to the right stood a concentrated group of about thirty or forty black students. I counted about twenty who were wearing different kinds of starter jackets. Further up the quad stood another group of fifteen blacks, mostly females. At the foot of quad, on the far right, was another group of maybe twenty black students, about equally male and female. Some were standing, while others were sitting on a short concrete wall against the auditorium. To the right of this group, I noticed one male, listening to a yellow walkman, dancing by himself. His arms were flung out, pulling as though he were skiing, while his feet ran in place.

This ethnographer was especially concerned with ethnic relations and wanted to track how, when, and where students socialized and with whom. Even when he could not hear or see exactly what the students were doing, he depicted these groupings in an almost snapshot fashion. Although the paragraph includes visual and kinetic details, it creates the scene as a still life rather than as an event in which actions could be sequenced.

In general, sketches are useful for providing an overall sense of places and

people that sometimes stand as a background for other fieldnote descriptions. Descriptive sketches of people standing around or of a person's expression and posture as she looks at someone, for example, can reveal qualities of social relations even when apparently nothing much is happening.

### Episodes

Unlike a sketch, which depicts a "still life" in one place, an episode recounts action and moves in time to narrate a slice of life. In an episode, a writer constructs a brief incident as a more or less unified depiction of one continuous action or interaction. Consequently, when recalling an incident that does not extend over a long period of time or involve many characters, ethnographers often write up that memory as a one- or two-paragraph episode.<sup>13</sup>

The following excerpt consists of a one-paragraph episode in which the writer describes an interaction between two students during the beginning of class time:

A black female came in. She was wearing a white puffy jacket, had glasses and straight feathered black hair. She sat down to my right. Robert and another male (both black) came in and sat down. They were eating Kentucky Fried Chicken which they took out of little red and white boxes. Robert's friend kept swiping at the black female, trying to slap her. She kept telling him in an annoyed voice to leave her alone. After a minute of this exchange, the black teacher said to the guy, "Leave her alone, brother." He answered Ms. Dubois with a grin on his face, "Don't worry. She's my sistah." The girl said "Chhh," looking briefly at him. He had gone back to eating his chicken.

Here, the students' and teacher's actions are presented as a sequence, each seeming to trigger the next; the girl responds to the boy's swiping, and the teacher responds to him, and so on. Thus, these actions are linked and appear as one continuous interaction, producing a unified episode.

Not every episode needs to build to a climax as the one above does. Many fieldnote episodes minutely recount one character's routine, everyday actions. In fact, in many entries, ethnographers find themselves writing primarily about mundane activities. In the following excerpt, for example, the ethnographer recounts how several students in an ESL class worked together to complete a group activity:

One group consisted of six people: two Korean girls, one Korean boy, two Mexican boys, and one Russian girl. Like all of the other groups, they arranged

their chairs in a small circle for the assigned activity. Ishmael, a Mexican boy, held the question card in his hand and read it to the rest of the group: "List five things that you can do on a date for less than \$10.00 in Los Angeles." (His English was heavily marked by his Mexican accent, but they could understand him.) Placing his elbows on the desk and looking directly at the group, he said, "Well?" He watched them for a minute or two; then he suggested that one could go for drinks at Hard Rock Café. The others agreed by nodding their heads. Ishmael again waited for suggestions from the group. The other Mexican boy said "going to the beach" and the Russian girl said "roller skating." The Koreans nodded their heads, but offered no other suggestions. (I think that Ishmael waited for others to respond, even though he seemed to know the answers.)

In describing this classroom scene, the ethnographer filled six pages with a series of such more or less isolated episodes occurring during that hour. Thus, she was able to present the small groups as working simultaneously on various activities. The episodes belong together only because they are situated in the same class during one period. Fieldworkers often write up such concurrent actions, loosely linked by time and place, as a series of discrete episodes.

Since episodes present action as progressing through time, a writer should orient the reader to shifts in time, place, and person as the action unfolds, particularly in longer scenes or those without obviously interconnected actions. Writers sequence actions in an order (e.g., first, second, third) and mark action shifts with transitions (e.g., now, then, next, afterward, the next morning). They also locate action with situational markers (e.g., here, there, beyond, behind). In the following excerpt, a researcher studying an outpatient psychiatric treatment facility connects actions through transitional phrases ("as he continues talking" and transitional words ("then," "as")):

I sat down on the bench in the middle of the hall. And as I sat waiting for something to gain my attention, I heard the director yell out, "Take off your clothes in the shower!" as he shuts the door to the shower room. . . . Remaining outside the door of the shower room, the director speaks with Roberta, one of the staff members assigned to look after the clients. Then Karen approaches them with a small, dirty Smurf that she found outside. "Look at it, how pretty, kiss it," she says talking to the director, but he doesn't pay any attention to her. As he continues talking to Roberta, he glances over and notices that I am observing them. As our eyes lock, he opens up his arm toward Karen and requests a hug. Karen, in her usual bashful way, giggles as she responds to his hug.

In this episode, the writer focuses on movement—sat, shuts, approaches, glances, opens—interspersed with talk: "the director yell(s) out, 'Take off your clothes in the shower!'" In observing and reporting actions, ethnographers interested in social interactions view action and talk as interconnected features of what people "do." They write about "talk" as part of people's actions.

Ethnographers often write episodic rather than more extended entries because they cannot track a sequence of actions and learn all the outcomes within one day. They may write an episode about an interaction simply because it bears upon a topic they are interested in. They often write without knowing whether that fieldnote will later be important in the full analysis. Yet, writing these episodes over time might enable the ethnographer to find patterns of behavior and connections between people's actions through different fieldnotes.

Many fieldnote episodes stand on their own, barely associated with others. Particularly in initial entries organized as narratives of the researcher's activities and observations for the day, writing *transitional summaries* can link different episodes. A transitional summary provides a succinct bridge between detailed episodes, enabling a reader to understand how the ethnographer got from one event or episode to another. How the ethnographer got from the school office to the classroom with a brief personal stop in the bathroom, for example, can simply be noted in this summary fashion if there is a need to show continuity. Of course, if something interesting occurred during this movement—a student stopped her to talk about a school fight—then writing detailed notes is advisable.

#### IN-PROCESS ANALYTIC WRITING: ASIDES AND COMMENTARIES

As the field researcher participates in the field, she inevitably begins to reflect on and interpret what she has experienced and observed. Writing fieldnotes heightens and focuses these interpretive and analytic processes; writing up the day's observations generates new appreciation and deeper understanding of witnessed scenes and events. In writing, a field researcher assimilates and thereby starts to understand an experience. She makes sense of the moment by intuitively selecting, highlighting, and ordering details and by beginning to appreciate linkages with, or contrasts to, previously observed and written-about experiences. Furthermore, she can begin to reflect on how she has presented and ordered events and actions in her

notes, rereading selected episodes and tales with an eye to their structuring effects.

To capture these ruminations, reflections, and insights and to make them available for further thought and analysis, field researchers pursue several kinds of analytical writing that stand in stark contrast to the descriptive writing we have emphasized to this point. As the result of such writings, the researcher can bring a more probing glance to further observations and descriptive writing and consequently become more selective and in depth in his descriptions.

The most immediate forms of analytic writing are asides and commentaries, interpretive writings composed while the ethnographer is actively composing fieldnotes.<sup>14</sup> Asides and commentaries consist of brief questions, ideas, or reactions the researcher writes into the body of the notes as he recalls and puts on paper the details of a specific observation or incident. (We will consider a third, more complex form of initial analytic writing, in-process memos, in chapter 4.) The lines between asides and commentaries (and in-process memos) are often blurred; we offer them as heuristic devices that can sensitize the fieldworker to both momentary and more sustained concentration on analytic writing while actively producing fieldnotes.

Asides are brief, reflective bits of analytic writing that succinctly clarify, explain, interpret, or raise questions about some specific happening or process described in a fieldnote. The ethnographer dashes off asides in the midst of descriptive writing, taking a moment to react personally or theoretically to something she has just recounted on paper and then immediately turns back to the work of description. These remarks may be inserted in the midst of descriptive paragraphs and set off by parentheses. In the following example, the ethnographer uses a personal aside to note his uneasy feeling that someone is watching him:

I turn around, away from the office, and face the woman with the blondish hair who is still smiling. (I can't shake the feeling that she's gazing at me.) "I'll see you Friday," I say to her as I walk by her and out the front door.

Fieldworkers often write somewhat more elaborate asides, several phrases in length, again triggered by some immediate piece of writing and closely tied to the events or scenes depicted in that writing. In the fieldnote below, the fieldworker describes a moment during her first day at a crisis drop-in center and then reacts to that experience in a more extended aside:

Walking up the stairs to the agency office, I noticed that almost every step creaked or moaned. At the top stands an old pine coat hanger, piled high with coats. Behind it is a bulletin board containing numerous flyers with information about organizations and services of various kinds. (Thinking about the scene as I climbed those stairs, I think that if I were an upset, distraught client, I would most probably find it difficult to find helpful information in that disorganized mass.)

In providing her own "lived sense" of the agency, the student incorporates in her description the meaning of physical space, while allowing for the possibility that others might perceive it differently. Asides may also be used to explain something that would otherwise not be apparent or to offer some sort of personal reflection or interpretive remark on a matter just considered. Ethnographers frequently use asides, for example, to convey their explicit "feel" for or emotional reactions to events; putting these remarks in asides keeps them from intruding into the descriptive account.

The ethnographer may also use brief asides to offer tentative hunches when the meaning of an incident to members is not clear or may only be inferred. In the following excerpt, the ethnographer asks questions about the meaning and import of an incident at a food bank in which a shopper rejects an item given to her as part of a preselected grocery cart full of food.

She had a package of frozen turkey meatballs in her hand and said that she didn't want the package because the contents were expired. The meatballs had apparently expired two days prior to today, and she said that she did not like taking expired food to her house. (Why the emphasis on "my house?" Self-respect? Could it be that if she took the expired meatballs, she was somehow accepting hand-me-downs? Just because she is not paying full price doesn't mean she can't receive up-to-par food?)

Using a question in this brief aside to reflect upon the possible meaning of the incident helps the ethnographer avoid reaching premature or unsupported conclusions. The aside also marks the incident as important, reminding her to look for further examples that will clarify and deepen her understanding of similar or contrasting examples.

A *commentary* is a more elaborate reflection, either on some specific event or issue or on the day's experiences and fieldnotes. Focused commentaries of the first sort are placed just after the fieldnote account of the event or issue in a separate paragraph set off with parentheses. A paragraph-long

summary commentary of the second sort should conclude each set of fieldnotes, reflecting on and raising issues and questions about that day's observations. Both types of commentaries involve a shift of attention from events in the field to outside audiences imagined as having an interest in something the fieldworker has observed and written up. Again, in contrast to descriptive fieldnotes, commentaries might explore problems of access or emotional reactions to events in the field, suggest ongoing probes into likely connections with other events, or offer tentative interpretations. Putting a commentary in a separate paragraph helps avoid writing up details as evidence for preconceived categories or interpretations.

Focused commentaries can raise issues of what terms and events mean to members, make initial connections between some current observation and prior fieldnotes, and suggest points or places for further observation, as in the following excerpt:

M called over to Richard. He said, "C'm here lil' Homey." Richard came over to sit closer to M. He asked Richard about something Richard said earlier (I couldn't completely hear it) . . . something to do with weight lifting. Richard replied, "Oh, I could talk about it for hours . . ." M asked Richard if there was a place where he could lift weights on campus. Richard said there was a weight room, but only "hoops" could use it today. M then asked Richard what "hoops" was. Richard answered that "hoops" was basketball. (Is the word "homey," possibly derived from homeboy, somebody who is down or cool with another person? It seems to me that M, who apparently didn't know Richard, wanted to talk to him. In order to do that, he tried to let Richard know M thought he was a cool person? "Homey" appears to be applied regardless of ethnicity. . . . Their interaction appeared to be organized around interest in a common activity, weight lifting. Judging by the size of M's muscles, this was something he excelled in.)

This ethnographer has been noticing the ways blacks use the terms "cool" and "down" to refer to inclusion of nonblacks in their otherwise black groupings. In this commentary, he reflects on other terms that also seem to be inclusive.

Focused commentaries can also be used to create a record of the ethnographer's own doings, experiences, and reactions during fieldwork, both in observing-participating and in writing up. A researcher-intern in a social service agency, after describing an incident with staff, wrote the following commentary about this moment as a turning point in her relationship with staff members:

Entering the kitchen, where staff often go to socialize alone, I began to prepare my lunch. Soon, several staff had come in, and they began to talk among one another. I stood around awkwardly, not quite knowing what to do with myself. I exchanged small talk for a while until D, the director, asked in her typically dramatic tone loud enough for everyone to hear: "Guess where A (a staff member who was also present) is going for her birthday?" There was silence in the room. Turning in her direction, I realized that she was speaking to me. "Where?" I asked, somewhat surprised that she was talking to me. "To Hershey Park!" she exclaimed. "No way!" I said, and feeling embarrassed, I started laughing. "Yeah," D exclaimed. "She's gonna dip her whole body in chocolate so R (lover) can eat her!" The room filled up with laughter, and I, too, could not restrain my giggles.

(With that, the group broke up, and as I walked back to my desk, I began to feel that for the first time, I had been an active participant in one of their kitchen get-togethers. This experience made me believe that I was being viewed as more than just an outsider. I have been trying to figure out what it takes to belong here, and one aspect undoubtedly is to partake in an occasional kitchen get-together and not to appear above such practices.)

In this commentary, the researcher not only reports her increased feeling of acceptance in the scene but also reflects on the likely importance of these informal, sometimes ribald "get-togethers" for creating a general sense of belonging in the organization.

In writing a summary commentary, the fieldworker takes a few moments to mentally review the whole day's experiences, selecting an important, memorable, or confusing issue to raise and briefly explore. Here, ethnographers have found it useful to ask themselves questions like the following: What did I learn today? What did I observe that was particularly interesting or significant? What was confusing or uncertain? Did something happen today that was similar to or radically different from things that I have previously observed? In the following excerpt, an ethnographer used commentary at the end of his day in the field to reflect his growing understanding of largely Spanish-speaking day laborers' interactions with employers in their efforts to get work.

English seems to be an important resource to acquire work, but even more interesting is the *illusion of knowing English* because even though Jorge does not speak English, he goes about acting to employers as if he does [know English] to increase his chances for hire. Something that was also intriguing was the employer searching for day laborers with legal documentation. It is interesting because day laborers are stigmatized as all being undocumented but



employers seem to know that there are many that are documented . . . Jorge believes that when folks are undocumented, employers threaten them with Immigration. Jorge seems to be at odds with this dynamic because as a person with documentation, he is held responsible [by employers] for information on others who may not be documented. And, due to his documentation, he seems to have a sense of entitlement [to work] due to his legal status.

The ethnographer uses this day's commentary to build on his growing understanding of both the strategic ways that day laborers use their knowledge of characteristics desired by employers to compete among themselves for work and day laborers' sense that legal status bring with it extra entitlement to work.

Summary commentaries are also useful for comparing and contrasting incidents that occurred on the same day or earlier in the field experience. In the following commentary, the ethnographer compares two incidents that occurred during the day's observations to further understand parent-child interactions in a public setting, in this case a grocery store:

Both of these incidents help illustrate how two very different parents choose to deal with their children in a public setting. Both children showed "bratty" behavior in two different ways: the first by illustrating his discontent in being forced to go shopping when he would have preferred staying home and the second by making the need to purchase an item within the store known. In both situations, the moms tried to ignore their children in what seemed to be the hope that their kids would realize that they were in a public setting and consequently stop their behavior. However, this was not the case. I believe that just as the moms knew that they were in a location where outside forces (i.e., limits on the ways that they could exercise control of their kids within a public store setting) influenced their ability to discipline the behavior of their children, the children knew this as well. This is all hypothetical, but the children also seem to know that they could continue to push their moms' buttons because the course of action that their parents could have taken at home would not occur in this public place. The first mom's response of "unbelievable" to her son is an indication that she is fully aware that her motherly duties are limited when considering the environment and the forces within it.

The ethnographer uses commentary to suggest possible patterns of parent-child interactions in public places, taking care to avoid "overinterpreting" and drawing conclusions too quickly based on meanings she attributes to just two examples. The understandings gleaned from these incidents should

remain suggestive of avenues for further investigation and ongoing comparison.

Finally, daily summary commentaries might identify an issue that came up in the course of the current set of fieldnotes and suggest practical, methodological steps for exploring that issue in future observations. Indeed, it is often useful simply to ask: What more do I need to know to follow up on a particular issue or event? Asking such questions helped a researcher in a battered women's shelter identify gaps in her understanding of how staff viewed and accomplished their work:

The goals staff have talked about so far of "conveying unconditional positive regard" for clients and "increasing their self-esteem" seem rather vague. How does the staff know when they have achieved unconditional positive regard? Is it based on their interaction with the client or by their refraining from being judgmental or critical of them during staff meetings? I will attempt to discover how they define and attempt to achieve the goal of "increasing a woman's self-esteem." It has been made clear that this goal is not only seen to be achieved when women leave their abusive relationships. If leaving their abusive partners were the primary indicator of achieving raised self-esteem, the organization would be largely unsuccessful, since most of these women go back to their abusive relationships. Yet, while I have learned what raising self-esteem is not, I have yet to learn what it is.

In this series of comments and questions, the fieldworker identifies two matters that shelter staff members emphasize as goals in their relations with clients: "conveying unconditional positive regard" and increasing client "self-esteem." She then considers ways she might look to understand how these general policies/values are actually implemented and how their success or failure is practically assessed in interactions within the shelter. These questions and tentative answers helped direct the ethnographer's attention, focusing and guiding future observations and analysis.

## REFLECTIONS: "WRITING" AND "READING" MODES

To characterize fieldnotes as descriptions initially conveys the prospect of simple, straightforward writing. But once we recognize that description involves more than a one-to-one correspondence between written accounts and what is going on, writing fieldnotes raises complex, perplexing problems. Descriptions are grounded on the observer-writer's participation in

the setting, but no two persons participate in and experience a setting in exactly the same way. Moreover, there is always more going on than the ethnographer can notice, and it is impossible to record all that can be noticed. Description inevitably involves different theories, purposes, interests, and points of view. Hence, fieldnotes contain descriptions that are more akin to a series of stories portraying slices of life in vivid detail than to a comprehensive, literal, or objective rendering.<sup>15</sup>

The ethnographer, however, needs to avoid getting drawn into the complexities of fieldnote descriptions while actually writing fieldnotes. She must initially work in a *writing mode*, putting into words and on paper what she has seen and heard as quickly and efficiently as possible. In this text-producing mode, the ethnographer tries to "get it down" as accurately and completely as possible, avoiding too much self-consciousness about the writing process itself. She stays close to the events at issue, rekindling her excitement about these events and inscribing them before memory fades. The writing ethnographer tries to "capture what is out there," or more accurately, to construct detailed accounts of her own observations and experience of what is "out there." At this point, too much reflection distracts or even paralyzes; one tries to write without editing, to produce detailed descriptions without worry about analytic import and connections, and to describe what happened without too much self-conscious reflection.

Only subsequently, once a text has actually been produced, can the ethnographer really step back and begin to consider the complexities that permeate fieldnote descriptions; only with fully detailed fieldnotes can the ethnographer adopt a *reading mode* and begin to reflect on how these accounts are products of his own, often implicit, decisions about how to participate in and describe events. That is, only with full notes in hand does it make sense to view these writings as texts that are truncated, partial, and perspectival products of the ethnographer's own styles of participating, orienting, and writing. It is at this point that the ethnographer can begin to treat fieldnotes as constructions and read them for the ways they *create* rather than simply record reality.

One key difference between initially working in a writing mode and subsequently in a reflective reading mode lies in how the ethnographer orients to issues of "accuracy," to "correspondence" between a written account and what it is an account of. In the moment of writing, the ethnographer must try to create some close correspondence between the written account and his experiences and observations of "what happened." The immediate task in writing fieldnote descriptions is to create a detailed, accurate, and com-

prehensive account of what has been experienced. But once notes have been written, this correspondence criterion loses salience. This shift occurs because "what happened" has been filtered through the person and writing of the observer as it was written onto the page. The resulting text "fixes" a social reality in place but does so in a way that makes it difficult to determine its relationship with realities outside that text. Readers might attempt to do so by invoking what they know from having "been there" or from experience with a similar reality. But readers are heavily constrained by what is on the page; they usually lack any effective means of gaining access to "what actually happened" independently of the written account. In such a reading mode, then, conscious, critical reflection on how writing choices have helped construct specific texts and textual realities becomes both possible and appropriate.