chapter seven

# Writing an Ethnography

In moving from fieldnotes to writing ethnographic texts, the ethnographer turns away from local scenes and their participants, from relations formed and personal debts incurred in the field. Now an author working at her desk, she reviews her recordings of members' everyday experiences and reorients to her fieldnotes as texts to be analyzed, interpreted, and selected for inclusion in a document intended for wider audiences. Thus, the dual awareness of members and outside audiences, inherent but often muted in the participant-observer role in the field, becomes overt and insistent in writing a polished ethnographic text.

While field researchers may envision different outside audiences, most write for other scholars.[1] Having been trained in a particular discipline (such as sociology, anthropology, or folklore), the field researcher draws upon and develops ideas which make sense within the conceptual language of that discipline. While disciplinary concerns will already have shaped many fieldnote entries, in actually composing ethnographic texts the researcher self-consciously makes his observations and experiences of particular local scenes speak to the concepts and traditions of a scholarly discipline. The ethnographer as author must *represent* the particular world he has studied (or some slice or quality of it) for readers who lack direct acquaintance with it. To do so, he moves back and forth between specific events recounted in his fieldnotes and more general concepts of interest to his discipline. An overconcern for a scholarly framework and concepts would distort and obscure the nuances of everyday life; but to simply

present members' categories exclusively in their terms would produce texts devoid of relevance and interest to scholarly audiences.

In this chapter we present an approach to writing finished ethnographies that seeks to use and balance this tension between analytic propositions and local meanings. Rather than composing a tightly organized analytic argument in which each idea leads logically and exclusively to the next, we advocate writing ethnographies as narrative "tales" (Van Maanen 1988; Richardson 1990). Ethnographies are tales or stories not in the sense that they are fictional but in that the writer uses standard literary conventions (Atkinson 1990) to "construct" from fieldnotes a narrative that will interest an outside audience. Such tales weave specific analyses of discrete pieces of fieldnote data into an overall story. This story is analytically thematized, but often in relatively loose ways; it is also fieldnote-centered, that is, constructed out of a series of thematically organized units of fieldnote excerpts and analytic commentary.

We begin the chapter by examining the distinctive sort of ethnographic story we seek to produce—what we call a "thematic narrative." Thematic narratives incorporate several analytic themes or concepts linked by a common topic.[2] We then discuss a series of steps that move progressively toward creating a thematic narrative that is fieldnote-centered. These steps include writing out initial statements of analytic themes, then selecting, explicating, sequencing, and editing fieldnote excerpts in order to build up a series of thematically organized units of excerpts and analytic commentary. Finally, we discuss the writing of introductions and conclusions necessary to produce the completed ethnographic manuscript.[3]

## Developing a Thematic Narrative

In coding and memo-writing, the ethnographer has started to create and elaborate analytic themes. In writing an ethnographic text, the writer organizes some of these themes into a coherent "story" about life and events in the setting studied. Such a narrative requires selecting only some small portion of the total set of fieldnotes and then linking them into a coherent text representing some aspect or slice of the world studied.

Writing a thematic narrative differs fundamentally from writing an analytic argument, both in the process of putting that text together and in the structure of the final text. Structurally, in a text which presents a



logical argument, the author sets forth a formal thesis or proposition in the introduction as a stance to be argued, then develops each analytic point with evidence logically following from and clearly supporting the propositional thesis.[4] In contrast, an ethnographic story proceeds through an intellectual examination of evidence to eventually reach its contributing central idea. While a thematic narrative begins by stating a main idea or thesis, it progresses toward fuller elaboration of this idea throughout the paper. Indeed, the more precise, fuller statement of the thesis is often most effectively presented at the end of the story, in a conclusion to the paper.

In addition, the structure of an ethnographic story results from an ordered progression of fieldnote excerpts. The details in the fieldnotes stand as the essential kernels of the story. That is, thematic narratives use fieldnotes not as illustrations and examples of points that have already been made, but as building blocks for constructing and telling the story in the first place. In this sense, the main idea grows out of the process of coding and selecting excerpts, rather than prefiguring the choice of fieldnotes to include. The excerpts in an ethnographic story are not so much evidence for analytic points as they are the core of the story.

In terms of writing processes, developing a thematic narrative requires constant movement back and forth between specific fieldnote incidents and progressively more focused and precise analysis. To facilitate this process, we do not recommend beginning with a tentative thesis or working hypothesis. Instead, we urge the writer to hold off formulating an explicit thesis until the paper is finished, so that even in the process of writing, she will make discoveries about data and continue to balance her analytic insights with the demands of sticking close to indigenous views. We suggest that the ethnographer begin developing a thematic narrative by writing out a statement of a general *topic* or *question*. A topic ties a broad analytic concern or sensitivity to the events that occurred in the setting. For example, "ethnicity as social construction in a high school" and "parental involvement in juvenile court hearings" provide such topic statements.[5] At this early stage, topic statements point to a concern or phenomenon, but they do not pose a specific problem or question, nor propose a formal thesis or explanation. Rather, a topic or question identifies a more general focus and helps the author to begin tying fieldnotes together into a coherent whole.

In general, the topic of the ethnographic story will incorporate several more specific analytic themes, i.e., claims about key patterns, processes,

or regularities within the setting. Hence one way to develop a topic is to review the earlier codings and memos, identifying a number of the more interesting or relevant themes in one's fieldnotes. At this point we advise that one write out phrases stating possible themes clearly and explicitly. Initially, the researcher need not be concerned with deciding how these themes relate to one another or how they might be tied together; the writing is intended simply to clarify and specify themes of possible interest. But once several promising themes have been identified, the ethnographer looks for ways of relating some of these themes to one topic and then decides to drop those themes which cannot be tied to this topic.

Alternatively, the ethnographer may come away from his coding and memo-writing with a clear sense of an interesting and unifying general topic. He should then write out this topic as explicitly as possible and then attempt to specify more particular themes that might develop that topic by reviewing his codings, memos, and perhaps even original fieldnotes. For example, having written the phrase, "I will show that parents become involved in court decisions," the student ethnographer studying juvenile court then asked in what different ways parents might become involved in these hearings. On reviewing his codings, he found two distinct patterns, one in which the judge used parents as a source of information about youth, the other in which the judge sought to help parents control their children. He then wrote out these two more specific themes: "The judge sometimes uses parental information against the minor in order to sentence him" and "the judge also might support the parents in disciplining the minor and therefore threaten punishment."

In either case, the ethnographer will move back and forth between topic and themes, writing an overview statement that relates themes to a topic and to one another, and/or developing explicit phrasings for each identified topic. The relations between themes need not be tight and closely reasoned; in "thematic narratives" the themes can be loosely integrated. Relating and ordering themes will usually require changes in wording and conceptualization. Clearly, some themes may not "fit" with others, even on these terms, and may have to be dropped. In fact, even after developing an overall plan for a first draft, it is quite common to revise both the specific thematic statements and their interconnections a number of times as work progresses and the ethnographic story begins to take shape.

Consider how one student began to develop a thematic narrative around the general topic "ethnicity as social construction" in a public



high school. First, he wrote out an elaboration of his topic: "Through people's interactions 'ethnicity' is constantly being recreated and modified within a situation." Then, he wrote out a number of specific themes or issues that he wanted to deal with. Finally, to present these themes, he worked out the following order for five specific sections of the text—each centered on one theme:

1. I provide an overview of some different ways ethnicity is used in schools.
2. I demonstrate that students refer to and recognize different social and ethnic groups, but that the composition of the group varies.
3. I examine the use of black ethnicity and the ways black social groups maintain ethnic boundaries.
4. I discuss people who use ethnic aesthetics of other people (whites' use of black styles), in terms of boundary definitions.
5. I analyze ethnic conflict as a process of generating cultural distinctions.

In developing these themes, the ethnographer does more than name different situations; more fundamentally, he points out distinctions and interconnections between related phenomena. For example, the theme of how students talk about and identify "different social and ethnic groups" not only considers a range of ethnic (and social) groups but also deals with the ethnic identities assigned to others; in contrast, the theme addressing how "black social groups maintain ethnic boundaries" will involve examining how group members establish their own ethnic identity. Yet he also suggests important linkages between these phenomena; for example, exploring "whites' uses of black styles" suggests a concern with the blurring and crossing of ethnic boundaries that will elaborate and extend his interest in the maintenance of black ethnic boundaries.

To pick a topic and specific themes, the ethnographer must make choices. Fieldworkers regularly find that they have many more themes than they are able to include in any particular manuscript. The process of developing a story is essentially one of selecting some themes that resonate with personal or disciplinary concerns and that recur in a number of specific fieldnotes. In selecting these themes and the data they make relevant, the ethnographer inevitably ignores other themes and data, at least for this particular manuscript.

In developing a topic and then assembling themes into a story, the ethnographer should make every effort to incorporate multiple voices and perspectives. To do so often requires giving special attention to selecting and framing the topic and subsequent, interrelated themes, for how a topic or theme is named and developed can implicitly privilege some

voices and perspectives and exclude others. For example, one student studying the relations between domestic workers and their employers initially identified "hiring" as one topic in her ethnography. But "hiring" frames events from the point of view of the employer, highlighting and privileging her concerns with finding a worker who is "reliable" and "trustworthy." "Hiring" implicitly neglects the domestic worker and her practices for "getting hired" or "finding work." A more relational framing—e.g., "the hiring situation"—would incorporate the perspectives of both employer and domestic worker.

In the following sections, we present ways of turning fieldnotes into ethnographic texts. While recognizing that the initial commitment to a general topic and several initial themes informs this process, we emphasize how the ethnographer elaborates, specifies, and excerpts fieldnotes—which may be only loosely associated with a common theme—in order to develop a finished ethnographic story.

## Transposing Fieldnotes into Ethnographic Text

Atkinson (1990:103) argues that the "persuasive force" of an ethnographic text derives from the "interplay of concrete exemplification and discursive commentary." We are explicitly concerned with producing such *fieldnote-centered texts*—stories that stay close to and are highly saturated with bits and pieces of fieldnotes. To create such a text, the ethnographer must conceptualize the relevance of local happenings so that they relate to analytic issues; but simultaneously, the ethnographer must remain sensitive to how these reframings might distort the meaning of member categories.

To begin this process, the fieldworker must return to the fieldnotes that inspired the story to look for potential excerpts that could develop a story line. The ethnographer first identifies pieces of fieldnote data and then writes interpretive commentary about these excerpts; she also edits each excerpt-and-commentary unit so that the analysis elaborates and highlights the fieldnotes which are the kernels of the story. Finally, the researcher must organize these excerpt-commentary segments into coherent sections of the ethnography; that is, she orders them in a sequence which creates a compelling story line which leads readers to an ever fuller understanding of the people and issues addressed.



### *Selecting Fieldnote Excerpts*

With a topic involving a number of themes in mind, the field researcher can return to the set of coded fieldnotes to identify the particular ones most relevant to key issues. He returns to these sorted notes, creating fieldnote *excerpts* that will comprise the building blocks of the emerging ethnographic story. We suggest several guidelines for deciding which fieldnotes to excerpt.

Selecting fieldnote excerpts is not a simple matter of "picking the most interesting examples." Rather, the ethnographer has a variety of reasons for deciding which fieldnotes to include in the final text. In introducing a setting, for example, a field researcher may select fieldnotes because they aptly illustrate recurring patterns of behavior or typical situations in that setting. Similarly, a field researcher may choose fieldnotes recounting commonplace happenings or concerns. These excerpts may introduce more specific analytic themes or identify significant variations from what is usual.

The ethnographer also selects fieldnotes for their evocative and persuasive qualities. An excerpt may appeal because it portrays a rare or moving moment—someone expressing deep anguish or two people in a poignant exchange. Or a fieldnote description may seem likely to engage and persuade readers by enabling them to envision scenes, hear voices, and identify momentarily with the ethnographer's perspective on the action. In general, excerpts that contain close-up, vivid descriptions that portray actions and voices will situate readers in the scene; such excerpts will often enable readers to imagine and vicariously experience what the researcher observed. In contrast, a "skimpy" excerpt lacking vivid details fails to persuade because it relies more on the author's interpretation than on sights and sounds readers can visualize or hear. In addition, excerpts that report naturally occurring dialogue often persuasively reveal members' concerns. Through hearing people respond to each other in a conversation, readers can infer their interpretations of each other's words. Through such a dialogue excerpt, an ethnographer presents the negotiated quality of interactions—hence revealing a process rather than just an outcome. A perceptive author, therefore, looks for excerpts—especially with talk and actions—which reveal members' different views and concerns.

In selecting evocative excerpts, the ethnographer does not need to

have a precise analytic idea in mind. But in most cases she will come to discern analytic significance in such excerpts. An ethnographer trusts her own intuitive sense that a particular written account is revealing even if, at the moment, she cannot clearly articulate why this might be so. Continuing reflection on how and why an excerpt is evocative, moving, or telling may ultimately lead to a new appreciation and a deeper, more insightful story.

When constructing a thematic narrative, the ethnographer also specifically seeks excerpts that illustrate concepts and suggest ways of elaborating or specifying these concepts. Finding and selecting excerpts clarifies and gives content to the emerging story. As ethnographers find and review new excerpts, they further clarify ideas, and, in turn, consider additional excerpts they had initially ignored. Often these insights happen spontaneously: as they clarify a theme or concept, a related instance recorded elsewhere in the fieldnotes comes to mind ("I remember another instance of that!") because it ties in analytically. And on finding and reviewing that piece of data, the ethnographer may further modify the core idea. He looks again in his fieldnotes and early memos for other excerpts that he may now see as relevant.[6]

A critical starting place, then, may lie in those fieldnote bits that touched off particular codings and memo-writing on themes of current interest. It is important to return to these previously thematized fieldnote accounts (and to related coding and memos), to review them, and to excerpt those that are relevant. For example, a research project on women applying for domestic violence restraining orders focused on the role of a friend or supporter in facilitating this process. The following fieldnote played a pivotal role in helping the ethnographer to recognize key dimensions in this process:

> Julie Peters was my fifth client. She was a 24-year-old Caucasian, married to a Caucasian cop. He had never hit her, but held a gun to her face and strangled her at one point and constantly abused her verbally. Julie had brought in her friend Tina who did most of the talking for her. I could tell that Julie was very quiet and preoccupied. Tina said that Julie was really "messed up" and was losing her hair, literally.
>
> Julie: I just don't want my husband to lose his job. He's a cop, you know.
> Interviewer: I know you're worried about him, but let's worry about him later. First, let's take care of you.
> Julie: I know, you're right.
> Tina: It took a lot for her to come in. I had to drag her in. She called me this morning, crying, and I said, 'That's it, we're going in.'



This friend's account of getting the wife to come in for a restraining order against her husband typified a process whereby a supporter pushed a "victim" to seek legal remedy. Having previously seen fieldnotes related to friends' active participation in the application for the restraining order, this fieldnote crystallized an appreciation of "third person support" in legal and other bureaucratic encounters.

In general, an excerpt may jog the memory, suggesting other "similar" instances or events, and, hence, provide a starting place for collecting a body of excerpts bearing on a common theme. Or, the ethnographer may begin to systematically review codings and fieldnotes, looking for excerpts of that "same thing." One might then note a common pattern or regularity captured in the mass of fieldnote data. In a study of probation progress hearings in juvenile court, for example, a field researcher observed that judges regularly solicited parents' views about their children's behavior, as in the following instance:

> Judge Smith answers [the minor] with a quiet but sharp tone: "I told you to get good grades. . . . You haven't been getting good grades. . . . I also told you to be obedient to your mother." He then asks the mother: "Has he been obedient or disobedient?" "Disobedient. He doesn't go to school when I tell him to go . . ." she answers while looking at her son.

By collecting a number of such instances, the ethnographer can see nuances within a theme and refine his interpretations of particular excerpts.

To do so, an ethnographer may begin to address issues of the *differences* between instances she has observed and written about. In the first place, she can look for *variations within the theme or pattern* seen in different fieldnotes. For example, in studying the role of friends and supporters in interviews applying for a domestic violence restraining order, one might look for instances, first, in which the supporter becomes actively involved in the interview and, second, in which the supporter says little and plays a secondary role. Similarly, one might look for excerpts showing differences in how parents respond to judges' questions about their children's misconduct. Thus, the ethnographer could juxtapose the excerpt in which the youth's mother reported that her son had been "disobedient" to the following one in which the mother supports her daughter—at least to some degree—by minimizing reports of misconduct:

> A young girl sits down to the left of her attorney. The mother sits down in the back of the room in a chair closest to the entrance. Judge Smith asks the mother

directly how the girl is doing. She comments that she has no problem at home "with her" but that school is "a problem."

Considering variations within a context of similarity helps the field researcher pursue further comparisons and thus make additional excerpts relevant.

In the second place, the ethnographer can select additional excerpts that involve more profound differences. Here, he looks for instances that *contrast with the previously discovered pattern.* In juvenile court probation hearings, for example, an ethnographer might select an excerpt in which the judge does *not* ask the parent for her view of her offspring's misconduct. Such excerpts begin to reveal the circumstances which shape and limit the pattern of interaction in the first place. In the juvenile court setting, this may occur in cases in which the parent has been discredited in some way or when incarcerating the youth is a foregone conclusion.

In this process, the ethnographer should actually write out all of the key dimensions, patterns, or distinctions. While the phrase or word which coded an excerpt implies an idea, an author's thinking often remains fuzzy until she actually writes it out in a sentence. In writing out ideas, she continues mulling over her interpretations. Ultimately, she will hone tentative ideas into more clearly articulated propositions in a final paper. But at this stage she aims for textured richness and flow, rather than logical tightness, and leaves precise formulations and wordings to be worked out later. She tries to fully explore variations in and exceptions to the theme she is investigating.

Throughout this process, an ethnographer continually refines her overall sense of the emerging ethnographic paper. Often a main idea for the ethnography becomes clear to her quite early—while determining a topic or identifying themes during coding. Other ethnographers clarify the main ideas while selecting excerpts. And for some authors, it is only with the start of writing commentaries on the selected excerpts that the central idea comes into focus. However, only when writing an introduction do many ethnographers finally settle on the exact focus and wording of a thesis statement. In the meantime, by writing out a tentative statement of the central idea, the ethnographer begins to shape the paper's overall focus and sense of what this ethnographic story will tell. But this tentative, central idea—not yet a controlling thesis statement—often changes during the process of explicating fieldnotes and revising sections of the paper.



### *Options for Explicating Fieldnotes*

With a story in mind and a series of fieldnote excerpts and initial memos in hand, the ethnographer next begins composing more elaborated analytic commentaries that explicate each excerpt and link it to others. Proceeding in this manner—producing a series of written segments combining analytic interpretation with fieldnote excerpt—builds up piece by piece a coherent, fieldnote-centered story.

Ethnographers use two different textual strategies for creating and presenting units of fieldnote excerpts and interpretive commentary. An *integrative strategy* weaves together interpretation and excerpt; it produces a text with minimal spatial markings—such as indentation or single spacing—to indicate where the fieldnote ends and interpretation begins. As an example, consider the following account of one way in which amateur pyrotechnists—people who illegally construct and set off homemade fireworks and related devices—acquire their working materials:

> A second category of high-yield explosives that are obtained primarily by the core pyrotechnist includes such things as dynamite and various liquid and plastic explosives used for both military and industrial purposes. In certain areas, dynamite is reportedly very simple to acquire. I was informed that in a neighboring state anyone over eighteen years of age with a "respectable purpose" could make an over-the-counter purchase of dynamite. During the study, Arnold, Russell and Hank made an excursion to that state to buy, among other things, eight sticks of the explosive. As Arnold remarked: "We just said we had a mine south of —— that we were working, and the only purpose we had in mind was to set it [the dynamite] off, just like anyone who uses firecrackers—just for the entertainment of it." He further reported that he and the others proceeded to detonate the dynamite in a remote spot to avoid the risk of transporting the explosive across state lines back to their home state.

Here the ethnographer employs fieldnotes as illustrations or "exemplars" (Atkinson 1990) of a claimed pattern, selecting and reworking them to explicate and document those claims. As a result, fieldnotes and ideas are merged into a single, flowing text written in a single voice. The writer does not mark differences between fieldnotes recorded in the past and present interpretations through textual devices but, rather, indicates this shift through such transitional phrases as "for example" or "a telling episode."

In contrast, an *excerpt strategy* visually marks fieldnote extracts off from accompanying commentary and interpretation, usually by indenting and/

or italicizing. Consider the following paragraph from an ethnographic section on "the difficulties which autistic clients experience as they attempt to integrate into the community around them." The author begins the paragraph with the analytic point that neighbors frequently treat them in a "stigmatizing manner." Then she provides an excerpt:

> At times people in the community respond more inclusively to clients, although in a stigmatizing manner. At a local bowling alley, a bartender attempted to accommodate John but patronized him instead:
>
> > I went with John to the bowling alley to get his coffee. John asked the man behind the bar if he could have a "very large coffee." The man gave him a cup of coffee and then, when John went to pay for it, the man handed back the dollar bill and said, "I forgot your birthday last year, Happy Birthday." John put the dollar back into his pocket and said, "Thank you," to the man. When we got back into the car, John said, "It's just my birthday. I'm going to get some things to open up." John continued to repeat these phrases (to "perseverate") until another situation redirected him.
>
> Although the bartender gives John positive social reinforcement, he too treats him in a discriminatory way. John in trying to "fit in" in his community receives a response showing that he remains locked out. The bartender's "special treatment" of John reveals that he views him as "special"—different—deserving of or in need of a break. In the bartender's attempt to do a good deed, he further stigmatizes a person who already has to work hard to attain the minimal entrance he receives into his own community.

Here, the particularized instance clarifies the more analytic statement the author sets forth as the topic sentence. The fieldnote description inclines the reader to be persuaded by her analysis. Then, through analytic commentary following the excerpt, this ethnographer extends her initial point by considering several features of the interaction: John's trying to fit in, the bartender's positive reinforcement, and the subtly stigmatizing effect of special treatment.

The fieldnote is easily recognized as an excerpt, since it is indented. This visual layout enhances the discursive contrast between descriptive and analytic writing. It also produces distinctly dialogic text, since the ethnographer speaks in two different voices—as fieldworker describing the experience depicted in the excerpt and as author now explaining those events to readers.

Furthermore, by visually separating excerpts from commentary, this mode of presentation frames fieldnote excerpts as accounts composed in the past, close to events in the field. In this sense, excerpting shapes up



fieldnote bits as "evidence," as what was "originally recorded," standing in contrast to subsequent interpretation. Indeed, through clear-cut excerpts, the ethnographer adopts a stance toward the reader which says, "Here is what I heard and observed, and here is the sense that I *now* make of it."

Many ethnographers develop a preference for one or the other option and employ it consistently throughout a given text.[7] But it is also possible to use both integrative and excerpt strategies at different places for different writing purposes. The integrative style promotes a smoother, more thematically focused presentation of field data. It allows the author to convey many ideas in a concise, focused manner, since the writer heavily edits portions of the original fieldnotes that are not germane to the issue or argument at hand. Moreover, an integrative style is particularly suited for presenting longer, continuous fieldnotes: extended episodes with complicated background circumstances can be recounted as one continuing story.[8] For this reason, this strategy facilitates consistent use of the first person and hence encourages more flexible and reflective narrative accounts. Finally, the integrative strategy is also useful for bringing together observations and occurrences scattered in different places in the fieldnote record to create a coherent overview of an issue or pattern.

In contrast, the excerpt strategy preserves earlier descriptions and details without extensive editing, in some sense letting readers see for themselves the "grounds" for analytic and interpretive claims. By textually distinguishing fieldnote and analysis, the excerpt style invites the reader to assess the underpinnings, construction, and authenticity of the interpretations offered. Clearly, this strategy relies heavily upon the rhetorical impact of presenting fieldnote excerpts as "evidence" collected prior to and perhaps independently of the eventual interpretation. Finally, the excerpt strategy allows for maximum presentation of unexplicated details and qualities of events observed in the field. For ethnographers need not, and in practice do not, explicate every aspect of the fieldnote excerpts they incorporate into the text. Rather, they often allow the scenes to speak for themselves. Containing more than the ethnographer chooses to discuss and analyze, such excerpts give depth and texture to ethnographic texts. In fact, these unexamined qualities or details contribute to readers' tacit understanding of the scenes or events being described and analyzed. In this strategy, the excerpts evoke as well as convince and, thus, stand out as striking, central, key writing in the ethnographic story.

Despite stylistic and other differences, integrative and excerpt textual

strategies share the common goal of interweaving portions of fieldnotes with analytic commentary. In this sense, both involve writing coherent units combining analysis with fieldnote data. We now want to address the specific writing processes involved in creating such excerpt-commentary units.

### *Creating Excerpt-Commentary Units*

To maximize the interplay between analytic idea and excerpt, a fieldnote-centered analytic commentary does a number of things. It focuses attention through an *analytic point;* illustrates and persuades through a *descriptive excerpt* introduced by relevant *orienting information;* and explores and develops ideas through *commentary grounded in the details of the excerpt.* We use the term *excerpt-commentary unit* to characterize this basic component of ethnographic writing. While in some instances all these components can be combined into a single paragraph built around a particular piece of fieldnote data, in others full explication of the excerpt may require a number of paragraphs. We examine how ethnographers write such units using an excerpt strategy; we point out, however, that the integrative strategy generally involves only minor variations in the procedure.

Consider the following complete excerpt-commentary unit from an ethnography of a store-front continuation high school for gay and lesbian students. Following a paragraph introducing the theme of the section—students subtly undermine teachers' power and role by "sexualizing" exchanges—the author has presented and interpreted a typical incident of "sexualizing." He then moves to this unit:

**analytic point** Furthermore, students sometimes position themselves as more powerful than the staff members by sexualizing the staff members' instructional comments. The

**orienting information** following excerpt is between Michael, the tutor, and Mark, a student:

**excerpt**

> Soon after Michael had left the room, after his exchange with Chris, he came back and looked at Mark and said, "Come with me, Mark." Mark, who at this point was putting some of his belongings in his back pack, had his back turned to Michael and said, "I don't want to come with you." While he said this, he looked up slightly towards Chris and smiled. The others [all students] laughed.



**analytic commentary** There are several aspects of this excerpt which are of particular importance. First is the sequence in which the comments occur. The teacher's command, "Come with me," is a function of his authority as a staff member, and Mark's subsequent sexualization is a challenge to this authority. Second, Mark not only refuses his authority command but also, by treating Michael's comment as a sexual proposition which he then turns down, further enhances his status. In essence, Mark had positioned himself as the more powerful of the two "potential partners" by refusing the staff member's "advance." Finally, the fact that this was done in front of the other students greatly affects the consequences of the interaction. When the other students laugh at Mark's comment, they are acknowledging the sexual component of his remark to the point that Michael cannot simply overlook the sexual aspect as he could if they were alone. In other words, the students' laughter makes the sexual component of Mark's comment real and consequential for Michael's role as staff member.

The author begins the segment with his *analytic point*—that students may sexualize staff orders as a way of redefining and resisting them. This statement not only links back to ideas in preceding paragraphs, thus contributing to the theme of the section and to the overall story of the ethnography; it also "instructs" the reader in how the writer intends him to read and interpret that excerpt by directing attention to certain of its features.

Following the analytic point, the author provides orienting information by writing a short sentence that acts as a bridge to the excerpt. This information identifies the major characters in the scene by name and role. Since the author has already described the physical structure and daily routines of this small school, he can assume that the reader understands that the action takes place in a classroom. He also assumes that the reader can understand the significance of the events that are about to transpire without knowing exactly when during the day this incident occurred or exactly what was involved in the unspecified encounter between the tutor and another student, Chris. In many circumstances, however, the author needs to orient readers explicitly to the context and previous actions of about-to-be-recounted events. Following this orienting sentence, the author presents his *excerpt* in indented form.

Finally, the ethnographer discusses the interaction described in the ex-

cerpt in more extended *analytic commentary*, raising three issues relevant to his theme: first, that Mark's remark represented a challenge to the teacher's authority; second, that Mark pulled off this challenge by interactionally reframing the instructor's command as a sexual proposition, playfully transforming their respective roles; and, finally, that other students made up an audience to this exchange, their laughing response confirming and dramatizing the sexualized meaning Mark had offered and making this incident a consequential challenge to Michael's authority.

In analytic commentaries, ethnographers further tell readers what they want them to see in the fieldnote. It is generally helpful when writing analytic commentaries to consider such questions as: What are the implications of the events or talk recounted in the excerpt? What nuances can be teased out and explored? What import does this scene have for the analytic issues addressed in the paper? Indeed, ethnographic writers often develop such commentary by exploring the tension set up between the focused idea and the more textured and less explicit fieldnote. Rather than just considering outcomes, for example, they might examine the negotiated quality of the interactions (e.g., transforming an order into a sexual proposition; examining the role of other students as audience).

As in the case in this segment, ethnographers often write the excerpt in the past tense but develop their analytic points in the "ethnographic present." This convention portrays the incident recounted in the excerpt as temporal and historical, whereas it presents the analytic commentary as ahistorical and generalizable.[9] Indeed, analysis inevitably generalizes specific individuals, unique interactions, and local events—at least to some extent. But these abstractions never veer too far when commentary stays grounded in fieldnote excerpts. The specificity and interactional dynamics, so vividly clear in the excerpt, temper the abstract insights.

In writing an excerpt-commentary unit, the ethnographer must closely examine his writing strategies to check whether idea and description reinforce each other. In a fieldnote-centered ethnography, a creative tension exists between analytic points and illustrative excerpts; the ethnographer tells the story through both excerpt and commentary and thus ideas and descriptive details must support each other. An excerpt should not only further a theme or concept; it should also *convince* the reader that the ethnographer's specific interpretation and more general story are justified. Conversely, the ethnographer should also ensure that the analytic point highlights the details of the excerpt. Often in checking the fit of fieldnote and commentary, the ethnographer must revise the latter to



bring it closer to the excerpt. In some instances, this revision so changes the analytic commentary that it becomes irrelevant to the theme of the section; consequently, the entire excerpt-commentary unit may have to be deleted—at least for the moment—until its relevance becomes clear in another section.

A discrepancy between idea and descriptive detail might also arise from tensions between the implicit point of view in the excerpt and that implied by the analytic claim. To be convincing, the perspectives of the analy-tic point and the description must conform. For example, a student-ethnographer studying a juvenile detention hall wished to focus his ethnographic story on juveniles' responses to staff authority. Yet, consider the following excerpt and the perspective it presents:

> The boys sitting in the dayroom had expressionless faces. One Hispanic boy rested his feet on one of the plastic chairs, and L told him to take his feet off. He took his feet off of the chair, and then L walked down the hallway. When she came back to the control room a few minutes later, she noticed that the boy's feet were back on the chair and she called him to the control room. He walked in with a grin on his face. She asked why he put his feet back on the chair, and he shrugged and looked at the ground. She then told him that when she tells him what to do, he had better do it. She told him to go and sit down in the dayroom.

Despite an initial focus on "the boys sitting in the dayroom," this excerpt quickly shifts from the point of view of an anonymous observer of the boys' activities to that of the adult probation officer charged with maintaining control in this setting. This staff point of view conflicts with an analytic focus on the activities of the boys and their responses to adult authority.[10]

The fit between fieldnote excerpt and analytic point should be seen as part of the progression of the whole ethnographic story. The author should think not only about writing an analytic point which develops the theme of this section but also about how this excerpt and accompanying commentary will convince through the interplay of fieldnote details and ideas and, therefore, move the story along. In writing excerpt-commentary units, the analytic point does not so much govern the excerpt as highlight its features; the excerpt itself—as previously constructed—constrains what analytic points the author can now make and how to angle them. In a sense, a thematic narrative progresses through incremental repetition. Each unit both repeats the theme but also through small increments adds some further ideas and glimpses of people. The

repeated look at the section theme from different angles deepens the reader's understanding.

Finally, the ethnographer should consider the implications of excerpt-commentaries already included in the ethnographic story for any additional such units that might be developed. Indeed, Katz (1988:142) argues that well-crafted ethnographies possess a "weblike character," allowing readers to use data offered in support of one idea to confirm or disconfirm other ideas. The ethnographic author, aware of these confirming and disconfirming possibilities, should be sensitive to the import of unexamined features of other fieldnote excerpts and analytic commentaries for current theoretical claims.

Because selecting and writing moves dialectically between excerpts and by stating analytic points—rather than by stating a point and hunting for a good illustration—the author more likely maintains a commitment to members' views. A preexisting theory or thesis should not overly determine what the excerpts might reveal. Rather the ethnographer works back and forth between coding, potential excerpts, and analytic points so that together they move the story along. That process implants a creative tension between excerpts and analysis which enhances the story and deepens the reader's understanding of the world it represents.

### *Editing Excerpts*

In writing an excerpt-commentary unit, the ethnographer reconstructs the relevant excerpt. The researcher has begun by reviewing the original fieldnote to decide which portions to block out and move to create a working excerpt. This decision involves making an initial determination about exactly where to start and where to end that excerpt. Generally, leaving in, rather than cutting, a longer fieldnote segment is a prudent policy in making these first cuts, since the author can later eliminate portions which prove extraneous.

The ethnographer continues to review and edit these initial excerpts as she elaborates an interpretive commentary. Indeed, we recommend thoroughly editing an excerpt as part of the process of writing an excerpt-commentary unit. Since the author is immersed in the details of the excerpt and its various analytic possibilities, this moment is an opportune time for assessing which portions of the fieldnote are pertinent to these issues and which are irrelevant. Such close reflection concerning the excerpt may push the researcher to new insights and analytic refinements. In building a complete excerpt-commentary unit, the author often decides to modify his decision about the point at which the excerpt begins and ends. The ethnographer may also decide to make his point more economically by shortening the excerpt and providing background details as orienting information in the prior text.



These editing decisions depend both upon the purposes for including an excerpt (e.g., providing vivid detail) and upon the issues pursued in the analytic commentary. But in editing excerpts, ethnographers also consider a number of more general criteria, including *length, relevance, readability, comprehensibility,* and *anonymity of informants.*

An excerpt should be held to an *appropriate length.* An excerpt should not ramble on endlessly just because the description or talk might be interesting; readers find it difficult to sustain attention and interest through long stretches—that is, pages—of unbroken fieldnotes. If deleting material is not advisable, the ethnographer can break up the initial excerpt into a series of smaller, separate units, and write interpretive commentary for each one.

*Relevance* provides a primary concern in editing fieldnote excerpts. In deciding relevance, the field worker must weigh both what qualities are vital to the descriptions provided and what qualities contribute to the theme of the section or analytic point of the unit. Thus, an ethnographer begins by marking those features which are core to the interaction and which reveal the point made. Then, she can review the intervening material and reflect on which portions can be deleted and which need to be retained to provide narrative continuity or to evoke a sense of scene and context. Following the editing conventions for elisions in a quotation, she then replaces the deleted portions with ellipses. Ethnographers should take special care in editing interview dialogue not to delete their own questions. Since these questions shape the answers given, they should be preserved as context for the responses of the person interviewed.

Consider the decisions Rachel Fretz made in excerpting and editing fieldnotes to include in a paper on Chokwe telling historical accounts *(kulweza sango)* in Northwest Province of Zambia. She was interested in the ways in which conventions common in narrating traditional stories were also employed in telling historical accounts about events that occurred in the recent past.[11] She focused on one instance of Chokwe storytelling about an aspiring political figure, Mushala, who, failing to win legitimate power, became an outlaw leading a band of soldiers who ter-

rorized the community. Eventually, the government soldiers came to the area to search for Mushala and to free the community from his raids. Several listeners had witnessed these events and others had heard many reports of them; they occasionally offered their remarks and insights during the narration. The fieldworker tape-recorded the narration and audience comments; in her fieldnotes, she wrote primarily about the circumstances of the storytelling, the family members present, and what their reactions were afterwards that evening and the next day. She began to work on her analysis by listening to the tape and by rereading the following extended fieldnote:

We asked Uncle John if he knew anything about the events connected with Mushala. He paused and answered, "Yes, I know it very well." He began talking slowly, in serious tone of voice. He narrated about the way Mushala hunted and chased the Chokwe and Lunda peoples of this area: about the burning of villages, the slaughter of farm animals, about the villagers escaping into the bush to live there. He narrated for about one hour and a half. During the entire time, the family sat there very still. Uncle Don joined the group, but sat to the side with his own charcoal burner: Jerald, his nephew, went over to join him. Only occasionally did someone comment. [Listen to tape.] I noticed that it was a very traditional scene there by the fireside: a grandfather, two maternal uncles, and their nephews. Except for Joe's wife, Kianze, a young girl traveling with me, and myself, it was all men. [Most of the women were sitting by a fire in the kitchen house nearby and were also listening attentively.]

Before the evening was over the women, Nyalona and Kalombo, went home across the road. And Nyakalombo, the grandmother, went inside to sleep. Mwatavumbi (grandfather) was dozing and when he woke up, he went to bed too. And still Uncle John narrated: as I sat there, I noticed that he used the dramatic effects and dialogue conventions of storytelling and built his plot to peak and end with the killing of Mushala.

When he ended, everyone sat still for a while. I said, "Thank you," and then they started talking—Frank, Chester, and Uncle Don talked, each adding their personal knowledge of events. Don asked his brother John a question and he narrated more: his own father had known Mushala. He also talked about Chilombo, a neighbor, who was involved in these events. (Chilombo is the well-dressed man—in suit and tie who came by one day to talk in KiChokwe to me near the *chisambwe* [the pavilion where the men and guests sit]. He asked me if I would come to his village because he had stories to tell. I said I would come some time. Now today, Jerald said that he met him in town and that he asked him why I had not come and that I had promised. Jerald said that he—Chilombo—had waited for me. Next time!)

At the end of taping the narration, Mwatushi asked everyone to say his or her name. Even after the recorder was off, people just sat there and talked a while longer, rather spellbound by the shocking events. **As we crossed the road to return to our village, Mwatushi, Uncle John, Chester, Jerald, Kianze, and I kept talking about it. They told me (and demonstrated) how the villagers would cross the road backwards, so that their footprints would seem to be going in the opposite direction so as to confuse the soldiers.**



It took me a long time to fall asleep—in my mind, I kept hearing the song, *"Kanda uliya mwana, kanda uliya. Kaakwiza akuloze."* ["Don't cry my child, don't cry; they'll come to shoot you." It's a song composed by contemporary Chokwe who crossed the river to escape from the war in Angola—our earlier topic of conversation that evening.] I felt as though there were people hiding in the bush from the soldiers. We all slept a long time the next morning.

Today at lunch, Mwatushi said that it was Mushala's wife who betrayed him to the soldiers because she saw that eventually he would kill her family and her whole village. When she was near childbirth, they called a midwife to come stay with her in the bush. After the birth, one day when Mushala was away, she decided to leave with the midwife and then they ran into four soldiers. **She told them who she was and that she would tell them where he was hiding. She also told them his charms and that they would be protected against them if they were naked, but they were ashamed, so she took off all her clothes and they all walked naked on the path. Then they came to a pool of water, and she said you must wash here so that he cannot see you coming. Then they heard Mushala coming, and they stepped back into the bush. He came carrying his gun on his shoulder. He passed the first soldier who was shaking with fear and could not move. He passed the second soldier who also was shaking with fear and could not move. Then the third soldier shot him right in the eye and then in the chest. Mushala tried to walk on, but could not. He fell down. Then they all came and hit him with their bayonets. And that is how he died.** Thus, Mwatushi told the story of those events.

In reflecting on this extended fieldnote, the author came to see analytic issues in the two highlighted passages. The first suggested the possibility that, as part of their response to storytelling, people might reenact certain actions; such associations are most likely when a detail in the present landscape reminds them of traumatic events that had occurred there in the past.[12] The story of Mushala had evoked in listeners the memory of the abandoned villages, the surrounding bush where they hid, and the road which people had to cross as they sneaked back to their village occasionally to get supplies. To develop an excerpt-commentary unit, the author selected out and edited this brief account of the reenactment of walking backwards to trick Mushala's soldiers:

As we crossed the road to return to our village, . . . [we] kept on talking about it. They told me (and demonstrated) how the villagers would cross the road back-

wards, so that their footprints would seem to be going to the opposite direction so as to confuse [Mushala's] soldiers.

She introduced the excerpt by saying that people were going home in the evening after hearing the tale: thus she did not need to include that information in the excerpt. She also deleted specific names of speakers but kept the real name of Mushala, because he was a public figure—a common convention in excerpted fieldnotes; she also clarified in a bracket that it was Mushala soldiers, not the government soldiers, who were persecuting the people and from whom they were hiding their comings and goings.

The second passage suggested the idea that people recount and shape events to fit conventional story patterns. In the more casual conversation the next day, Mwatushi drew on familiar narrating conventions to recount how Mushala died: the use of charms to make oneself invisible (and invulnerable) and the repetition of three attempts to kill the villain with only the last effort succeeding.

She told them [the government soldiers] about his [Mushala's] charms and that they would be protected against them if they were naked, but they were ashamed, so she took off all her clothes and they all walked naked on the path. Then they came to a pool of water, and she said you must wash here so that he cannot see you coming. Then they heard Mushala coming, and they stepped back into the bush. He came carrying his gun on his shoulder. He passed the first soldier who was shaking with fear and could not move. He passed the second soldier who also was shaking with fear and could not move. Then the third soldier shot him right in the eye and then in the chest. Mushala tried to walk on, but could not. He fell down. Then they all came and hit him with their bayonets. And that is how he died.

In editing this passage, the author did not include the wife's reasons for betraying Mushala, since they were not directly relevant to a discussion of these narrative conventions. She also avoided making any editorial changes in the wording of this account; she wanted to maintain as much of the sequence and details of Mwatushi's retelling as she could, even though it is not verbatim dialogue. She added clarification in brackets and determined what background information she could most efficiently provide in sentences leading into the excerpts.

When preparing the fieldnote for a final text, the ethnographer usually must do more than simply leave out portions of a longer fieldnote; rather, she must refocus and sharpen details in her editing. Consider the decisions that Linda Shaw (1988) made when describing borrowing and lending



patterns among residents of a psychiatric board-and-care home. Her original fieldnote is not only longer but is also more detailed than the edited fieldnote.

**Original fieldnote:**

I went into the dining room to see what the snacks were and came upon Marie angrily talking to Michelle about the fact that Michelle told Reid not to lend her money. Michelle replied that she didn't tell Reid not to lend Marie money, but that he shouldn't lend anyone money, that he should keep his money for himself. Marie wanted to know who Michelle thought she was telling people not to lend to her, that she wasn't bumming but always paid her friends back. The argument went on this way for a little while, seeming to escalate as Marie charged Michelle with trying to cause her trouble and Michelle defending herself saying that she hadn't done anything to Marie. Then Mic, the only other member sitting at the table, said something—can't exactly remember what—that seemed intended to lighten the conversation, but had the effect of getting Marie off onto talking about Patsey being Mic's girlfriend and how could he have such a fat girl friend. Mic defended himself, saying Patsey wasn't so fat, and they had only dated anyway.

In the midst of this diversion, Michelle got up and left the dining room. Marie then turned to me and asked if everyone at Vista didn't bum money. I agreed that it was done by quite a lot of people. She said that Michelle was new, had only been there a month, what right did she have going around telling people not to loan to her when that's what everyone here does. She said again, "Michelle is new. Just wait until she is here for a while. She'll be doing it too." Marie went on to say that she helps her friends out when they need it. She spoke about having given Earl and Kara her entire rebate check last month because they were out of money and she felt sorry for them.

**Edited fieldnote:**

In the dining room after dinner I came upon Marie angrily accusing Michelle, a new resident, of having told Reid, another resident, not to lend her money. Michelle insisted she had urged Reid to keep his money for himself and not to lend *anyone* money, never mentioning Marie. Marie demanded to know just who Michelle thought she was, telling people not to lend to her; she wasn't bumming but always paid her friends back. Eventually Michelle got up and left the dining room. Marie then turned to me, asking if everyone at Vista didn't borrow. I agreed. She noted that Michelle was new, having only been at Vista a month; what right did she have going around telling people not to loan to her when that's what everyone here does? She continued, "Michelle is new. Just wait until she is here for a while. She'll be doing it, too." She added that she always helps her friends out when they need it; she gave Earl and Kara her entire rebate check last month because they were out of money and she felt sorry for them.

The author included this fieldnote in a section of her ethnography devoted to the broad theme of interdependence and cooperation among those living in the home. The fieldnote was chosen specifically to illus-

trate the point that because residents have little money and few sources of support, they count on being able to ask others at the home for small amounts of money and other needed items when they run short. In this excerpt, we see how intensely those in the home may feel when these sources are threatened. In editing this excerpt, the author preserved indirect speech in the original form and in the same order. She retained those parts of the fieldnote that revealed the grounds for participating in the system of exchange and edited out sentences and phrases describing actions that were unrelated to these issues (Mic and his girlfriend). She included aspects of Marie's talk that described those aspects of her participation that, in her view, demonstrated that she had entered into the exchange system (giving to others) in ways that entitled her to ask of them in return. Finally, she included Marie's explanation that only an outsider who had not fully experienced the need to call upon others would have questioned participation in the system of exchange. Hence, the author edited the fieldnote, dropping some of the description but preserving those sentences and phrases that bore most directly on that point. In the end, editing involves the delicate balance between efforts to preserve the essence of what members say and do, while focusing the reader's attention on those bits of talk that most clearly and economically support the story the ethnographer is attempting to tell.

There is always the risk in any condensation or selective quotation that the author will leave out details which might present people and their actions more convincingly. The process of editing is not a straightforward, simple task. On the one hand, shortening and editing for clarity forwards the smooth flow of the overall ethnographic story: too long excerpts bog the reader down in extraneous details. On the other hand, one always loses some of the vividness and complexity of the original fieldnotes in the editing process.

At times, field workers encounter problems because an excerpt is especially "rich," containing materials that bear on several different themes. Simply duplicating the fieldnote in several sections of the final text does not work. Because readers quickly tire of unnecessary repetitions, ethnographers avoid using the same fieldnote excerpt more than one time. Rather, the solution lies in clearly identifying the different analytic themes in the excerpt and then using these themes either to split the excerpt into two independent units or, if that is not possible, to discuss the various aspects of the excerpt sequentially. Consider an example from a study of domestic workers and their employers in which the following



excerpt was initially used to illustrate workers' moral evaluations of their employers' own housekeeping practices:

> "She never cleans her bathroom, and I couldn't get the scum off the—she had one of these tiled showers? And we used a good product, but I told her, 'you leave that on overnight.' 'Cause it was so filthy. . . . In fact, when I left that lady (hah hah) I said, 'I'm gonna leave it like this' [leave a paste of Comet on the sink], and *she* had to rinse it off the next day."

On reviewing this excerpt, the ethnographer decided to cut the worker's last statement—about how she maneuvered to make her employee finish cleaning up this mess herself—out of the excerpt and to use it instead in a subsequent section on house-cleaner's ways of resisting and turning the tables on their employers.

Ethnographers generally delete the reflective commentary they incorporated into the original fieldnote. Rather than retain these initial thoughts in the version of the fieldnote that appears in the finished ethnography, an ethnographer may incorporate any useful insights into the analytic discussion that follows the excerpt. Frequently, however, the researcher will have elaborated and specified analytic issues to such an extent that earlier commentary seems more simplistic or undeveloped and thus of minimal use. Furthermore, because the author writes, selects, edits, and organizes excerpts, she already has a privileged voice. Excerpts dominated by the fieldworker's explanations sound contrived and become truly redundant in a final ethnography.[13]

The ethnographic writer edits to make excerpts *readable* by using standard conventions for punctuation, spelling, and grammar. For the sake of clarity, she should take particular care to revise unclear sentences and to correct confusing tense shifts in portions of the excerpts that are not direct quotations. The author, however, should be very conservative in editing direct quotations, carefully balancing the reader's need for clarity against a commitment to providing an accurate rendering of peoples' actual use of words. Ethnographers take special care to preserve and convey speakers' dialect, idiom, and speech rhythms. Even individual speech disfluencies—false starts, pauses, and repetitions—should be treated carefully. For many purposes, producing readable dialogue (especially from tape-recorded transcripts) requires editing out many such disfluencies.[14] But in some circumstances the author may specifically want to preserve such speech in order to indicate the speaker's emotional state or mood. For example, retaining the "and- and- and-" in the following excerpt reveals

the speaker's disturbed hesitancy as he talks about his "mental illness" to the researcher:

> "I'm telepathic. I can actually hear thought in other people's heads. . . ." He said he wished he could tell people but . . . "they'll just increase my medication. . . . No matter how drugged I am, nothing can take away my telepathy. And- and- and- it's not because of me. It's because Jesus wills it for me."

Furthermore, editing should make excerpts *comprehensible* to readers. The author must clarify any *allusions*—such as names, places, procedures—which depend on references external to the fieldnote. She can do so when orienting the reader to the excerpt, or for briefer, less central matters by embedding a brief explanation in brackets within the text. For example, an author might identify the locally relevant status of people named in the excerpt (e.g. "the others [all students]"), or clarify the meaning of direct speech that might not be clear in context (e.g., "the only purpose we had in mind was to set it [the dynamite] off"). At this time, the ethnographer must once again verify that all details are accurate; misrepresentation of factual information or of local terms very quickly tells readers that this ethnographer is not reliable. Indeed, a few mistakes can undermine the credibility of the whole story.

Finally, an excerpt must protect the people, institutions, and communities studied by providing *anonymity*. Therefore, in completing the editing, an ethnographer changes all names and identifying markers such as personally distinctive details in descriptions. Authors provide pseudonyms, generally echoing qualities evoked (e.g., ethnic identity) by the original name.[15] We do not recommend using initials to indicate different characters, since this minimal identification makes gender difficult to remember, lacks evocative qualities, and makes it difficult for a reader to recognize that person in other excerpts.

### *Ordering Excerpt Commentary Units within a Section*

With the overall framework as a guideline, ethnographers usually organize their ethnographies into sections set off by titled headings. Each section generally presents one theme, perhaps divided further into several subthemes. A section is built from a series of excerpt-commentary units. For example, the section of the ethnography on the gay and lesbian high school entitled "Sexualization of Conversation" is constructed of the following units:



**Unit 1**

*analytic point:* "Sexual innuendos" are a common means by which students sexualized talk to and about teaching staff.

*excerpt:* On finding out that a teacher's age is twenty-seven, a student comments: "I've had sex with someone who was twenty-eight—it was gross."

**Unit 2**

*analytic point:* Students sexualize their responses specifically to staff instructions.

*excerpt:* A student responds to staff command to "come with me" as a sexual proposition.

**Unit 3**

*analytic point:* In some situations staff do not let the challenge implicit in student's sexualizing comments pass, but themselves respond in ways that reassert their position.

*excerpt:* Staff responds to a student who quipped "search my tongue" when asked to throw away his gum: "I don't want to—I'm sure many people already have."

**Unit 4**

*analytic point:* In some instances staff members themselves use sexual talk in ways that implicitly maintain their authority.

*excerpt:* As a student turns down the researcher's offer to help with math, staff member comments: "Go ahead, you were asking about him earlier."

Within a section, the ethnographer organizes units to develop a progression of ideas in ways that increasingly reveal the complexities of fieldnote data and analysis, so that the story progresses to a deeper understanding of the theme. In the above example, the first two units focus on students' sexualizing talk, the third introduces the added complication of how teaching staff respond to such talk, and the last looks at the more subtle issues involved when staff intiate such talk.

To aid the reader in following the progression of ideas from one unit to the next, the author should provide a clear *transition* that links the main idea of the current paragraph to those of preceding paragraphs. In some cases, constructing a transition is a relatively straightforward matter of writing an introductory sentence to the paragraph beginning a new unit. For example, the author of the "sexualization of conversation" section provides this transition sentence into his third unit:

> Although, as in the previous excerpt, the staff members sometimes don't respond to the students' sexualizing comments, this is not always the case. . . .

This transition refers back to the prior excerpt, noting one feature not commented on at the time: staff did not explicitly respond to students'

sexualizing talk. This retroactively noted feature is then used to introduce, by contrast, the focus of the current unit: how staff did respond to such talk.

In other instances, when the analytic point in a subsequent unit raises a significantly different issue than that of the preceding one, the author should not rely simply on an introductory transitional sentence. Rather, the author should also revise the *preceding unit* and explicitly anticipate the idea of the later one. For example, the transition to Unit 2 of the "sexualization of conversation" section reads:

> Furthermore, the students sometimes position themselves as more powerful than the staff members by sexualizing the staff members' instructional commands. . . .

This sentence focuses on student sexualizing as a response specifically to staff "instructional commands." However, in Unit 1 the author had not considered the specific forms of staff-student interaction within which sexualizing comments occurred. To now learn that such comments are made in response to commands may leave the reader feeling slightly confused: Do students respond in sexualized ways to other sorts of staff talk, such as polite requests or general questions? Thus, the author should have revised the discussion in Unit 1 to provide more context for this upcoming distinction.

In addition to deciding on the ordering of units, the author must also write an introduction and conclusion to the section. The introduction should connect the theme of the section to the overall theme of the ethnography, and it should discuss any general features of that theme needed to understand and appreciate the ideas of the different units that follow. The author introduced the "sexualization of conversation" section, for example, with a paragraph observing that students commonly sexualized conversations in this setting and that "the sexualization is consequential to the power relations between staff member and student," thus linking this section back to the major theme of the paper. In the next paragraph, he argued that "sexual innuendos" provide one form of sexualizing, a form that is "particularly useful for students since they are ambiguous [and] indirect," allowing denial of sexual intent.

Finally, in a conclusion to the section, the author tries to draw together the implications of the excerpts and analytic commentary for the core theme of the section. He may also suggest how these issues tie in with the theme of the section to follow.



## Producing a Completed Ethnographic Document

Depending upon the time available, the ethnographer might rework units and sections a number of times, replacing initially selected excerpts with new ones, refining analytic commentary and transitions, reordering units within a section and/or rearranging sections within the overall ethnography. Although she sees still further possible changes and refinements, at some point she must stop revising and take up a series of final writing tasks required to turn the now substantial body of text into a completed ethnographic document. These projects include titling the ethnography, writing an introduction linking the topic and major theme to other research, describing the setting and methods, and providing an overall conclusion to the ethnography.

### *Introducing the Ethnography*

The title and introduction to an ethnography provide readers with their first means of orienting to the text. The title and introduction not only tell readers what they can expect the ethnography to be about, but they also provide clues to the writer's analytic and substantive concerns.

One kind of ethnographic title communicates to the reader both the general topic and exactly what people, setting, activity, or process was studied. For example:

"Ritualized Drinking Behavior in the Fraternity System"
"Interactional Dynamics of Ethnicity at an Urban High School"
"Waiting to Die: An Ethnographic Study of a Convalescent Home"

Rather than simply stating the general topic, however, an author may attempt to convey the more abstract analytic theme of the ethnography in a title. As Atkinson (1990:76) has noted, ethnographers often do so by linking a phrase containing the abstract, "generic" issue by a colon to a phrase specifying the general topic and concrete "local" setting or activity:

"Systems of Power: Authority and Discipline in a Boys Group Home"

Finally, the ethnographer may incorporate local members' terms or phrases as key elements of a title:

"The Dynamics of Down: Being Cool with the Set"
"'These Kids Live in Their Own Little Worlds': Interpretive Framework in a Halfway House."

In the first paragraph of the introduction to the ethnography, many authors begin with an attention-getting opening. They may use an incident from their fieldnotes which focuses on the topic or briefly describes common approaches to the topic. Next the author very briefly introduces the topic and location of his own research as a bridge to presenting his thesis. In a thematic narrative, the author writes a "topical thesis" which explains the general focus of the paper and lays out the themes to be examined. In that sense, the thesis does not delineate every development in the ethnographic story, nor foreshadow the conclusions to be made at the end. Rather, the thesis gets the story going. Finally, the author generally provides an overview of the paper by presenting the thematic statement for each upcoming section.

For example, the ethnographic author of "Interactional Dynamics of Ethnicity at an Urban High School" begins by orienting the reader to his topic.

> In everyday life, we commonly assume ethnicity as a given category. People belong to distinct groups with unique cultural practices. We say that the President of the United States is White, that the magic of a people in Africa is Azande witchcraft, that rap is Black music, that Cinco de Mayo is a Mexican holiday, etc. We assume that we are describing what is objectively there. We are simply stating the "natural facts" of the world. When we do become more aware of ethnicity as a category, it is often because of conflict. The newspaper reports that a "Black" girl was shot by a "Korean" storekeeper and that a "White Power" group is marching in a "Jewish" neighborhood. We ask, How did this happen? How can diverse peoples get along? But we still imply that definite aggregates of people exist and that they have distinct cultures.

In this introductory paragraph, the author points out that, in their talk about ethnicity, people commonly assume that terms that identify ethnicity refer unambiguously to naturally occurring and distinct "aggregates of people." In his next paragraph, he makes explicit the analytic stance he takes toward ethnicity:

> What we ignore in this everyday discourse is that ethnicity is "social work": People identify a person, place, or thing as having a certain "character" through an implicitly interactional dynamic of inclusion or exclusion. This process creates what Barth calls "boundaries" in interaction (1969). These boundaries are not objective, but subjective borders, and they are constantly being recreated, reaffirmed, negotiated, and even discarded. Thus, in everyday life, ethnicity is a local phenomenon originating in specific situations.



He proposes to look at ethnicity not as an objectively given "fact" but rather as a product of "social work," i.e., of local, interactional negotiations of inclusion and exclusion. By citing another researcher, he suggests that this issue also interests other scholars and implies that his "new angle" contributes to a scholarly discussion.

The author next substantiates his topic, first by identifying the people and setting of his research and then by specifying the sort of data he will rely on:

> In this paper, I examine ethnicity and ethnic groups at an urban high school in Southern California. The fieldnote excerpts describe the processes by which people use ethnicity in everyday life.

Next, he presents his general thesis about ethnicity, an interpretive statement about ethnicity as situationally "recreated and modified":

> I argue that through people's interactions "ethnicity" is perpetuated by constantly being recreated and modified within a situation. This "social work" in situations and through interactions then generates the discrete units of specific groups, recognized as having particular cultures, symbols, styles, and objects. Thus, this paper is a study of how people "ascribe the ascribed" (Garfinkel 1967).

Finally, he closes this portion of the introduction with an overview of his argument, briefly describing the main idea for each upcoming section (see "Developing a Thematic Narrative," above).

In contrast to an introduction which begins by setting up an analytic idea and then subsequently identifying just what was studied, some ethnographers begin with an actual fieldnote-based description or observation. Following the presentation of the specific details, they then pinpoint a more general analytic issue or problem that this incident represents. The above ethnographer, for example, might have begun by describing an especially perspicuous instance of the "social work" that contributes to recreating and maintaining a particular ethnic identity: for example, an extreme or dramatic instance of a white student dressing, talking, or acting black. He could then have moved to identifying the general analytic problem or issue that he saw reflected in or illustrated by this incident.[16]

### Linking the Study to Other Research

As part of the introduction (or in a section immediately following it) ethnographers generally link their interpretation to wider issues of scholarly interest in their disciplines. In that way, they invite their readers to consider seriously the topics to be discussed. At this point, the writer thinks again of his intended readers and selects words and ideas familiar to them.

For example, the author of the paper on ethnicity writes for sociologists and thus discusses the concept of "ethnicity" as it is used by sociologists. In each paragraph, he addresses some feature of the problem of research on ethnic issues. Although he discusses other scholars' research, he only raises those ideas about ethnicity which he addresses later in the body of the paper. In his findings, he then offers analytic ideas and fieldnote excerpts which touch on the problems he raises:

> Marger (1991) notes that sociologists classify ethnic groups based on three indices: unique cultural traits, sense of community, and ascription. First, ethnic groups have some unique behavioral characteristics that set them off from other people. Second, ethnic groups display a sense of community among members. This "we" almost seems to necessitate a "they" and leads to the creation of ethnic group boundaries separating insiders and outsiders. Third, ethnic status is almost always ascribed, which usually means given by birth. In presenting these traits, Marger emphasizes a supposed objective criteria for ethnicity. Ethnicities are seen as discrete collectives that can be studied in relation to each other. This approach is typical in many studies of race and ethnic relations in the United States. And the demographic data for this paper is analyzed thus.
>
> Unfortunately, while this approach offers information for macro studies of society, it leads to a neglect of the subjective perception and dynamic features of ethnicity in everyday life. It downplays how "ethnic identity is an acquired and used feature of human identity, available for employment by either participant in an encounter and subject to presentation, inhibition, manipulation, and exploitation" (Lyman and Douglass 1973). In this approach, ethnicity is a resource to be used in strategic creation and maintenance of self. . . .
>
> For purposes of this study, an ethnic group is defined as "a reference group invoked by people who identify themselves and are identified by others as sharing a common historical style" (Royce 1982). An ethnic group, thus, is a subculture with symbols, style, and forms. Unlike many other subcultures though, membership in the ethnic group is held to be ascriptive.

These few paragraphs briefly raise problematic issues in ethnic studies. In this introductory section on other research, the author does not attempt to provide an overview of all possible approaches to ethnicity. He only



selects those researchers' works and ideas which provide a context for his own study. Thus, this writer implicitly demonstrates the relevance of his research to the other sociologists who are his intended readers.

In sum, the ethnographer does not review "the literature" on the topic, nor does she simply cite several works others have done. Rather, she carefully selects other research which provides a context for the upcoming findings and only discusses those ideas which highlight her own analysis.

### Introducing Setting and Methods

Before launching into the ethnography proper, authors introduce their setting and their methods for learning about it. Setting and methods can be discussed either in separate sections or in a single section addressing both topics.

In describing the *setting,* the ethnographer orients readers to the place, people, and situations to be examined in detail in the subsequent ethnography. This description should help the reader picture the physical and social features of the setting. It should also provide overviews of the key individuals and of procedures or processes that are central to the substance of the ethnography; the former, for example, might trace differences between core and volunteer staff in a community mental health center or between managers and canvassers in a political action committee; the latter would address how clients enter and move through the program, what basic job responsibilities entail, and perhaps the overall organization of door-to-door canvassing.

While providing an overview of the setting, its personnel, and its routines, this discussion should also anticipate and highlight specific features of the setting that are central for subsequent ethnographic analyses. For example, an ethnographer writing about the nature and consequences of staff practices for categorizing or *labeling* resident clients of a homeless shelter provides a two-pronged introduction to the setting. First, he presents the types of clients sought by the shelter:

> My field work was carried out in an emergency shelter for the homeless in the downtown area of Los Angeles. The shelter has a capacity of 54 persons, but had an average house total of 35 or so for the time I was there. The shelter's primary service is to provide food and housing for persons who are absolutely broke. While in the shelter the "clients," as they are called by the staff, are also

provided with some assistance in looking for housing and dealing with the welfare bureaucracy. That stated target group for the shelter is the "new homeless"; that is, persons who have only recently lost their homes and been thrust upon the streets. This is in contrast to those the staff refer to as the "chronic homeless" or "shelter hoppers" who have been living on the streets for some time and who are understood to move from shelter to shelter with no intention of finding a more stable residence. . . .

The shelter's other general criterion for admission is that they will take any sort of client, except for single men. They are one of the few shelters that will handle homeless families with children, a fact that they pride themselves on. In practice, the predominant client group consists of a woman with several young children.

The author then introduces the frontline staff whose routine work practices are to be examined:

The staff most relevant to the typifying tasks in the shelter are six Program Aids [PAs]. The six PAs are four black women between the ages of approximately thirty and fifty, a younger white woman recently graduated from college, and a twenty-one year old white male seminary student. None are trained social workers, perhaps due, at least in part, to the extremely low pay PAs receive. The PAs spend most of their working time in the office which overlooks the lounge on the second floor of the shelter. (The first floor contains the offices of the shelter while the third floor consists of the clients' rooms.) The schedule is such that there is only one PA on duty at a time, apart from a one hour overlap period at the boundaries of the shifts.

He continues by describing PAs' routine duties: answering the phone, screening possible clients, maintaining logs, etc.

The ethnographer may move directly from such a description of key features to an overview of her entry into the setting and of the nature of her participation in it.[17] Here, the ethnographer summarizes what she actually did to get close to and learn about the events and issues considered throughout the ethnography. In so doing, it is important to explain how and in what capacity she obtained initial access to the setting, how those in the setting understood what she was doing and/or was interested in, and how different members of the setting reacted to or treated her.

It is generally useful to consider different stages or phases in the research, distinguishing, for example, between processes of initial entry, of getting used to the setting and its participants, and of established, longer-term participation. An ethnographer working in a community mental health center, for example, traces her socialization from initial encouragement to participate in a few routine activities under staff supervision, through observation and testing of her competence in dealing with highly disturbed patients, to eventually being charged with conducting community meetings with the clients.



In presenting their *methods,* ethnographers seek to depict the varied qualities of their participation and their awareness of both the advantages and constraints of their roles in a specific setting. The ethnographer of a community mental health center, for example, analyzed these qualities of her role in the following terms:

My status is that of a "volunteer intern." When I first arrived here I was not sure what this title/status entailed. As I became associated with the staff and socialized into a staff role, I have realized that my role is that of a lower staff member. I do not have the power nor the privileges of a core staff member. For example, although I am encouraged to participate in Case Review Meetings, my "insights" are not required to be considered for staff decisions.

Such an analysis demands that the ethnographer reflect on the specific kinds of interactions and events to which she had or was denied access. For example, one student ethnographer described how her participant role in a feminist political-action committee shaped and delimited her access to and observations of key interactions in political canvassing:

I play more than a passive observer role. I am a canvasser and, as such, go out with the rest of the crew and canvass at least once a week. But I am also part of management in that they are grooming me for the position of field manager in the summer. This puts me in the ideal position to see what the canvassers are feeling and thinking and, at the same time, gives me access to information not otherwise available to canvassers. This does, however, work against me in that sometimes the canvassers will label me as management and therefore be less likely to confide in me. This becomes a particular problem when I have to act on behalf of management (such as doing retrainings) or when issues become polarized and one has to take either management's or the canvassers' perspective. . . . [Furthermore] it is hard to go to the field to observe as a researcher, because to observe means that I am there on behalf of management, and I am the authority rather than a peer.

Finally, in presenting and analyzing methods and their implications, it is helpful to include fieldnote excerpts to illustrate and support key points. The ethnographer in the study of the community mental health center, for example, presented the following fieldnotes, the first to show the character of the "testing" that she was subject to from one staff member during her first week at the center, the second to illustrate how her role differed from "regular staff":

I was playing ping-pong with a client when I saw Cathy, a caseworker, point David in my direction. David walked over to me and said: "Hi. I'm the President, and I demand that you go to the Alaskan pipeline to save the world and my sister in Kansas. You must do this—it is your duty to your Country. You must save the world." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cathy and a couple of other staff members giggling. I responded: "Well, David, I'm sorry but that's just too big of a responsibility for me." David: "You must save the world." He then walked away. Cathy came over to me and said: "He's really crazy, isn't he?" She laughed. "Don't worry. He's just about the craziest one we've got."

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Today we were having client nominations for government. The clients were nominating other clients for President and Vice President. Norman (a client) nominated me for VP. Arlene (art therapist) stepped in and said to Norman: "Karina cannot be nominated. She is a staff member and cannot be nominated."

While discussions of the setting and of the complexities of doing field research highlight features and processes that are central to upcoming ethnographic analyses, they can also lend credibility to the final document. These descriptions may allow readers to assess whether or not the enthnographer had access to the kinds and quality of observations needed to sustain subsequent analytic claims. With this background information to draw on, the reader may be more inclined to assume that the author is credible and informed. Indeed, ethnographers may select fieldnote excerpts about their involvement exactly in order to implicitly convince the reader "that I was there and experienced this first-hand."

### *Writing a Conclusion*

Finished ethnographic texts usually end with a section which reflects on and elaborates the thesis addressed in the introduction to the paper. Hence, while naturally among the last pieces of writing the author does, conclusions are intricately tied to introductions.[18] Often the conclusion explores the implications of the theoretical and/or substantive issues raised in the paper's introduction. In an ethnographic paper, the wording of the introductory thesis focuses the reader on the central idea, but often this idea may not be as sharply delineated as the concluding presentation of the thesis. Whereas the introduction prepares the reader to understand the upcoming analytic points and excerpts, the conclusion more precisely interconnects the ideas because, by the paper's end, the reader has read



the whole ethnographic story and absorbed the details of its fieldnote excerpts. In other words, the ethnography tells a story which can be understood fully only by reading the progression of analytic ideas and fieldnote excerpts. Each section with its theme, points, and discussion of excerpts moved the reader further along toward the conclusion, with its more finely tuned thesis.

To write a conclusion, the ethnographer should review the now completed tale, paying particular attention to the framing of that story in the introduction. In most cases it is useful to write a *summary* of the major findings and themes of the paper. This summary should generally restate the thesis of the paper and then in short, concise sentences suggest how each section advances or contributes to this thesis. In some cases the ethnographer may choose to use the summary to begin the conclusion. In others, she may move directly to other issues without a summary. Yet even when one does not plan to make the summary part of the conclusion, writing a summary is beneficial to the ethnographer; it forces the author to turn from the minute problems of writing up specific ideas and segments to a review of the overall structure and flow of her paper. The result is a gestalt view of the ethnography's initial promises compared to where it has actually gone: a view which gets the writer thinking about some of its wider implications.

Whether the author summarizes or not, conclusions take up the paper's thesis. The ethnographer may do so in at least three ways: (1) by extending or modifying the thesis in light of the materials examined; (2) by relating the thesis to some more general theory or current issue in the relevant literature; and/or (3) by offering a *meta-commentary* on the thesis or on the methods or assumptions associated with it. An author might employ only one of these options, or might weave together two or even all three options in one longer, more elaborate conclusion.

As an example of the first option, consider some of the concluding portions of the ethnographic study on how family caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's disease manage the stigma associated with this condition. The introduction to this study had highlighted Goffman's (1971) concept of the "family information rule," i.e., the preference for family members to keep knowledge of the stigma (discrediting information) within the family to prevent outsiders from learning about the problem. In the conclusion, the author returns to this issue, suggesting that, as the disease worsens, there is a radical change in the family's ability to honor this information rule:

The Alzheimer's caregiver will try for as long as possible to collude with the family member, continuing to abide by the family information rule to the extent that she or he is able, and limiting initial disclosures to intimates and medical personnel. However, there may well come a point where the caregiver realizes that she or he cannot count on the person with Alzheimer's to be cognizant of what is discrediting, let alone motivated or able to collude in trying to cover it up or minimize its embarrassment. Thus, the information control within the family tends to give way to more direct caregiver interpersonal and interactional control.

The caregiver increasingly relies on a variety of management practices to control the individual, both within the private family domain as well as outside it. And, as the person with Alzheimer's can no longer play the collusive game, caregivers gradually come to align with outsiders, disclosing discrediting information.

Here the author argues that while the family caregiver initially seeks to honor the family information rule, to do so requires cooperation from the person with Alzheimer's disease. When such cooperation can no longer be counted on, the caregiver increasingly violates the rule by disclosing discrediting information to outsiders in order to enlist their help in managing the patient. In this way the author highlights in the conclusion how her findings have modified Goffman's notion to point out previously unnoted conditions underlying the operation of the family information rule and to appreciate the kinds of circumstances which may lead family members to violate it.

Another way authors might extend a thesis statement is to develop theoretical linkages between separate components of the thesis. For example, in the introduction to the study of residents in a home for ex-mental patients, the introductory thesis pointed to two conflicting tendencies within the home: resident dependence on staff members and the residents' ability to actively influence staff views of them. In the conclusion, the author uses her more specific analyses of these relations to explicitly connect these contradictory tendencies as parts of an ongoing vicious circle. Residents feel vulnerable to the power of staff and may respond by trying to build credit and good-will with them. In order to do this, they participate in therapy sessions and other staff-initiated activities. As a result they gain the staff's support and protection but thereby become more directly dependent upon the staff members who "sponsor" them. This analysis thus links two patterns which initially appear separate and indeed contradictory, pointing to an ironic outcome whereby residents' actions intended to lessen vulnerability and dependence on staff end up tightening that dependence. In this option, the writer tells an ethnographic story which progresses from an initial thesis which highlighted conflicting tendencies, through an in-depth discussion of analytic points with appropriate excerpts, to finally come to a conclusion which intertwines these conflicting strands.



Second, a conclusion may attempt to connect the ethnography's thesis to issues raised in a relevant disciplinary literature. In the study of Alzheimer's family caregiving, after the paragraphs quoted above, the author relates the contrast between colluding with the person with Alzheimer's and colluding with outsiders to a more general issue in the sociology of deviance: When do family members *accept,* tolerate, and continue to look out for another family member with some kind of stigmatizing condition or behavior, and when do they turn against, exclude, and implicitly *reject* this family member? This issue had been recently addressed in a journal article entitled "Toward a Sociology of Acceptance: The Other Side of the Study of Deviance" (Bogdan and Taylor 1987) which the author cites in developing her argument:

Recognition of these two phases of caregiver stigma management, collusion with the person with Alzheimer's, and a realignment and collusion with outsiders, allows for an integration of a sociology of acceptance with a sociology of rejection (Bogdan and Taylor 1987).

Here the author suggests the possibility of unifying sociological theories about why and how people tolerate deviants with theories about why and how people exclude and reject deviants. These reactions need not be opposed, alternative courses of action; some forms of exclusion develop exactly because of a deep and abiding commitment to caring for another, under conditions where the afflicted family member can no longer be "counted on" to aid the caregiver in tolerantly managing the situation. This unity of acceptance and rejection is frequently highlighted, the author argues, in caregivers' deeply ambivalent feelings about having to take overtly rejecting actions toward the person with Alzheimer's disease:

Many caregivers were disturbed about having to take more and more control over their family members. In monitoring the person as well as using physical coercion, they made such comments as, "I hate my nagging voice." Or as one caregiver said with regard to taking control over his wife: "I have no right."

In this way the concept of acceptance is also extended to encompass rejecting actions that are performed reluctantly and are combined with deep regret.

A third option in writing a conclusion is to pause, step back, and reflect on the ethnography in offering some *meta-commentary* on its methods, assumptions, tone, or conclusions. In the study of resident life in the home for ex-mental patients, the author not only addressed staff-resident relations but also considered how residents related to and developed important social and supportive ties with one another. One section of the ethnography explored the ways in which residents regularly exchanged certain items with one another—cigarettes, food, small amounts of money. The author suggested that these exchanges and the continuing relations they created and sustained helped residents deal with the chronic deprivation that they faced. In one portion of her conclusion, however, she reflected on how this earlier consideration of resident exchange "strategies" presented an "overly rationalized," game-playing view of these exchanges. This view, she argued, needed to be complemented by appreciation of the caring and emotional qualities also characteristic of these exchanges as well as the role of these exchanges in fostering a sense of sharing and community among a number of residents. The prior strategies-and-tactics analysis tended to obscure and distort these critical processes.

In all these approaches to writing a conclusion, the ethnographer takes up once again the problem of identifying and writing out in explicit, elaborated form the relevance of some of her experiences, observations, and insights into others' way of life for an outside audience. But by proceeding in a way that keeps fieldnotes at the center of the analytic process, the ethnographer is often able to reach understandings and make connections that do not neatly fit existing explanations and theories in the discipline. The refined, more precise thesis to be presented in the conclusion will more likely privilege members' views and show what is interesting (and has theoretical import) about this local life in ways which convince one's scholarly readers. Thus, the more explicit thesis in the conclusion not only represents what the ethnographer saw and heard of members' experience, but also will further clarify known issues, or propose an entirely original perspective.

## Reflections: Between Members and Readers

In producing an ethnography for wider audiences, fieldworkers are constantly pulled by conflicts between representing some indigenous world and its meanings and making their own experiences with that world speak to the very different concerns of scholarly readers. In creating a finished ethnographic story, the ethnographer self-consciously orients toward the latter; in regularly returning to his fieldnote record and to the memories bound up with and evoked by this record, he is again and again reminded of the former.



While the give-and-take of relations in the field continue to shape the ethnographer's understanding, the finished ethnography is the ethnographer's version of those happenings and events. Most ethnographic conventions allow the writer to represent others (and her experience with them) as she sees best. In this sense the ethnographer openly assumes and exercises authorial privilege. Even in those instances when ethnographers ask members to read portions or to comment on certain analyses, the author has the final say about both the text itself and the extent of members' evaluations of it (see Bloor 1988; Emerson and Pollner 1988; Rochford 1992). Despite the efforts of intensive participation, the attempts to learn members' meanings, and the self-reflection in representing others' realities, the final document turns into a rather linear narrative, defined and controlled primarily by the author.[19]

Over time—beginning in the fieldwork and extending beyond writing a paper—an ethnographer develops a complex view of field experiences. Nevertheless, the ethnographic text offers one overriding perspective—his own at the time of writing. Only when the reader's interpretation differs from that of the fieldworker do the many ways to interpret a set of notes become explicit. But to keep these various possibilities in mind while writing may paralyze the writer, preventing any story from being told. Hence, an ethnography remains one author's vision of field experiences. And thus, because the author controls the text, she takes on an authoritative voice in writing.

Nonetheless, the ethnographer sometimes provides unintended glimpses into others' everyday lives. Readers may discern things which the ethnographer did not intend to reveal. In fact, reader participation in text-making can be a double-edged advantage in ethnographies built around fieldnote excerpts. On the one hand, readers more directly engage in the described social scenes and thereby convincingly follow the story line. On the other hand, they can also more readily assess the proposed analysis, at least the version presented by the author, and derive different insights from the fieldnotes.

Readers ultimately make their own sense of these fragments, even

though the note-taking ethnographer created, selected, and arranged them in the text. By choosing fieldnotes for their rhetorical effects as well as for their signifying and conceptual functions, an ethnographer tries to prefigure a reader's likely range of interpretations. Still, the original fieldnotes stand there embedded within the analysis, allowing any reader to listen closely to members' voices, to vicariously experience their actions, and to imagine other interpretations. In the end, it seems, the reader has her say.