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WRITING ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDNOTES

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Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research

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

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

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

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

ETHNOGRAPHIC PARTICIPATION

Ethnographers are committed to going out and getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people. “Getting close” minimally requires physical and social proximity to the daily rounds of people’s lives and activities; the field researcher must be able to take up positions in the midst

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

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

Clearly, ethnographic immersion precludes conducting field research as a detached, passive observer; the field researcher can only get close to the lives of those studied by actively participating in their day-to-day affairs. Such participation, moreover, inevitably entails some degree of *resocialization*. Sharing everyday life with a group of people, the field researcher comes “to enter into the matrix of meanings of the researched, to participate in their system of organized activities, and to feel subject to their code of moral regulation” (Wax 1980:272–73). In participating as fully and humanly as possible in another way of life, the ethnographer learns what is required to become a member of that world and to experience events and meanings in ways that approximate *members’ experiences*.² Indeed, some ethnographers seek to do field research by doing and becoming—to the extent possible—whatever it is they are interested in learning about. Ethnographers, for example, have become skilled at activities they are seeking to understand (Diamond 1992; Lynch 1985; Wacquant 2004) or, in good faith, have joined churches or religious groups (Jules-Rosette 1975; Rochford 1985) on the grounds that by becoming members, they gain fuller insight and understanding into these groups and their activities. Or, villagers might assign an ethnographer a

role, such as sister or mother, in an extended family, which obligates her to participate and resocialize herself to meet local expectations.

In learning about others through active participation in their lives and activities, the fieldworker cannot and should not attempt to be a fly on the wall.³ No field researcher can be a completely neutral, detached observer who is outside and independent of the observed phenomena (Emerson and Pollner 2001). Rather, as the ethnographer engages in the lives and concerns of those studied, his perspective “is intertwined with the phenomenon which does not have objective characteristics independent of the observer’s perspective and methods” (Mishler 1979:10). But, the ethnographer cannot take in everything; rather, he will, in conjunction with those in the setting, develop certain perspectives by engaging in some activities and relationships rather than others. Moreover, often relationships with those under study follow political fault lines in the setting, exposing the ethnographer selectively to varying priorities and points of view. As a result, the task of the ethnographer is not to determine “the truth” but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others’ lives.⁴

Furthermore, the ethnographer’s presence in a setting inevitably has implications and consequences for what is taking place, since the fieldworker must necessarily interact with and, hence, have some impact on those studied.⁵ But “consequential presence,” often linked to *reactive effects* (that is, the effects of the ethnographer’s participation on how members may talk and behave), should not be seen as “contaminating” what is observed and learned. Rather, these effects might provide the very source of that learning and observation (Clarke 1975:99). Relationships between the field researcher and people in the setting do not so much disrupt or alter ongoing patterns of social interaction as they reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place. For example, in a village where social relations depend heavily on kinship ties, people might adopt a fieldworker into a family and assign her a kinship term that then designates her rights and responsibilities toward others. Hence, rather than detracting from what the fieldworker can learn, firsthand relations with those studied might provide clues to understanding the more subtle, implicit underlying assumptions that are often not readily accessible through observation or interview methods alone.⁶ Consequently, rather than viewing reactivity as a defect to be carefully controlled or eliminated, the ethnographer needs to become sensitive to, and perceptive about, how she is seen and treated by others.

To appreciate the unavoidable consequences of one’s own presence strips any special merit from the highly detached, “unobtrusive,” and mar-

ginal observer roles that have long held sway as the implicit ideal in field research. Many contemporary ethnographers assume highly participatory roles (Adler and Adler 1987) in which the researcher actually performs the activities that are central to the lives of those studied. In this view, assuming real responsibility for actually carrying out core functions and tasks, as in service learning internships, provides special opportunities to get close to, participate in, and experience life in previously unknown settings. The intern with real work responsibilities or the researcher participating in village life actively engages in local activities and is socialized to, and acquires empathy for, local ways of acting and feeling.

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

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

THE COMPLEXITIES OF DESCRIPTION

In writing about one’s experiences and observations deriving from intense and involved participation, the ethnographer creates *descriptive* fieldnotes. But writing descriptive accounts of experiences and observations is not simply a process of accurately capturing as closely as possible observed reality, of “putting into words” overheard talk and witnessed activities. To view the writing of descriptions as essentially a matter of producing texts that *correspond* accurately to what has been observed is to assume that there

is but one “best” description of any particular event. But, in fact, there is no one “natural” or “correct” way to write about what one observes. Rather, because descriptions involve issues of perception and interpretation, different descriptions of similar or even the same situations and events are both possible and valuable.

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

Mayfair Market Express Line

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

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

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

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

Ralph’s Express Line, Easter Morning

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

I got behind the woman who was already [in the ten-items-or-less line]. She had left one of the rubber separator bars behind the things she was going to buy, one of the few personal friendly moves one can make in this highly routinized queue. I appreciated this, and would have thanked her (by smiling, probably), but she was already looking ahead, I suppose, in anticipation of checking out. I put my wine and lettuce down. There was already someone behind me. I wanted to show them the courtesy of putting down a rubber separator bar for them too. I waited until the food in front of mine was moved up enough for me to take the bar, which was at the front of the place where the bars are (is there a word for that? bar bin?), so that I wouldn’t have to make a large, expansive move across the items that weren’t mine, drawing attention to myself. I waited, and then, finally, the bar was in sight. I took it and then put it behind my items, looking at the woman behind me and smiling at her as I did so. She looked pleased and a bit surprised, and I was glad to have been able to do this small favor. She was a pretty blonde woman, and was buying a bottle of champagne (maybe also for Easter brunch?). She was wearing what looked like an Easter dress—it was cotton and pretty and flowery. She looked youngish, maybe about my age. She was quite tall for a woman, maybe 5’10” or so.

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

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

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

Boy’s Market Express Line

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

At this point the guy who I’d spoken to earlier, the guy who was right in front of me, showed a look of surprise and moved past me, over to an abandoned cart at the end of the aisle. He was looking at what was in it, picking up the few items with interest and then put them back. I thought he’d seen something else he wanted or had forgotten. He came back over to his cart, but then a supermarket employee walked by, and he called out to the man, walking over to the cart and pointing at it, “Do you get many items like this left behind?” The employee hesitated, not seeming to understand the question, and said no. The guy on line said, “See what’s here? This is formula (cans of baby formula). That’s poor people’s food. And see this (a copper pot scrubber)? They use that to smoke crack.” The employee looked surprised. The guy says, “I was just wondering. That’s very indicative of this area.” The employee: “I live here, and I didn’t know that.” The guy: “Didn’t you watch Channel 28 last night?” Employee: “No.” Guy: “They had a report about inner-city problems.” Employee, walking away as he talks: “I only watch National Geographic, the MacNeil-Lehrer Hour, and NPR.” He continues away. . . .

Meanwhile the man with the bread has paid. As he waits momentarily for his change, the “guy” says, “Long wait for a loaf of bread.” Man says, “Yeah,” and then adds, jokingly (and looking at the cashier as he says it, as if to gauge his reaction), “these cashiers are slow.” The cashier does not appear to hear this. Man with bread leaves, guy in front of me is being checked out now. He says to the cashier, “What’s the matter, end of your shift? No sense of humor

left?” Cashier says, “No. I’m tired.” Guy: “I hear you.” Guy then says to the bagger: “Can I have paper and plastic please, Jacob” (he emphasizes the use of the bagger’s name)? Jacob complies, but shows no other sign that he’s heard the man. Guy is waiting for transaction to be completed. He’s sitting on the railing, and he is singing the words to the Muzak tune that’s playing, something by Peabo Bryson. Guy’s transaction is done. He says thank you to the bagger, and the bagger tells him to have a good day.

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

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

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

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

CB’s Account

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

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

NL’s Account

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INSCRIBING EXPERIENCED/OBSERVED REALITIES

Descriptive fieldnotes, then, involve *inscriptions* of social life and social discourse. Such inscriptions inevitably *reduce* the welter and confusion of the social world to written words that can be reviewed, studied, and thought about time and time again. As Geertz (1973:19) has characterized this core ethnographic process: “The ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted.”

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

In part, this transformation involves inevitable processes of *selection*; the ethnographer writes about certain things and thereby necessarily “leaves out” others. But more significantly, descriptive fieldnotes also inevitably *present or frame* events in particular ways, “missing” other ways that such events might have been presented or framed. And these presentations reflect and incorporate sensitivities, meanings, and understandings the field researcher has gleaned from having been close to and participated in the described events.

There are other ways of reducing social discourse to written form. Survey questionnaires, for example, record “responses” to prefixed questions, often reducing these lived experiences to numbers, sometimes preserving something of the respondents’ own words. Audio and video recordings, which seemingly catch and preserve almost everything occurring within an interaction, actually capture but a slice of ongoing social life. This means that what is recorded in the first place depends upon when, where, and how the equipment is positioned and activated, what it can pick up mechanically, and how those who are recorded react to its presence.

Further reduction occurs with the representation of a recorded slice of audio and/or video discourse as sequential lines of text in a “transcript.” For while talk in social settings is a “multichanneled event,” writing “is linear in nature, and can handle only one channel at a time, so must pick and choose among the cues available for representation” (Walker 1986:211). A transcript thus selects particular dimensions and contents of discourse for inclusion while ignoring others, for example, nonverbal cues to local meanings such as eye gaze, gesture, and posture. Researchers studying oral performances spend considerable effort in developing a notational system to document the verbal and at least some of the nonverbal communication; the quality of the transcribed “folklore text” is critical as it “represents the performance in another medium” (Fine 1984:3). Yet the transcript is never a “verbatim” rendering of discourse because it “represents . . . an analytic interpretation and selection” (Psathas and Anderson 1990:75) of speech and action. That is, a transcript is the product of a transcriber’s ongoing interpretive and analytic decisions about a variety of problematic matters: how to transform naturally occurring speech into specific words (in the face of natural speech elisions); how to determine when to punctuate to indicate a completed phrase or sentence (given the common lack of clear-cut endings in ordinary speech); deciding whether or not to try to represent such matters as spaces and silences, overlapped speech and sounds, pace stresses and volume, and inaudible or incomprehensible sounds or words.⁹ In sum, even those means

of recording that researchers claim as being closest to realizing an “objective mirroring” necessarily make reductions in the lived complexity of social life similar, in principle, to those made in writing fieldnotes.¹⁰

Given the reductionism of any method of inscription, choice of method reflects researchers’ deeper assumptions about social life and how to understand it. Fieldwork and ultimately fieldnotes are predicated on a view of social life as continuously created through people’s efforts to find and confer meaning on their own and others’ actions. Within this perspective, the interview and the recording have their uses. To the extent that participants are willing and able to describe these features of social life, an interview may prove a valuable tool or even the only access. Similarly, a video recording provides a valuable record of words actually uttered and gestures actually made. But the ethos of fieldwork holds that in order to fully understand and appreciate action from the perspective of participants, one must get close to and participate in a wide cross-section of their everyday activities over an extended period of time. Ethnography, as Van Maanen (1988:ix) insists, is “the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one’s own experience in the world of these others.” Fieldnotes are distinctively a method for capturing and preserving the insights and understandings stimulated by these close and long-term experiences. Thus, fieldnotes inscribe the sometimes inchoate understandings and insights the fieldworker acquires by intimately immersing herself in another world, by observing in the midst of mundane activities and jarring crises, and by directly running up against the contingencies and constraints of the everyday life of another people. Indeed, it is exactly this deep immersion—and the sense of place that such immersion assumes and strengthens—that enables the ethnographer to inscribe the detailed, context-sensitive, and locally informed fieldnotes that Geertz (1973) terms “thick description.”¹¹

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

IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING FIELDNOTES

We draw four implications from our interpretive-interactionist understanding of ethnography as the inscription of participatory experience: (1) what is observed and ultimately treated as “data” or “findings” is inseparable from the observational processes; (2) in writing fieldnotes, the field researcher should give special attention to the indigenous meanings and concerns of the people studied; (3) contemporaneously written fieldnotes are an essential grounding and resource for writing broader, more coherent accounts of others’ lives and concerns; and (4) such fieldnotes should detail the social and interactional processes that make up people’s everyday lives and activities.

Connecting “Methods” and “Findings”

Modes of participating in and finding out about the daily lives of others make up key parts of ethnographic methods. These “methods” determine what the field researcher sees, experiences, and learns. But if substance (“data,” “findings,” “facts”) are products of the methods used, substance cannot be considered independently of the interactions and relations with others that comprise these methods; *what* the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with *how* she finds it out (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). As a result, these methods should not be ignored; rather, they should comprise an important part of written fieldnotes. It thus becomes critical for the ethnographer to document her own activities, circumstances, and emotional responses as these factors shape the process of observing and recording others’ lives.¹²

From this point of view, the very distinction between fieldnote “data” and “personal reactions,” between “fieldnote records” and “diaries” or “journals” (Sanjek 1990c), is deeply misleading. Of course, the ethnographer can separate what he says and does from what he observes others saying and doing, treating the latter as if it were unaffected by the former.¹³ But such a separation distorts processes of inquiry and the meaning of field “data” in several significant ways. First, this separation treats data as “objective information” that has a fixed meaning independent of *how* that information was elicited or established and by whom. In this way, the ethnographer’s own actions, including his “personal” feelings and reactions, are viewed as independent of, and unrelated to, the events and happenings involving others that constitute “findings” or “observations” when written down in fieldnotes. Second, this separation assumes that “subjective” reactions and perceptions can and should be

controlled by being segregated from “objective,” impersonal records. And finally, such control is thought to be essential because personal and emotional experiences are devalued, comprising “contaminants” of objective data rather than avenues of insight into significant processes in the setting.

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

The Pursuit of Indigenous Meanings

In contrast to styles of field research that focus on others’ behavior without systematic regard for what such behavior means to those engaged in it, we see ethnographic fieldnotes as a distinctive method for uncovering and depicting local interpretations or indigenous meanings. Ultimately, the participating ethnographer seeks to get close to those studied in order to understand and write about what their experiences and activities *mean to them*.¹⁴

Ethnographers should attempt to write fieldnotes in ways that capture and preserve indigenous meanings. To do so, they must learn to recognize and limit reliance upon preconceptions about members’ lives and activities. They must become responsive to what others are concerned about in their own terms. But while fieldnotes are about others, their concerns, and doings gleaned through empathetic immersion, they necessarily reflect and convey the ethnographer’s understanding of these concerns and doings. Thus, fieldnotes are written accounts that filter members’ experiences and concerns through the person and perspectives of the ethnographer; fieldnotes provide the ethnographer’s, not the members’, accounts of the latter’s experiences, meanings, and concerns.

It might initially appear that forms of ethnography concerned with “polyvocality” (Clifford and Marcus 1986:15), or oral histories and feminist ethnographies (Stacey 1998) that seek to let members “speak in their own voices,” can avoid researcher mediation in its entirety. But even in these in-

stances, researchers continue to select what to observe, to pose questions, or to frame the nature and purpose of the interview more generally, in ways that cannot avoid mediating effects (see Mills 1990).

Writing Fieldnotes Contemporaneously

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

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

Similar considerations hold when examining the ethnographer’s “findings” about those studied and their routine activities. Producing a record of these activities, as close to their occurrence as possible, preserves their idiosyncratic, contingent character in the face of the homogenizing tendencies of retrospective recall. In immediately written fieldnotes, distinctive qualities and features are sharply drawn and will elicit vivid memories and luminous images (Katz 2001c, 2002) when the ethnographer rereads notes for coding and analysis. Furthermore, the distinctive and unique features of such fieldnotes, brought forward into the final analysis, create texture and variation, avoiding the flatness that comes from generality.

The Importance of Interactional Detail

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

Beyond this general “microscopic” commitment, however, our specifically interactionist approach leads us to urge writers to value close, detailed reports of interaction. First, interactional detail helps one become sensitive to, trace, and analyze the interconnections between methods and substance. Since the fieldworker discovers things about others by interacting with them, it is important to observe and minutely record the sequences and conditions marking such interactions. Second, in preserving the details of interaction, the researcher is better able to identify and follow *processes* in witnessed events and, hence, to develop and sustain processual interpretations of happenings in the field (Emerson 2009). Field research, we maintain, is particularly suited to documenting social life as process, as emergent meanings established in and through social interaction (Blumer 1969). Attending to the details of interaction enhances the possibilities for the researcher to see beyond fixed, static entities, to grasp the active “doing” of social life. Writing fieldnotes as soon and as fully as possible after events of interest have occurred also encourages detailed descriptions of the processes of interaction through which members of social settings create and sustain specific, local social realities.

REFLECTIONS: WRITING FIELDNOTES AND ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

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

It is easy to draw a sharp contrast between these activities, between doing

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

While ethnographers increasingly recognize the centrality of writing to their craft, they frequently differ about how to characterize that writing and its relationship to ethnographic research. Some anthropologists have criticized Geertz’s notion of “inscription” as too mechanical and simplistic, as ignoring that the ethnographer writes not about a “passing event” but, rather, about “already formulated, fixed discourse or lore”; hence, inscription should more aptly be termed “transcription” (Clifford 1990:57). “Inscription” has also been criticized as being too enmeshed in the assumptions of “salvage ethnography,” which date back to Franz Boas’s efforts to “write down” oral cultures before they and their languages and customs disappeared (Clifford 1986:113). Indeed, ethnographers have suggested a number of alternative ways of characterizing ethnographic writing. Anthropologists frequently use “translation” (or “cultural translation”) to conceptualize writing a version of one culture that will make it comprehensible to readers living in another. Richardson (1990), Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), and other sociologists describe the core of ethnographic writing as “narrating.” And Clifford (1986) and Marcus (1986) use the more abstract term “textualization” to refer to the generic processes whereby ethnography “translates experience into text” (Clifford 1986:115).

In general, however, these approaches conflate writing final ethnographies with writing ethnographic fieldnotes; thus, they fail to adequately illuminate the key processes and features of producing fieldnotes. Yet, each approach has implications for such contemporaneous writing about events

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

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

2

In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes

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

Field researchers using this ethnographic approach want to relate naturally to those encountered in the field; they focus their efforts on figuring out—holistically and intuitively—what these people are up to. Any anticipation of writing fieldnotes is postponed (and in extreme cases, minimized or avoided altogether) as diluting the experiential insights and intuitions that immersion in another social world can provide.¹ Only at some later point does the ethnographer turn to the task of recalling and examining her experiences in order to write them down.

But the ethnographer may also participate in ongoing events in ways that directly and immediately involve inscription. Here, the fieldworker is concerned with “getting into place” to observe interesting, significant events in order to produce a detailed written record of them. As a result, participation in naturally occurring events may come to be explicitly oriented toward writing fieldnotes. At an extreme, the fieldworker may self-consciously look for events that should be written down for research purposes; he may position himself in these unfolding events to be able to observe and write; and he may explicitly orient to events in terms of “what is important to remember so that I can write it down later.”

Each mode of field involvement has strengths and drawbacks. The former allows an intense immersion in daily rhythms and ordinary concerns that increases openness to others’ ways of life. The latter can produce a more detailed, closer-to-the-moment record of that life. In practice, most field researchers employ both approaches at different times, sometimes participating without thought about writing up what is happening and, at other times, focusing closely on events in order to write about them. Indeed, the fieldworker may experience a shift from one mode to another as events unfold in the field. Caught in some social moment, for example, the field researcher may come to see deep theoretical relevance in a mundane experience or practice. Conversely, a researcher in the midst of observing in a more detached, writing-oriented mode may suddenly be drawn directly into the center of activity.²

In both approaches, the ethnographer writes fieldnotes more or less contemporaneously with the experience and observation of events of interest in the spirit of the ethnographer who commented, “Anthropologists are those who write things down at the end of the day” (Jackson 1990b:15). In the experiential style, writing may be put off for hours or even days until the field researcher withdraws from the field and, relying solely on memory, sits down at pad or computer to reconstruct important events.³ In the

participating-to-write approach, writing—or an orientation to writing—begins earlier when the researcher is still in the field, perhaps in the immediate presence of talk and action that will be inscribed. The ethnographer may not only make mental notes or “headnotes”⁴ to include certain events in full fieldnotes, but he may also write down, in the form of jottings or scratch notes, abbreviated words and phrases to use later to construct full fieldnotes.

Furthermore, in both styles, field researchers are deeply concerned about the quality of the relationships they develop with the people they seek to know and understand. In valuing more natural, open experience of others’ worlds and activities, field researchers seek to keep writing from intruding into and affecting these relationships. They do so not only to avoid distancing themselves from the ongoing experience of another world but also because writing, and research commitments more generally, may engender feelings of betraying those with whom one has lived and shared intimacies. Ethnographers who participate in order to write, in contrast, pursue and proclaim research interests more openly as an element in their relationships with those studied. But these field researchers often become very sensitive to the ways in which the stance and act of writing are very visible to, and can influence the quality of their relationships with, those studied. And they also may experience moments of anguish or uncertainty about whether to include intimate or humiliating incidents in their fieldnotes.

In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on a participating-in-order-to-write fieldwork approach that confronts writing issues directly and immediately in the field. This approach brings to the fore the interconnections between writing, participating, and observing as a means of understanding another way of life; it focuses on learning how to look in order to write, while it also recognizes that looking is itself shaped and constrained by a sense of what and how to write. We will begin by examining the processes of participating in order to write in detail, considering a number of practices that ethnographers have found useful in guiding and orienting observations made under these conditions. We then take up issues of actually writing in the presence of those studied by making jottings about what we see and hear, even as these interactions are occurring. Here, we first present illustrations of actual jottings made in different field settings and discuss a number of considerations that might guide the process of making jottings. We then consider choices confronting field researchers in deciding how, where, and when to make jottings in field settings.

PARTICIPATING IN ORDER TO WRITE

In attending to ongoing scenes, events, and interactions, field researchers take mental note of certain details and impressions. For the most part, these impressions remain “headnotes” until the researcher sits down at some later point to write full fieldnotes about these scenes and events. In the flux of their field settings, beginning students are often hesitant and uncertain about what details and impressions they should pay attention to as potential issues for writing. We have found a number of procedures to be helpful in advising students how initially to look in order to write.

First, ethnographers should take note of their *initial impressions*. These impressions may include those things available to the senses—the tastes, smells, and sounds of the physical environment, and the look and feel of the locale and the people in it. Such impressions may include details about the physical setting, including size, space, noise, colors, equipment, and movement, or about people in the setting, such as their number, gender, race, appearance, dress, movement, comportment, and feeling tone. Writing down these impressions provides a way to get started in a setting that may seem overwhelming. Entering another culture where both language and customs are incomprehensible may present particular challenges in this regard. Still, the ethnographer can begin to assimilate strange sights and sounds by attending to and then writing about them.⁵

Furthermore, this record preserves these initial and often insightful impressions, for observers tend to lose sensitivity for unique qualities of a setting as these become commonplace. Researchers who are familiar with the setting they study, perhaps already having a place in the setting as workers or residents, have lost direct access to their first impressions. However, such fieldworkers can indirectly seek to recall their own first impressions by watching any newcomers to the setting, paying special attention to how they learn, adapt, and react.

Second, field researchers can focus on their personal sense of *what is significant or unexpected* in order to document key events or incidents in a particular social world or setting. Particularly at first, fieldworkers may want to rely on their own experience and intuition to select noteworthy incidents out of the flow of ongoing activity. Here, for example, the fieldworker may look closely at something that surprises or runs counter to her expectations, again paying attention to incidents, feeling tones, impressions, and interactions, both verbal and nonverbal.

Similarly, field researchers may use their own personal experience of

events that please, shock, or even anger them to identify matters worth writing about. A fieldworker’s strong reaction to a particular event may well signal that others in the setting react similarly. Or a fieldworker may experience deeply contradictory emotions, for example, simultaneously feeling deep sympathy and repulsion for what he observes in the field. These feelings may also reflect contradictory pressures experienced by those in the setting.

To use personal reactions effectively, however, requires care and reflection. One must first pay close attention to how others in the setting are reacting to these events; it is important to become aware of when and how one’s own reactions and sensitivities differ from those of some or most members. But in addition, in taking note of others’ experiences, many beginning ethnographers tend to judge the actions of people in the setting, for better or worse, by their own, rather than the others’, standards and values. Prejudging incidents in outsiders’ terms makes it difficult to cultivate empathetic understanding and to discover what import local people give to them (see chapter 5). The field researcher should be alive to the possibility that local people, especially those with very different cultures, may respond to events in sharply contrasting ways. For example, an ethnographer in a Chokwe village may react with alarm to an unconscious man drugged by an herbal drink in a trial-for-sorcery court, only to realize that others are laughing at the spectacle because they know he will soon regain consciousness.

Yet, fieldworkers should not go to the other extreme and attempt to manage strong personal reactions by denial or simply by omitting them from fieldnotes. Rather, we recommend that the ethnographer first register her feelings, then step back and use this experience to ask how others in the setting see and experience these matters. Are they similarly surprised, shocked, pleased, or angered by an event? If so, under what conditions do these reactions occur, and how did those affected cope with the incidents and persons involved? Whether an ethnographer is working in a foreign or in a familiar culture, she needs to avoid assuming that others respond as she does.

Third, in order to document key events and incidents, field researchers should move beyond their personal reactions to attend explicitly to *what those in the setting experience and react to as “significant” or “important.”* The field researcher watches for the sorts of things that are meaningful to those studied. The actions, interactions, and events that catch the attention of people habitually in the setting may provide clues to these concerns. Specifically: What do they stop and watch? What do they talk and gossip about? What produces strong emotional responses for them? “Troubles” or “problems” often generate deep concern and feelings. What kinds occur in the

setting? How do people in the setting understand, interpret, and deal with these troubles or problems? Such “incidents” and “troubles” should move the field researcher to jot down “who did what” and “how others reacted.”

Often, however, a researcher who is unfamiliar with a setting may not initially be able to understand or even to identify local meanings and their significance. Hence, the researcher may have to write down what members say and do without fully understanding their implications and import. Consider, for example, the following fieldnote written by a student ethnographer making her first visit to a small residential program for ex-prostitutes:

We walk inside and down the hallway, stopping in front of the kitchen. One of the girls is in there, and Ellen [the program director] stops to introduce me. She says, Catherine this is our new volunteer. She says, “Oh, nice to meet you,” and thanks me for volunteering. We shake hands, and I tell her it’s nice to meet her as well. Ellen adds, “Well most people call her Cathy, but I like the way Catherine sounds so that’s what I call her.” Catherine is wearing baggy, navy blue athletic shorts and a loose black tank top. Her thick, curly hair is pulled into a bun resting on the side of her head. She is barefoot. She turns to Ellen, and the smile leaves her face as she says, “Julie cut her hair.” Ellen responds that Julie’s hair is already short, and asks, “Is it buzzed?” Catherine responds no, that it’s cut in a “page boy style and looks really cute.” Ellen’s eyebrows scrunch together, and she asks, well, is she happy with it? Catherine smiles and says, “Yeah, she loves it.” To which Ellen responds, “Well, if she’s happy, I’m happy,” and that she’s going to finish taking me around the house. I tell Catherine, “See you later.”

Here, the program director’s response to Catherine’s report treats Julie’s haircut as simply a decision about personal style and appearance—“is she happy with it?” On its face, it does not seem to be an important or significant statement and could easily have been left out in the write-up of this encounter.⁶

But events immediately following this encounter made it clear that Julie’s haircut had important implications for the institution and its program. Leaving Catherine, the program director continued to show the ethnographer around the home:

[In an upstairs bedroom] Ellen tells me to take a seat while she “makes a quick phone call.” She begins the conversation, “Hey, so I just got home, and Catherine told me that Julie cut her hair.” She listens for awhile, and her voice becomes more serious as she says, “Yeah, I know. I’m just thinking she’s headed toward the same bullshit as last time.” [Later in her office] Ellen explains to me

that Julie used to be a resident of the house but left and went back into prostitution. When Julie wanted to come back “we took her back on one condition, that she doesn’t focus on her physical appearances but works on what’s inside instead.” That is why she was so concerned about the haircut: “It seems like she’s going back to the same things as before,” because this is how it starts.

The program director’s phone call, immediately reporting Julie’s haircut to someone else connected with the program, displays the local importance of this event. Later, the program director explains to the observer that, given Julie’s history in the program, her haircut is a likely indicator of a troubled psychological state and weakening commitment to the program.

As this incident illustrates, the field researcher discerns local meanings, not so much by directly asking actors about what matters to them, but more indirectly and inferentially by looking for the perspectives and concerns embedded and expressed in naturally occurring interaction. And in gleaning indigenous meanings implicit in interaction, the ethnographer is well placed to apprehend these meanings, not simply as static categories, but, rather, as matters involving action and process. This requires not just that the ethnographer describes interactions but that she consistently attends to “when, where, and according to whom” in shaping all fieldnote descriptions. Those in different institutional positions (e.g., staff and clients) may evaluate different clients as doing well or poorly in “working the program” and may do so by invoking different evaluative criteria. Indigenous meanings, then, rarely hold across the board but, rather, reflect particular positions and practical concerns that need to be captured in fieldnote descriptions.

Fourth, ethnographers can begin to capture new settings by focusing and writing notes as systematically as possible, focusing on *how routine actions in the setting are organized and take place*. Attending closely to “how” something occurs encourages and produces “*luminous descriptions*” (Katz 2001c) that specify the actual, lived conditions and contingencies of social life. Consistent with our interactionist perspective, asking *how* also focuses the ethnographer’s attention on the social and interactional processes through which members construct, maintain, and alter their social worlds. This means that field researchers should resist the temptation to focus descriptions on *why* events or actions occur; initially focusing on “why” stymies and prematurely deflects full description of specific impressions, events, and interactions because determining “why” is a complex and uncertain process requiring explanation and, hence, comparison with other

instances or cases. Consider the difference in understanding that Katz develops between asking *why* one decides to get gas for one's car and *how* one does so:

I can describe how I did that on a given occasion, but why I did it is never really as simple as top-of-the-head explanations suggest, for example, "because I was low on gas" or "because I needed gas." I needed gas before I entered the station; I did not rush to the station the first moment I noticed the gas gauge registering low; and usually I get there without having to push the car in because it ran completely dry. In any case, my "need" for gas would not explain the extent to which I fill the tank, nor why I pay with a credit card instead of cash, nor which of the pumps I choose, nor whether I accept the automatic cut-off as ending the operation or top up with a final squeeze. As the description of how the act is conducted improves, the less convincing becomes the initially obvious answer to "why?" (Katz 2001c:446)

Finally, ethnographers' orientations to writable events change with time in the field. When first venturing into a setting, field researchers should "cast their nets" broadly; they should observe with an eye to writing about a range of incidents and interactions. Yet, forays into a setting must not be viewed as discrete, isolated occasions that have little or no bearing on what will be noted the next time. Rather, observing and writing about certain kinds of events foreshadow what will be noticed and described next. Identifying one incident as noteworthy should lead to considering what other incidents are similar and, hence, worth noting. As fieldwork progresses and becomes more focused on a set of issues, fieldworkers often self-consciously document a series of incidents and interactions of the "same type" and look for regularities or patterns within them.

Even when looking for additional examples of a similar event, the field researcher is open to and, indeed, searches for, *different forms* of that event, and for *variations from, or exceptions to, an emerging pattern*. Beginning field researchers are often discouraged by such discoveries, fearing that exceptions to a pattern they have noted will cast doubt upon their understanding of the setting. This need not be the case, although noting differences and variations should prod the field researcher to change, elaborate, or deepen her earlier understanding of the setting. The field researcher, for example, might want to consider and explore possible factors or circumstances that would account for differences or variations: Are the different actions the result of the preferences and temperaments of those involved or of their dif-

ferent understandings of the situation because they have different positions in the local context? Or the ethnographer may begin to question how she decided similarity and difference in the first place, perhaps coming to see how an event that initially appeared to be different is actually similar on a deeper level. In these ways, exploring what at least initially seem to be differences and variations will lead to richer, more textured descriptions and encourage more subtle, grounded analyses in a final ethnography (see chapter 7).

In summary, ethnographic attention involves balancing two different orientations. Especially on first entering the field, the researcher identifies significant characteristics gleaned from her first impressions and personal reactions. With greater participation in that local social world, however, the ethnographer becomes more sensitive to the concerns and perspectives of those in the setting. She increasingly appreciates how people have already predescribed their world in their own terms for their own purposes and projects. A sensitive ethnographer draws upon her own reactions to identify issues of possible importance to people in the setting but privileges their "insider" descriptions and categories over her own "outsider" views.

WHAT ARE JOTTINGS?

While participating in the field and attending to ongoing scenes, events, and interactions, field researchers may, at moments, decide that certain events and impressions should be written down as they are occurring in order to preserve accuracy and detail. In these circumstances, the field researcher moves beyond mere "headnotes" to record jottings—a brief written record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases. Jottings translate to-be-remembered observations into writing on paper as quickly rendered scribbles about actions and dialogue. A word or two written at the moment or soon afterward will jog the memory later in the day when she attempts to recall the details of significant actions and to construct evocative descriptions of the scene. Or, more extensive jottings may record an ongoing dialogue or a set of responses to questions.

In order to convey how field researchers actually write and use jottings, we provide two illustrations. Each identifies specific scenes, observed actions, and dialogue rather than making evaluations or psychological interpretations. But each researcher approaches interaction in their settings in different ways, noting different sensory and interpretive details. (We will consider the full fieldnotes written from both these sets of jottings in chapter 3.)

“Too Many Sexual References”

A student ethnographer jotted the following notes while sitting in on an after-school staff meeting attended by a continuation school principal, four teachers, and the school counselor:

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

Here, the observer begins by marking off one of the topics that came up during this meeting—“sexual harassment.” His jottings then identify a student—Andy—who has been accused of making “too many sexual references.” The next line records a specific incident: When placed on a team composed mostly of boys during an Ultimate Frisbee game on the physical education field, Andy had commented that “this team has too many sausages.” There follows the name of another student—Reynaldo—but no indication of what he said or did. Adjacent to this name was a circled phrase, including another name “Carlos” and a comment “in jail for stealing bicycle, 18 yrs old.” The rest of the jotting names a teacher—Laura—and sketches her proposal to create “sexual harassment forms” to be filled out in response to such “inappropriate” sexual talk by students. Detention is mentioned as one possible punishment for such offenders, but this idea is countered by the observation that staff already has too much paperwork in dealing with students in detention.

“You Can Call His Doctor”

In contrast to the focus on named individuals and a variety of events linked to them, the following jottings focus strictly on dialogue, recording bits of talk in a formal court proceeding. The case involved a woman seeking a temporary restraining order against her two landlords, one of whom is not present in the courtroom. The landlord who is present disputes the woman’s testimony that the missing landlord is “well enough to walk” and, hence, could have come to court:

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)ʹ

Here, only spoken words are recorded; specific speakers are not indicated but can be identified by content—the landlord defendant in the first two lines and the judge in the last four lines. The words represent direct quotes, written down as accurately as possible when spoken; an exception occurs in the last line where the observer missed the judge’s exact words ending this sentence (because of jotting down the preceding dialogue) and inserted a paraphrase “in person” (indicated by parentheses). As in the prior illustration, there is no indication of what the ethnographer had in mind in noting these pieces of the flow of social life; they “speak for themselves,” making no reference as to why they were recorded or about their possible implications.

Each of the jottings in these illustrations is “a mnemonic word or phrase [written] to fix an observation or to recall what someone has just said” (Clifford 1990:51). As preludes to full written notes, jottings capture bits of talk and action from which the fieldworker can begin to sketch social scenes, recurring incidents, local expressions and terms, members’ distinctions and accounts, dialogue among those present, and his own conversations.

Making jottings, however, is not only a writing activity; it is also a mindset. Learning to jot down details that remain sharp and that easily transform into vivid descriptions on the page results, in part, from envisioning scenes as written. Writing jottings that evoke memories requires learning what can be written about and how. We have found the following recommendations helpful for making jottings useful for producing vivid, evocatively descriptive fieldnotes.⁸

First, jot down details of what you sense are key components of observed scenes, events, or interactions. Field researchers record immediate fragments of action and talk to serve as focal points for later writing accounts of these events in as much detail as can be remembered. The field researcher studying the continuation school staff meeting, for example, relied on the jotted names of two youth, supplemented by one direct quote, to recall two accounts provided by the complaining teacher about students’ “inappropriate” sexual comments. In this way, jottings serve to remind the ethnogra-

pher of what was happening at a particular time, providing a marker around which to collect other remembered incidents. But the fieldworker does not have to have a specific reason or insight in mind to make a jotting about what she has seen and heard. For example, one field researcher teaching in a Headstart Program described a series of incidents that occurred while supervising children playing in a sandbox. Included in her jottings, but not in her full fieldnotes, was the phrase, “Three new bags of sand were delivered to the sandbox.” In discussing this scratch note later, she commented: “I don’t think it is so important as I would want to include it in my notes because I think it is just—I wrote it down to remind me more what the day was like, what was happening.”⁹

Second, jot down concrete sensory details about observed scenes and interactions. Sensory details will later help to reconstruct the feel of what happened. Pay particular attention to details you could easily forget. Since jottings must later jog the memory, each field researcher must learn which kinds of details that they best remember and make jottings about those features and qualities that they might easily forget. Thus, fieldworkers come to develop their own jotting styles reflecting their distinctive recall propensities, whether visual, kinetic, or auditory. Some focus on trying to capture evocative pieces of broader scenes, while some jot down almost exclusively dialogue; others record nonverbal expression of voice, gesture, and movement; still others note visual details of color and shape. Through trial and error, field researchers learn what most helps them to recall field experiences once they sit down to write up full notes.

Third, avoid characterizing scenes or what people do through generalizations or summaries. Many novice field researchers initially tend to jot down impressionistic, opinionated words that lend themselves better to writing evaluative summaries than to composing detailed, textured descriptions. For example, it is problematic for a field researcher to characterize the way someone works as “inefficient.” Such cryptic, evaluative jottings are likely to evoke only a vague memory when the fieldworker later on attempts to write a full description of the social scene. Such jottings also convey nothing of how people in the setting experience and evaluate worker performance. Similarly, jottings that a probation officer “lectures about school” and that a youth is “very compliant—always agrees” during a probation interview are overly general; such summary statements are not helpful for writing close descriptions of how the probation officer and the youth actually talked and acted during a particular encounter.

Fourth, fieldworkers use jottings to capture detailed aspects of scenes,

talk, and interaction; short or more extended direct quotes are particularly useful for capturing such detail, as reflected in the previous two illustrations of jottings. In general, field researchers note concrete details of everyday life that *show*, rather than tell, about people’s behavior (see chapter 3). By incorporating such details, jottings may provide records of actual words, phrases, or dialogue that the field researcher wants to preserve in as accurate a form as possible. It is not enough, for example, to characterize an emotional outburst simply as “angry words.” Rather, the ethnographer should jot the actually spoken words, along with sensual details such as gestures and facial expressions, suggesting that the speaker’s emotional experience involved “anger.” Jotting these words should evoke recall, not only of the details about what happened, but also of the specific circumstances or context involved: who was present, what they said or did, what occurred immediately before and after, and so on. In this way, jottings may be used to reconstruct the actual order or sequence of talk, topics, or actions on some particular occasion.

Fifth, use jottings to record the details of emotional expressions and experiences; note feelings such as anger, sadness, joy, pleasure, disgust, or loneliness as expressed and attended to by those in the setting. Beginning ethnographers sometimes attempt to identify motives or internal states when recording observed actions. Having witnessed an angry exchange, for example, one is often tempted to focus on the source or “reason” for this emotional outburst, typically by imputing motive (e.g., some underlying feeling such as “insecurity”) to one or both of the parties involved. But such psychologized explanations highlight only one of a number of possible internal states that may accompany or contribute to the observed actions. Anger could, for example, result from frustration, fatigue, the playing out of some local power struggle, or other hidden factors; the ethnographer who simply witnesses a scene has no way of knowing which factors are involved.¹⁰ When witnessing social scenes, then, the ethnographer’s task is to use his own sensibilities and reactions to learn how others understand and evaluate what happened, how they assess internal states, and how they determine psychological motivation. Useful jottings should correspondingly reflect and further this process of writing textured, detailed descriptions of interactions rather than attributing individual motivation.

Sixth, use jottings to signal your general impressions and feelings, even if you are unsure of their significance at the moment. In some cases, the ethnographer may have only a vague, intuitive sense about how or why something may be important. Such feelings might signal a key element that in the

future could enable the field researcher to see how incidents “fit together” in meaningful patterns. For example, at another point the ethnographer in the Headstart Program made a jotting about a student, “Nicole showing trust in me,” which she decided not to write up in her full notes: “It was just an overall feeling I had throughout the day; . . . at that point when I wrote the jottings I couldn’t remember an exact incident.” But this jotting served as a mental note, subsequently stimulating her to appreciate (and record) the following incident as a revealing example of “children trusting teachers”:

At one point, Nicole got on the swings without her shoes on and asked me for a push. I told her that I would push her after she went and put her shoes on. Nicole paused and looked at me. I repeated my statement, telling her that I would save her swing for her while she was gone. Nicole then got off of the swing and put her shoes on. When she came back to the swing, I praised her listening skills and gave her a hug. I then gave her a push. I found this incident to be a significant accomplishment for Nicole, as usually she doesn’t listen to the teachers.¹¹

Through thinking about whether or not to write this jotting up as full notes, this student developed sensitivity to the issue of “trust.” The jotting later acted as a stimulus to observe and write up a “concrete event” involving such “trust.”

In summary, by participating in a setting with an eye to making jottings, an ethnographer experiences events as potential subjects for writing. Like any other writer, an ethnographer learns to recognize potential writing material and to see and hear it in terms of written descriptions. Learning to observe in order to make jottings thus is keyed to both the scene and to the page. Ethnographers learn to experience through the senses in anticipation of writing: to recall observed scenes and interactions like a reporter; to remember dialogue and movement like an actor; to see colors, shapes, textures, and spatial relations as a painter or photographer; and to sense moods, rhythms, and tone of voice like a poet. Details experienced through the senses turn into jottings with active rather than passive verbs, sensory rather than evaluative adjectives, and verbatim rather than summarized dialogue.

MAKING JOTTINGS: HOW, WHERE, AND WHEN

Making jottings is not simply a matter of writing words on a notepad or laptop. Since jottings are often written close to or even in the immediate pres-

ence of those whose words and deeds are at issue, producing jottings is a social and interactional process. Specifically, how and when an ethnographer makes jottings may have important implications for how others see and understand who she is and what she is about. There are no hard and fast rules about whether to make jottings and, if so, when and how to do so. But with time spent in a setting and by benefitting from trial and error, a field researcher may evolve a distinctive set of practices to fit writing jottings to the contours and constraints of that setting.

One initial choice involves the selection of writing materials. Traditionally, fieldworkers have relied on pen and paper. Many have used small notepads that fit easily into pocket or purse. Others prefer even less obtrusive materials, using folded sheets of paper to record jottings about different topics on specific sides. Writers also frequently develop idiosyncratic preferences for particular types of pens or pencils. But with the spread and common use of electronic and computer technologies in many contemporary settings, many field researchers now avoid pen and paper entirely and make jottings directly onto laptop computers, netbooks, smartphones, or audio recorders.

Field researchers actually write jottings in different ways. It is time-consuming and cumbersome to write out every word fully. Many fieldworkers use standard systems of abbreviations and symbols (for pen-and-paper ethnographers, a formal transcribing system such as shorthand or speed writing; for those using electronic devices, the evolving codes of texting). Others develop their own private systems for capturing words in shortened form in ways appropriate to their particular setting; in studying highly technical judicial mediation sessions, for example, Burns (2000:22) “developed a system of shorthand notation and abbreviations for commonly used terms” that allowed her to produce minutely detailed accounts of these events. Abbreviations and symbols not only facilitate getting words on a page more quickly; they also make jotted notes incomprehensible to those onlookers who ask to see them and, hence, provide a means for protecting the confidentiality of these writings.

Field researchers must also decide when, where, and how to write jottings. Clearly, looking down to pad or keyboard to write jottings distracts the field researcher (even if only momentarily), making close and continuous observation of what may be complex, rapid, and subtle actions by others very difficult. But beyond limited attention, jotting decisions can have tremendous import for relations with those in the field. The researcher works hard to establish close ties with participants so that she may be included in

activities that are central to their lives. In the midst of such activities, however, she may experience deep ambivalence: On the one hand, she may wish to preserve the immediacy of the moment by jotting down words as they are spoken and details of scenes as they are enacted, while, on the other hand, she may feel that taking out a notepad or smartphone will ruin the moment and plant seeds of distrust. Participants may now see her as someone whose primary interest lies in discovering their secrets and turning their most intimate and cherished experiences into objects of scientific inquiry.¹²

Nearly all ethnographers feel torn at times between their research commitments and their desire to engage authentically those people whose worlds they have entered. Attempting to resolve these thorny relational and moral issues, many researchers hold that conducting any aspect of the research without the full and explicit knowledge and consent of those studied violates ethical standards. In this view, those in the setting must be understood as collaborators who actively work with the researcher to tell the outside world about their lives and culture. Such mutual collaboration requires that the researcher ask permission to write about events and also respect people's desire not to reveal aspects of their lives.

Other field researchers feel less strictly bound to seek permission to conduct research or to tell participants about their intention to record events and experiences. Some justify this stance by insisting that the field researcher has no special obligations to disclose his intentions since all social life involves elements of dissembling with no one ever fully revealing all of their deeper purposes and private activities. Other researchers point out that jottings and fieldnotes written for oneself as one's own record will do no direct harm to others. This approach, of course, puts off grappling with the tough moral and personal issues until facing subsequent decisions about whether to publish or otherwise make these writings available to others. Finally, some advocate withholding knowledge of their research purposes from local people on the grounds that the information gained will serve the greater good. For example, if researchers want to describe and publicize the conditions under which undocumented factory workers or the elderly in nursing homes live, they must withhold their intentions from the powerful who control access to such settings.

Many beginning researchers, wanting to avoid open violations of trust and possibly awkward or tense encounters, are tempted to use covert procedures and to try to conceal the fact that they are conducting research; this practice often requires waiting until one leaves the field to jot notes. While these decisions involve both the researcher's conscience and pragmatic

considerations, we recommend, as a general policy, that the fieldworker inform people in the setting of the research, especially those with whom he has established some form of personal relationship. In addition to making these relations more direct and honest, openness avoids the risks and likely sense of betrayal that might follow from discovery of what the researcher has actually been up to. Concerns about the consequences—both discovery and ongoing inauthenticity—of even this small secret about research plans might mount and plague the fieldworker as time goes on and relations deepen.

Of course, strained relations and ethical dilemmas are not completely avoided by informing others of one's research purposes. While participants might have consented to the research, they might not know exactly what the research involves or what the researcher will do to carry it out.¹³ They might realize that the fieldworker is writing fieldnotes at the end of the day, but they become used to his presence and "forget" that this writing is going on. Furthermore, marginal and transient members of the setting may not be aware of his research identity and purposes despite conscientious efforts to inform them.

By carrying out fieldwork in an overt manner, the researcher gains flexibility in when, where, and how to write jottings. In many field situations, it may be feasible to jot notes openly. In so doing, the fieldworker should act with sensitivity, trying to avoid detracting from or interfering with the ordinary relations and goings-on in the field. If possible, the fieldworker should start open jottings early on in contacts with those studied. If one establishes a "note-taker" role, jotting notes comes to be part of what people expect from the fieldworker. Here, it helps to offer initial explanations of the need to take notes; an ethnographer can stress the importance of accuracy, of getting down exactly what was said. People often understand that such activities are required of students and, therefore, tolerate and accommodate the needs of researchers who, they believe, want to faithfully represent what goes on. When learning a new language in another culture, the field researcher can explain that she is writing down local terms in order to remember them. By saying the word as she writes, people might offer new terms and become further interested in teaching her.

Although taking down jottings may at first seem odd or awkward, after a time, it often becomes a normal and expected part of what the fieldworker does. In the following excerpt from a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) office, the office manager and a worker jokingly enlist the fieldworker as audience for a self-parody of wanting to "help" clients:

Later I'm in Jean's office and Ramon comes up and waxes melodramatic. Take this down, he says. Jean motions for me to write, so I pull out my notepad. "I only regret that I have but eight hours to devote to saving" . . . He begins to sing "Impossible Dream," in his thick, goofy Brooklyn accent. . . . "Feel free to join in," he says. . . .

Here, the ethnographer and his note-taking provide resources for a spontaneous humorous performance.¹⁴

Yet even when some people become familiar with open writing in their presence, others may become upset when the researcher turns to a notepad or laptop and begins to write down their words and actions. Ethnographers may try to avoid the likely challenges and facilitate open, extensive note-taking by positioning themselves on the margins of interaction. Even then, they may still encounter questions, as reflected in the following comment by a field researcher observing divorce mediation sessions:

I tried to take notes that were as complete as possible during the session. My sitting behind the client had probably more to do with wanting to get a lot of written notes as unobtrusively as possible as with any more worthy methodological reason. While taking copious amounts of notes (approximately 50 pages per session) did not seem to bother the clients, a few mediators became quite defensive about it. One mediator wanted to know how I "decided what to write down and what not to write down." At staff meetings, this same mediator would sit next to me and try to glance over to see what I had written in my notebook.

Given the delicacy of this and similar situations, fieldworkers must constantly rely upon interactional skills and tact to judge whether or not taking jottings in the moment is appropriate.¹⁵

Furthermore, in becoming accustomed to open jotting, people may develop definite expectations about what events and topics should be recorded. People may question why the fieldworker is or is not taking note of particular events: On the one hand, they may feel slighted if she fails to make jottings on what they are doing or see as important; on the other hand, they may react with surprise or indignation when she makes jottings about apparently personal situations. Consider the following exchange, again described by the field researcher studying divorce mediation, which occurred as she openly took notes while interviewing a mediator about a session just completed:

On one occasion when finishing up a debriefing, . . . [the mediator] began to apply some eye makeup while I was finishing writing down some observations. She flashed me a mock disgusted look and said, "Are you writing *this* down too!" indicating the activity with her eye pencil.

Open jotting, then, has to be carefully calibrated to the unfolding context of the ongoing interaction.¹⁶ Open jottings not only may strain relations with those who notice the writing, but, as noted previously, jottings can also distract the ethnographer from paying close attention to talk and activities occurring in the setting. A field researcher will inevitably miss fleeting expressions, subtle movements, and even key content in interactions if his nose is in his notepad.

Taking open jottings is not always advisable for other reasons as well. In some settings, the fieldworker's participation in ongoing interaction might be so involving as to preclude taking breaks to write down jottings; in such instances, he may have to rely more upon memory, focusing on incidents and key phrases that will later trigger a fuller recollection of the event or scene. For example, in a setting where only a few people write and do so only on rare occasions, an ethnographer who writes instead of participating in an all-night village dance might be perceived as failing to maintain social relationships—a serious offense in a close-knit village.

As a result of these problems, even ethnographers who usually write open jottings may, at other times, make jottings privately and out of sight of those studied. Waiting until just after a scene, incident, or conversation has occurred, the ethnographer can then go to a private place to jot down a memorable phrase. Here, it is often useful for the fieldworker to adopt the ways members of the setting themselves use to carve out a moment of privacy or to "get away." Fieldworkers have reported retreating to private places such as a bathroom (Cahill 1985), deserted lunchroom, stairwell, or supply closet to record such covert jottings. Depending upon circumstances, the fieldworker can visit such places periodically, as often as every half hour or so, or immediately after a particularly important incident. Another option is to identify the natural "time-out" spaces that members of the setting also rely on and use as places to relax and unwind, to be by oneself, and so on. Thus, fieldworkers can often go to the institutional cafeteria or coffee shop, to outside sitting areas, or even to waiting rooms or hallways to make quick jottings about events that have just occurred. Other researchers avoid all overt writing in the field setting but immediately upon leaving the field,

pull out a notepad or laptop to jot down reminders of the key incidents, words, or reactions they wish to include in full fieldnotes. A similar procedure is to record jottings or even fuller notes on some kind of recording device while driving home from a distant field site. These procedures allow the fieldworker to signal items that she does not want to forget without being seen as intrusive.

Finally, an ethnographer may write jottings in ways intermediate between open and hidden styles, especially when note-taking becomes a part of her task or role. In settings where writing—whether pen on paper or on a computer or laptop—is a required or accepted activity, fieldworkers can take jottings without attracting special notice. Thus, classrooms, meetings where note-taking is expected, organizational encounters where forms must be filled out (as in domestic violence legal aid clinics), or in public settings such as coffee shops and cafeterias where laptops are common, jottings may be more or less openly written. Those in the field may or may not know explicitly that the fieldworker is writing jottings for research purposes. Though many activities do not so easily lend themselves to writing jottings, fieldworkers can find other naturally occurring means to incorporate jottings. For example, fieldworkers often learn about settings by becoming members. For the fieldworker who assumes the role of a novice, the notes that as a beginner he is permitted or even expected to write may become the jottings for his first fieldnotes.

Strategies for how, where, and when to jot notes change with time spent in the field and with the different relationships formed between fieldworker and people in the setting. Even after the ethnographer has established strong personal ties, situations might arise in fieldwork when visibly recording anything will be taken as inappropriate or out of place; in these situations, taking out a notepad or laptop would generate deep discomfort to both fieldworker and other people in the setting.¹⁷ One student ethnographer studying a campus bookstore who had grown quite friendly with bookstore workers—with whom she had spoken openly about her study—nonetheless reported the following incident:

One of the younger cashiers came up to me after having seen me during two of my last observation sessions. She approached me tentatively with a question about me being a “spy” from the other campus bookstore or possibly from the administration. Trying to ease the situation with a joke, I told her I was only being a spy for sociology’s sake. But she didn’t understand the joke, and it only made the situation worse.

Sometimes people may be uncomfortable with a jotting researcher because they have had little experience with writing as a part of everyday life. Especially in oral cultures, watching and writing about people may seem like a strange activity indeed. In other instances, people have unpleasant associations with writing and find jottings intrusive and potentially dangerous. On one occasion, an elder in a Zambian village became very hesitant to continue speaking after the ethnographer jotted down his name on a scrap of paper simply to remember it. She later learned that government officials in colonial times used to come by and record names for tax purposes and to enlist people into government work projects.

Finally, even with permission to write openly, the tactful fieldworker will want to remain sensitive to and avoid jotting down matters that participants regard as secret, embarrassing, too revealing, or that put them in any danger. In other instances, the people themselves might not object and, in fact, urge the researcher to take notes about sensitive matters. Even though she thinks they may be embarrassing or bring them harm if they were to be made public, the researcher might take jottings but then later decide not to use them in any final writing.

All in all, it is a defining moment in field relations when an ethnographer begins to write down what people are saying and doing in the presence of those very people. Therefore, fieldworkers take very different approaches to jottings, their strategies both shaping and being shaped by their setting and by their relationships. Hence, decisions about when and how to take jottings must be considered in the context of the broader set of relations with those in the setting. In some situations and relations, taking open jottings is clearly not advisable. In others, fieldworkers decide to take jottings but must devise their own unique means to avoid or minimize awkward interactions that may arise as a result. When deciding when and where to jot, it is rarely helpful or possible to specify in advance one “best way.” Here, as in other aspects of fieldwork, a good rule of thumb is to remain open, flexible, and ready to alter an approach if it adversely affects the people under study.

REFLECTIONS: WRITING AND ETHNOGRAPHIC MARGINALITY

Starting as outsiders to a field setting, many fieldworkers find themselves pulled toward involvement as insiders in ways that make maintaining a research stance difficult. The student-ethnographer working in a bookstore, for example, noted this tension:

There were times when I wanted to be free to listen to other individuals talk or to watch their activities, but friends and acquaintances were so “distracting” coming up and wanting to talk that I wasn’t able to. Also, there was this concern on my part that, as I got to know some of the staff people better, their qualities as human beings would become so endearing that I was afraid that I would lose my sociological perspective—I didn’t want to feel like in studying them, I was exploiting them.

Many field researchers similarly find themselves unable to consistently sustain a watching, distancing stance toward people they are drawn to and toward events that compellingly involve them.¹⁸ Indeed, some may eventually decide to completely abandon their commitment to research (a possibility that has long given anxiety to anthropologists concerned about the dangers of “going native”). Others may abandon their research commitment in a more limited, situational fashion, determining not to write fieldnotes about specific incidents or persons on the grounds that such writing would involve betrayals or revelations that the researcher finds personally and/or ethically intolerable (see Warren 2000:189–90).

But more commonly, ethnographers try to maintain a somewhat detached, observational attitude, even toward people whom they like and respect, balancing and combining research commitments with personal attachments in a variety of ways.¹⁹ One way to do so is to take occasional time-outs from research, not observing and/or writing fieldnotes about selected portions of one’s field experience while continuing to do so about other portions. When living in a village on a long-term basis, for example, an ethnographer may feel drawn into daily, intimate relations as a neighbor or perhaps even as a part of a family. On these occasions, she may participate “naturally”—without a writing orientation or analytic reflection—in ongoing social life. But on other occasions, she participates in local scenes in ways that are directed toward making observations and collecting data. Here, her actions incorporate an underlying commitment to write down and ultimately transform into “data” the stuff and nuances of that life.

Several practical writing conflicts arise from these opposing pressures toward involvement and distance. The inclination to experience daily events either as a “natural” participant or as a researcher shows up in writing as shifts in point of view as well as in varying kinds of details considered significant for inscription. Even where and when to jot notes depends on the person’s involvement, at a particular moment, as a participant or as an observer. Whether a researcher-as-neighbor in the village or as a researcher-

as-intern on a job, ethnographers experience tension between the present-oriented, day-to-day role and the future-oriented identity as writer; this tension will shape the practical choices they make in writing both jottings and more complete notes.

While a primary goal of ethnography is immersion in the life-worlds and everyday experiences of others, the ethnographer inevitably remains in significant ways an outsider to these worlds. Immersion is not merging; the ethnographer who seeks to “get close to” others usually does not become one of these others. As long as, and to the extent that, he retains commitment to the exogenous project of studying or understanding the lives of others, as opposed to the indigenous project of simply living a life in one way or another, he stays at least a partial stranger to their worlds, despite sharing many of the ordinary exigencies of life that these others experience and react to (see Bittner 1988; Emerson 1987).

Writing fieldnotes creates and underlies this socially close, but experientially separate, stance. The ethnographer’s fieldnote writing practices—writing jottings on what others are doing in their presence, observing in order to write, writing extended fieldnotes outside the immediacy of the field setting—specifically create and sustain separation, marginality, and distance in the midst of personal and social proximity. Overtly writing jottings interactionally reminds others (and the ethnographer herself) that she has priorities and commitments that differ from their own. Observing in order to write generates moments when the fieldworker is visibly and self-consciously an outsider pursuing tasks and purposes that differ from those of members.²⁰ And going to tent, home, or office to write fieldnotes regularly reminds the ethnographer that she is not simply doing what members are doing but that she has additional and other commitments.

In sum, in most social settings, writing down what is taking place as it occurs is a strange, marginalizing activity that marks the writer as an observer rather than a full, ordinary participant. But independently of the reactions of others, participating in order to write leads one to assume the mind-set of an observer, a mind-set in which one constantly steps outside of scenes and events to assess their “write-able” qualities. It may be for this reason that some ethnographers try to put writing out of mind entirely by opting for the more fully experiential style of fieldwork. But this strategy simply puts off, rather than avoids, the marginalizing consequences of writing, for lived experience must eventually be turned into observations and represented in textual form.

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

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.¹ 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.²

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.'"³

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(udge) 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 “categorical” 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.⁶

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 peppering 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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:¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.