



For their constant support, encouragement and for a sense of perspective, this book is dedicated to:

Jacqueline, Charlotte and Lizzie Mannix-Pole (C.P.)

and

Margaret and David Hillyard (S.H.)



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WHAT IS FIELDWORK?

Chapter overview

- Fieldwork is an intellectually and technically challenging total experience aimed at capturing meaning.
- Being there first-hand is important.
- Fieldwork is also curiosity-driven – to gain insight and understanding or *verstehen*.
- In this book we are against methodological fundamentalism, but rather advocate an inclusive approach to fieldwork.

This is a book about doing research. Not any research in general, but a specific kind of research which is as much about the role of the researcher as it is about the focus of the research. The intention is to provide an open and frank account of what it is like to do research: where you, the researcher, are the reason(s) why it will succeed or fail; where you are the main influence on what the research will discover and; how it will be received and evaluated by those who read or use its findings. The idea is that by the end of the book you will have a good idea of the ethos surrounding doing fieldwork – what it's all about and what knowledge it can yield. This includes what this kind of research entails, but also what it's like to do it. We will talk about the excitement of research, the challenges and frustrations, the rewards, the tedium and the sheer hard slog that all research projects involve in different proportions, at one time or another.

The kind of research this book is about is that which is based on *fieldwork*. The idea behind fieldwork is that *it is about getting involved with what and who you are researching*. It is about doing research in a practical, applied, 'hands on' sense. The essence of it is what Robert Park, when he was director of the Chicago School

of Sociology, instructed his Chicago undergraduates to do, 'go get the seats of your pants dirty in real research' (Park in Prus 1996: 119). In this sense, fieldwork is about getting out there, wherever there is, and becoming part of what is going on and what you are researching. It is about what Geertz (1988: 1) called 'being there'. But, furthermore, in our digital age, understanding that this may also take place in a virtual research environment where no-face-to-face contact is made but nevertheless co-presence occurs.

However, this is not the full story. By emphasizing 'doing' research in this active (or participatory) sense, we are not suggesting that it is only about running around collecting data. To suggest that is all there is to it would be to reduce research to a set of technical operations. We are not doing what Mills (1959: 74) called 'fetishism of the Concept' and getting stuck with over-elaborations of method (Mills 1959: 74–75). This book is about making sense of, or analysing the data that are collected, about writing and representing the research findings and conclusions. In this sense, it is about the whole package. It is about the research process – from initial ideas and thinking about research, to designing, executing, analysing, writing and finishing research. We also want to emphasize that research based on fieldwork is real research – serious, scholarly and powerful. It can begin to tell us a great deal about things that are strange to us and also encourage us to question and re-examine things that are familiar. Indeed, perhaps the latter is trickier than the former.

In some ways, this is a book which is a celebration of fieldwork. We do not apologize for this, as the reason for writing it is that we believe it is central to social science and has an important role to play in the way in which we try to understand and make sense of the world. However, we are not saying that research based on fieldwork is the only way of doing research or that it should be the only way. Underpinning the approach we take is a belief in the need to fit the research question or problem with the right kind of research methods. Sometimes it will not be obvious which is the right method, but finding out which is, forms part of the research process and can, itself, tell us something about the subject we are researching and the things we value exploring.

WHAT IS FIELDWORK?

So far we have only talked in general terms about fieldwork. Before going any further it is necessary to define it in order that we know what we are concerned with throughout the book. However, as with many things in social science there will be disagreement over the definition of what we argue counts as fieldwork.

To some extent disagreement and debate is positive as it encourages us to think about the thing being defined and to come to an understanding of whatever it is we are concerned with. What we are presenting is our definition of fieldwork and we invite you to consider your own definition against it. If you

can't do that now, it may be possible after you have read more of the book or after you have had a go at something you would like to call fieldwork. Having encouraged you to do this, we are not suggesting that anybody's definition of fieldwork is as good as anybody else's. To do this would be to suggest that anything goes, that fieldwork could be both everything and nothing. Whilst we would accept a fairly broad definition, we nevertheless, see it as a specific approach to research, which can be differentiated from approaches which are not fieldwork approaches. Therefore, it is possible to say what fieldwork is and what it is not. So here goes:

What it is: Fieldwork is a way of doing research where the emphasis is placed on the collection of data at first hand by a researcher. It relies on personal interaction or engagement between the researcher and those being researched in the research setting, during which the researcher(s) will use one or a combination of particular methods to collect data over a prolonged period of time.

What it is not: Fieldwork is not the kind of research that relies on a 'scientific' distance between researcher and research subject or object. Through its emphasis upon emersion, it is not research which can be conducted quickly. As a richness of data flows from emersion in the field, neither does fieldwork necessarily look to produce generalizations which cover large populations or groups of people.

The problem of providing definitions, either in terms of what things are or what they are not, is that there are always exceptions and grey areas. By offering these two definitions some of you will now be saying, 'But what about this situation' or 'Does that rule out that method?' Some of you will disagree with our definitions and, implicitly or explicitly, suggest your own. In turn, other people will take issue with your definitions and suggest that they too are ambiguous, exclusionary, too broad and confused. And so it goes on. The best we can hope for in offering these definitions is to identify some general principles, which underpin fieldwork, and to use these in our following discussions. In doing this, we may, ourselves, come to challenge the definitions and so push back the boundaries of what fieldwork is and what it is not. Importantly, we do not see the traditional as static or rooted in the past. So, these debates keep it fresh and better able to engage with changes in society.

RESEARCHING IN THE FIELD AND DOING FIELDWORK

From the definitions it is possible to draw an important distinction between doing fieldwork and working in the field. Whilst fieldwork takes place in the field – albeit a field that is broadly defined – it does not follow that all research

which occurs there is fieldwork. In drawing this distinction we are separating location and activity. For example, there are many hundreds of books which describe the use of many different kinds of methods which might be used in the field. Many of these are, in our opinion excellent books that we have both used in teaching research methods (e.g. Berg 2004, Bryman 2012, Greener 2011, Mason 1996, Neuman 2011, Robson 2002, etc.) and doubtless have helped many researchers over the years. In most cases, however, these and many others, remain books about a range of methods, rather than books about fieldwork *per se*. By way of contrast, Burgess (1982, 1984), Delamont (2002), Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), Shaffir and Stebbins (1991) and Wolcott (2005) again to name just a few, address fieldwork as a distinctive approach to research. Whilst such texts may very well draw on a similar range of methods as those outlined in the more general books, it is possible to draw an important distinction between them. Whilst the former are concerned with research tools or techniques, the latter are concerned with a holistic approach *to a particular kind or style of doing research*. It is not the intention to suggest that one of these types of books is qualitatively better than the other, nor to dismiss any out-of-hand. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. The intention is, however, to draw attention to the difference between research methods and research methodology. This merits further explanation. In short, research methods refer to *the range of tools* that the researcher has at his/her disposal. Methodology, meanwhile, is about the way in which the researcher *uses these tools*, the relationship between the tools, the data which they can yield and the knowledge which follows from those data. Applying this distinction to our discussion of fieldwork, we are purporting that fieldwork is a methodology rather than a method. It is simply more than the sum of its parts.

FIELDWORK AS METHODOLOGY

Having made what some might see as lofty claims for fieldwork as a distinctive methodology, we should say more about what it seeks to achieve and what distinguishes it from other approaches to research. This in itself is not easy. As with discussions about what makes ethnography a distinctive approach to research (Atkinson 1990, Brewer 2000, Hammersley 1990, 1992, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, Pole and Morrison 2003, Walford 2009, Willis and Trondman 2000), the term fieldwork is often used interchangeably with a number of other phrases, which are seen, if not as direct synonyms, then as phrases that describe broadly similar activities. For example, ethnography, case study and qualitative research are all terms used to convey a picture of research that seeks to collect primary data at source, usually on a face-to-face basis. Therefore, in discussing and seeking to define fieldwork, it may be that we are also discussing other forms of research or certain aspects of it.

However, we want to adopt an inclusive approach. That is, our argument is that fieldwork may incorporate these synonyms, for example, an ethnographic approach may be taken to fieldwork, similarly, a case study may be conducted as part of fieldwork and fieldwork is usually based on qualitative research. Consequently, using these terms in place of fieldwork fails to convey all that this might involve. Whilst we would not wish to diminish ethnography or case study research, we would argue that there remains something which sets fieldwork apart from these approaches. In short, this is the capacity of fieldwork to embrace the entire research process and to incorporate research design, method and methodology, field relations, politics and ethics of research, analysis, dissemination and subsequent impact. It is then, a total experience. When we say we are engaging in fieldwork we are by implication taking on all of the above as integral to our research. Moreover, to return to a point made at the very start of this chapter, they are all processes which are mediated at first hand through the researcher.¹

THE TOTAL EXPERIENCE

It is not our intention to build fieldwork into something which is unattainable or remote from all but the largest, generously-funded research projects. In defining fieldwork as a total experience we would see it as applicable or relevant to research of large and small scale, available to experienced researchers and to students who may be coming to research for the first time as part of their undergraduate studies.

In using the term 'total experience' we are doing two things. Firstly, we are attempting to convey a sense in which doing fieldwork is an absorbing activity by virtue of the involvement that it demands of the researcher, technically in terms of the deployment of particular methods and intellectually in thinking about and planning research strategies. In many respects, fieldwork may be seen as a form of living research. Secondly and closely allied to this, the term total experience relates to the theoretical underpinnings of fieldwork where the intention is to seek to understand whatever is being studied from the perspective of those who are being studied. In order to do this, it will be necessary for the researcher to immerse him/herself in the research setting and to deploy research methods which provide, as far as possible, an insider's view.

Whilst there are many modern commentators who base their work on such a position (e.g. Allan 2012, Atkinson 2005, Delamont and Stephens 2006, Sparkes et al. 2012, to name but a few), the approach may be traced back to that of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologists like Powdermaker, Rivers and in particular Malinowski. These pioneers of modern anthropology sought not to rely on the second-hand reports of faraway places from missionaries and travellers, but to see and experience things for themselves. They talked directly to the 'natives'; they lived with them and took part in their everyday lives as well as the festivals, feasts and other less ordinary activities.



FIGURE 1.1

Source: Malinowski (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Plate I The ethnographer's tent on the beach of the Nu'agasi, demonstrating 'life among the natives'.

The intention was that by taking part in the everyday life of the research setting and by participating alongside members of the indigenous population, the researcher(s) would, as far as possible, become members of the social setting which they were studying. In an original anthropological sense, therefore, the notion of fieldwork could be taken quite literally, that it was work (research) conducted in a field (rural location).

The idea of sailing away to uncharted, faraway lands to study unknown or little-known people, lends to fieldwork a degree of exoticism in which the anthropologist (fieldworker) may be cast as explorer, swashbuckler or pioneer. This may have been the case at the turn of the twentieth century when foreign travel was rare and many parts of the planet remained inaccessible to Westerners. It is now, in a globalized context, little more than a caricature perpetuated largely by Hollywood heroes like Indiana Jones! Few of today's fieldworkers would see themselves in such a role.

The advent of relatively cheap and easy international travel has meant that few places in the world – physically or culturally – remain inaccessible to the tourist, let alone the intrepid anthropologist or researcher. In addition, a rethink about the ethical and political relationship between the 'visiting' anthropologist or fieldworker and the indigenous population, has led to a greater emphasis on researchers in what might previously have been seen as faraway places, researching their own societies. The world has, in effect, become a much smaller place. This more local approach to fieldwork was typified by the work of the Chicago School of Sociology, who produced many studies of everyday events in Chicago during the early decades of the twentieth century (e.g. Anderson 1923, Polsky 1967, Shaw 2013 [1930], Thrasher 1927). Their approach was to treat the relatively new phenomenon of the city of Chicago, with which they were familiar,

in the same way as the anthropologist would treat the faraway locations. In doing this, the Chicago sociologists were instrumental in encouraging an approach that challenged the familiar and looked beyond what was often taken for granted within their own society.

In the words of Burgess (1982) as the twentieth century progressed, anthropology came home. By this, he refers to the fact that although traditional 'faraway' anthropology has declined, ironically, the research methods and the general approach are now more common than ever. Researchers may no longer travel to the islands of the South Pacific to gather data and try to understand 'exotic' and remote communities in the way that they did at the start of the twentieth century, but they are now more likely to be found 'at home' in their own communities practising fieldwork. For some modern day fieldworkers, the homecoming meant that they studied whole communities. Classic examples being Stacey's (1960) study and restudy (Stacey et al. 1975) of Banbury, or Frankenberg's (1957) study of a north Wales village. Here, the approach to what became known as the community study was, and in many respects remains (Payne 1996), very similar to that taken by the anthropologists working in the islands of New Guinea. The principles of working (and living) alongside the 'natives' did not vary with the location, be it Banbury or the South Pacific. The objective of understanding the location (the field) at first hand, from the inside remained the same.

Transporting the principles of anthropological fieldwork a little further, the approach did not always have to be applied to a field in a rural or geographical sense. The 'coming home' of anthropology meant that research based on fieldwork became common in what in some sense, were much smaller or more tightly defined fields. For example, the definitions of a school or a factory, a football stadium or a family as a field, meant that researchers could apply anthropological techniques to situations with which they were often very familiar. In this respect, it could be argued that the late-twentieth-century emphasis on the ordinary or the familiar research setting, as opposed to the exotic or the unfamiliar, limited the scope of fieldwork. However, such an argument emphasizes technical issues of geography and location over methodological and theoretical issues. Although fieldwork is now more commonly found in the researcher's own 'back yard', the principles which underpin its use remain largely unaltered. The concern is to understand the field and those who 'inhabit' it from the inside. So even in 'ordinary' surroundings, exploring the total experience remains the objective.

FAMILIAR AND STRANGE

The fieldworker born and bred in Birmingham, UK would doubtless regard an opportunity to conduct research in a village located within the Amazon Rain

forests as an opportunity to observe and experience the 'exotic' and the unfamiliar. Similarly, a researcher from the Amazon Rain Forest is also likely to regard the prospect of conducting research in Mosely or Solihull in the same way. The concept of the exotic or the strange is of course relative. The fieldworker can also find themselves responding differently to the field, Atkinson (2012), for example, recounted 'doing fieldwork in the opera company':

I went on tour with them. I spent a great deal of time observing rehearsals and a few performances watching from the stage wings and observing backstage activity. I hung out in the offices of some of the administrative staff. I got in the way in the props department. It was one of the best possible periods of field research [...] a rare opportunity to study performances at first hand (Atkinson 2012: 44).

Even sustained fieldwork in Birmingham is personal and emotive, as Moore (1977) recounted of his seminal study with Rex on race relations in the Sparkbrook:

For a year I ate, breathed and slept Sparkbrook. I made new friends, made and dissolved relationships, took sides in conflicts, had problems with my landlady and went to parties [...] [The] demands on emotions are certainly felt very acutely when one is working in the field of race relations [...] The most beguiling interview was with a dim and amiable young prostitute who said as we parted that if I wanted to know any more about her work I should call at her place 'anytime' (Moore 1977: 87, 88).

The definition of what is exotic or strange depends on the particular circumstances of whoever is defining the situation. In the same way, the definition of familiar is contingent upon the same things. However, the concepts of strangeness and familiarity are central to an understanding of fieldwork and what it attempts to achieve. So it becomes important to think about what these concepts mean and how they work in fieldwork practice.

The researcher from Birmingham perceives the rainforest village as strange because it is unfamiliar. He/she does not have to try very hard to think of questions to ask about what he/she sees, hears and experiences because they are different and unfamiliar. Similarly, the researcher from the village in an Amazon rainforest is likely to find Birmingham strange and will, therefore, have many questions to ask of what he/she sees and experiences. This is part of our everyday thinking – what interactionists see as our making-sense of the world around us. However, to suggest that our capacity to ask questions about a particular location or institution or process depends on how well we know it, is to oversimplify things. For example, we have all been to school, but how many of us can say that we understand fully the way in which a school works? Or perhaps even more basic than that, most of us will live with, or have lived with, other people at some stage of our lives, as part of a family – in the many forms they can appear – but who can claim to fully understand the role of the

family in all its different forms in the twenty-first century? We may all have personal experience of a school or family, but that does not mean that we know everything there is to know about them. Moreover, it is likely that we know about those situations from a particular vantage point, say as a pupil or a youngest son or daughter. How different does a primary school seem from the position of the head teacher or the caretaker? Similarly, how does the family seem from the perspective of a great grandmother, a father, a stepmother or an adopted brother?

These examples of where we may find the present-day researcher, studying a family or a school, suggest that fieldwork can be *as much about situations which are familiar to us as it can about those which are strange*. This is an important point, given the sheer scale and pace at which contemporary life is moving and working. We would argue, therefore, that the essence of fieldwork relates to the capacity of the fieldworker to pose questions about whatever situation or location he/she finds him/herself in. In some cases this may appear easy because everything is new and unfamiliar or strange. In others it may appear very difficult because everything is all-too familiar. In both situations there are problems and challenges, the fieldworker's job remains the same – *to attempt to get to the essence of what is happening*. This may mean making familiar situations strange by asking questions about everyday activities and situations. For example, in the context of the school we may wish to pose questions, which on the face of it seem a little strange, but actually succeed in getting to the heart of what happens everyday and which we take for granted. This is taking things apart in order to get a better picture of how they work together. For example:

- Why does the head teacher have their own office when other teachers do not?
- Why are the children grouped by age for lessons?
- Who decided that it would be a good idea to read the plays of Shakespeare?
- Why do we have prefects or houses?

Or in the context of the family:

- Why do I live with my brother and sister and not with my cousins?
- Why does dad pay towards the upkeep of the house although he doesn't live here anymore?
- Why does mum do most of the cooking and the housework?
- Why do my teenage daughters argue so much?

At first glance we may think that we know the answers to these questions, that they are obvious and not worth serious consideration. However, if we stop to think about our everyday lives – about what we do almost automatically, every day and why we do it – our familiar world starts to become less familiar.

We start to 'exoticize' or problematize everyday occurrences and to treat as strange those things we may have always regarded as so familiar. For many present day fieldworkers, the research task rests on their capacity to ask challenging questions, not to take things for granted and to look beneath what we may have always regarded as ordinary. Given that we are part of the social world we want to study, that is neither easy nor straightforward.

There are, of course, many anthropologists who continue to conduct fieldwork in faraway places, where most things are unfamiliar to them. Essentially, however, we would argue that wherever fieldwork is conducted, it is seeking to achieve the same things:

- To observe and experience at first-hand what is happening
- To examine the significance of events and activities, beliefs and rituals (including the mundane and the ordinary) to people involved
- To examine the ways in which activities and events, beliefs and rituals relate to each other and to the participants in the location
- To look for the significance and meaning of social behaviour
- To look below the surface of events and activities, beliefs and rituals for patterns and theories which can begin to explain social life in ways which go beyond the particular fieldwork location

As with the early and the present-day anthropologist, the fieldworker is driven by curiosity, by a desire to understand, to be there, as things happen and to use what he/she sees, hears and experiences to begin to explain social behaviour. Whilst this broad remit for fieldwork may be traced back to anthropology, the process by which anthropology 'came home' means that fieldwork is now a research process which is applicable to many disciplines. The fieldworker may be an anthropologist, a sociologist, an economist, a geographer or a member of one of many more disciplines which have primary research as their core. Whichever label the fieldworker attaches to his/her intellectual identity, we would argue the basic tenets of fieldwork remain the same. We should also add that fieldwork is defined here as an approach to doing research, whereas ethnography, for example, uses fieldwork. In this sense, it is the activity, the research process, the total experience which defines fieldwork rather than the discipline to which it is applied.

DOING FIELDWORK

In attempting to define fieldwork as a particular approach to research by identifying characteristics and objectives which distinguish it from approaches to social research which are not based on fieldwork, we have pointed to particular forms of research practice. Underpinning this research practice is the

intention to understand at first hand what is happening in the particular field of study – to encounter that climate or environment. To do this the fieldworker uses a range of different methods which allow him/her access to the interior world of those who populate that particular setting or field. For example, Sarah Pink's work on both visual and sensory ethnography (Pink 2012, 2013) has continued and extended moves by ethnographers to appreciate the embodied and emotional characteristics of fieldwork (cf. Coffey 1999, Madison 2011). Pink (2012) is clear in her own use of visual techniques as well as in her reflections upon their use that they are tools helping to achieve a rich and detailed understanding of a fieldwork site. Therefore, it remains important to reflect upon who took (or, to use Becker's term, made) any visual images that make up a portfolio of fieldwork data and contributed to an understanding of a research site. So, in a 'tour' of a locale in Wales using visual data, Pink (2008: 193) outlined how she sought to share the 'emplaced' feel of that environment and how visual techniques were instrumental to that process:

the tour can be understood as an ethnographic pathway which, through its entanglements with the pathways of others, gathered memories, imaginings and the immediate present through multiple modes and media (Pink 2008: 193).

Pink (2008) used visual and sensory ethnography here to capture the sense of belonging and space in the locality of Mold, Flintshire, UK but we would argue they can be applied to a wide range of settings, including virtual settings. Again, the work of the early anthropologists and particularly Malinowski is relevant here in offering guidance on the principled use of fieldwork techniques. This is important because photographs and visual data are only artefacts that facilitate fieldwork, they are not fieldwork in themselves.

In 1922, in the introduction to his most celebrated work *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and in a chapter entitled 'How an anthropologist works in the field', Malinowski outlined the preconditions for effective ethnography. For Malinowski, fieldwork and ethnography were synonymous. Whilst we may now wish to argue the differences between the two, and we would personally suggest that rather than being synonymous they are in fact facilitative, as fieldwork is the research approach used in the conduct of ethnography. Therefore, Malinowski's (1922: 6) three preconditions for effective ethnography offer a useful guide for our consideration of fieldwork:

- The student must possess real scientific aims and know the values and criteria of modern ethnography.
- He ought to put himself [sic] in good conditions of work, that is, in the main to live without white men, right among the natives.
- He [sic] has to apply a number of special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence.

If we translate these preconditions into their present-day equivalents then we can see that Malinowski's concern was to facilitate access for the fieldworker to as much of the life of the research setting (the field) as possible. The conditions he identified centred largely around the researcher him/herself adopting appropriate behaviour, having particular abilities like languages and the capacity to blend in with the situation by spending time with the subjects² of the research. In addition, his preconditions highlight the need for a genuine and legitimate reason for conducting the research. His reference to possessing real scientific aims can be seen as a warning against research which is perhaps more voyeuristic than scientific. Moreover, some technical pre-requisites are identified to facilitate the effective collection of data. Like Malinowski, we need good access to key informants; we would need to be able to speak the language of those we are studying. For Malinowski this meant quite literally learning a new language in order to communicate directly with informants and not having to rely on translators. For present-day fieldworkers there may well be the need to speak additional languages, particularly where cross-cultural fieldwork (Pole and Burgess 2000) is conducted, but alternatively language may refer to a particular kind of speech or argot. For example, Hockey (1986) conducted intensive fieldwork with new recruits to the British Army. In order to understand much of the argot which passed between the squaddies, Hockey had to 'tune in' to a form of language often constituted by slang, sexual innuendo, swearing and mickey-taking. In short, he learned the language of the young soldier.

Similarly, we can see in Delamont's (in Atkinson et al. 2008) fieldwork the unravelling of not only the terms used to capture the Brazilian martial art form of capoeira, but the nuances in the teaching of capoeira across instructors. For Delamont, a highly experienced fieldworker, unlocking the complexities of this social form and its political context was deeply challenging (Delamont 2009). In the case of fieldwork conducted in single locations, the researcher would not necessarily be pulled into political debates, but Delamont's immersion and the knowledge that her fieldwork yielded led her to understand that the very status of capoeira in the UK was shot-through with wider concerns (see 2009). In addition, fieldworkers also need to be able to observe and experience the everyday activities and social rhythms of the field in which they are researching (indeed, why capoeira classes always start late). This means that they are not just interested in the spectacular or the unusual (though as Delamont notes, this can be useful in getting to know a research field) but in the ordinary and the mundane. For Malinowski, as for the fieldworker a century later, this emphasizes the need to spend prolonged periods of time in the field, to witness at first-hand the range of activities which shape the life of the community. For an opera house, it may be the rehearsals and intense background preparations before a new performance is staged (Atkinson 2005). For a gamekeeper, it would have to be the habitat, predation control and feeding routines that underpin preparations for the

game-shooting season (Hillyard and Burrige 2012). Above all, Malinowski's preconditions are about enabling fieldworkers to get close to what they are researching, to see for themselves what is going on and to understand as far as possible from the perspective of an insider. To achieve these same things, the modern fieldworker uses a range of research methods that traditionally have involved face-to-face contact. In particular, these techniques include: observation and participant observation, interviews and conversational techniques, life histories, documentary analysis and the use of various sources of visual data including photographs, works of art and artefacts. Each of these is an active method in which the fieldworker is central to the data collection process. Unlike research which is based on questionnaire or survey techniques, fieldwork methods facilitate direct interface between the researcher and the researched. We also need to acknowledge here Savage and Burrows' (2007, 2009) call for empirical sociology to engage more seriously with what they term 'social transactional data' (Savage and Burrows 2007: 885). Their call is for sociologists to take more seriously the kind of digital data that capitalism now yields (such as new social media; archives not presently available to the academic and; the 'scraping' of unrestricted data from sources such as Facebook). They call for sociologists 'to get their hands "dirty" by exploring the potential of such methods and issues posed by their use' (Savage and Burrows 2009: 766–7). These new forms of media are important because they are new means by which people associate and construct their social worlds (Lawler 2013). But, we would also reiterate that pictures and artefacts facilitate fieldwork but they are not fieldwork in themselves. So, for example, Smith's (2012) use of CCTV footage of Aberdeen city and the working environment of the operators of that city's cameras is not fieldwork although it offers an insight into social action in the city, both malignant and benign. The proliferation of social data is a resource that can be used by fieldworkers and we attach great importance to it, as have many social scientists in their analyses in the past,³ where new inroads were made into understanding the 'politics of [such] methods' (Savage and Burrows 2007: 885). Yet with fieldwork, you cannot hide behind the white coat of a laboratory scientist, the software of the social statistician and distanced manipulation of digital datasets.

Fieldwork is a human method dependent to a great extent on the social and interpersonal skills of the researcher. In this respect, this very human character of fieldwork makes it an unpredictable approach to research. The journey or apprenticeship involved in becoming a good fieldworker has been discussed elsewhere (Delamont 2002, 2009). Whilst it is important for fieldwork to be carefully planned in advance of entering the field, there are limits to which this is possible. Social life is difficult to predict and the fieldworker must maintain a degree of flexibility in his/her work. Unlike the experimental scientist, he/she needs to react and adapt to situations as they occur rather than stick rigidly to a set research procedure in the interests of uniformity

and a notion of scientific replication and reliability. For the fieldworker, the intention is not to impose a restrictive framework on the research which must be adhered to, come what may. This is one of fieldwork's strengths, in that it has – at its very core – the capacity to be flexible and move to explore something unanticipated.

Given the aim of understanding social processes from the inside, the fieldworker seeks not to influence the situations or the behaviour that he/she is researching. In this simplistic sense, it is a naturalistic approach to collecting data which attempt, as far as possible, to capture the reality of the situation from the perspective of those being researched. So, rather than a concern with objectivity, we might claim that fieldwork is concerned with subjectivity. This statement may seem to run counter to those in many 'general methods' textbooks, which advocate the centrality of objectivity to social research (see Cooper et al. 2012, for a very clear introduction and overview by Hammersley). However, by referring to subjectivity in this context we are not suggesting or advocating that the fieldworker provides an account of events merely to suit his/her own prejudices or ideas about the situation being researched. By using the term subjectivity, we refer to one of the key reasons for conducting fieldwork, that is *to capture the significance and meaning of a situation, a set of events or whatever is being researched for the people (social actors) who are taking part in those events*. In this sense it is subjective insofar as it seeks to capture and portray the internal reality of the situation being researched. The fieldworker will unavoidably influence the field setting at some level, wittingly or otherwise. The issue then is to account for this in their analysis and reflexive discussion. Returning to our earlier example of the school-based research may help to clarify the point.

In seeking to understand the way in which a primary school operated by identifying some everyday activities, we may wish to examine or observe these activities from a number of different perspectives. For example, if we wished to understand the significance of the assembly to the life of the school we may see it as important to not only observe and take part in the assembly but also to talk to different participants about their experience of it. On doing so, we might collect a range of views. For example, the head teacher may see it as important in bringing the whole school together, providing a sense of collective identity for the pupils and teachers and at the same time an opportunity to recognize and celebrate the achievements of the school (this might be to reward individual pupils, say goodbye to school-leavers or to congratulate the school on displays arranged for the village flower festival or suchlike). From the perspective of the new arrivals in a small, rural primary school, this might be an exciting experience where they use the biggest room in the school and when the whole school (and bigger children) and even their mum and dad might attend. From the perspective of the caretaker, the assembly may simply be a nuisance. All the chairs and benches

for teachers and parents have to be put out and then collected in, the floor to be re-polished after the children have walked on it in muddy shoes and the room re-organized for lunch-time.

The task of the fieldworker, therefore, is to collect these different experiences in the round (all of which represent a particular subjective view based on the different positions of the different actors) and then to analyse them in accordance with the context within which they were collected and the perspective from which they were expressed. In this situation, there may be no single objectivity possible. All the different views are subjective, based on the position of those expressing them, *but all are valid and important*. It is the role of the fieldworker, therefore, to collect and portray these different perspectives in the understanding of the school which he/she seeks to convey. In addition, as the fieldworker will have witnessed the school assembly at first hand, he/she will also be able to add his/her own perspective on the event. This will be useful not only in adding another perspective on the assembly, but also in providing something against which the other perspectives can be compared. In some respects, the fieldworker's view may be seen as one which is not shaped by vested interest or by him/her having a specific position in the school such as head teacher, pupil or caretaker. However, it will remain subjective in that it is the fieldworker's interpretation of events that he/she has observed and participated in. By being there, the fieldworker also, of course, becomes part of the social action being researched. Although he/she may take steps to minimize any direct impact or interference on the setting, the very fact of his/her presence means the situation has changed and it is therefore vital that the fieldworker adopt a reflexive stance throughout their fieldwork (see Atkinson 1990: 2 for an excellent definition of reflexivity).

It is worth reiterating at this point that fieldwork is an approach to research which requires the fieldworker, if not to take part, then to be there – or rather to immerse themselves in what action is taking place. Consequently, who the researcher is may have an impact on the interpretation he/she brings to the events witnessed and also on the extent to which and in what capacity it is possible to participate in events. For example, characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age and social class may affect the role a fieldworker might play in any given situation. In Dunning et al.'s (1986) research into football hooliganism, John Williams as the principal fieldworker, needed to be there when violence occurred. He needed to blend in with the 'hooligans', to run with them and to experience, as far as possible, their emotions as the violence ensued. In order to do this, Williams needed to be male, young and fit. In addition he needed other attributes which enabled him to blend into a male, largely working-class group of football supporters. Things like accent (Williams has an identifiable Liverpool accent), knowledge of football and the right kinds of clothes, all went to help Williams in his quest to be there.

There are many more examples of attempts to blend in and be acceptable, some of which we will draw on in Chapter 4 where we discuss participant observation. The point to be made here is that in doing fieldwork, the fieldworker's role is both facilitated and constrained by his/her own social, physical and emotional characteristics. In short, it is his/her identity that is fundamental to the whole fieldwork experience.

FIELDWORK AND THEORY

By now we hope to have established that fieldwork, in the way that we have defined and portrayed it, rests upon the capacity to understand situations as defined from the perspective of the insider. This in itself is a theoretical position based on Weber's (1949) notion of *verstehen* (by which we mean empathy or understanding). In addition, we have also discussed issues of objectivity and subjectivity in relation to the accounts of particular events that the fieldworker gathers and the interpretations brought to them. We have asserted that fieldwork is about *finding ways to portray the subjective reality of social action in terms of its meaning for the social actors*. Putting these two conceptual issues together we move towards a broad theoretical position for fieldwork research which is based upon interpretivism. By this we mean that fieldwork facilitates an approach to understanding the social world, which is based upon the interpretation of social action from the position of the social actors who create or construct that action. Whilst interpretivism is a broad church (which we like), fieldwork is not an approach to research which will facilitate large generalizations or social trends and behaviour across large populations. Rather, the way we see it, fieldwork is an approach which says: let's see how people shape the situations which constitute their lives; let's see what things mean and how they work out for the people involved in a particular social situation. It is curiosity-driven in the sense that it is exploratory, but it values people's own accounts of their everyday lives and their own actions and words.

This characterization of fieldwork is an approach which emphasizes interpretation, social construction and meaning. Together with the idea of subjectivity (in the way that we discussed it earlier) this locates fieldwork within a micro-sociology framework of social research. By this we wish to infer that for the fieldworker, the concern is with discrete social behaviour rather than large-scale social structures. This is not to say that the fieldworker ignores structure, far from it. It is, however, fair to say that fieldwork focuses on the ways in which structures are constructed, interpreted and made meaningful to the lives of those who live within them or who construct them. It is the performance of structures in the everyday realm which is of interest. In terms of its general theoretical orientation, therefore, we see fieldwork

emphasizing social action and individual agency. This is important as it directly links the kinds of research methods upon which the fieldworker may draw and the desire to understand social behaviour from the inside. For us, the two flow into one another. The use of participant observation, observation, conversation techniques and documentary analysis, in short, the fact of placing a value on being there and seeing/experiencing at first hand is what defines the theoretical orientation of fieldwork.

SUMMARY

Our characterization of fieldwork in this opening chapter has attempted to raise a number of issues which will help to facilitate an understanding not only of how fieldwork is done, but also to begin to understand what it can achieve in terms of producing knowledge and understanding of the social world. We are not arguing that fieldwork is in itself a theoretical position – it is too broad for that. What we are saying, however, is that fieldwork lends itself to a particular way of attempting to understand the social world, how it is constructed and what it means to those who construct it. By this we are not rejecting the importance of large-scale macro theories of the social world, we see these as having an important role to play in explaining social structures and organizations of a different scope. Indeed, some large-scale trends demand exploration at the local level. Our view is that fieldwork is an approach best applied to facilitate an understanding of the ways in which people experience social systems and structures and how they, in turn, may influence them. It recognizes the structural limitations and constraints which are placed on free will and individual action, but rather than seeing these as the sole determinants of the ways in which individuals or groups live their lives, it seeks to recognize – even celebrate – the importance of human interaction.

Research based on fieldwork is, therefore, attempting to understand the significance of social structure from the perspective of the individual social actor. It is about being there, wherever the social action is, at home or faraway. Fieldwork is about doing and being. It can be tremendously rewarding, frustrating, fun, dull, exciting and ordinary. It can be all of these things because it is about life – the way people make it and how it is experienced.

NOTES

- 1 Although this mediation can also take place in virtual environments.
- 2 We discuss scales of participation and the importance of power in Chapter 3.
- 3 For example, Dingwall (1977), Travers (2007).

FURTHER READING

Hammersley H and Atkinson P (2007, 3rd edition) *Ethnography*. London: Routledge. (Chapter 1 and prologue to the third edition.)

Any text or article from the shortlist for the BBC/BSA Ethnography Award.

Sampson H (2013) *International Seafarers and Transnationalism in the Twenty-first Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. (2014 award winner.)