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## Basic Principles of Ethnographic Research

The previous chapter introduced some of the ways in which ethnographic research differs from other kinds of social research. In this chapter we will take a closer look at the concepts, approaches, and assumptions that characterize the use of ethnographic methods.

First, ethnographic research presupposes a “natural laboratory” (the field) rather than a laboratory or clinic as the locus of study. Ethnographers are interested in studying people in the settings in which they actually live, work, and play rather than settings that are specifically designed to meet the demands of a researcher’s hypotheses. For example, much of my own research over the past two decades has focused on adults with mental retardation and/or chronic mental illness. Since the 1980s such people have been treated mainly in local communities rather than in large institutions. Most researchers who are interested in this population take a clinical per-

spective and they tend to gauge the success or failure of a client's "deinstitutionalization" by means of controlled observations at treatment facilities or highly focused interviews by medical or social work professionals. As an anthropologist, however, I have been more interested in what it is like for a person diagnosed with a mental "disability" who must make his or her way in the community beyond the protective walls of the state hospitals of yesteryear; I also wanted to know what the concept of "disability" itself meant—not to the professionals who write the clinical manuals, but to the people who must live with the label on a day-to-day basis. As a result, I have conducted ethnographic research with deinstitutionalized adults in several communities (both urban and semi-rural) around the United States. I have been a participant-observer in sheltered workshops, training facilities, group homes, and at supervised job sites. I have attended social events of various kinds in the company of my study populations. My research does not yield answers to important clinical questions (such as which medications are most successful in alleviating psychiatric symptoms), but I do have answers to equally important social and cultural questions. I learned, for example, that clients were particularly concerned with learning about managing their sexuality, because they believed that this factor, even more than academic and job skills, made them able to function with reasonable success as adults in the "real world."<sup>1</sup>

Second, ethnography usually requires personal contact between the researcher and the members of the study community. In other words, the researcher is not simply "the researcher" who relates to his or her "subjects" only in that one dimension. The ethnographer becomes, as much as is feasible, a part of the everyday life of the people being studied. Ideally, the ethnographer becomes such a familiar presence that his or her research agenda is no longer even consciously on the minds of community members. Ethnographers must therefore seek to establish real *rapprochement* with the people they study—not just the ordinary trust they might inspire as competent researchers, but a real friendship that is based on their personal as well as their professional qualities. The process of

establishing rapport continues throughout the life of a research project—it is not something that happens in one fell swoop.

Establishing rapport is vital to ethnographic research precisely because the method is based on personal contact rather than the objective distancing typical of experimental research. Essential to the rapport-building process is the notion of *mutuality*. The researcher is, after all, asking a lot of the people he or she is studying—they are being coaxed to share private information as well as a considerable amount of time. It is therefore only fair that the researcher be willing to reciprocate in some way. In some cases, doing so might take the form of cash remuneration. This solution is rarely considered desirable, however, as it not only might be beyond the financial resources of a researcher, but it might put the relationship on a depersonalized level that violates the essence of rapport. For those reasons, mutuality is more often expressed in terms of reciprocal social arrangements—for example, the researcher might drive people to appointments, babysit their children, treat them to meals. The researcher should also be prepared to share some of the same kinds of private information that he or she is asking of community members; the ethnographer, for example, should be prepared to show pictures of family or friends, or talk about events or relationships important in his or her life.

One of my graduate students was interested in the ways in which African American women with diabetes managed their treatment (i.e., to what extent they followed their doctors' recommendations about modifying diet and exercise, taking medications, and monitoring glucose levels). She decided to do this research because a close relative had recently passed away due to complications from diabetes and she wanted to learn as much as she could to help people of her own community make the most of available health care. At the outset, however, she thought it would be best to rely on her professional status (she has an extensive background in public health as well as in anthropology). Although the women she met at various community clinics were cordial to her, they were not altogether forthcoming with their information. It was not until she began sharing her feelings about the death of her loved one that the

women in the community recognized an emotional link with her. Once she opened up to them, they opened up to her and her ability to collect richly contextualized (as opposed to merely clinical) data was greatly enhanced.

This student developed a role for herself in the community with her own initiative. It is also possible, however, to work toward rapport in a more structured way. For example, the anthropologist Elizabeth Grobsmith has long specialized in studying the concerns of Native Americans who are incarcerated. Her involvement began back in the 1970s when a U.S. District Court in Nebraska allowed Native Americans to practice their religion (and other aspects of their traditional culture) while in jail. The decree also allowed the prisoners access to culture-specific education and, with the assistance of the state's Indian Commission, provided academic programs in American Indian studies. Grobsmith began as a teacher in one such program, and over the course of time her expert professional contributions to a course of action endorsed by the Indian prisoners resulted in a fund of trust and goodwill. This kind of report might not otherwise have been forthcoming to a non-Native American seeking to do research with such a population.<sup>2</sup>

Third, ethnographic research seeks the perspectives and meanings held by members of the study community. To be sure, all research begins with a researcher whose studies have led him or her to believe that a certain issue merits investigation. But expert outsider perspectives, no matter how well informed by a global, comparative view, should not stand as the whole story. People involved in a social situation will inevitably have their own take on what is going on in their lives, and this inside view, which ethnographic methods are particularly well-suited to elicit, should be an important part of a description of a culture.

The anthropologist Philippe Bourgois, for example, studied crack dealers in New York City. While most observers would see this phenomenon as a social problem, Bourgois wanted to learn how the dealers saw themselves—did they think of themselves as criminals or social deviants? He found out that the dealers preferred to see themselves as entrepreneurs; in an inner-city community lacking viable economic



options for young men, selling drugs was a way to earn money and hence to acquire desirable goods as well as prestige. Bourgois's vivid description of this insider perspective certainly does not alter the fact that the outside world continues to evaluate drug dealers in harshly negative terms. But it does give us some unaccustomed insight into the ways in which people can find positive benefits in an activity that might otherwise be seen as having no redeeming value at all. It suggests that one way to conduct a "war on drugs" is not to inveigh against the immorality of the practice but to provide economic options that might make dealing less attractive as a career path for bright, ambitious young people.<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, ethnographic research is designed to generate data so as to build general theories. In the language of the philosophy of science, ethnographic research is an *inductive inquiry* that operates out of a framework sometimes referred to as *grounded theory*. It is certainly possible to conduct scientific research the other way around: *deductive inquiry* is a process in which one starts with an established theory from which testable hypotheses can be derived. But when working in the relatively open-ended "field" where there are no controlled variables, it is usually more practical to begin with general research questions (rather than formal hypotheses) that can be explored through a variety of data collection techniques. This process continues until new information builds into a clear pattern that supports a general explanation of an event or behavior. (A *theory* in social science is, quite simply, a way to explain a perceived pattern in events and behaviors.) Inductive inquiry in ethnography is therefore associated with a technique known as *triangulation*: using multiple means to collect data from a variety of sources (e.g., the observations, interviews, and archival materials that you are learning about in this manual) so that the researcher can close in on the ultimate general explanatory model from the widest possible set of perspectives.

For example, sociologist Gary Dworkin was interested in the phenomenon of teacher burnout, but he was unimpressed with the prevailing theories he had read about, most of them formulated by psychologists who focused on the dynamics of individual stress. Dworkin conducted extensive ethnographic

fieldwork in public schools in various parts of the United States, interviewing many teachers, students, and administrators and observing many different schools in different types of social settings. He learned that the stress that leads to burnout has less to do with insufficiencies within the individual teachers and more to do with structural or institutional problems inherent in the way public schools are run in modern society. It is the feeling that “the rules have all changed and I cannot do anything about it” that generates the stress leading to burnout.<sup>4</sup>

Fifth, ethnographic research always seeks to understand the *context* of behavior, and not simply the content of that behavior. A social and/or cultural context is the sum total of all the factors (people, groups, institutions, history, economics, politics, the physical environment) that influence the behavior and beliefs of people. Anthropologists traditionally refer to this principle as a *holistic perspective*. A medical doctor, for example, might see a patient's diabetes as a result of an organic breakdown in the insulin-producing cells and would treat only those physical symptoms. A social researcher would look for predisposing factors that constitute the context of the patient's condition and that exacerbate this physical disease (e.g., limited dietary choices available in a poor community).

In a different kind of project, the anthropologist Constance deRoche was interested in the ways in which a small, rural fishing community in Nova Scotia, Canada, had adapted to the new economic opportunities provided by the opening of an industrial park just a few miles away. It would be a relatively simple matter to document the purely economic changes (reflected in salary patterns, household expenditures, and so forth), but deRoche realized that in a close-knit, traditional community such as this village it would be necessary to understand the more extensive context in which these economic changes had come about. For one thing, it turned out that the villagers had a long-standing pattern of emigrating elsewhere for wage employment (either temporarily or permanently); but no matter how often or how far they went away from home, they maintained very strong ties to the home town. Indeed, it was impossible to understand the patterns of economic opportunity just by looking at local employment options—it was

necessary to understand something about the kinship patterns, which in turn reflected religious beliefs and ideas about gender. In short, people were not motivated purely by economic opportunism; a number of people in the study community had, in fact, chosen to stay put for reasons of tradition that, in their own minds, outweighed the economic advantages of going away.<sup>5</sup>

Sixth, ethnography is predicated on an understanding of culture. In the previous chapter we defined a culture as a kind of system—an integrated set of beliefs, behaviors, and material products that is shared by a particular people. Thus, it is not individual behavior, except insofar as an individual can be seen as a representative of a more extensive pattern. An ethnographic researcher is therefore not interested in merely recording specific acts or expressions, he or she wants to see how those factors fit together in a systematic way so as to constitute a culture. We cannot assume that a culture is a ready-made phenomenon that is easy to identify. For example, a certain neighborhood in a city might be inhabited primarily by people defined by the census as “Hispanic.” Although such people might share a number of traits, the defining characteristic of this category is that they all speak Spanish. But important as language is to cultural identity, it is never the sum total of culture. “Hispanics” in the United States derive from many different parts of the world (Mexico, Puerto Rico, various countries in the Caribbean, Central and South America, to name just a few); local traditions might well override any solidarity implied by the shared language. Moreover, in the United States “Hispanics” are divided by social class, occupation, educational attainment, religious affiliation, and so on. We should not assume that there is a unitary “Hispanic” culture just because that category is available as a single check-off box on so many government forms. The job of the ethnographer is to find out the elements that matter to people in specified communities and to see how they construct a sense of cultural identity that suits their particular needs.

Of particular importance to the ethnographic study of culture is the principle of *cultural relativism*, which means that every culture is assumed to be meaningful and useful to those

who follow its ways. The ethnographer cannot possibly study culture without beginning with the assumption that whatever is observed or elicited through interviews or the study of artifacts is neither good nor bad—it just is. The principal task of the ethnographer is to *describe* and *explain*, not to judge. Being a cultural relativist does not mean that the ethnographer is not entitled to his or her opinions of what is right or wrong, just that in the course of research such opinions are set aside and the culture is allowed to speak for itself on its own terms. (In the previous chapter we pointed out that if some cultural practices are completely unacceptable to the researcher, the thing to do is diplomatically bow out—not to lecture the people about their supposed misdeeds and call them to reform.)

Since the United States is preeminently a land of immigrants, it is important to understand the cultural matrix in which people move from place to place—a process very much speeded up and facilitated by modern transportation and communication networks. Some ethnographers, such as Kathleen Murphy for example, have studied the phenomenon of the “border identity”—people from Mexico who cross into the United States to work, shop, or socialize with friends, but who return to Mexico to buy land or access social services. They are neither “Mexican” nor “American” in the stereotyped sense of those labels—they have created a culture and an identity that reflects the transitional nature of their circumstances.<sup>6</sup> In another case, Dianna Shandy has studied refugees from the civil war in Sudan who have been relocated by international agencies to Minnesota. They seemed to her at first to be an “incongruous” people—black herdsmen from Africa plunked down in a largely white (and cold) urban setting. But she soon learned that the refugees’ desire to “make a better life” (the eternal refrain of the immigrant) encouraged them to make the best adaptation they could to these strange new surroundings. They had lost almost all the important elements of their traditional culture (raising cattle in a tropical ecology not being a replicable strategy in the heart of Minneapolis), and yet they kept a sense of themselves as a distinct people by means of a very modern piece of technology—the Internet. Shandy learned that refugees from Sudan had been resettled in as



many as thirty different states in the United States, but they had created a viable strategy for keeping in touch with one another. They were also able to keep in touch with relatives back in Africa; marriages, Shandy found, were often arranged via long-distance phone calls.<sup>7</sup>