

(p. 9). Part 2 of the *Handbook* contains seven chapters with detailed descriptions of all the techniques mentioned in the present chapter, including discussions on structured interviewing and questionnaire construction, person-centered interviewing and observation, and visual anthropology. See also the most recent of his authored texts on anthropological methods (Bernard 2006).

3. Technically it is impossible to live your way into a culture because cultures don't exist as such, an argument to be discussed in chapter 4.

4. Among recent books and articles dealing with the topic of participant observation is a useful one by sociologist Danny Jorgensen (1989); anthropological perspectives on the activity by Michael Agar (1980, 1996); Kathleen and Billie DeWalt (1998); and Barbara Tedlock (1991); chapters in both editions of the comprehensive Denzin and Lincoln *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Tedlock 2000); chapters in the *Handbook of Ethnography* (Atkinson et al. 2001, see especially ch. 24); and Russ Bernard's authored texts on anthropological research (1988:ch. 7; 2006:ch. 13).

5. The *Cultural Anthropology Methods Newsletter*, originally published three times a year, became the *CAM Journal* in 1995 and, in 1999, under the name *Field Methods*, became the first journal publication of AltaMira Press and is now published by Sage. A journal devoted exclusively to method would seem to support Russ Bernard's argument about the centrality of method in anthropology (see note 2, above), so I hasten to add that he is the founding editor of CAM and has continued in that role to the present.

6. For interviewing discussed in 44 separate chapters, see Gubrium and Holstein, eds., *Handbook of Interview Research*, 2002; see also Kvale 1996; Seidman 1991. For more on the long interview, see McCracken 1988; for focus group interviews, Morgan 1988; for conducting interviews with special groups, such as children, Fine and Sandstrom 1988; with elites, Herz and Imber 1995; with the downtrodden, Hagan 1986. For early discussions of interviewing in ethnographic fieldwork, see Paul 1953; Spradley 1979.

4

Ethnography as a Way of Seeing

Natural science does not simply describe and explain nature; it is part of the interplay between nature and ourselves; it describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning.

—Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.

—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

The previous chapter dealt with the techniques of ethnographic research. Collectively, those techniques are sometimes referred to as ethnographic methods (Malinowski 1922) and even as “the” ethnographic method (for example, Gold 1997). So this chapter might be called “Beyond Method.” That ethnography is more than method is a major theme throughout this book, and the discussion here is pivotal to show how I intend to represent and present ethnography in the chapters that follow. In order to get beyond method without seeming to abandon it, I press the distinction reflected in the titles chosen for these chapters of part 2: the previous chapter addressing ethnography as a way of looking and the present one addressing ethnography as a way of seeing.

Let me illustrate the distinction I make between “looking” and “seeing” by referring to the Rorschach cards mentioned earlier. At one time, use of the cards as a projective technique was fairly standard practice, especially among

Harry F. Wolcott,
Ethnography: A Way of Seeing.
second ed.

Lanham, MD;

AltaMira P,
2008.

the more psychologically—or psychoanalytically—oriented fieldworkers. The cards were also known, and are perhaps better remembered, as the ink-blot cards. Anthropologists often carried a set of these cards into the field for the purpose of inviting informants to describe what they “saw” in them, the same way that psychoanalysts were using them with patients in their offices back home. In an era when Freudian terminology and concepts were highly touted in the anthropological quest for developing a unifying theory of humankind, Rorschach cards offered a standard stimulus (the set of cards, each presenting an ambiguous black-and-white or color figure) that provided an opportunity to collect protocols from subjects anywhere in the world. The protocols could then be sent away for independent analysis by someone unfamiliar with either the individuals who volunteered them or with their “culture.” Here indeed was objective science that could be used in the comparative study of societies.¹

The cards are now passé; fieldwork fads change, and Freudian theory no longer holds the promise or prominence that it did. But the cards nicely illustrate the distinction between *looking* and *seeing*. The psychoanalyst (if you were paying her) or the anthropologist (if she was paying you) asked you to *look* at the cards, but it was up to you to report what you *saw* in them. Whether addressing patients or informants, one can give all kinds of directions for looking—where, when, for how long, even what one *should* give special attention to or what one *should* see. Here I go beyond ways of looking to discuss what ethnographers see, and should see, *because they are ethnographers* who (more or less) share ideas about a way of viewing human social behavior.

For a different kind of example in making a distinction between looking and seeing, consider what might result if one were to invite a biologist, a hunter, and a real estate developer to visit and render an independent appraisal of an attractive rural site. Although the setting is the same, we would expect each of them to *see* and appreciate something quite different. My point is that an ethnographer’s way of seeing tells us more about the doing of ethnography than does an ethnographer’s ways of looking. The ethnographer’s ways of looking are strikingly similar to the ways of looking shared by humans everywhere: observing, asking, examining what others have done.

What the ethnographer does, to be a bit disarming about it, is to think about how other ethnographers would see the setting, what they would make of it. To become an ethnographer one must acquire a sense of what constitutes an ethnographic framing of a problem, what guides an inquiry so that it re-

sults in ethnography rather than, say, the inventory of flora and fauna we might expect from a biologist, the stalking strategy proposed by a hunter, or the subdivision potential envisioned by a real estate developer. One quickly realizes that, as important as fieldwork is to accomplishing ethnography, it is the mindwork (and its accompanying deskwork) that goes with it that is most critical. Ethnography is more than method.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS MORE THAN METHOD

For the anthropologically oriented researcher, ethnography has traditionally been associated with and directed toward learning about culture. Early assumptions that any research along these lines must necessarily be directed toward the study of “primitives” and their “tribal cultures” have yielded to broadly defined concerns for cultural events, cultural scenes, microcultures, and to the interactions between and among groups with differing cultural orientations. The underlying idea is that *culture is revealed through discerning patterns of socially shared behavior*. That idea rests a bit uneasily in the absence of satisfactory resolutions to provocative questions such as how much “sharing” is necessary or how much agreement there must be to keep the concept itself viable.

As viewed from *outside* its discipline of origin, however, ethnography has slowly become dislodged from the conceptual framework once so closely associated with it. As a consequence, for some researchers an ethnographic question may simply be a question that is amenable to study through *techniques* comparable to those employed by the early ethnographers. The orienting question need not call for interpretation at all, only description, with finely *detailed* description substituted for, and perhaps even misconstrued for, carefully *contextualized* description.

Given the wide range of activities that anthropologists themselves are inclined to label as ethnography, we might feel resigned to define ethnography as “what ethnographers do,” always a safe, if not particularly enlightening, way to define an activity. In perusing a periodical like the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (formerly *Urban Life and Culture*) one realizes that today’s ethnographers may be found anywhere, studying anything that can be studied through a fieldwork approach. That is how *Contemporary Ethnography* defines its mission, informing readers and contributors in its policy statement that it “publishes original and theoretically significant studies based upon participant-observation, unobtrusive

observation, intensive interviewing, and contextualized analysis of discourse as well as examinations of such ethnographic methods." Approach has become paramount. For many, the ethnographic question is no longer *what* one studies, or *where* one conducts research, but whether the data are obtained by techniques consistent with standard fieldwork practice.

FOLLOWING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TRADITION IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Taking ethnography to be a method of inquiry independent of the study of culture is a reasonable adaptation (or "appropriation") of it in service to other disciplines and areas of practice. I imagine that some ethnographies in the future will show increasing evidence in that regard; they will veer from the course of traditional ethnography. Nevertheless, that is not the tack I have taken in the past (e.g., HFW 1975a, 1982b) and it is not the tack I pursue at present. In the classical sense that I follow here, *ethnography finds its orienting and overarching purpose in an underlying concern with cultural interpretation*. That is not to say that an explicit cultural framework must be rigorously imposed on every study, but it does mean that to be ethnographic in the traditional sense a study must provide the kind of account of human social activity from which cultural patterning can be discerned.

Culture is, of course, an abstraction, a perspective for studying human behavior that gives particular attention to ("privileges," in today's lexicon) acquired social behavior. Such a view does not dismiss those who equate ethnography with participant observation or any particular constellation of fieldwork techniques, but it goes beyond merely insisting that a researcher must be on site to collect data. I join with Michael Agar in insisting that "ethnography is much more complicated than collecting data" (1996:51).

All researchers, most certainly the qualitatively oriented ones, ought to have a clear sense of what Agar means. But beyond that, you are free to draw upon any aspects of ethnography that prove helpful. Pursuing research through a fieldwork approach is, therefore, a logical starting place for realizing ethnographic potential, but it is not the only possible result of taking that approach. If you simply want to "borrow" the techniques, you should find quite a bit here to guide you. But perhaps I can expand your embrace so that for you, too, ethnography becomes more than method.

The underlying purpose of ethnographic research in this traditional view is to describe what the people in some particular place or status ordinarily do,

and the *meanings* they ascribe to the doing, under ordinary or particular circumstances, presenting that description in a manner that draws attention to regularities that implicate cultural process. One can *do* ethnography anywhere, anytime, and of virtually anyone or any process, as long as human social behavior is involved (or *was* involved, in the case of studies made by archaeologists and ethnohistorians). The important question is not whether ethnography is feasible in a particular instance but whether and how cultural interpretation might enhance understanding of the topic or problem under investigation. What, then, is an ethnographic question? And what are some of the core features of ethnography?

WHAT IS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC QUESTION?

To pose an ethnographic question is to pose a question in such a way that ethnographic research is a reasonable way—although not necessarily the only way—to go about finding an answer.

There is always a strong descriptive element in ethnography, so an ethnographic question must implicate what it is that the ethnographer is to describe as a result of exercising either or both of the two major fieldwork components described earlier: experiencing and enquiring, or participant observation and interviewing. You haven't posed an ethnographic question until it is clear what the ethnographer is to look at and to look for, at least with sufficient clarity to initiate an inquiry. There is a rather narrow window here, somewhere between posing questions hopelessly broad (e.g., "Does Buddhism account for the patience that seems to dominate the Thai world view?" or "How do leaders make their decisions?") or so specific that they can better be investigated by quicker means ("What is the prevailing attitude of the Japanese toward Americans doing business in their country?" or "What television programs do Brazilians watch most?").

In chapter 2, I stressed the importance of serendipity and of location in the ethnographic career, but neither of these aspects of fieldwork can define purpose. Ethnography cannot proceed without purpose. In the course of assessing the possibilities of all that might be researched, researchable questions readily arise. As an ethnographer who now finds yourself in some particular setting, what aspects do you find worthy of study? If time and resources allow the luxury of a traditional ethnography, such broad questions as "What is going on here?" or "What do people in this setting have to know in order to do

what they are doing?" are adequate for initiating an inquiry. Such inquiry should go beyond simply developing a descriptive account. It requires framing more provocative questions—descriptive questions as to *how*, and underlying questions as to *meanings* imputed to action.

The purposes that guide ethnographic inquiry do not spring forth from the settings in which ethnography is conducted; they are something that ethnographers bring with them to the scene. Even so direct a question as "What is going on here?" has its origins outside the setting in which it is posed. As my own academic interests turned to processes in the acquisition of culture, I began to frame guiding questions that helped me attend to those interests. Two questions I could address in virtually any setting were, "What do people in this setting have to know and do to make this system work?" and, "If culture, sometimes defined simply as shared knowledge, is mostly caught rather than taught, how do those being inducted into the group find their 'way in' so that an adequate level of sharing is achieved?"

Orienting questions like these help me to focus on some aspects of what is going on and relieve me of feeling that I ought to try to observe "everything." And that introduces an important caveat about how ethnography proceeds, a quality not fully appreciated by those unfamiliar with it. Whether stated explicitly or not, efforts at description must always be directed at *something*. One cannot simply "observe." A question such as "What is going on here?" can only be addressed when fleshed out with enough detail to answer the question it begs, "In terms of what?"

I hedge my statement, noting there is always a "strong" descriptive element in ethnography, rather than suggesting that ethnographers try to achieve "pure" description. Description can only be accomplished in terms of purpose. Our most intense efforts to achieve complete objectivity are foiled from the outset. Despite how scientifically satisfying it might seem to argue on behalf of the purity of our descriptive efforts, we must concede that descriptive data are always "theory laden."

I use theory here in its little "t" sense, not in its capital "T," Grand Theory, one. There has to be an *idea* guiding what we choose to describe and how we choose to describe it. Ethnographers do not engage in what has been referred to lightheartedly as "immaculate perception." We do not and cannot simply *observe*, *watch*, or *look*; we must observe, watch, or look at *something*. That fact surely tarnishes any notion that ethnography has somehow transcended the

inherent human limitations of those who pursue it. And conversely, each of us who does it is *someone*, not *everyone* at once. No getting around it.

When pressed about what they hope to learn in the course of an inquiry, ethnographers often claim they are not exactly sure what they are looking for. That answer is always partially true, and I think it becoming to preserve all we can of such tentativeness toward what we are observing and what we make of it. Nonetheless, without some idea of what we are about, we could not proceed with observations at all. To be accused of "haphazard descriptiveness" reveals more of a failure to convince our audiences that we do indeed have an idea of what we are doing, even when we are unable or unwilling to specify our exact parameters.

Observation is, of necessity, a zero-sum game: the cost of looking at anything is at the expense of looking at something else, or looking elsewhere. Kenneth Burke had it right: A way of seeing is, indeed, also a way of not seeing (1935:70). Don't be fooled by the anthropologist who insists, "I haven't a clue what to look at," for most assuredly he or she has a hunch or an intuitive feeling to guide observations. When you become established at this, you may even start calling those guiding hunches your "theories." But Charles Darwin long ago warned against pushing too hard on that term. Back in 1863 he advised, "Let theory guide your observations, but till your reputation is well established be sparing in publishing theory. It makes persons doubt your observations" (quoted in Gruber 1981:123).

The same holds for asking an ethnographic question: One cannot ask an ethnographic question without some idea of what an ethnographic answer looks like. One needs an idea of the circumstances under which it does and does not make sense to pursue ethnography beyond a commitment to fieldwork. Given the customary limits within which ethnographic research has traditionally been conducted—one person working alone for an extended period of time—there are corresponding limits to the scale of the issues or projects on which one may reasonably engage.

When topics grow in complexity to exceed the scope of what a lone researcher can accomplish, a ready and willing ethnographer must assess the goodness of fit between the information needed and whatever contribution ethnography might make. Should conducting an independent inquiry seem to serve little purpose, an alternative contribution is to help create a better fit between some grander and more systematic approach and the issue to be addressed.

THE SCALE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PROJECT

To broad social concerns such as ethnic conflict, stemming the tide of AIDS, or understanding why children of certain backgrounds do poorly in school, one can ask how (or whether) the particularistic nature of ethnography can shed enough light to warrant the effort? Yet even the most rigorous of quantitatively oriented researchers may be willing to concede that ethnography can play a role in *shaping* an inquiry: helping to identify common factors, dramatizing differences among cases in different circumstances, refocusing or sharpening the research question, or helping to prioritize questions in terms of time and resources available.

There is wide recognition of ethnography's potential contribution in this problem-forming stage, even among those who harbor doubts as to whether "real" research results can be achieved by such means. Researchers who have no trouble accepting ethnography as adjunct nonetheless have trouble with the idea of accepting it as a full-blown research approach in its own right.

I do not share such doubts, but that is certainly not to claim that ethnography is the be-all and end-all of research. A conservative view might hold that ethnography is not well suited to grand-scale research problems, and that for many pressing problems it has at best only a modest contribution to make. It does no harm to be modest in claims about what it can accomplish.

And in instances when it *is* well suited, I think ethnography achieves its fullest potential when the ethnographer is free to work independently. That seems a better use of ethnographic effort than simply having ethnographers run interference for large-scale studies or watch their efforts get swallowed up in number-crunching efforts that facilely report too little about too many.

I trust you recognize such preferences as personal as well as professional. I like to do my own thing, to work in my own way and at my own speed, and to assume responsibility for seeing a project through from start to finish. For me, that "independent researcher" feature is an aspect that I find especially appealing about ethnography. It also presents a good argument for including an appreciation for ethnographic experience in the training of both future researchers and future *consumers* of research, because it takes them through the entire research sequence from start-up to write-up. It helps to explain why ethnography has caught on among doctoral students anxious to experience the entire research sequence rather than simply become part of some large ongoing project and make only a minor contribution within it.

Although fieldwork tends to be conducted as an individual activity, there have always been ethnographers—today in increasing numbers—who find team research appealing. (For more discussion, see Erickson and Stull 1997; Tedlock 2000.) The two-person fieldwork team (often a married couple) is especially well institutionalized in ethnographic research. This includes the not-too-uncommon circumstance where one partner is professionally trained when the fieldwork begins, and from the shared experience and working relationship the other partner acquires a working knowledge, and, later perhaps, formal professional credentials as well. Rather predictably, when the team consists of a male and a female, the guiding ethnographic question has been split in two, the male partner focusing on men's activities and beliefs, the female partner on women and children, in a seemingly "natural" division of the research task that, until recently, we seemed not to question for some stereotyping of its own.

In times past, other ethnographers, typically younger ones beginning their research careers, did sometimes join large-scale projects on site or participated in ongoing projects administered through their academic department. Consider, for example, the Indonesian research described in chapter 2, and projects of even grander scale such as the Cornell Peru Project, or the Harvard Chiapas Project that began as a five-year program and lasted for 35 years (Vogt 1994). In such cases the overriding ethnographic task became a collective one, the project defined in such a way that cadres of fieldworkers could be sent to investigate a central topic through research conducted in different communities. Prominent among such projects were the five-cultures study at Rimrock (Vogt and Albert 1967), and the six-cultures study under the direction of John and Beatrice Whiting (Whiting and Whiting 1975).

In spite of the romantic appeal of researchers seemingly free to study anything they want, ethnographers have also performed admirable service conducting preliminary fieldwork to find a sense of the range and depth of community feelings on an issue before systematic study was initiated on a larger scale. Contributing an ethnography or two won't cut down on infant mortality or AIDS, but in communities where information is lacking about local practice, efforts to gather survey data or to modify prevailing practice may entirely miss their mark. An assumption that infant mortality is a *problem* rather than an answer—for example, in a society that values offspring of one sex more than another—warrants ethnographic attention, preferably from an

ethnographer who can recognize some assumptions of her or his own. So although I remain partial to the idea of the ethnographer as independent agent, I recognize the contribution to be made when ethnographers hire on as consultants to larger projects or are incorporated into social science teams.²

Some unusual uses of ethnography in applied settings are discussed in chapter 8. Here I draw attention to ethnography's more or less "pure" state, as with community studies that once characterized much of the total ethnographic effort. Even in those for-its-own-sake days, ethnography had to accommodate a multitude of practitioners, problems, and motives. My chosen subtitle is intended to convey and underscore the idea that ethnography is a way of seeing. As I delve deeper into what ethnographers do and the kinds of issues they confront, I may seem to portray the ethnographer not only as the lone researcher but also the Lone Ranger,³ the troubleshooter with infinite skill, patience, and personal resources to get to the bottom of things before riding off into the sunset, the Compleat Researcher after all. Michael Agar seems to start out that way in the following quote, but he quickly shrinks the ethnographer's task—and thus the ethnographer as well—down to size:

Ethnography is really quite an arrogant enterprise. In a short period of time, an ethnographer moves in among a group of strangers to study and describe their beliefs, document their social life, write about their subsistence strategies, and generally explore the territory right down to their recipes for the evening meal. The task is an impossible one. At best, an ethnography can only be partial. [Agar 1980:41]

Instead of envisioning the ethnographer as Superman or Wonder Woman, one must recognize that it is the scope of the ethnographic *question* that must be pared to what one individual, or a researcher working with a colleague or small research team, can accomplish in a limited amount of time. In an ideal world, *every* researcher would be sufficiently talented to be able to summon from a vast repertoire whatever combination of techniques is required for addressing the issue at hand. And such an ideal might seem most nearly attainable in the role of the ethnographer, responsible for an inquiry in its entirety, from conception to final report. It would be splendid indeed to have at one's command all the research skills one might ever need.

But think about it! If you, as sole or principal investigator, really did have all the skills of social research at your command—computer skills, language skills, statistical skills, survey techniques, ability to work with experimental and quasi-experimental design, let alone all the observer and interviewer and interpersonal skills an ethnographer is likely to need—why would you invest your time plodding along with ethnography? Whatever else it is, ethnography is a time-consuming way to conduct inquiry. If you already know what results you need, or are under the gun to quickly provide quantifiable "findings," ethnography probably makes no sense at all as your strategy.

Alternatively, if you see yourself as a dyed-in-the-wool ethnographic researcher who happily leaves treatment groups or the controlled sampling procedures of the survey researcher to others, then you need carefully to assess—and make sure that others understand—what you (alone) can and cannot accomplish by following this approach. If world problems (hunger, violence, religious or racial intolerance) or broadly conceived variables (leadership, morale, power, resistance, corruption) intrigue you, then ethnography is probably not your thing. If ethnography *is* your thing and you are nonetheless attracted to such issues, you need to assess how, and to what extent, small-scale study can contribute, whether by calling attention to problems seen in broader context, to exploring the range and variation extant, or to helping others frame better questions for inquiry conducted on a grander scale. You also need to recognize personal strengths and preferences in conducting fieldwork, so that in whatever ways you execute the research role you make the fullest use of what you do best.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS OR MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

Do you remember a popular television series years ago, or more recently a film by the same name, titled *Mission Impossible*? The story in each episode took shape as the special agent—its hero—listened to a brief tape recording announcing his next assignment. The message always began the same: "Your mission, should you choose to accept it . . ."

Attempting to address the topic of ethnography as a way of seeing—to examine the numerous forms it may take, to review all the arguments over definition it has prompted, or to weigh all its advantages and shortcomings—presents me with something of a "mission impossible." Small wonder that when invited

to write about ethnography in general, we usually retreat to writing about fieldwork *techniques*, as I confess to having done in the past (HFW 1975a,b; 1981a,b; 1988; 1990a; 2005).

I noted Agar's warning that ethnography can at best only be partial. My effort to capture and communicate its essence must necessarily prove partial as well. First, like ethnography itself, the effort is partial by reason of being incomplete: one person's view, at one point in time, based on one set of experiences, enhanced by a purposeful but serendipitous selection of experiences related by others. And I continue to frame ethnography in terms of the purpose for which it was originally developed, toward understanding culture in general by studying cultures in specific. "A true ethnography is about something called a culture," writes Richard Shweder (1996b:19). I couldn't agree more.

Being the flat-footed ethnographer that I am, I was rather impervious to the whole postmodern critique of the 1980s and 1990s with its "crisis of representation." I have no problem with the consciousness-raising and introspection the critique generated; I have been at this so long that I must be part of the problem. But I do not believe that we were all that insensitive *then*, and I do not see much impact on ethnographic *practice* now, except in cautioning about ethnographic authority and in evincing a more penetrating concern about power in human relationships. The dust seems finally to have settled on the postmodern era (see, for example, Marcus 1997), but that part of the story will have to be told by others.

ON FINDING DIFFERENCE ENOUGH

I regard myself as a flat-footed (i.e., traditional or old-fashioned) ethnographer in a day when the culture concept itself has come under increasingly sharp attack. Yet I rather doubt that my own studies would pass muster among the *really* old guard who searched out tribal groups that left no doubt in anyone's mind as to what constituted "difference enough." Only by contrast with what sometimes passes today for ethnography do my own studies seem all that traditional.

In my study among the Kwakiutl I spent a great many of my "days in the field" in what had by then become my customary role at the head of a classroom. Four years later, the idea that I claimed to be doing an ethnography of a principal in a local elementary school produced frowns among some senior

anthropologists whom I had rather hoped would find the idea intriguing. "Can you do an ethnography of *one* person?" I was asked. I found myself offering what I felt was a convincing distinction between *the ethnography of the school principalship* and *an ethnography of a school principal*, the latter a seemingly more satisfactory way to describe what I intended to accomplish. In spite of the absence of dramatic cross-cultural comparison, however, culture remained, as it has always remained, at the center of my interpretations.

I find it impossible to think about ethnography in any other way; I cannot accept the idea that fieldwork is nothing more than a set of research techniques that can be applied anywhere. To me, ethnography entails *both* the way we study culture and the interpretive framework that ethnographers impose on what they study. I do not set out to "observe" culture, but I do take responsibility for making culture explicit in whatever I observe, because that is how ethnographers make sense of what they see.

I assume that the anthropologically oriented ethnographer is *always* guided by a concern for cultural description. If you are going to conduct ethnographic research, that can be your mission—should you choose to accept it—but it does not have to be your mission. As I note, you are free to use these techniques to accomplish your research purposes, whether you draw upon them in only the most basic way, model your work on existing studies without a corresponding investment in a cultural perspective, or pursue your inquiry intent on producing a contemporary equivalent of one of the early classics. You will be better off following *any* of these alternatives if you understand how ethnographers have conducted their studies in the past, or at least the recent past when ethnography finally "came home."

Admittedly, ethnographers have *always* felt free to fashion, or refashion, ethnography to suit their purposes. Even *teams* of ethnographic researchers sent into the field with detailed handbooks designed to guide the collection of data and assure some uniformity of results have returned to write up accounts that bear their individual and unique stamp. It can be no other way. "Whatever else an ethnography does," notes James Clifford, "it translates experience into text" (Clifford and Marcus 1986:115), and experience is always idiosyncratic.

As central and unifying as it is, a commitment to cultural interpretation is not the clear mandate it might appear to be, even among those steeped in a sociocultural orientation. Were culture something one could observe firsthand, all

any ethnographer would have to do is observe and record human interaction and bring back a detailed account of what had been observed. But culture is not “there” waiting to be observed, and no ethnographer can ever hope to catch so much as a glimpse of it. Overly enthusiastic researchers do succumb at times to representing culture that way, as though they not only have seen it but have watched it push (or in a stronger version, pull) people around, fill their heads with beliefs, or keep them from realizing their full human potential. But the ethnographer’s mission—the culturally oriented ethnographer I am describing here—recognizes culture not as something to be observed but as something ethnographers *put there because that is the way they render their accounts*.

ATTRIBUTING CULTURE

Ward Goodenough explains culture by saying that ethnographers *attribute* it to the people among whom they study:

In anthropological practice the culture of any society is made of the concepts, beliefs, and principles of action and organization that an ethnographer has found could be attributed successfully to the members of that society in the context of dealing with them. [Goodenough 1976:5]

Goodenough is careful to distinguish between “culture” and “society.” Although often used interchangeably, these two terms serve better when they are differentiated. As Goodenough has observed (1981:103n), people belong to *groups*, not to *cultures*. One cannot belong to a culture any more than one can belong to a language; *cultures and languages are ways of doing things, not something one can join*. Because culture has been so closely associated with social groups and communities, Goodenough remarks, we often read about people being “members of a culture,” but he finds the idea “truly nonsensical.” I trust that I have been consistent here in differentiating between what people *do* and what they can *belong to*.

To make their mission possible, following this particular way of viewing culture, ethnographers must be able to posit the “concepts, beliefs, and principles of action and organization” they *infer* from what they observe firsthand and what others tell them.

With so broad a charter as “doing the ethnography” of some group, the ethnographer must sometimes paint with a broad brush in order to communicate this essence. Among the more problem-focused ethnographers, atten-

tion is directed to those aspects of culture most relevant to the issue under investigation. Whatever the case, the ethnographer will experience tension between getting the big picture and getting the fine detail. The advice I offer is to try to capture something of each, but to have clearly in mind which of the two warrants greater emphasis according to the purposes of the inquiry. Ethnography demands constant selectivity on the part of the ethnographer as to what to put in and thoughtful reflection about what must be left out.

MORE EXPECTATIONS

How many qualities or characteristics or criteria are enough to nurture great expectations for ethnography and to help ethnographers achieve some reasonable ones? I have reviewed two critical expectations, first that ethnography is a *field-oriented* activity, and second that ethnography has traditionally taken *cultural interpretation* as its central purpose. Yet even in the good old days when consensus rather than “deconstructing” was the prevailing mood, I doubt that these two characteristics necessarily would have received universal approval. “Field-oriented activity” might pass muster simply because the phrase is sufficiently ambiguous to accommodate scholars who rely on ethnographic data but are themselves neither well suited for fieldwork nor attracted to the field in any sense other than metaphorical. And assigning centrality to “culture” might meet unexpected resistance even among some cultural anthropologists who find too little power in a “tired old culture concept” to devote a career to pursuing it.

So even two seemingly basic expectations might variously be argued or interpreted. Yet a book like this that boldly proclaims *Ethnography* for its title can rightfully be expected either to identify ethnography’s core components or at least to distinguish between its critical and its merely customary features. I accept as part of my mission to try to identify the essential components of ethnography. Be aware, however, that what may sometimes appear to be its essential features will prove instead to be only *customary* ones. Ethnography is going to prove a bit elusive.

Take the two criteria discussed above as a tentative starting point. Do these criteria hold in every case? And where do we go from here? It might be tempting to give way to further sermonizing about what ethnography *ought* to be (have I overdone that already?) or to draw up the equivalent of the Boy Scout Law for the Truehearted Ethnographer: an ethnographer should be clean, courteous, kind, honest, trustworthy, and so on, qualities that should be evident in

the ethnographic account as well. Or should I turn to a ready-made list of research expectations that might be proposed by experimentally oriented researchers and cast in a familiar vocabulary—calling attention to validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalizability—criteria that invariably find us scrambling to defend our approaches on their home ground.

Rather than dwell too obsessively on ethnography's essential elements, perhaps I can make more headway if I begin by identifying what I refer to as *customary* features. I do not have to stretch a point to say that customarily it is a field-oriented activity. As to cultural interpretation, that, too, is customary. The often reported fact notwithstanding that there have been numerous attempts to define the concept of culture (see Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952, for example), the concept remains a bit diffuse—and is perhaps all the more useful because of that very diffuseness.

Let me illustrate how I think about culture. Think back to a comment that I made earlier in chapter 2 where I singled out from Spradley and McCurdy's *Cultural Experience* a case that, for me, failed to achieve its ethnographic potential. The chapter, "Fire Calls," was subtitled "Ethnography of Fire Fighters." Where I felt the student ethnographer went wrong was in how she proceeded with her interviews.

Following the then-popular ethnosemantic approach, she asked her firemen participants to describe what kinds of fires there are. Her mistake was in pursuing a technical question that focused on fires, not a question about firemen. She organized a beginning taxonomy of the kinds of fires that firemen encounter; that gave her plenty to report, but I think it cost her the opportunity to study the true "culture" of firemen. She would have done better to study the qualities one seeks in one's fellow firemen, perhaps the unwritten code of ethics among them, their beliefs about saving lives or looking out for others, how one is expected to behave in an emergency. Surely that would have been harder, more mysterious, more elusive, but it would have led her in the direction of a cultural interpretation. If you can detect the difference between these two ways of pursuing her study, you are on your way to understanding the kind of ethnography I am writing about.

ON GETTING ENOUGH DETAIL

Another feature expected in an ethnographic account is context—lots of it. To be commended for providing well-contextualized reporting should bring sat-

isfaction to any ethnographer for having successfully resolved the tension between providing irrelevant or excessive detail and providing too little. Ethnography is not an open invitation to "fill up" a study; it is a call for identifying and tracing interrelated elements and fitting parts together. I trust I render a service by remarking on the tension between exhibiting an economy of style and providing an adequate level of detail. If you are inclined to offer your descriptions in great detail, here is an activity that not only calls for but insists on it. Ethnography is a matter of detail. Ethnographic questions beg for relevant and complex detail.

Personal styles, rather than training or theoretical orientation, underlie how each of us deals with detail. By nature, do you ordinarily take on, try to do, and inevitably report on, too much or too little? You don't have to restrict your assessment only to how you report. In my own case, I have a difficult time throwing away *anything*. As a consequence, my writing can become as cluttered as my carport or desk with material that probably should be filed away or tossed out. I know others who keep everything pared to the bare bone, their prose included. The critiques they receive of their written work generally ask for more detail, more context. My reviewers invariably call for less. The rendering of detail presents different problems to different researchers; not everyone needs to be more sparing of it.

As general advice, I recommend attending to as much detail as possible in one's observations and notes—especially during the initial period of note taking—and rendering as much detail as possible in the preliminary reporting, at least in early drafts. That seems preferable to skimping on detail that one must later try to recapture.

Colleagues can play a helpful role by reading drafts to identify details that receive too little or too much attention. We lose track of the fact that we bring more to our personal accounts than other readers could ever bring. The details we include are often shorthand references for which only the observer has the complete picture. Events we have witnessed can be related to others only through the details we provide. As observers, we ourselves are immersed in a richness of detail we can neither appreciate nor fully explicate. We are always caught between needing to be less wordy and needing to provide sufficient context.

One place where this is likely to occur is when we repeat verbatim what several informants have said about the same topic. Because we were there in person,

we “hear” the words as actually spoken, perhaps by informants strikingly different in appearance or circumstance. But to the reader, such accounts may appear virtually identical and, therefore, needlessly repetitious. The challenge is to find other ways to communicate what is significant about such differences, if merely repeating informant’s words fails to accomplish it. This is another advantage in having someone else read your early drafts. To any reader other than yourself, informants all speak with one voice, the printed one. Much as you may have preferred to have them speak for themselves, the nuances will be lost.

We can also get lost in detail in ways of which we ourselves are not always cognizant. One is in subtle efforts to effect sheer “dazzle,” showing off how much information we have gathered through our unrelenting attentiveness. We want readers to recognize that we have worked hard, done a good job, been thorough in our endeavors. We also want to provide ample evidence that fieldwork is hard work, and thus our accomplishment worthy of commendation. We seek to validate an implicit claim that we are trustworthy observers *in general* through the level of detail we demonstrate in our descriptions of *particular* people or events.

By the time we are ready to present our more tenuous observations or interpretations, we hope to have brought readers along so they recognize and appreciate the authority of the authorial voice with which we speak. I suspect most of us are also guilty of employing our ability to dazzle by giving emphasis to what we *are* able to report so that the reader becomes less mindful of what might be missing. Attention to detail is a critical part of claims-making in an endeavor in which everything to be reported must be seen through our eyes alone. While it is currently popular in some camps to pretend to divest ourselves of all authority, we simply must be listened to if we are to present our cases.

Associated as it is with the gathering of detail, and criticized as it often is for excesses in that regard, ethnography and ethnographers often take a bad rap for a quality that ought to warrant celebration. Isn’t a preoccupation with detail one of our strong points? We need to see that our efforts are brought to the attention of those who share our patience for detail, rather than acquiesce to our rushy culture’s insistence on getting on with it. Hear Arthur Kleinman’s eloquent plea on behalf of ethnographers who go “on and on”:

In order to build the scaffolding of scholarly materials that makes cultural analysis convincing and authorizes the ethnographer to apply that analysis to

different problems and special themes, the author composes an iterative process that goes back and forth across ethnographic context, social theory, and key issues. The sedulous reader of ethnography, being a devotee of detail, expects to become absorbed in the intricacies of thought and experience that represent an alternative way of being-in-the-world. While coherence and analytic power count for something, so too do reflexive voice, style, thickly described ethnographic materials, and *aperçus* that illuminate a local world, often in order to challenge a putative universal or to critique the world of the ethnographer, a not-so-silent subject in many ethnographic monographs.

If all this sounds old-fashioned, that is one of the arresting charms of ethnography. In place of our era’s egregious emphasis on minimalist interpretation, ethnography develops, meanders, even circles back; it goes on and on. [Kleinman 1995:194–195]

Voilà! There is your authoritative footnote, should you find yourself meandering, going “on and on.” I can’t really recommend that you make a grim determination to get “everything.” But I temper that advice with an anthropologist’s own reflection on our era’s “egregious emphasis on minimalist interpretation,” everything coming at us byte by byte. If ethnography is a meander, acknowledging that characteristic might help sort out who is better suited to pursue it and who, as readers, are more likely to appreciate it. Maybe that explains why I resist some of the “rapid” approaches to ethnography that I review in chapter 7 but present without advocacy. My problem is not with the techniques *per se*, but I do question why those who rely on them too exclusively want to burden their studies with the label “ethnography.”

Level of detail is a problem for anyone working in a qualitative/descriptive mode. The answer does not lie with detail itself. Nor is it much help to be advised not to get caught up in detail. If the research question can be addressed by giving painstaking attention to certain facets of behavior, then close examination of a few items may best satisfy the research intent. For the anthropologist drawn to cultural know-how as a way to portray culture, looking, say, at issues of consensus about how things are called, or how things are done within a community, one had better be willing to be caught up with detail.

Both the nature of issues explored and the methods employed to analyze them may exceed the boundaries of ethnography, especially in its more traditional form. Then again, ethnographers are not doomed only to conduct long-term, intimate studies of small groups, nor does their work necessarily exclude

them from attending to problems requiring strict quantification. In the latter regard, some important branching into new facets of quantitatively oriented inquiry has been going on for years, especially among the more mathematically inclined or computer-oriented anthropologists investigating cognitive structuring.⁴

A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

A cross-cultural perspective based on firsthand experience continues to be recognized as highly *desirable* for anyone claiming to do ethnography, but the idea of insisting on it as prerequisite has been losing ground. Students well-versed in anthropological literature have sometimes been able to compensate for a lack of personal cross-cultural experience by drawing upon appropriate concepts and by comparisons from their broad grounding in area studies, much as their forebears had done through "library studies" of their own.

As ethnography has gained favor outside anthropology, however, researchers have felt neither the obligation nor the need to bring a cross-cultural perspective to their work. Watching this happen early on in educational anthropology, George Spindler, one of its "founding fathers," expressed the following concern:

It would be a grievous error to think that a generation of educational anthropologists could be trained without a solid exposure to this kind of [cross-cultural] experience. I suggest that no anthropologist-of-education-to-be should start with his or her first significant piece of empirical research in a school in our own society. It is essential for him or her to get turned around by seeing and experiencing differently. [Spindler 1973:16]

Anthropologists might have chosen to use culture as a barrier to keep outsiders from encroaching on their sacred ground. But they never became all that protective of either "culture" or "ethnography" as exclusive intellectual properties of their discipline. Matter of fact, only recently have their introductory texts even begun to acknowledge "ethnography" as a term worthy of discussion. Meanwhile, in many parts of the world, finding opportunities for experiencing another macro- or national culture firsthand *for the explicit purpose of conducting ethnographic research* has become increasingly difficult.

A contributing factor to the perceived extent of this problem is the close association in the minds of many, anthropologists included, between culture and ethnicity. Ethnicity may indeed signal the presence of dramatic cultural difference of the sort on which ethnography was founded, but culture is by no means limited to differences rooted in ethnicity. I was surprised to hear a graduate student in Australia lament that it was almost impossible these days to do cross-cultural research in her country because of difficulties in securing permission to work with Aboriginal populations. In her mind, the only opportunity for *real* cross-cultural research was with that group. For years I have been hearing a similar lament at home about the difficulties of gaining permission to work with Native American groups.

Such responses are the consequence of a misperception that culture is found only among *others* and thus is defined implicitly as any behavior different from our own. I listened with dismay as a high school teacher who only recently had "discovered" ethnography reported how she had begun assigning her ethnically different students to do "ethnographies" in their own homes. She had mislocated the role that cross-cultural perspective plays in ethnography. What she herself might be able to discern from visiting her students' homes, they are quite unlikely to recognize in their own; ethnography does not begin at home! In *her* home, her ethnically different students would be most likely to detect the kinds of differences she expects them to discover in theirs.

What exactly does a cross-cultural perspective provide? It should allow the observer to make problematic what might otherwise be taken for granted. Years ago Clyde Kluckhohn provided the following oft-quoted rationale for the need to study among others in order to see ourselves:

Studying primitives enables us to see ourselves better. Ordinarily we are unaware of the special lens through which we look at life. It would hardly be fish who discovered the existence of water. Students who had not gone beyond the horizon of their own society could not be expected to perceive custom which was the stuff of their own thinking. . . . This, and not the satisfaction of idle curiosity nor romantic quest, is the meaning of the anthropologist's work in non-literate societies. [Kluckhohn 1949:11]

Let me offer an example of how a cross-cultural perspective can lend insight when pursuing an ethnographic approach in familiar circumstances. In

writing up my Kwakiutl village material, I followed the anthropological tradition of organizing part of my account around the annual cycle of activities. I drew upon the economic cycle as a way to incorporate the seasons and to emphasize what the seasons meant, rather than simply to make some contrasts between long winter nights and long summer days.

In the research project in which I next engaged—my study of an elementary school principal—the annual cycle seemed at first so obvious, at least to anyone familiar with public schools in North America, as to warrant little or no mention. As everyone knows, school starts in the late summer and, except for a brief Thanksgiving respite (October in Canada, November in the United States), continues through until the holiday season at the end of December. That break ends abruptly within a day or two after the New Year. Teachers generally regard January as a “teaching month,” with the distractions of the fall (Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas) safely past. A holiday or two, a week-long spring break in March or April, and a combination of winding up and winding down through May, extending perhaps into early June, complete the school “year” and cycle. Although my attention was focused on the school principal, it seemed obvious that his calendar would not differ significantly from that of the teachers and students, save for remaining on duty a bit longer after school closed in the summer and returning to duty a bit before the teachers returned at summer’s end.

But was I really thinking about school the way a principal does, or had all those years spent as a student, followed more recently by five years as a classroom teacher, blinded me from taking more careful account of what the principal was doing that might differ from what teachers and students were doing? In October, with the school year barely underway, the principal had complained about having to submit his budget projections for the *next* school year. Later he was assigned to a committee to interview candidates for administrative openings anticipated the following year. Later still, he was involved in the annual “spring shuffle” when some teachers transferred, retired, or were replaced. In May teachers grew impatient with his requests about class lists and assignments for the next school year, reminding him that they were totally preoccupied with getting through the present one! I discovered that a more realistic way to look at a principal’s cycle of activities was to think of overlapping cycles of about 20 months’ duration that begin in October of the previous year and go virtually until the day school ends the year following. Realizing the dif-

ference in their annual cycles helped me to understand some of the circumstances that often found principal and teachers out of step with each other. The cross-cultural framework allowed me to uncover a pattern so obvious that might otherwise completely have escaped attention.

My study was also guided by a broader perspective, thinking about the principal’s role compared to the role of the village chief (who happened as well to be a seine boat skipper). Throughout the study I kept thinking about what constituted a problem for an individual in either role and how it was likely to be resolved. In the village, I had endeavored to make the strange familiar; in a local school, I needed to make the familiar strange. No matter how achieved, discerning difference is critical to ethnography.

Conversely, if the conceptual tasks of working on a grand scale in multiple arenas are what most interest you, then ethnography seems a rather inefficient way for you to invest your research energy. Comparative efforts on such scale are beyond the pale of the lone ethnographer. Ethnography, which makes controlled comparison possible, is not in itself a *comparative* endeavor, except implicitly, in the sense discussed earlier of differences that call attention to themselves or a conscious effort on the ethnographer’s part to view the familiar as strange. And paradoxical as it may sound, I suggest that ethnography proceeds best when explicit comparison is minimized rather than maximized. Ethnographers that are not overly comparative are the most helpful when one wishes to draw upon them comparatively; that is, when the ethnographer assumes the complementary role, the one the British reserve for the ethnologist.

In the course of individual careers, anthropologists who continue to do fieldwork may build a sufficient basis for macrocultural-scale comparisons of their own, a fact that helps to explain some of the unlikely comparisons that have occurred. Such comparisons might appear in the introductory texts in which authors interject observations from their own fieldwork by way of illustration. Some authors are able to integrate their writing by focusing on a few societies they know reasonably well, a practice preferable to simply allowing comparisons to get out of hand by seeming to draw randomly in a contemporary version of what is now dismissed as armchair anthropology.

Along more systematic lines within the range of possibilities for the experienced ethnographer, one can cite such examples as Clifford Geertz’s comparisons between the role of colonialism in agricultural development in Japan and Java (1963) or his comparisons of religious developments in Morocco and

Indonesia (1968). His comparative studies are beyond the scope of the beginning ethnographer, but they illustrate how ethnography can play a major role in the evolution of a career. Keith Otterbein has proposed a career trajectory for someone interested in pursuing comparative research:

In my own teaching and research I advocate a research progression wherein case studies are followed by small-scale comparative studies . . . or longitudinal studies and then by world-wide cross-cultural studies. Finally, cases that deviate from predictions can be scrutinized in a new round of case studies. [Otterbein 1994:560]

Elsewhere Geertz offers critical advice about the proper role of comparison, whether cross-cultural or not. I read his caution as an effort to keep anyone from falling into the mindless, endless, and pointless task of simply inventorying similarities and differences: "We need to look for systematic relationships among diverse phenomena, not for substantive identities among similar ones" (1973a:44).

I suggest that the neophyte ethnographer avoid the trap of mindless comparison by doing as *little* comparing as possible rather than as much. Ethnographers need to recognize that when they conduct fieldwork they are *already* comparing what they know, or think they know, with what they are discovering. Geertz quotes what he refers to as Santayana's "famous dictum" that "one compares only when one is unable to get to the heart of the matter" (Geertz 1983:233). We can take that idea for a fieldwork aphorism of our own: Get to the heart of the matter if possible; if not, compare (HFW 1994:183).

I am not arguing against comparison. By nature, that is how we learn. As anthropologist Michael Jackson reminds us, "No human being comes to a knowledge of himself or herself except through others" (1995:118). The whole concept of ethnography hinges on recognition of aspects of human behavior capable of being noticed by another human observer, something far more likely to occur in the presence of differences rather than similarities.

What I suggest is that ethnographers draw explicit comparisons only to the extent necessary to make a case, rather than allow themselves to be distracted by a mistaken notion that more comparison produces a more satisfying product. To my way of thinking, the ideal unit of study for any ethnographic inquiry is *one* of something, whether it be one village, one key event, one institution (such

as Malinowski's Kula exchange), or, under some circumstances, one individual. In a day when large sample sizes remain the vogue, and computer capabilities entice us to substitute breadth for depth, ethnography offers an authoritative mandate to study in units of one, the single case studied holistically. That is also consistent with my general advice to ethnographers (as well as the advice I give to most everyone, about most everything): to do less more thoroughly.

I doubt that urging fieldworkers to restrict the scope of their studies will raise many eyebrows except perhaps for the quantifiers and closet quantifiers among us. From the outset, stepping into a strange community or group for the first time, seasoned ethnographers recognize that the scope of their work will have to be narrowed sufficiently to make it manageable. The unseasoned ones may have to learn that lesson as part of their seasoning.

As ethnography has come to be adapted more widely, this critical aspect of focusing in depth rather than breadth has become somewhat contentious. Increasingly I found myself serving on dissertation committees for studies in education purportedly *inspired* by the ethnographic approach but subsequently recast in terms of some other prevailing research tradition. Multiple cases were routinely called for where it seemed to me that one case examined in depth would have been sufficient. Time after time I argued that those seemingly small increments in sample size, doing two, three, or four "little" cases instead of one case in depth, are not likely to increase the power of a study but unquestionably they diminish the attention that can be devoted to each case. In a situation where the researcher proposes a study of a single case but is "encouraged" (or bullied?) to do a comparison among four or five, the strength of each case is reduced proportionately, the number of cases serving as a denominator that reduces the time that can be devoted to each one. It took me forever to realize that the answer to the seemingly straightforward question, "What can we learn from studying only a single case of something?" is an equally straightforward answer, "All we can!"

So much for comparison in the numerical sense, trying to compensate for our characteristically small sample sizes. Such modest increases in sample size do not accomplish an adequate basis for generalization, but they most certainly compromise the opportunity to report in depth.

Another kind of comparison, less frequently found in ethnographic writing, is the *literary* one. Such comparisons do have the capability to lend power of a different sort through helping us to communicate our understanding.

Comparisons are not as common as one might expect in accounts that sometimes seem to beg for parallels drawn from the literary classics. As suggested earlier, perhaps the type of individuals intrigued by the all-consuming activities of ethnography tend not to be prodigious readers. And perhaps that is just as well, for when literary comparisons are done, they are often overdone, authors too facilely assuming a posture that implies that any well-read individual really *ought* to recognize the reference, the work, the full quote, or whatever.

I am grateful for authors who strive to keep me informed by offering enough explanation (or sometimes simply the courtesy of a translation of a foreign phrase) so that I remain on the inside of the joke, or allusion, or reference, or whatever. As you will discover in these pages, my preference in making comparisons is to draw analogies. I admit to occasionally getting stuck with an analogy, working a good one too hard or trying too hard to make a bad one work, but I try to avoid subjecting readers to being left out just because they may not have read what I happened to have read or be familiar with a foreign phrase that I happen to know.⁵

ETHNOGRAPHY AS IDIOSYNCRATIC

Whatever else it is, ethnography is always idiosyncratic. What results from any *particular* ethnographic inquiry represents a coming together of a personality and personal biography in the persona of the ethnographer, interacting in a particular place in a unique way, for the purposes of preparing a study framed broadly by an academic tradition, and more narrowly by how the assignment is perceived by the ethnographer and others in the setting. Some of those others play important roles in the final outcome. Still others not likely to be part of the immediate setting may exert an even greater influence on the form and manner of reporting, in much the same way patron audiences play a critical role in what artists produce as “art.”⁶

The consequence of this idiosyncratic dimension in fieldwork is that if I were to ask permission to conduct an ethnographic inquiry in which you were to be involved, you probably would not have a clue as to what will result. And, in terms of specifics, quite frankly I probably wouldn’t, either. Recognizing my interest in cultural acquisition, you might suspect some aspect of a broad cultural interpretation would be emphasized. You would probably have a clearer idea of what that might mean for someone in quite different circumstances

from your own, for, as noted, we are inclined to view our own behavior as normal rather than as “cultural.” Culture is an abstraction we reserve for describing the (sometimes strange) behavior of others.

Nonetheless, ethnography is, and will always be, something of a wild card. That makes it fun to engage in, but also something of a risk. And fun, and somewhat risky, to fund, or commission, or direct, or even allow. One of the problems associated with cultural anthropology, and thus of ethnography, is the reluctance of those in positions of authority who are able but not always eager to employ ethnographers on research projects because “you never know what you are getting or what they will come up with.”

In part 3, I discuss some of the range and variation in ethnography one finds today, but such information does little in helping to predict how any *particular* ethnographer will proceed with any *particular* inquiry. About the best one can do in anticipating what to expect is to examine the record for what has already been accomplished, leavened perhaps with some straight talk about what can go wrong, such as in Caroline Brettell’s edited volume, *When They Read What We Write* (1993).

THE ETHNOGRAPHER’S TASK

As elusive as it is, “culture” provides an underlying cohesiveness not only to ethnographies individually but to the whole ethnographic enterprise. And so in spite of the variability we see in what is offered up as ethnography, I return to Malinowski’s description of the ethnographer’s task as one of “pursuing evidence.”

Malinowski himself was not above drawing an analogy or two, and there is some hint in the following quotation from *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* that he was well aware of the customs of the British gentry for whom he could presume to be writing.

But the Ethnographer has not only to spread his nets in the right place, and wait for what will fall into them. He must be an active huntsman, and drive his quarry into them and follow it up to its most inaccessible lairs. And that leads us to the more active methods of pursuing ethnographic evidence. [Malinowski 1922:8]

The language of Malinowski’s famous text no longer seems appropriate in a day when we are circumspect in our use of a word like “native” and have long

since dropped terms like “savage” or “primitive.” Today we prefer to represent ourselves as working in concert with those among whom we study, our *participants*, even our *collaborators*, but certainly not our *subjects*. Even our own well-meant term *informant* makes us uncomfortable. We know what we mean by it and acknowledge our immeasurable debt to those upon whom we depend to “inform” us. Nevertheless, as Michael Agar notes, the label “really does sound ugly now” and it would be a welcome relief to have a more suitable word in its place (1996:x).

I find a certain charm in thinking of ethnography as a kind of hunt or quest or, in Malinowski’s term, “pursuit.” I would not be offended were a reviewer to note that I seemed to have “captured” the essence of culture in the course of some ethnographic endeavor. Malinowski, intent on securing a place for ethnography in a scientific world, underscored its methodological nature and lamented then-current practice “in which wholesale generalisations are laid down before us, and we are not informed at all by what actual experiences the writers have reached their conclusion” (1922:3). In a subsection titled “Active Methods of Research,” he included the material quoted above as part of the important introduction prepared for *Argonauts*, a chapter that has remained a standard reference on ethnographic research ever since.

What is the nature of this “ethnographic evidence” that Malinowski calls for? For anyone knowingly (or unknowingly) following the traditions that distinguish American anthropology from the anthropologies of other nations, ethnographic evidence is the stuff out of which one can render cultural description. The ethnographer who sets out to “capture” the culture of some group needs not only descriptive material adequate for composing a picture of that group’s way of life but also an idea of how to frame that picture in cultural terms.

Readers need to be oriented. That is why ethnographies often begin with a description of the social setting, looking at anything from compass points or degrees of longitude and latitude to a cluster of houses in a village or to cronies who meet regularly at a neighborhood restaurant (as, for example, at *Slim’s Table* [Duneier 1992]). Taking cultural orientation in its broadest interpretive sense, the researcher may want to portray the “ethos” of the group, whether a tiny community (e.g., a rock band, a group of rock collectors) or a nation.

A cultural orientation can help the ethnographer define the outer physical and experiential boundaries of the lives of those being described: boundaries

of time, place, and circumstance. One’s family, one’s place in that family, and that family’s place in a larger community; one’s first language; one’s gender; one’s stature—all these are prior conditions that influence what one can become and how family and community expectations influence what one is to become.

The necessary caution to today’s ethnographer is to recognize such boundaries as an *artifact of research*, a convenience for the researcher. We have come to recognize that culture resists the tight packaging in which it was so often wrapped in days gone by. Anthropologists no longer describe their “others” as encapsulated entities in which everyone inside behaves more or less the same and there is little or no contact with anyone different, not even the anthropologists themselves.

How the ethnographer chooses to situate the people being described in terms of their cultural setting—geographically, with physical landmarks; comparatively, among similar or dissimilar groups as to memberships, socioeconomic status, modernization, and technology; or interpretively, reflecting on their worldview and their underlying cohesiveness—also offers clues as to the orientation of the ethnographer. While the term *culture* may or may not be defined (or necessarily employed at all), a reader ought to be able to assess the extent to which an underlying notion of culture has guided the research and writing. Now that it has become fashionable in some camps to downplay and even to disparage the notion of culture, today’s ethnographer writing against culture must articulate what concept or concepts are being substituted in its place.

Consider a classic example of cultural orientation offered in the most literal sense. “Let us imagine that we are sailing along the South coast of New Guinea towards its Eastern end,” Malinowski writes, inviting us to join him in learning about the Kula district and its people (1922:33). He continues, “At about the middle of Orangerie Bay we arrive at the boundary of the Massim, which runs from this point north-westwards till it strikes the northern coast near Cape Nelson (see Map II).” A reader of contemporary ethnography may reasonably expect to find not only a comparable statement of orientation but one that concludes with the same parenthetical instruction, “See map.”

There is little doubt that the reader needs to be “oriented,” although that practice may be observed without much apparent thought as to exactly what orientation the reader needs, especially a reader unfamiliar with local landmarks. Malinowski properly discharged his duty, but I cannot get my bearings from

“about the middle of Orangerie Bay,” I do not know what the Massim is, and I rather doubt that it is marked with so obvious a boundary line as he implies. Nevertheless, I fully understand what Malinowski was up to in presenting this description.

I admit to deriving a certain satisfaction in telling visitors to my home that the elevation where my graveled drive leaves the county road is 1,010 feet above sea level, a fact of little consequence to them and presumably even less to you. Yet any such physical description reveals something of what can or cannot reasonably be expected to occur in that setting. Malinowski’s description strongly suggests that the ocean plays a key role in his account, while mine rules out the likelihood of the ocean playing any role at all in my own “backyard” ethnography (HFW 1983a, 2002). To capture and convey the *cultural* orientation of a group in a well-formed statement about a people’s “worldview” or *eidos* is the epitome of what ethnography is about—at least for the interpretively inclined ethnographer. Although anthropologists tend to be chary of such broadly conceived generalizations in their professional dialogues, I think they recognize, even when they resist, that this is what patron audiences want and expect. Ruth Benedict “painted” the Kwakiutl as “vigorous and overbearing,” a “Dionysian” people for whom “life would have been impossible without the sea” (Benedict 1934:173,175). “In their religious ceremonies,” she reported, “the final thing they strove for was ecstasy” (p. 175). Like it or not—and in this case I can’t conceal my discomfort with such broad generalizations about a people among whom I have many acquaintances—this is the kind of reporting that audiences have come to associate with ethnography. Those expectations egg us on to sweeping statements intended to capture and reveal a culture, regardless of whether the generalizations apply in a literal sense to even one individual in it.

There is more precedence and pressure to report in such terms than one may realize. I was dismayed to receive an invitation to prepare a brief encyclopedia-like entry about the Kwakiutl for yet another encyclopedic volume on the world’s “cultures” and to realize the level of generalization that would be necessary to cover, in the number of words allowed, the categories I was expected to address. I declined the invitation.⁷ A contemporary ethnographer, heeding Richard Fox’s admonition to attend to “the everyday life of persons, not the cultural life of a people” (1991:12), is not so eager to make sweeping statements of the sort made by early ethnographers. Nevertheless, the urge to

generalize presents a fierce dilemma, damned if you do, damned if you don’t. An ethnography lacking in generalization leaves something to be desired. It is as though the author has timidly held back, forsaking the opportunity to transform observed *instances* of behavior into inferred *patterns* of behavior, opting instead to take refuge under the aura of the meticulous scientist at work.

I encourage ethnographers to share whatever generalizations they can offer, taking care only to distinguish between warranted ones and those put forward ever so tentatively. The important point is to state the basis on which generalizations have been formed and the extent to which they include impressions, emotions, and whatever other personal resources have been drawn upon. Intimate, long-term acquaintance with a group of people ought to enrich an account, not be regarded as a threat to it. Taking cultural orientation as an approach invites painting with a broad brush, with generalizations tentatively offered, but offered nonetheless, to be examined in terms of ethnographic evidence presented in support.

I believe it was Erich Fromm who years ago wrote about getting people to *want* to act as they *have* to act. I have never heard a better shorthand expression of the role of culture in human life, at once underscoring culture as an ideal system for how things are supposed to be and recognizing that “how things are supposed to be” is never exactly how they are.

Fromm’s observation also helped me to distinguish between two terms often heard in early discussions about cultural acquisition and (particularly) cultural transmission: *socialization* and *enculturation*. The term “socialization” seems best suited for describing how people *have to act*, the “know how” of the range of behavior acceptable within a particular group. That leaves enculturation to refer to a complementary set of beliefs and values linking the knowledge of what *must* be done with a set of shared values that recognizes such behavior as “good,” “proper,” “moral,” and so forth, and thus how one *wants* to act. Beliefs are embedded in the values undergirding them: notions of good and bad, right and wrong, better or worse; as well as beautiful or ugly, graceful or awkward, tragic or comic. Thus a society’s projective systems—its art, music, literature, and so forth—are subsumed under the topic of cultural beliefs.

Given my interest in cultural acquisition, you might understand why I find cultural beliefs to be of special interest. How do particular groups convey to succeeding generations not only their know-how but a corresponding sense of self-righteousness about the knowing? And what is the nexus between how

one generation goes about transmitting such ideas and the way those ideas are actually acquired by the next generation?

Highly systematic procedures such as consensus modeling serve as excellent examples of fine-tuned cultural analysis that can produce percent figures as to the level of cognitive sharing, but they do not address an interest in how culture is acquired. Among the topics just reviewed, there should be room for everyone interested in studying culture, and plenty of opportunity for ethnographers to call attention to *instances* which we can examine, in searches that must ultimately exceed those bounds.

CULTURE AND ETHNOGRAPHY UNDER SIEGE

I recognize some need to temper what may appear as my unbridled enthusiasm for the culture concept. I close this discussion by pointing to some lingering problems and criticisms before turning away from procedures, the focus of the chapters in this section, to *outcomes*—the accounts that result from the ethnographer's efforts. That is the subject matter for the chapters in part 3.

A continuing debate over culture has to do with the *efficacy* of the culture concept. On that question there is wide-ranging opinion. Its severest critics dismiss it: If culture is both ubiquitous and unseen, how does it help explain anything? Those who regard the culture concept as moribund might seem its severe critics, but it occurs to me that their very word choice does allow that the concept did have its day, even if they perceive it as stagnant or near death at present. Since I remain a true believer, I have found the arguments of the skeptics more instructive than arguments of those who dismiss the concept outright. Skeptics tend to be more helpful by pointing out what they feel is lacking in argument or evidence. Hear the voices of two skeptical British social scientists who recognize major problems with culture's self-fulfilling aspect, a concept that in their view is defined in such a way that its very existence is reaffirmed in the act of searching for it:

When setting out to describe a culture, we operate on the basis of the assumption that there are such things as cultures, and have some ideas about what they are like; and we select out for analysis the aspects of what is observed that we judge to be "cultural." While there may be nothing wrong with such cultural description, the kind of empiricist methodology enshrined in naturalism renders the theory implicit and thus systematically discourages its development and testing. [Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:13]

Most certainly the concept of culture fares worse to whatever degree its promises are overstated. For example, if I modestly portray and defend (and commend!) culture as an "orienting concept" rather than as theory, its shortcomings are somewhat mollified: we tend to be more forgiving of concepts than of theory. Similarly, by defining the ethnographer's task as "attributing" culture to a group, rather than insisting that culture can be "found" there, I arm myself against the criticism that ethnographers "select out for analysis the aspects of what is observed that we judge to be 'cultural.'"

My enthusiasm for giving culture its due does not extend to simply tossing the term about. Statements about how a people's culture makes them do this-or-that are highly suspect; humans do things, cultures do not. For the researcher willing to make allowance for sociocultural influences, but uncertain how to portray them, it may be sufficient to limit one's account to describing instances of observed behavior. Readers can draw their own inferences about what is cultural.

In spite of all the rhetoric, as Robert Wuthnow observed years ago in the overview to *Cultural Analysis* (Wuthnow et al. 1984:2), "the denial of culture has been difficult to sustain in actual practice." Rather than insist that ethnography is the study of culture, let me turn the argument to its gentler side to suggest that ethnography, both by tradition and by design, presents the opportunity and the challenge to pursue an inquiry in a manner especially attentive to broad social contexts. In times or places where the culture concept itself is in disrepute, there are other terms that one can employ (e.g., conventions, customs, folkways, lifeways, lifestyles, mores, practices, traditions) that point essentially to the same thing. The "idea" of culture in reference to the social context of behavior is not exclusively a property of the term *culture* itself.

Like culture, ethnography, too, has its critics, and it, too, has been declared moribund. Yet I think both ethnography and culture have outlasted and will continue to outlast their harshest critics. The sometimes severity of the attacks raises questions for me as to what it is about academia that brings out such cynicism (is that word strong enough?) among otherwise genteel folk. Both concepts probably owe their longevity and vitality not to flat-footed ethnographers like myself who are inclined simply to take them at their best and get on with it, but to a loyal opposition who worry and argue over them with titles like *The End(s) of Ethnography* (Clough 1992, 1998) or *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* (Hammersley 1992) or debate whether to give "Culture—A Second Chance?"⁸ But then, I'm one of those who finds nothing wrong with such cultural description. Indeed, what other kind of description is there?

NOTES

1. For a retrospective account of such practice, see the Spindlers' article, "Rorschaching in North America in the Shadow of Hallowell," 1991. For an example of field reports of the day, see Clifton and Levine 1961.
2. For example, the Experimental Schools project of the 1970s placed resident fieldworkers in a number of American communities with the intent of studying the effects of educational change during a period of five years (for an overview, see Herriott and Gross 1979; see also Hennigh 1981).
3. Educator/illustrator Sally Campbell Galman has capitalized on the idea of the lone ethnographer with her book-length, comic-book style, *Shane, the Lone Ethnographer: A Beginner's Guide to Ethnography*, including along Shane's humorous journey timely warnings like "If you pick [a research question] that bores you, you will later pray for death" (Galman 2007:25).
4. For models of such work, see Boster 1985; Romney, Weller, and Batchelder 1986; Weller 2004, 2007; or overviews provided by these authors (Romney 1994; Romney and Moore 1998; Weller and Romney 1988).
5. In that regard, forgive me for having failed to provide a translation for Sturm und Drang noted in connection with Margaret Mead's study of adolescence in Samoa. The phrase is a literary one, in this case referring to the period of "storm and stress" associated with American adolescence. How easy to make assumptions about what everyone knows.
6. I have explored comparisons between the work of artists and fieldworkers in HFW 2005. See especially chapter 3, drawing on an earlier study by Howard Becker (1982).
7. I did eventually accept such an invitation, but it required only an "update" on the Kwakiutl, not an attempt to encapsulate their entire history in a few brief paragraphs (See HFW 2004).
8. A supplement to volume 40 of *Current Anthropology* (February 1999) titled "Culture—A Second Chance?" continues the never-ending debate, with a special issue devoted to examining the viability of the culture concept. See also Fischer 2007. For an updated list of critiques that have appeared in the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, see <http://culanth.org/?q=node/24> (accessed April 15, 2007).

III

ETHNOGRAPHIC
APPLICATIONS