



THE BIG ETHNOGRAPHY

Doing serious ethnographic work was traditionally the preserve of professional anthropologists possessing, or working toward, their doctorates. Fieldwork took anywhere from nine months to several years, plus time to write up the data, and was conducted in exotic climes. In 1972 James Spradley and David McCurdy stood that conventional wisdom on its head in *The Cultural Experience*, a how-to for introductory students, which empowered all who came after to become ethnographers, not merely to read the ethnographies of others. Spradley and McCurdy's technique is to abandon the idea of a whole study of a whole society in favor of finding a "cultural scene," which they define somewhat inadequately as "the information shared by two or more people that defines some aspect of their experience" (1972:24). More completely, a cultural scene may be defined as a *geographic or symbolic place where two or more people repeatedly share activities that lead to shared understandings*. Within the cities and towns where most institutions of higher education are located, examples of cultural scenes range from a mom-and-pop store to a street gang to a classroom or playground to a drug ring to a convent to a house of prostitution to a hospital ward to a junkyard. They are large and small, legal and illegal, related to making money and spending it, open and secret. There are no limits to what may constitute cultural scenes except that they must be social, the scenes of repeated activities by the same

people, and serve as incubators which generate cultural (i.e., language) understanding. The classroom in which you take this course is a cultural scene.

Although Spradley and McCurdy showed us all how to do what we could not do before, their method has two important limitations: It fails to allow for different constructions of reality between the individuals who share the scene, and it is exclusively intellectual (i.e., related to processes of the intellect), not at all affective (related to the emotions, or even to motivation). The first time that a Colorado College (CC) student found a cultural scene which the people concerned defined differently (Jeff White on the Broadmoor police force, reproduced later), we began to realize that we had to move past the confines of cognitive analysis. Anthony F.C. Wallace made our job easier by replacing the "replication of uniformity" assumption made by Spradley and McCurdy and most of their predecessors about cultural behavior, with what Wallace called "the organization of diversity" (1970). Making sense out of the oxymoron that people can interact successfully while failing to share culture perfectly has proven to make our task more lively and to produce cultural analyses that are closer to commonsense reality.

Putting affect, both ours and our informants', to work for us in ethnographic reconstruction and analysis was a slower process. It received a boost when Renato Rosaldo (1989) insisted on looking emotions in the face in his statement on rage among headhunters and rage in himself when his wife Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo (whom he was courting in the last chapter's breakfast scene) died unexpectedly and violently on a trail in the Philippines. Among the smaller papers in this book, Tony Muñoz handles his own emotions very productively; among the big ethnographies, Jennifer Sands is conspicuous. Andy Lewis uses his emotions to get him going.

Finally, here is a thought to keep before you as you work with your informants and as you analyze your field notes: David Warren, an historian of Brazil who is a native of Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico and works with Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo cultures in the United States, advises those who would advance multicultural understanding, "Once you get to know their realities, you can communicate with anyone." You will know that you are close to finishing your ethnography when you begin to understand the realities of the people whose cultural scene you are studying.

PROCEDURE

Before you do anything else, reread the section on ethics at the beginning of the book. If you pay close attention to it, you and your informants will have a positive and memorable experience.

We shall proceed now in stately but not very ritual fashion with this biggest field assignment and break it down into a summary of four stages. Following the summary, the stages are spelled out in greater detail.

1. Find yourself a cultural scene off campus. Possible scenes may include the following: an occupation you are considering entering, but do not already know (see White's and Goodwin's papers in this volume); a way to get out of your present cultural confines (see Andy Lewis's paper); or an alternative lifestyle you may have been curious about but lacked the courage/excuse to investigate (see the Cunningham-Hayes paper). At the same time, use prosaic criteria such as accessibility of the site vis-à-vis your means of transportation, resistance of informants to be studied, and complexity of the scene in relation to the time at your disposal. Introduce yourself to informants and get their permission for you to do the work. In the case of some bureaucracies, this step may require a letter from the instructor. You will be expected to report that you have made a start to the instructor or the student assistants on or before a date to be announced.

2. Spend time with your informants on a regular schedule, preferably over a month's time, preferably at different times of the day, to understand variations in the routine. Ask what Spradley calls "grand tour questions" early on—that is, "Describe a typical day," or "How does this store/office/school run, week by week?" Such questions will give you a framework within which to pursue more detailed questions as your knowledge opens them up to you.

Get as close as you honorably can to your informants. This is called establishing rapport, and means presenting yourself to the people who are teaching you in such a way that they will welcome you on subsequent visits. Be as open with them about yourself as you hope they will be with you; successful cultural communication is a two-way street.

Check your information with your best informants as it takes shape. They will often be able to correct your interpretations. They may be pleased to see themselves through your eyes, or they may not. You will be expected to report to the assistants that you are well along with collecting information and to discuss with them questions of analysis on or before a date to be announced. "I've done what you told me to, I've asked all the questions. It just doesn't add up to anything," is a frequent complaint at this stage. Take heart. Many people experience this dilemma, and almost everyone, with help, pushes beyond.

3. The last period of the field assignment is devoted to analyzing your material and making sense of it. Diagramming the intellectual understanding is useful (see Christopher Goodwin's paper).

During this period of fieldwork, concentrate on pulling together the threads and fragments of your understanding into a single well-organized whole. But do not impose organization on a scene that is disorganized, and do not assume perfectly shared understanding if in fact people share only partially. Two distinguished anthropologists offered helpful advice concerning the analysis of imperfect systems. David Aberle used to tell his students, "All systems have bugs in them." And A.F.C. Wallace believes that understanding is never shared entirely. He contrasts the "replication of uniformity" approach to culture, which is implicit in old-fashioned ethnography, with an

“organization of diversity” approach, which assumes that cultural understanding is always partial and results from the intersection of different understandings of the same data (Wallace, 1970:123–29). You will be expected to report to the student assistants your progress with analysis and any analytic problems on or before a date to be announced.

4. Hand in a beautifully thought out and written paper on the due date and enjoy the praise that comes from creative work well executed. These papers tend to run about twenty pages.

You or your instructor may wonder why “construct a hypothesis” or at least “set yourself a research problem” is not among the procedures I recommend. After more than forty years in cultural anthropology, I am a little cynical about hypotheses that are more often constructed after than before the fact. For beginning students I am convinced that theory before practice is cart before horse. Ethnography is almost always opportunistic in any event. Stephanie Smith’s experience in finding what to emphasize when studying a racetrack is typical of the bright and flexible student.

I. CHOOSING A SCENE

What will be the topic of your big ethnography? Consider the following questions among others as you make up your mind:

1. What profession(s) am I interested in but know too little about to decide if I want to enter?
2. What are my nonprofessional interests that I never had time or opportunity to inquire into?
3. What sorts of experience has my upbringing not opened me to? What fantasies have I about “life on the other side” that I might explore? *Stretch yourself.*
4. How mobile am I? What means of transportation are available to me?
5. Given the severe time pressure, how big an ethnographic bite can I chew?
6. What linguistic or other interpersonal skills do I possess that I can put to use in gathering information?

Note that the first three questions ask you to expand yourself, the last three to bring yourself back down to earth.

Discuss the possibilities with the staff—the instructor and the assistants. Put out feelers, using whatever contacts you may have, plus any that the staff may add. Do this early in the course, anticipating that several requests may be turned down by potential informants. Some organizations (e.g., city government) may require letters of introduction from the instructor, and a few will require you to sign waivers of liability. These steps take time.

Parameters

The parameters of the possible are wide, but not infinite. First, the various scenes of your own college or university are off limits. Here you are a player, and gaining perspective on your own scene would be a formidable task for any ethnographer; it is too daunting for the first attempt. Avoid noncampus scenes you already know. On the one hand, they are so easy that they are a copout. But at the same time they will betray you into neglecting to ask pertinent questions because you know, or think you know, the answers. If you want to learn the properties of water, don't ask a fish.

What about sex? Stephen O. Murray published an amusing paper on sleeping with the natives as a source of data (1996), which makes some serious points, including the caution that informants often react sexually to the ethnographer as foreigner differently from the way they would with people in their own society and that consequently this kind of participant observation is going to skew the data more than most. Your informants are not likely to be very foreign from yourself and yet, as more than a few ethnographers have found, perspective is hard to gain or maintain while in bed with the scene. All things considered, it is better to limit your contact with informants to the particular scene you are studying during your maiden effort at ethnography. Save the arpeggios of more difficult field techniques for later in your career.

Exchange

Always remember that informants have no obligation to you or to your institution, and consequently you have no rights to their time or their cooperation. I remember that when the Eastern Cherokee of North Carolina failed to provide information as enthusiastically as I would have liked, or failed to keep their appointments to look at the Rorschach cards during my doctoral fieldwork, my first reaction was, "I came all the way down here from Philadelphia to work with you guys. Now cooperate, damn it!" That irrational reaction was ridiculous, of course, and it helped me realize how necessary it was to present myself to the Cherokee in such a way that they would rather provide information about their culture than not. Otherwise, as one saucy young girl of Big Cove remarked, "Why should we answer your silly questions? Just so that you can go back North and teach other people to sit around all day and do nothing, like you?"

What can you offer informants, then, in exchange for their information? The most important answer is the flattery of your interest in their lives, and the fact that you regard their culture as worth the effort of learning, with themselves as teachers. Sometimes you can perform specific tasks they want done; this is an important part of participant observation, the method that is the hallmark of ethnography as opposed to other means of eliciting information. You will also find that information sharing is a two-way street,

and your informants may be as interested in learning about your life as you are about theirs. Be prepared to give as much as you get. Finally, you have amusement value; you are a diversion in what may (or may not) be dull routine lives.

Pitfalls to Avoid in Choosing a Scene

1. If your informants are people much like yourself (e.g., young adults working in a record store), you will be hard put to stand at what is called ethnographic distance so as to see them with some perspective. Your rapport may be great, but your gaze myopic. Try for a scene as different from your own as you dare. See "Parameters." (Not all of my colleagues would agree with me. Some ethnographic research is done by "native informants," i.e., by those already part of the scene. What seems obvious and easy is, however, so difficult that I cannot recommend it for beginners.)

2. Religious institutions are tricky. The foregoing procedural guides might seem to imply that they would be ideal, for you are asked to collaborate with your informants in a student-teacher relation and to report what your informants want known about them. Religious institutions, especially those that are evangelical, are happy to regard you as a neophyte who can be taught/converted. And they have their versions of the truth that they disseminate. The problem is that you may find it difficult to obtain anything from them *but* their truth, which is probably already published. A theological statement is not, after all, the same as the model of how a sociocultural system in fact works. This caution is not intended to put all religious scenes off limits. An excellent study was done by a shy Jewish male student of a Roman Catholic convent; somehow, the personal chemistry clicked, and the nuns did not try to convert the Jew.

3. The one-person scene. A single informant does, of course, derive cultural understanding from many others, so one could argue that such a scene is composed of "two or more people." The ethnographer exercises fewer skills, however, in interviewing and interacting with one person than with several, whose varying accounts of reality he or she must accommodate in the report.

4. Breaking the law. Illegal activities are as cultural as any other, often as rule bound, and at least as interesting to study. But you must be crystal clear whether studying such activity requires you to break the law yourself. Most colleges and universities, because of fear of lawsuits, will not permit students to break laws in the pursuit of course credit. Check carefully and concretely with your instructor (not, in this one case, with the student assistants) to find out what rules govern your own situation. This caution is not meant to discourage you from studying illegal cultural understandings, but to help you and your institution avoid trouble. Even if you manage to

study lawless behavior while staying clear of it yourself, be forewarned that you have no immunity from testifying if called on by legal authorities to do so. If you nobly refuse, the American Anthropological Association may praise you, but the judge is likely to find you in contempt of court.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD INFORMANT?

Once you have chosen a scene, you may hope to have some choice among informants. The criteria that follow will help you choose among several places where similar scenes are played or to select among the people on the particular stage you have chosen.

Don't expect that just because you are the ethnographer and they are the informants, all relationships will work. You don't like all your fellow students or your teachers either, and personality clashes will make some informants good and others bad, quite apart from whether they are knowledgeable about the scene. Beat your head against no brick walls. Here are some criteria for good informants, adapted from James Spradley's *Ethnographic Interview* (1979:45-54):

1. Thorough enculturation. It takes a while for anyone to know the scene. Make sure he or she has been in it long enough to know it inside and out.
2. Current involvement. We all grow rusty quickly. You would no longer be adequate informants for high school culture or for the daily life of the family in which you grew up. Likewise, someone who has left the scene you want to understand won't do. Ethnography went through a long period of collecting "memory culture." In the case of Native American societies which had ceased to exist when the information was collected from the mythic "last survivor," it was either use that technique or lose the whole record. (Theodora Kroeber's *Ishi in Two Worlds* [1961] is a touching comment on this technique.) Ruth Benedict (1946) constructed an ethnography of Japan from interviewing Japanese people in the United States when Japan was unreachable because of World War II. You yourself have just described several small ethnographic scenes from memory. But we know such records to be faulty, and we don't collect them when we have alternatives.
3. Adequate time. Even if they are willing, some potential informants don't have time to cooperate with you in the patient probing, questioning, and requestioning that make a thorough ethnography. Physicians, surgeons, and attorneys are notoriously busy. They may give you a friendly initial interview, then turn you over to their receptionists, which is fine if the focus of your study is the culture of the office, but fatal if you want to learn the culture of the profession.

4. Analytic ability. You want intelligent reflective informants, who are willing to talk about their activity in the scene, hopefully willing to say when appropriate, "How interesting. I never thought about how the parts of the scene go together until I began to explain it to you." The clearest argument that I have seen for encouraging informants to help shape the analysis was made by Roger Lancaster in the introduction to his study of religion among poor people in Sandinista Nicaragua (1988:4):

I see anthropology [read "ethnography"] . . . as an "intersubjective" practice, wherein the subjectivity of the people under study is understood by honest but no less subjective observers. . . . [M]y informants were always reminding me that they, too, were watching me, learning about my beliefs, and assuming a give-and-take in our relations. Commonly, my informants would ask me: "And what are you writing in your notes about us today?" and then proceed to offer suggestions on the interpretation of their own culture and practices. . . . Far from being inhibited by this type of interest, I was often able to refine and sometimes completely revise my models.

II. WORKING WITH INFORMANTS

Recording Data

The most important part of your ethnographic record will consist of field notes. You may also collect tape recordings, photographs, and other material.

You will find it useful to play an intellectual game as you compile your field notes: Assume, even though it may seem on the face of it absurd, that you speak one language (we could call it the ethnographer's language) and that your informants speak another. You will find the germ of truth in this fantasy if you write down the words of your informants exactly as they are spoken. Exert a lot of effort to catch their turns of phrase. It is entirely possible that different informants will speak different languages within the same scene. The very keen ear will hear women's versus men's language, boss's versus employee's language, the language of the old versus the language of the young. In the terminology of literary criticism, these differences in language and points of view are referred to as different voices. This is what David Warren tried to tell us a few pages back.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of learning the language because at the same time you will be doing a task that sounds identical but is not: understanding the scene. Learning something new means translating the unfamiliar into terms one already understands. In a foreign language class one translates literally, but in every other discipline one translates from the new to the old, from the unknown to the known, or one cannot reach understanding. Your final product, your ethnographic report, will be written in your language. But it will be a far better report if it is richly illustrated by the language of the informants. It will take you a while to tune your ear to

catch the difference between your language and that of informants. This is yet another reason not to seek informants of your own sort, who speak your own language in every sense of the term. A number of the papers that follow here are conspicuously successful in recording the speech of informants.

Taking notes: You will quickly discover whether your informants are most comfortable if you tape-record, take copious notes in their presence, or note nothing until you leave. Perhaps you will find that in more formal interaction on the ethnographic stage you can record in detail, but that while informally participating you cannot. Among the tricks of the trade for the latter occasions are to keep pencil and bits of paper in your pocket, so that the moment you leave your informants you can record key words and phrases as aids to your memory when later you write up your notes. A trip to the lavatory just after memorable statements or action may provide the few moments of privacy needed to save important nuggets.

Write out those fragmentary notes in full as soon as you possibly can—at least once a day. However good your memory may be for the gist of what has been said, you are not likely to remember the exact words, or even the exact sequence of events, for more than a few hours. A biographer of Sir Richard Burton, the famous nineteenth-century explorer, says that “Burton owed his success as a narrator in great measure to his habit of transferring impressions to paper the moment he received them,” and credits the idea to Dr. Samuel Johnson, an equally famous eighteenth-century traveler and lexicographer: “An observer deeply impressed by any remarkable spectacle . . . does not suppose that the traces will soon vanish from his mind. . . . [T]he succession of objects will be broken . . . separate parts will be confused . . . and many practical features and discriminations will be found compressed and conglobated [conflated] into one gross and general idea” (Johnson’s *Journey to the Western Islands*, and comments on Burton, in Wright, 1906:149).

Your success as a narrator is even more important, in a discipline that reveres the specific voices which utter culture. In this volume, Elizabeth Cunningham and Kathryn Hayes’s paper captures those voices especially well.

Every day, read over all of your notes. For this small assignment, they will not be so long that this task will become a great burden. Ask yourself as you read what patterns emerge that had not occurred to you. Ask also what gaps appear, so that you can return to the scene and fill them. Make hypotheses as you go along, to test by tomorrow’s fieldwork.

Asking Questions

First, you and your informants must become familiar enough with each other so that information flows freely. Expect apprehension from both of you at first and be patient with it. At the extreme, informants sometimes suspect that ethnographers are undercover agents. Each of us has favorite stories about such

misapprehensions. When I appeared among highlanders in Eastern Kentucky in 1956, where coal mine owners and United Mine Workers had gone through bloody confrontations during the preceding decades, some of the inhabitants of "Henry's Branch" thought I was a secret land buyer for the Ford Motor Company because I wore clumsy army surplus ski boots of a design they had never seen before. If your scene involves activities of questionable legality or respectability, you can be sure that it will cost you time and effort to reassure your informants that you are what you say you are and can be trusted.

Once you begin to overcome your and your informants' apprehensions (i.e., once you have established rapport), you can begin in earnest the stages of exploration, cooperation, and participation. If you want to become an expert interviewer, a goal usually beyond the aim of an introductory course, you will profit by using Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979), which has detailed guides for asking questions in a way that will elicit the data you need in the informants' own voices.

At the same time you are practicing how to capture other people's voices, record your own reactions and your own actions. This process is a necessary part of ethnography in the postmodern era. It is called reflexivity, and we say more about it later. Ethnography is, as noted earlier, a two-way exchange of information. It is also, as Clifford Geertz declared, "an interpretive [discipline] in search of meaning" (1973:5). That meaning, so most of us now believe, is constructed, not discovered, by ethnographers as they put their own culture into contact with the culture of the informant. During this stage of your ethnographic work it is sufficient to take note of yourself-with-your-informants, as well as to note what your informants say and do.

Saying Goodbye

By the time you read this section you have ideally established friendly relations with your informants, have quite possibly got to know them, and they you, better than you know many people with whom you have had long-term casual acquaintance. The relations between informant and ethnographer are very often among the more intimate in European and American life.

How do you take leave? The answer is not so self-evident as you may think. Your fieldwork, if you established good rapport and if you and your teachers/informants made discoveries about their culture, themselves, and yourself, was one of the closest relationships you have ever established. One student of field methods, in fact, jokingly says that making and breaking field ties is like making and breaking a love affair: "It has been pointed out that with sexual liaisons, getting *out* of bed gracefully requires more art than getting in it" (Wolcott, 1995:125).

So take leave formally, even ritually (reread Josh Keilty's ritual paper). Recognize that the familiar "Bye. See you around," won't do. Prepare your speech. Drop hints during the few visits before the very last one about how

much you will miss them. Then shake all the hands that need to be shaken, hug all the people who need to be hugged. Thank all of the people you have worked with, taking care to give each one the specific thanks appropriate to the specific help he or she has given and/or specific incidents you have shared. If you agreed to give one or all of them a copy of your paper, keep that promise. Assure them you will continue to think of them.

Your aim is to leave them feeling enriched by your presence as you are by theirs, glad they took the time and energy to share their lives with you, and receptive to the next anthropology student who may knock at their door. The casualness that marks most American personal encounters is totally inappropriate and would leave your informants feeling exploited. If you think you might visit them at some time in the future, it is better not to promise but do it than it is to promise and not do it.

III. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

By this stage you are well along in data collection or feel you are almost finished. You have asked the grand tour and the mini-tour questions. Your informants have opened up the connections between their participation in the scene and at least some aspects of their lives away from the scene. You have offered a good deal of information about yourself. Perhaps you are beginning to question some of your own long-held values and beliefs as you are challenged by the different beliefs of informants you are learning to respect. This is a normal process in good ethnographic fieldwork. You may have consulted the student assistants and/or the instructor about these doubts. If you have done all or most of these things, you are ready to turn the bulk of your attention to the second large procedural task—analyzing and interpreting your field data. Some students approach this point desperately, asking us, “I have done everything I was supposed to and I have all this information [here they may spread out reams of paper on the table] and it doesn’t add up to anything. What do I do now?”

There are many approaches to that question, and we do not have dogmatic answers, because ethnography in the late twentieth century is not one technique or a single methodology, but a variety of approaches to understanding culture. We do have a number of suggestions—ways of looking at your data.

Wendy Davis’s experience was one that beginning ethnographers frequently run up against. She assigned herself the task of discovering the structure of employee authority and relations in a motel. Like Goodwin, Davis was handed a table of organization. She talked to most of the employees, decided she liked them (some more than others, and the bartender who hit on her not very much at all), that they were interesting people. “But what does it add up to as far as the motel is concerned?”

It added up, as she learned by a systematic comparison of her data with the official statement, to a complex operation that succeeded very well by short circuiting. The manager managed, but below him people took informal charge of various relations with clients (especially reservations and rapport) according to their talents instead of according to their assigned duties. As Davis began to find her way through the masses of interview notes she had collected, she discovered also that employees covered for each other, both in the limited sense of doing each other's jobs when necessary and in the broader sense of helping each other cope with their personal and emotional problems and keeping up each other's morale. The motel was successful, but it succeeded because of informal ties that corporate headquarters would never have recognized and might have disapproved of. The theme of Davis's paper became the informal mutual support structure of work in this small bureaucracy.

What you are after is a model that will make sense of what your informants do. Ruth Benedict, in *Patterns of Culture* (1934), constructs her models around themes, for example, the Zuñi of western New Mexico are Apollonian, the Kwakiutl of the Northwest Coast are Dionysian, the Dobu of Melanesia are prudish, cutthroat, magic-ridden. You may find that some attitudes and opinions recur like leitmotifs in the talk and behavior of your informants, and these motifs can be used as an armature (to borrow a term from sculpture) on which to place the field data in your notes and in your head. Remember that you are constructing a model of a culture, not telling *the* truth about your data; there are numerous truths.

Whether you find themes or not, set out an outline of the information you have. You may be able to do this by yourself; if not, do so in consultation with the instructor and/or the staff, who can help you talk your outline onto paper. Then organize your information according to the outline. Keep in mind that the outline itself is a tool and is likely to change as you work on it. Once you have key points written in outline form, then you can move the points around as the argument of your paper dictates.

A second suggestion is that you organize your data around a narrative sequence. You may tell the story of a day or a week in the lives of your informants; indeed, they may have given you information in these terms in response to grand tour questions. This device can lead to an interesting paper, if it is preceded, followed, and perhaps interspersed with more purely explanatory and interpretive sections. In fact, once you have organized your data in such a fashion, a number of interpretive sections will probably appear to you as necessary in order to make the cultural scene clear to your readers. Ask a friend or one of the course assistants to read this draft, to see what aspects of the scene are unclear to someone who has not been there as you have been, and let these recommendations guide you concerning the additional passages.

A third suggestion is that you ask your informants to help you structure your report. They can sometimes help you with the outline, which

means they have their own ideas what order information best goes in, what follows what, and so on. Even if they cannot do this, they are likely to be able to edit your report for accuracy. "You almost understood what we're about, but you didn't quite get it right at this point" is one of the more helpful responses an informant can offer. And this stage of consultation may lead to further information on key matters that the informant neglected to describe and you didn't know to ask about before you started analyzing and writing. Not all informants can or are willing to read your report, and you may have good reasons for not wanting them to see it before you have finished. But if your aims and needs come together with their desires and abilities, few techniques are more effective for representing other people's culture through their own eyes than to let informants literally help you write about them. (No, this is not a violation of your school's honor code because the informant is helping you revise your draft, not originating it, and because you and not he or she is responsible for the coherence of the model you construct. What it is, or can be, is your own work raised to a higher level of sophistication.)

Whatever technique you employ to analyze your field information, read over your notes several times, making notes on the notes, both concerning outline and further information you need to fill in gaps. And whatever technique you employ, keep in mind that one of the unique properties of *Homo sapiens* is to impose meaning on what we do. Your informants find meaning in their scene; they probably won't agree perfectly on what the meaning is, but they will all be able to interpret it for you. Your task as a student of culture is to construct a model of the scene that shows its meaning. Your model may agree with informants' models; more likely, it will partly agree, partly disagree.

Model and "Truth"

It is time for me to say explicitly what I mean by the term *model*, and to describe the relation between models and facts, and between both and the "truth." Not many decades ago, ethnographers aimed to discover scientific truth and record it in their reports. We have abandoned the search for that kind of truth, in favor of recognizing the multiplicity of truth and of interpreting the interaction between ethnographer and informants. This approach is sometimes called reflexive ethnography. Consider your report as one among a number of possible models.

The aim of a contemporary cultural model is to construct a conceptual picture of a culture or cultural scene that accounts for all of the data you collected. The ethnologist Ward H. Goodenough (personal communication) described ethnographic information as a hierarchy: The primary level consists of what happens; the secondary is what the ethnographer observes, recognizing that he or she is incapable of observing everything; the

third is what the ethnographer records in field notes; the fourth is the model of the culture, derived from those notes. You are working toward level 4. (A fifth level, says Goodenough, is ethnological theory, which is built from separate models of separate cultures. Theory is studied in more advanced courses.)

A model can be defined as a theoretical system, or more poetically as a "scientific metaphor." It is an analogy to data. (These terms are from Pelto, 1970:13.)

Models have certain properties if they are to be useful in science. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1953:525) lists four, of which two are pertinent to our discussion: First, "the structure exhibits the characteristics of a system," a statement which Pelto echoes; and fourth, "the model should be constituted so as to make immediately intelligible all the observed facts."

Your model of your cultural scene will be a system; That is, it should be internally consistent, except where inconsistencies in the behavior and statements of your informants require you, in effect, to make plural models. And your model should take account of all the data available to you. If you find you can reduce some of the relationships of system to charts and diagrams, then you will be quite literally modeling (see Goodwin's charts of an intensive care unit and White's model of the world of a police officer). Sophisticated models often use sophisticated mathematics, but in your first serious approach to ethnography it will be enough to be aware that you are constructing a verbal, and perhaps a pictorial, model.

Of course, there is no such thing as *the* adequate model for a given set of "observed facts." But not all models are equally valid, either. Lévi-Strauss again: "the best model will always be . . . the simplest possible model which, while being extracted exclusively from the facts under consideration, also makes it possible to account for all of them" (1953:526). In all scholarly work, as in art, simplicity is elegance, and it is worth striving toward. Robbins Burling (1964), in a humorous critique of the pretensions of componential analysis to show us how informants really think, says that for any set of facts there are plural adequate models, equally valid, sometimes equally simple. But there is not an infinite number of adequate models. Reach for simplicity. Reach also for your informants' models, for they may have speculated as much about what their activities mean as you have. Compare your model to theirs. If the two models are radically different, discuss the differences between them—with the staff in the course if you have time, and with yourself in any event. The disparity will be profitable to explore, as we implied earlier.

You may think that the material with which you construct your model consists only of the tapes, notes, pictures, and whatever else you have recorded, and of nothing else. Not so. The heart of your field knowledge is in your memory, while the material record you have compiled is best thought of as a mnemonic device to call it up. This may sound unreasonable. Eth-

nologists classically thought that we wrote down (or otherwise recorded) everything we knew, until Frederik Barth inherited the field notes on the Marri Baluch of Pakistan left behind by his colleague Robert Pehrson on the latter's death. Since Pehrson was a thorough and careful scholar, Barth assumed he could write up the notes for publication without complication. He could not. The notes (by extension, all field notes) were tantalizingly fragmentary. Barth found that he had to go to Pakistan himself and spend five weeks doing participant observation with Pehrson's informants, building on the field records Pehrson had compiled (Pehrson, 1966:vii-xii).

Barth apologetically called the Pehrson-Barth sequence of learning about a culture "a makeshift procedure" and "a serious methodological weakness" in the discipline (Pehrson, 1966:xi), but few ethnologists of the 1990s would agree. We now regard the subjectivity of models as intrinsic to all ethnographic work. Most of us, I think, concur with Goodenough (1991), who declares, "I take the position, widely held among modern scientists, that the world out there 'as it really is' and the truth with a capital 'T' are beyond the human capacity to know. We can only have propositions about our world. . . ."

George Mills, an ethnologist decades ahead of his time and a student of the relation of art styles to culture (Mills, 1959), told his students back in the 1960s that if a red ethnographer studied a blue culture, the resulting ethnography would be purple, whereas if the ethnographer were yellow, the result would be green. You must do your best to understand how your self and your culture interact with your informants and their cultures and write honestly about the juxtaposition, at the same time working hard to avoid distortion or inaccuracy. (Reread the quote from Roger Lancaster in the section "Choosing a Scene." Take another look also at Adán Trujillo's desert-born eye on a tree-lined street, and at the contrast between what Dana Curtis and Alan Stewart found worth recording about a mass.)

Your field notes, tapes, photographs, and introspections are therefore necessary but not sufficient materials with which you construct your ethnographic model. They will assist you in making that model (note that the verb is "making," not "discovering" the model). The structure you create is in your mind.

Your final product, then, will be you as well as they or, to use the jargon of the trade, will be Self as well as Other. It will be, whether you intend it to be or not, a dialogue between yourself and your informants. Since it *will* be so, you may as well do it consciously. Most of the student papers that follow contain Self/Other dialogues, each expressed in a voice which fits the writer's own experience.

Once you have decided your focus and the aspects of the culture you wish to stress in your ethnography, look yet again at your own likes and dislikes, your relations with your informants, your motives for choosing the particular scene, your reactions to it, and put them consciously into the paper.

This procedure has more than one advantage. In no particular order, they include the following (and perhaps others of which I am not conscious).

First, in good Freudian style, you can handle your bias better if you deal with it over rather than under the table of your consciousness. You may discover aspects of your bias of which you had been unaware, and counter them in the analysis.

Second, you acknowledge by putting yourself on your own stage that the human psyche is an imprecise recording instrument, and you are likely to describe the culture more modestly, more tentatively, with more humanity—all desirable qualities in scholarship as well as in other pursuits.

Third, you give your readers information they can use to discount your bias and also credit your special access to information. To manufacture a few simple examples, if you are premed and do your fieldwork in a hospital, the reader can simultaneously watch out for your medical prejudices and be more likely to accept your interpretation of some aspects of hospital work. If you are gay and writing about a gay scene, the reader can simultaneously discount your bias and assume that you are likely to have an ear well tuned to the kind of information your informants can tell you. The permutations of interest, bias, and special access are infinite.

Fourth, you can enter one of the most interesting discussions now going on in ethnology—reflexivity, and the assumption that all ethnography is a dialogue between Self and Other, which both parties to the dialogue help to shape, the assumption that if there is any such abstract and fixed entity as “the culture of X,” it cannot be apprehended by ethnography or any other means we can now conceive (see Goodenough on page 99), and that the best and most honest we can do is to publish our Self-Other dialogues, always remembering what other Selves we write for. (In academic assignments, one unavoidable other Self is the instructor, and all students know how much instructors’ expectations influence the way they write.)

What happens to “truth?” Does it disappear in a semantic shuffle? If you define truth as single and absolute, forget it. But if you define it as accuracy, then its importance cannot be overemphasized. Reread the admonitions to set down your informants’ ideas in their own words, exactly as they say them, complete with gesture and inflection. Make sure your own observations about the setting are as accurate as you can make them. *Never cook the data* (that is, don’t distort the facts). And, although in your paper you cannot include every statement from every page of your field notes, be self-critical so your selection leaves “the system” intact insofar as it is within your power to do so. “Truth” is like absolute zero—impossible to attain, but a useful concept and worth all the effort it takes to approach it.

In sum, honor the facts, set them forth as fully and accurately as you can. Seek the truth. But be always aware that you are constructing your model of the scene, which is not likely to be identical to the informants’ model, and which will depend, among other things, on the personal expe-

rience and the theoretical (or, more generally, intellectual) set you bring to the fieldwork.

IV. WRITING THE PAPER

What will your paper look like? Ethnographic reports vary enormously; the student authors of the papers in this volume use widely disparate strategies to organize their field experiences. But all ethnographies should be organized according to the topics you decide characterize your particular cultural scene. Your paper should present a vivid enough picture so that readers can say, as Clifford Geertz (1988) said in a slightly different context, "I am there because you were there." It will be well if your report has a central theme, but do not strain for one.

Wendy Davis, one of the best former student assistants in my course, suggests that it may be useful to "attack writing as if you are trying to prove that the scene is 'cultural.' Go back to earlier assignments and break down this big one in terms of the smaller ones: categorize the information into a physical map, language, ritual, and your reactions as ethnographer" (personal communication).

To recapitulate, put yourself deliberately into the scene, and describe your interactions with the actors on that stage and your reactions to them and to the scene. Neither hog the stage nor pretend you are absent. Although ethnographic reports describe interaction between Self and Other, nevertheless they are not psychological navel gazing; spend more energy trying to understand the Other (using their words to do so) than you do indulging the Self, and keep a balance between the two.

Quite a number of authors, both student and professional, suffer from writer's block. It is not the end of the world, although it may seem like it. If the advice here doesn't work, just start writing—anywhere. You will almost certainly throw away the first few pages of desperation writing, but the dam will have broken and the flow started.

FURTHER IN VARIOUS DIRECTIONS

Beyond the present assignment you should choose among the alternative methods that ethnologists use in doing field ethnography, of course mixing them according to your taste, but recognizing their differences. The Spradleyan method is widely esteemed and goes by the name of ethno-science, sometimes (because it focuses so strongly on what people say and how they say it) ethnolinguistics. Sociologists using such an approach tend to label it ethnomethodology (e.g., Van Maanen, 1988). The simplest guide to doing ethnography written from that point of view is Spradley and

McCurdy's *The Cultural Experience* (1972), already mentioned. Virtually any other book or article that Spradley wrote before his untimely death is also useful. I recommend especially *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979), which will lead you step by step through a productive way to interview informants. Other guides in the ethnoscience tradition are Harry Wolcott's somewhat chatty *The Art of Fieldwork* (1995), an accessible discussion of many of the personal and professional problems the ethnoscience is likely to run into, and Oswald Werner and Mark Schoepfle's exhaustive two-volume *Systematic Fieldwork* (1987), a treatise more useful to graduate students and professionals than to undergraduates. Both contain long bibliographies on the topic. Russell Bernard's *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (2nd ed., 1994) has often been used by undergraduates, although it is not for beginners. It is positivist, stresses scientific method, the use of electronic technology, and sophisticated data management.

To the best of my knowledge, no field manual stresses the cultural ecological method. That is unfortunate, because it is conceptually simpler than ethnoscience and can be used by advanced undergraduates (although the most sophisticated ecological work tries to understand such intricate pressures and counterpressures between environment and culture that they tax the minds even of professionals). Nor, so far as I am aware, has any post-modernist entered the lists.

Beyond such field guides for graduate and advanced undergraduate students as those mentioned here, you must swim with the rest of us in the endless sea of literature on ethnological theory, much of which carries implications for field methods although not written primarily with the field in mind. I confess a bias toward postmodern questions such as the interpenetration of cultures and identities and the uses of reflexivity. Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) is regarded as a founding document on reflexivity. Rosaldo's *Culture and Truth* (1989), which I have referred to several times already, is a favorite of mine on several postmodern topics and has deeply influenced my own work. Even reflexivity, as a subcategory of postmodern theory, has an enormous and constantly expanding literature.