



# An Overview

## The First Step

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.

—Lao-tzu

Ethnography is about telling a credible, rigorous, and authentic story. Ethnography gives voice to people in their own local context, typically relying on verbatim quotations and a “thick” description of events. The story is told through the eyes of local people as they pursue their daily lives in their own communities. The ethnographer adopts a cultural lens to interpret observed behavior, ensuring that the behaviors are placed in a culturally relevant and meaningful context. The ethnographer is focused on the predictable, daily patterns of human thought and behavior. Ethnography is thus both a research method and a product, typically a written text.

Ethnographers are noted for their ability to keep an open mind about the groups or cultures they are studying. However, this quality does not imply any lack of rigor. The ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, not an empty head. Before asking the first question in the field, the ethnographer begins with a problem, a theory or model, a research design, specific data collection techniques, tools for analysis, a specific writing style, and a set of ethical codes and guidelines; not to mention Institutional Review Board approval

(American Anthropological Association, 2004, 2012). The ethnographer also begins with biases and preconceived notions about how people behave and what they think—as do researchers in every field. Indeed, the choice of what problem, geographic area, or people to study is in itself biased. Biases serve both positive and negative functions. Controlled, biases can focus and limit the research effort. Uncontrolled, they can undermine the quality of ethnographic research. To mitigate the negative effects of bias, the ethnographer must first make specific biases explicit. A series of additional quality controls, such as triangulation, contextualization, and a nonjudgmental orientation, place a check on the negative influence of bias.

An open mind also allows the ethnographer to explore rich, untapped sources of data not mapped out in the research design. The ethnographic study allows multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data throughout the study. As discussed, the ethnographer is interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider's, perspective. The ethnographer is both storyteller and scientist; the closer the reader of an ethnography comes to understanding the native's point of view, the better the story and the better the science.

## Overview

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This chapter presents an overview of the steps involved in ethnographic work. The following chapters elaborate these steps in detail. The process begins when the ethnographer selects a problem or topic and a theory or model to guide the study. The ethnographer simultaneously chooses whether to follow a basic or applied research approach to delineate and shape the effort. The research design then provides a basic set of instructions about what to do and where to go during the study. Fieldwork is the heart of the ethnographic research design. In the field, basic anthropological concepts, data collection methods and techniques, and analysis are the fundamental elements of “doing ethnography.” Selection and use of various pieces of equipment—including the human instrument—facilitate the work. This process becomes product through analysis at various stages in ethnographic work—in field notes, memoranda, interim reports, and most dramatically, in the published report, infographic, data visualization, blog, article, or book.

The following chapters present these steps in a logical order, using concrete case examples throughout to illustrate each step. This step-by-step approach also highlights the utility of planning and organization in ethnographic work. The more organized the ethnographer, the easier is his or her task of making sense of the mountains of data collected in the field. Sifting through notepads filled with illegible scrawl, listening to hours of digital voice

recordings, labeling and organizing digital photos and video, and conducting cross-tabs and various data sorts in online surveys are much less daunting to the ethnographer who has taken an organized, carefully planned approach.

The reality, however, is that ethnographic work is not always orderly. It is like trekking to Mt. Everest Base Camp, there are few straight paths, detours are routinely required, and most of the journey involves following the natural, but often byzantine, curves of dried-up river beds to reach your destination. Ethnographic work also involves serendipity, creativity, being in the right place at the right or wrong time, a lot of hard work, and old-fashioned luck. Thus, although this discussion proceeds within the confines of an orderly structure, I have made a concerted effort to ensure that it also conveys the unplanned, sometimes chaotic, and always intriguing character of ethnographic research.

Whereas in most research, analysis follows data collection, in ethnographic research, analysis precedes and is concurrent with data collection. An ethnographer is a human instrument and must discriminate among different types of data and analyze the relative worth of one path over another at every turn in fieldwork, well before any formalized analysis takes place. Clearly, ethnographic research involves all different levels of analysis. Analysis is an ongoing responsibility and joy from the first moment an ethnographer envisions a new project to the final stages of writing and reporting the findings.

## The Problem

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Ethnographic research begins with the selection of a problem or topic of interest. The research problem that the ethnographer chooses guides the entire research endeavor. It typically dictates the shape of the research design, including the budget, the tools to conduct the research, and even the presentation of the research findings. How the ethnographer interprets and defines the problem usually reflects either a basic or an applied research orientation. The problem may also suggest the most appropriate research approach—ethnographic, survey, or experimental.

A researcher can address a problem—such as unequal minority representation in higher-paying and higher-status occupations in the United States—in many ways. For example, a survey approach would probably be more efficient than an ethnographic approach in determining the number of ethnic groups in specific occupations throughout the United States. A descriptive approach such as ethnography, however, would be most useful to study how unequal representation in specific occupations comes about, including how cultural values are transmitted to create institutional racism and what people think about this inequity. To determine the impact of programs to ameliorate economic differences between specific ethnic groups, a quasi-experimental design accompanied by a descriptive approach would be most appropriate. Research problem definition, therefore, is really a statement about what the ethnographer wants to know.

In essence, the problem or its definition is the driving force behind the research endeavor. The problem must precede the selection of a research method to avoid the trap of having a method in search of a problem—a situation referred to as the methodological tail wagging the research dog—a situation that produces frustrating and imprecise results.

## Basic or Applied Role

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The researcher's role further refines the definition of the problem. A study of the incest taboo appears to be classic anthropological or psychological research. More specific questions are necessary, however, before the researcher can determine the appropriate classification: basic or applied; anthropological, psychological, or sociological; and so on. In this instance, the issue most relevant to proper classification is a function of the type of questions posed.

An ethnographic study of incest raises questions of social organization and cultural rules and regulations. Arthur Wolf's (1970) ethnographic study of incest in China is a classic example of basic research. His work supports Westermarck's hypothesis that intimate childhood contact promotes sexual aversion rather than Freud's contention that the taboo is imposed to prohibit incestuous behavior. This work is primarily theoretical in nature, without any policy, pragmatic, or timely application.

A study of incest can also be an applied ethnographic task. Phelan's (1987) work in this area is a good example. Phelan studied what incest means in US society. She found significant differences between the behavior and perceptions of incestuous natural fathers and those of stepfathers. For example, natural fathers were more likely to have intercourse with their children because they considered them extensions of themselves. Her work raised important questions about the role of the incest taboo, and her research had direct implications for treatment facilities throughout the country. Wolf's (1970) basic research approach to the problem of incest involved long-term fieldwork and years of sifting through familial and government records. Phelan's applied research approach required less time in the field and less time sifting through records. Whereas Phelan's applied research had significant implications for immediate practical counseling approaches, with some less powerful theoretical impact, Wolf's research findings had significant implications for kinship theory, with little or no immediate practical significance. Basic research is conceptualized and designed by the researcher, who seeks funding—typically a grant—from a potentially interested sponsor. The findings are reported in refereed journals. The applied research effort, often funded by a contract, is a fully developed response to a sponsor's expressed interest in the topic. Its findings are published in reports for the sponsor. (See González-López's 2015 *Family Secrets: Stories of Incest and Sexual Violence in Mexico*, for a series of reflections on the methodological challenges and ethnographic complexities of studying incest.)

Despite these differences, the boundaries between basic and applied research become fuzzier every day. Many applied researchers now have an established research interest with significant theoretical implications, and they search for a sponsor with stated similar interests in a request for proposals. Furthermore, they are publishing more frequently in refereed journals and scholarly texts—not unlike basic researchers, who have career interests and seek funding from interested sponsors. The traditional differences that characterize each type of researcher, however, still hold, and these also characterize the relationship between the problem and how it is articulated, researched, and written about.

## Theory

Theory is a guide to practice; no study, ethnographic or otherwise, can be conducted without an underlying theory or model. Whether it is an explicit anthropological theory or an implicit personal model about how things work, the researcher's theoretical approach helps define the problem and how to tackle it.

When my father taught me how to fix a leaky faucet, he began by explaining the first law of thermodynamics and hydraulic theory before showing me how to stop the leak. Although he was clearly more interested in theory than in practice, because of that lesson, I have never forgotten



**FIGURE 1.1** Theory can inform and illuminate practice. It can help you see a bonding ritual between father and son while fixing a leaky faucet.

to shut off the water before working on the plumbing. His philosophical approach also helped me to understand how all the pieces worked together. In essence, he provided a theoretical road map, explaining the theories by demonstrating how each piece of the fixture worked.

Everyone tackles a problem with a theory or set of theories in mind about how things work. The trick is to select the most appropriate level of theory for the task at hand. I argue, for instance, that a simple flowchart would have told me how to fix the faucet more easily (and in much less time) than my father's highly technical, explicitly theoretical approach. However, the flowchart would not have been as effective a tool for bonding between father and son, in part because it would have been too efficient.

The ethnographer recognizes the importance of understanding the epistemological basis for a selected model. For example, a feminist theory (Coia & Taylor, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Reinharz, 1992), Black feminist theory (Collins, 2000; McClellan, 2012); queer theory (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Hermann-Wilmarth & Bills, 2010), critical race pedagogy (Hill, 2014; Hughes, 2008); Latino critical theory (Chavez, 2012; Correa & Lovegrove, 2012); social justice leadership theory (Garza, 2008; Theoharis, 2008); or other poststructural epistemology (Freire, 1972, 1974; Gannon, 2006), provides a powerful lens with which to see the world, often in ways that were overlooked in the past. They challenge the status quo. They question the framing of the question. Each of these theoretical lens privileges a specific group typically ignored, marginalized, or not even acknowledged, to surface their insights and lived experiences, with the aim of more accurately decreasing or eliminating inequalities.

For example, queer theory "challenges notions of heteronormativity" (Madison, 2012, p. 80). It rejects binary distinctions concerning sexual identify and instead views sexual identities as open, fluid, and nonfixed. Queer theory provided the lens needed to question a heterosexual bias in Schools of Medicine. Our Stanford University School of Medicine study of allopathic or osteopathic medical schools in Canada and the United States found that the "median reported time dedicated to teaching LGBT-related content in the entire curriculum was 5 hours" (Obedin-Maliver et al., 2011). This was in spite of the fact that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals experience health and health care disparities and have specific health care needs (Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, & McCabe 2010; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; Cohen-Kettenis & Pfäfflin, 2010; Coker, Austin, & Schuster, 2010; Garofalo, Deleon, Osmer, Doll, & Harper, 2006; Kulkin, Williams, Borne, de las Bretonne, & Laurendine, 2007; Lindley, Nicholson, Kerby, & Lu, 2003; Marrazzo, Thomas, Fiedler, Ringwood, & Fredricks, 2010; King & Nazareth, 2006; Park & Palefsky, 2010; and Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Our study also reported that 33.3% of medical schools that responded spent zero hours on LGBT health-related content during clinical training (p. 973). Moreover, deans of

medical education reported “dissatisfaction with their institutions’ coverage of LGBT-related topics” in their curriculum (p. 976). The findings were published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA). The findings attracted wide-spread media attention, ranging from CNN to the *New York Times*. A queer theory lens helped raise this issue to the surface, and the findings had a ripple effect, helping to improve LGBT-related training in medical education throughout the United States and Canada.

These critical theories bring into question the very nature of our dialogue about what constitutes truth, objectivity, and rationality (or at least raises the question of “whose truth?”). Similar to the Broadway play *Wicked*, a theory serves as a new lens in which to view the same “facts” or beliefs and/or behaviors. However, they help us see those beliefs and behaviors in a completely new way, often complementing and at times contradicting the normative view (see Madison, 2012, for a discussion about critical ethnography).

## Phenomenology

The typical model for ethnographic research is based on a phenomenologically oriented paradigm. This paradigm embraces a multicultural perspective because it accepts multiple realities. People act on their individual perceptions, and those actions have real consequences—thus the subjective reality each individual sees is no less real than an objectively defined and measured reality. Phenomenologically oriented studies are generally inductive; they make few explicit assumptions about sets of relationships. Such an approach is the basis of grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The theory underlying a sociocultural system or community develops directly from empirical data.

A positivistic paradigm stands in stark contrast to phenomenology. Unlike the typical ethnographer, an experimental psychologist is more likely to adopt a positivistic paradigm. Positivism assumes the existence of an objective reality, is typically deductive in approach, and establishes a priori assumptions about relationships.

## Ideational or Materialist Theorists

The ethnographer has a vast array of specific theories from which to choose. Each theory has application for specific topics and is uninformative or misleading when applied to inappropriate problems. Theories that offer little explanatory power, are inappropriate for most topics, or have been debunked are best left rotting on the vine. Most researchers, explicitly or implicitly, use one of two types of theory: ideational or materialistic. Ideational theories suggest that fundamental change is the result of mental activity—thoughts and ideas. Materialists believe that material conditions—ecological resources, money, and modes of production—are



the prime movers. Neither approach answers all problems; individual ethnographers select one of the two approaches to suit their training, personality, and specific needs or questions of interest.

Cognitive theory is the most popular ideational theory in anthropology today. Cognitive theory assumes that we can describe what people think by listening to what they say—not an unreasonable assumption. Using linguistically driven (ethnosemantic) techniques, we can create taxonomies of how people view the world (Bock & Lelavitt, 2019). For example, we may learn from Eskimos about their conception of snow—specifically, that they identify many types of snow within the larger category, corresponding to its many uses in their lives. Ideational theory researchers view the human world from the perspective of its mental origins—ideas, cognitive maps, beliefs, and knowledge. Classic ideational theories in anthropology include culture and personality theory (including psychoanalytic theory), sociolinguistics (Bayley, Cameron, & Lucas, 2013; Cazden, 1979; Gumperz, 1972; Heath, 1982; Trudgill, 1995, 2003), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Crossman, 2018), and ethnomethodology (Ball & Smith, 2011; Bogdan & Taylor, 1998; Crossman, 2017; Garfinkel, 1967, 2002; Mehan, 1987; Mehan & Wood, 1975).

In contrast, ethnographers who adopt materialist theories view the world according to observable behavior patterns. A limited but classic political and economic materialist theory is historical materialism, or neo-Marxism. Marxist theory assumes that all change results from shifts in the modes of production and in the control over these modes. Economic forces, class consciousness, class conflict, and various forms of social organization drive social and cultural change. Other materialist approaches in anthropology include cultural materialism (Elwell & Andrews, 2016; Harris, 1968, 1974, 1979, 1994) and cultural ecology (Anindita, 2012; Casagrande, 2019; Geertz, 1963; Steward, 1973; Toledo, 2002; Tucker, 2013).

I found many theories useful in my study of a national program for dropouts—the Career Intern Program (CIP). Both static and dynamic theories were necessary to understand what was going on. A static functionalist theory (Geertz, 1957; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Thompson, 2013; Vogt, 1960), combined with the static equilibrium model (de Cordoba, 1997; Gluckman, 1968), was useful in creating a descriptive baseline. A structural functionalist approach made the structure and function of the schools and their relationship to the various government and quasi-government institutions easy to map. The equilibrium model allowed me to hold everything still, as if the situation were in stasis for a moment, to identify where everyone stood in the picture. The theory and the model used were useful in establishing a baseline to begin observations of change over time. These approaches, however, are generally regarded as static—not sufficient for the study of sociocultural change.<sup>1</sup>

One dynamic theory that guided the study of the CIP for dropouts was innovation theory (Barnett, 1953; Godin, 2014). The experimental program for dropouts was the innovation in question. This theory helped me



pigeonhole observations about the innovative program, ranging from its introduction through the intricate maze to its acceptance, rejection, modification, or all three. Acculturation and diffusion approaches were also useful in analyzing how the program model was disseminated to different parts of the country (for additional examples of acculturation approaches in ethnographic research, see Guarnaccia & Hausmann-Stabile 2016; Leal, 2011; Spindler, 1955; Spindler & Goldschmidt, 1952; Spindler, 1962; Tonkinson, 1974). Whereas static theories provided “snapshots” of various moments throughout the project, dynamic theories helped identify patterns of significant behaviors over time (as part of a larger process of change).

Theories need not be elaborate juxtapositions of constructs, assumptions, propositions, and generalizations; they can be midlevel or personal theories about how the world or some small part of it works. Typically, ethnographers do not make a grand theory explicit because they do not automatically subscribe to one. A grand theory can be instructive, but many ethnographers find it unwieldy and unresponsive to day-to-day research needs. Usually, ethnographers use theoretical models indirectly linked to grand theories to guide their work. Grand theories, models, and personal theories all fall into either ideational or materialist camps—a basic dichotomy that is useful in analyzing another researcher’s work and in pursuing one’s own. Obviously, approaches overlap in the field, but most researchers begin by selecting a theory or model that is primarily ideational or materialist in nature before they even begin to conceptualize the problem.

The selection of a theory should depend on its appropriateness, ease of use, and explanatory power. Ideological bases for theory often blind rather than guide researchers making their way through the maze of data in the field. When theory is no longer a guide, it is no longer useful; when the data do not fit the theory, it is time to look for a new theory (for more detailed discussions of theory in ethnographic research, see Bee, 1974; Dorr-Bremme, 1985; Fetterman, 1986b; Harris, 1968; Kaplan & Manners, 1972; Pitman & Dobbert, 1986; Simon, 1986; Studstill, 1986; and Wilson & Chaddha, 2010).

## Research Design: Fieldwork

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The research design, according to Pelto (1970), “involves combining the essential elements of investigation into an effective problem-solving sequence” (p. 331). It is usually an idealized blueprint or road map that helps the ethnographer conceptualize how each step will follow the one before to build knowledge and understanding. The design is usually presented in the form of a proposal to solicit funds from a sponsor. The proposal will include background information, including historical information and a literature search, specific aims, rationale, methods, and significance, as well as a timetable and budget. (Parts of the proposal can be reused for such products as papers, articles, final reports, and books.) A useful research design limits the scope of the endeavor, links theory to method, guides the ethnographer, and assures the sponsor.

Fieldwork is the most characteristic element of any ethnographic research design. This approach shapes the design of all ethnographic work. Classical ethnography requires from 6 months to 2 years or more in the field. Fieldwork is exploratory in nature. The ethnographer begins with a survey period to learn the basics: the native language, the kinship ties, census information, historical data, and the basic structure and function of the culture under study for the months to come. Even when the ethnographer has specific hypotheses to test in the field, information gathering proceeds inductively. (See Brim & Spain, 1974, and Hesse-Biber & Dupuis, 2000, for a discussion of hypothesis testing in anthropology.) Typically, the ethnographer generates more hypotheses than concrete findings in a study. After this survey or get-acquainted period, the ethnographer begins to draw clearer geographic and conceptual boundaries. During this postsurvey phase, the ethnographer identifies significant themes, problems, or gaps in the basic understanding of the place or program. Judgmental sampling techniques are useful in learning more about how a group thinks about the system under study. For example, in a study of conflict among the staff in a research library, I selected the most vocal and articulate group of disgruntled librarians to explain the subculture's perception of an ongoing conflict. A random sample would have been useful to depict a representative picture of the library climate, but it might have ensured that I systematically missed the most rebellious and distraught librarians. Those librarians were the ones I needed to listen to in order to understand the powerful undercurrents in the system.

In many applied settings, long-term continuous fieldwork is neither possible nor desirable. Although Malinowski's position that long-term continuous work in the field is essential applies to foreign cultures, it may be an overstatement for work conducted in one's own culture. In the CIP study mentioned previously, I visited sites for 2-week periods every few months during a 3-year study. This approach allowed me to conduct intensive fieldwork, pull back and make sense of what I had observed and recorded, and then return to the field to test my hypotheses. The effort was successful because I was able to see patterns of behavior over time. In many applied contexts, limited resources compel the researcher to apply ethnographic techniques in a contract deadline time frame rather than to conduct a full-blown ethnography.

The most important element of fieldwork is being there—to observe, to ask seemingly stupid but insightful questions, and to write down what is seen and heard. Life histories of individuals can be particularly illuminating. One articulate individual may provide a wealth of valuable information. The ethnographer must then cross-check, compare, and triangulate this information before it becomes a foundation on which to build a knowledge base. Proper organization from the beginning of the effort can facilitate this process, whether the researcher uses index cards,

cardboard boxes, and lists or more high-tech databases, electronic spreadsheets, word processing software, and plenty of flexible storage space for data. Keeping the data organized and handy allows the ethnographer to test mini-hypotheses throughout the investigation. In addition, organized, accessible data are enormously valuable when the ethnographer leaves the field and tries to put the entire puzzle together. Work conducted in the researcher's native village or country allows a second or third round of visits to check on missing information but, in most cases, it is impossible to go back. Either the culture is too far away or the program no longer exists—as is often the case with demonstration programs in evaluation research.

The decision to leave the field is based on several criteria. Often, research funding will allow only a limited amount of time in the field, thus establishing the time schedule of the research design. In other cases, either the sponsor needs information at a predetermined date or the researcher has personal and professional deadlines to meet. Of course, the best reason to leave the field is the belief that enough data have been gathered to describe the culture or problem convincingly and to say something significant about it. Different researchers require different levels of confidence about specific research findings. No one can be completely sure about the validity of research conclusions, but the ethnographer needs to gather sufficient and sufficiently accurate data to feel confident about research findings and to convince others of their accuracy. Small errors in the description of a building that houses the program under study are tolerable; basing the conceptual argument on idiosyncratic interviews is not. Finally, the law of diminishing returns can determine that it is time for the ethnographer to leave the field.



**FIGURE 1.2** Invited to participate in a ceremony in a temple in Thailand. Fieldwork involves an immersion in other people's lives and listening deeply.



**FIGURE 1.3** Having a snack in a Nepalese school in Mt. Everest (with my son in the background).

When the same specific pattern of behavior emerges over and over again, the fieldworker should move on to a new topic for observation and detailed exploration. Similarly, when the general picture reaffirms itself over and over again, it is probably time to wrap things up and return home.

## Formal Analysis

Fieldwork ends when the researcher leaves the village or site, but ethnography continues. Some ethnographers spend as much time formally analyzing and reanalyzing their data and writing their ethnographies as they do conducting fieldwork. Formal analysis and report writing are more efficient when the ethnographer keeps the data organized and writes sections of the ethnography during the fieldwork. This process is much simpler in applied settings than in traditional ethnographic work because in applied settings clients expect memoranda and interim reports detailing research findings. These interim reports are the beginnings of the ethnography or ethnographically informed final report. The applied researcher also has the benefit of feedback while still in the field. A description of the group or program under study can be revised to take into account client responses about its accuracy and the ethnographer's own increasing knowledge about the program. Similarly, memoranda can be a test of the researcher's understanding of specific relationships and status symbols. During an applied

study of a hospital emergency room, I wrote a memorandum describing the different types of uniforms that helicopter nurses wore compared with the traditional garb of the regular emergency nurses and suggesting that these different uniforms were status symbols that the regular nurses envied. I then concluded that this envy created friction during hospital hours (potentially affecting patient care). The response from hospital management and both sets of nurses was surprisingly positive, affirming my description and conclusions. In basic research, I have also found that sharing drafts of professional papers with informants is extremely useful. On a kibbutz in Israel, I used this technique to test my understanding of kibbutz life. Responses from kibbutz members to my observations improved the accuracy of my descriptions, insights, and findings.

In the final stage of analysis, however, the ethnographer must reconfigure all notes, memoranda, interim reports, papers, digital recordings, and so on to draw an overall picture of how a system works from myriad minute details and preliminary conclusions. This phase can be the most creative step of ethnographic research. The researcher synthesizes ideas and often makes logical leaps that lead to useful insights. Such unexpected insights are often the result of allowing the mind to wander and consider unusual combinations of thoughts. The researcher must of course backtrack to see whether the data will support these new ideas or invalidate them, but he or she will rarely achieve them through linear, methodical work alone. Conventional hard work sets the state for these moments, but flexible thinking and what appear to be random associations are catalysts that make them happen.

## The Ethnography

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An ethnography attempts to be holistic—covering as much territory as possible about a culture, subculture, or program—but it necessarily falls far short of the whole. An ethnographically informed report in applied studies typically has even greater limitations than an ethnography because it develops under greater time and funding constraints.

The success or failure of either report or full-blown ethnography depends on the degree to which it rings true to natives and colleagues in the field. These readers may disagree with the researcher's interpretations and conclusions, but they should recognize the details of the description as accurate. The ethnographer's task is not only to collect information from the emic, or insider's, perspective but also to make sense of all the data from their own ethnographically informed or etic, external social scientific, perspective. An ethnographer's explanation of the whole system may differ from that of the people in the field and at professional meetings. Basic descriptions of events and places, however, should sound familiar to native and colleague alike (with the logical exception of accounts of aberrant behavior or newly discovered ideas or thought processes).

Verbatim quotations are extremely useful in presenting a credible report of the research. Quotations allow the reader to judge the quality of the work—how close the ethnographer is to the thoughts of natives in the field—and to assess whether the ethnographer used such data appropriately to support the conclusions. The ethnographer therefore must select quotations that are typical or characteristic of the situation or event described. Making sweeping generalizations about a group based on atypical conversations or behaviors is not science, and the reader will probably detect the spurious nature of such material.<sup>2</sup> (Deviations from the norm, however, can shed light on, and help define, the norm and, as such, merit attention.)

Conveying findings in the most appropriate medium is a vital, but often overlooked, last step in ethnographic reporting. The ethnography or the ethnographically informed report is the most common medium for presenting findings. I usually include charts, pictures, and, whenever possible, computer-projected screens along with my text in presentations. Ethnographic research with policy implications in particular requires sophisticated multimedia presentations to draw an audience. The benefit of Web-based postings is that, although they require the same level of preparation, they reach the most people in the shortest period of time. In any type of research, the report or presentation must be in the language each audience understands best: “academese” for academics, “bureaucratese” for bureaucrats, plain English for most US communities, and the predominant language of the people under study. Unless the ethnographer couches the research findings in a language the audience understands, the most enlightening findings will fall on deaf ears. Just as learning to speak the languages of the natives under study is essential to research, learning to speak the languages of the study’s multiple audiences is essential to the communication of research findings (see Fetterman, 1987a, 1987b; Gobo & Molle, 2017, pp. 269–270).

The ethnography can be written in many styles and in many formats. A typical ethnography describes the history of the group, the geography of the location, kinship patterns, symbols, politics, economic systems, educational or socialization systems, and the degree of contact between the target culture and the mainstream culture.<sup>3</sup> Specialized ethnographies may focus on specific elements of socialization of the young or the role of a significant person such as the principal (Wolcott, 2003).

Ethnographic research findings can be communicated through newspaper releases, photographs, recordings, speech, and a variety of electronic communications, including blog, Web page, and social media postings. Book form, however, provides the most control over ethnographic work and remains the standard. Other forms still fall into the supplemental category.

Ethnographies usually form long but quite interesting scholarly books. Sponsors in applied settings are often more likely to read long ethnographic reports than the avalanche of figures and indecipherable statistical tables that often appear in psychometric studies. If the ethnography is too long or poorly written, however, no one but another ethnographer will



read it. A lucid style and reasonable length, therefore, are critical if the ethnography is to see the light of day. I recommend a clear, easy-to-read writing style that nonacademics and readers unfamiliar with the culture or study will find interesting and understandable. Within the bounds of this rather omnibus recommendation, a multitude of writing styles exist that can interest and persuade readers of the value of an ethnographic work. In selecting a style suitable to various audiences, the ethnographer becomes rhetorician, pursuing the means of effective communication to diverse populations (see Evergreen, 2017, for effective data visualization; Fetterman, 1987b concerning ethnographer as rhetorician; and Shrum & Scott, 2017 concerning video ethnography and public engagement and activism).

## Book Organization

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This chapter has provided a brisk walk through the intellectual landscape that this book will explore. Specifically, it has included discussion of the basic steps in ethnographic research, focusing on the selection of a problem and the use of theory. The following chapters will lead the reader step by step through the ethnographic terrain, periodically stopping to smell the roses and contemplate the value of one concept or technique over another.

Chapter 2 focuses on guiding concepts in ethnography: culture, cultural interpretation, a holistic perspective, contextualization, emic and etic perspectives, a nonjudgmental orientation, inter- and intracultural diversity, structure and function, and symbols and ritual, as well as micro and macro approaches, reflexivity, and operationalism. Chapter 3 presents the specific data collection methods and techniques necessary for conducting an ethnography. Methods and techniques under discussion include fieldwork, selection and sampling, gaining entry, participant observation, interviewing (structured, semistructured, informal, and retrospective), survey or grand tour questions, specific questions (such as structural and attribute questions), open-ended and closed-ended questions, interviewing protocols and strategies, key actor or informant interviewing, gathering of life histories and expressive autobiographical interviews, use of lists and forms, questionnaires, projective techniques, and various unobtrusive measures.

Ethnographic research equipment is discussed in Chapter 4. The most important piece of equipment is the human instrument—the ethnographer. Other common tools include pen and notepad, digital voice recorder, smartphone, Web mapping navigation services, tablets, computers with accompanying software, cameras, video cameras, and cinema. Internet tools include videoconferencing technology, online surveys, and cloud sharing of documents and photographs are invaluable. Blogs, collaborative word processing and spreadsheets, and collaborative Web sites make the ethnographic process more interactive, accessible, and accountable. These tools facilitate the ethnographic mission. They are used to collect, organize, store, analyze, and present the data.



Chapter 5 explores the role of analysis throughout ethnography. The process includes a discussion of seemingly simple thought processes and more time-consuming and labor-intensive processes, such as triangulation, documentation of thought and behavior patterns (with qualitative data analysis software), and key event analysis. In addition, it discusses maps, flowcharts, organizational charts, matrices, content analysis, statistics, and crystallization. Analysis also includes reflexivity at various stages in the process.

Chapter 6 describes ethnographic writing. Writing, like analysis, occurs throughout the ethnographic endeavor. Specific milestones highlight the significance of writing in ethnography, including the research proposal, field notes, memoranda, interim reports, final reports, blogs, data visualizations, social media posting, articles, and books. Fundamental elements of ethnographic style are also examined, such as thick description, verbatim quotations, the use of the ethnographic present, and ethnographic presence. The chapter discusses ethnographically informed reports and the role of literature and various editorial concerns.

Chapter 7, the last step in our hike through the ethnographic landscape, presents a discussion of ethics, focusing on the conceptual crossroads of methods and ethics in ethnographic research. Ethics, like analysis and writing, cut across every step in the ethnographer's path. The selection of a problem to study and the choice of an academic or applied role have ethical implications for each stage of the study—from inception to publication. Basic underlying ethical standards include the securing of permission (to protect individual privacy), honesty, trust (both implicit and explicit), use of pseudonyms, reciprocity, and rigorous work. More sophisticated ethical dilemmas in ethnographic research include guilty knowledge and dirty hands.

Each chapter builds on the one before—as each step on the Himalayan trail from Kathmandu to Gorak Shep follows the step before. The discussion about the selection of a problem and the role of theory in this chapter is followed by a detailed discussion of guiding concepts in Chapter 2. The ethnographer's next logical step is to become acquainted with the tools of the trade—the methods and techniques required to conduct ethnographic research and the equipment used to chisel out this scientific art form. A discussion of analysis in ethnographic research becomes more meaningful at this state, once the preceding chapters have laid the foundation for this discussion. Similarly, the role of writing is discussed in Chapter 6 because writing is one of the final stages in the process and because the meaning of writing in ethnography is amplified and made more illuminating by a series of discussions about what “doing ethnography” entails. Finally, ethics is discussed last because the complete ethnographic context is necessary to a meaningful discussion of this topic. Step by step, the chapters provide a path through the complex terrain of ethnographic work. Newcomers will be able to proceed chapter by chapter toward an overall understanding of ethnography. Experienced ethnographers will find that the chapters offer self-contained reference points for refreshment and enjoyment.

## Questions for Reflection

1. What do you want to know (from an ethnographic perspective)?
2. Do you have a basic or applied orientation or some combination? Why?
3. How would you apply feminist or queer theory to your ethnographic work? How would it influence your methodology or your use of methods?

## Notes

1. Arguably, Radcliffe-Brown's (1952) functionalism is static and Vogt's (1960) and Geertz's (1957) is dynamic, but both forms are static in comparison to most conventional dynamic theories.
2. A researcher may select quotations that reflect political ideology or altruistic intentions. This course, however, is an overzealous commitment to a cause and not science. The line between good conscientious research and political advocacy is thin, but when the researcher crosses it, the quality and integrity of the research are compromised. A good researcher is not afraid to enter the political arena—after completing the research.
3. An ethnography is primarily descriptive in nature. An ethnology compares and contrasts cultures and cultural elements. Ethnology relies on ethnographies as the primary data. An ethnography and an ethnology are both used to complete a comprehensive anthropological study, requiring the conventional literature review, presentation of data collection techniques, description, interpretation, and discussion of implications. An ethnography is the descriptive tool in anthropology that can stand alone or be the foundation for larger efforts.