Ethnography is an approach to the study of people in everyday life with particular attention to culture, that is, to the processes through which people make (and sometime impose or contest) meaning. This chapter asks when ethnographic research is called for and whom it serves. It asks where and how to look for meaning making, and considers the research philosophy behind participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and other tools such as video analysis and the study of material artifacts. It includes comments on insiders as ethnographers and on the use of cross-cultural and historical comparison to get beyond the blinders we all have because of intimate familiarity with educational systems. Although inappropriate for straightforward hypothesis testing, ethnographic methods are crucial tools for understanding real human behavior in all its complexity and, therefore, for seeking real and lasting solutions to human problems.

Ethnography is an approach to studying people that developed in anthropology and is used as well in sociology, educational research, and other fields. It is the study of people in everyday settings, with particular attention to culture—that is, how people make meaning of their lives. Ethnography is really a philosophy of research rather than a specific method; it depends primarily on the two broad methods of participant observation and open-ended interviewing. This chapter on the design and analysis of ethnographic research offers a foundation for the use of ethnographic methods whether they are part of a mixed tool kit or directed toward a full-blown ethnography. It should be read in conjunction with other chapters in this handbook on related topics such as Case Studies, Discourse Analysis, Exploratory Data Analysis, Field Methods, Interviewing, Cross-Case Generalizability, and Ethnographic/Qualitative Fieldnotes.

Some authors use the terms ethnography and qualitative research almost interchangeably. However, if qualitative research means any study that focuses on describing things (their qualities) rather than counting things (their quantities), then ethnography is one kind of qualitative research among others. Qualitative research also includes history, biography, life history, non-participant observation (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966), focus groups, and many other social science methods, not to mention natural history in the natural sciences. Some scholars see ethnography as nothing more than a fancy word for “fieldwork.” However, for many cultural anthropologists, particularly in the United States, ethnography means describing and interpreting cultural behavior (Wolcott, 1987, p. 43; see also Bernard, 2002). That is what the roots *ethnos* (a people or culture) + *graphy* (writing) imply, and that is what David Bloome (2003) meant when he referred to ethnography as “grounded in anthropological theory” (p. 53).
However, “culture” and “cultural” are complex words that will require considerable unpacking in this chapter.

HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHY OF EDUCATION

The earliest ethnographies of education, broadly defined, were studies conducted in the field of culture and personality, such as Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1930). (See Daniel Yon’s, 2003, recent review.) Psychologically oriented anthropologists wanted to understand how children learned culture outside as well as inside formal settings like schools. Soon, Mead herself and anthropologists like George and Louise Spindler (2000) and Jules Henry (1963) began to apply ethnographic methods to the study of formal education in their own society. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of scholars, many of them teachers, sought explanations for troubled urban schools and neglected rural schools. They found in ethnographic research tools for identifying the complex and context-bound nature of trouble in schools that, unlike the dominant paradigm of the day, did not locate the blame inside the children or in their families (e.g., McDermott, 1977). In 1969, these two generations of scholars founded the Council on Anthropology and Education to make a home within U.S. anthropology for themselves and for qualitative sociologists and linguists of education.

Meanwhile, in Great Britain, the ethnography of education grew out of the sociology of education, largely in response to the expansion of colleges of education. Classroom ethnography and studies of the curriculum were inspired by the Chicago school of symbolic interactionism, social anthropology of the British tradition, and U.S. anthropology of education (Delamont, 1986; Hargreaves & Woods, 1984). Another strand within Britain was neo-Marxist research, notably Paul Willis’ (1977) study, *Learning to Labor*, with its emphasis on students as autonomous actors resisting, albeit sometimes counterproductively, the reproduction of social class. Ethnography of education also developed in other countries, including Israel and Japan. In France, the ethnographic study of education emerged from the sociology of education and from contact with U.S. anthropology of education, but remained distinct from the emerging anthropology of France. In Mexico, under the leadership of scholars like Elsie Rockwell and Antonia Candela, ethnographers of education are aligned with the history of education on the one hand and with classroom discourse analysis on the other.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

If ethnography, in its analysis of everyday life, focuses on culture, what is culture? First, like “personality,” “social structure,” and other terms from the social and behavioral sciences, culture is an abstract concept (Borofsky, 1994) that ethnographers infer from people’s talk and behavior and tools (Wolcott, 1987). The word culture points to very real experiences, as anyone who has lived through culture shock can attest, but it does not point to a thing in the world that people recognize immediately without analysis.

Not surprisingly, then, anthropologists have debated the meaning of culture ever since introducing the word as a technical term. We agree on one point, however: We use the word culture to refer to learning as opposed to whatever is biologically innate in human behavior. Culture is not determined by a person’s “blood” or genes. Moreover, we generally define culture as learning that people do as members of human groups, not learning done completely on one’s own without the intervention of other people. In fact, it is difficult to identify ideas or behaviors learned completely
on your own, without any input from other human beings (such as a word of advice, a model to imitate, a written text, or an illustration on TV) because we are such social animals.

Culture as Meaning Making

What people learn from and through other people is to “interpret experience and generate behavior” (Spradley, 1980, p. 6). That is, we learn to behave in ways that let us survive in the natural world and to organize ourselves socially to do so; we also learn to make sense of the world and our experiences in it. We live in worlds of cultural meanings created by others and ourselves—in worlds that contain Tuesdays and ghosts and godparents and schools and a host of categories that do not exist in the non-human world. Moreover, neither we nor any people do not simply learn to interpret and generate the world as our ancestors did. We are not cultural robots programmed by tradition. Instead, as Brian Street (1993) put it, “Culture is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition” (p. 25). For this reason, many anthropologists today talk about culture as an action or process, not as a thing (cf. Wax, 1993).

Culture as meaning making includes explicit meaning-making—asserting facts and beliefs, such as “the earth is round,” “learning to read is difficult,” or “the soles of shoes are dirty and polluting.” Culture also includes tacit meaning making, such as the assumption that schooling is a good thing for everyone in the world or that 5-year-olds are too young to learn to write in cursive.Tacit meaning making is recognized as “common sense” or “what everybody knows” as “naturally” or “obviously” true. In addition, meaning making includes values, attitudes, and feelings, such as the sensation in your stomach at the thought of eating raw liver or your feeling about seeing a 7-year-old whipped at school.

Culture as the generation of meaningful behavior includes knowing how to act—for example, knowing how to greet colleagues in the morning, knowing how to design a classroom, or knowing how to rear children. Culture also includes “motivational force” (D’Andrade & Strauss, 1992), which is the desire or sense of compulsion to act that is built into the meaning we have made of the world. For instance, if we see the soles of shoes as dirty, we feel pressed to say, “Get your shoes off that couch!”

Because people usually learn to make meaning as a member of human groups, anthropologists often refer to culture as shared. However, the question remains, “Shared with whom?” Contrary to popular conceptions—and contrary to some classics books in anthropology like Ruth Benedict’s (1959) Patterns of Culture—there is no reason to expect to find one distinct culture per group or per community. For the sake of simplicity, LeComte and Schensul (1999) wrote, “All ethnographers begin—and end—their work with a focus on ... patterns and traits that, lumped together, constitute a people's culture” (p. 21). However, as Renato Rosaldo (1993) pointed out, reference to “a people's culture” in the singular makes it difficult to “to study zones of difference within and between cultures” (p. 28). Even in the remote New Guinea community studied decades ago by Gregory Bateson (1958), men and women held different values and views of the world; how much more so in societies where people living side by side in a large nation work at different occupations, affiliate with different religious communities, earn different incomes, or speak different sets of languages? Therefore, ethnographers do not expect that everyone in the same setting, even members of the same group, will always agree on meanings.

Moreover, “we are all multicultural” (Goodenough, 1976). Each individual brings together his or her own constellation of cultural meaning making, and therefore, many ethnographies today focus on “identity.” For example, Aurolyn Luykx's (1999) remarkable study of students at
a Bolivian teacher training college asked how the students continued to participate in some ways in rural Indian culture—to maintain their identities as indios—even as they acquired teaching culture (i.e., became profesionales). Jan Nespor (1994) examined the different communities of practice into which physics students and management students at a large state university were inducted. Although the two groups of students shared many cultures (and identities) as Americans and as university students, they also developed distinct identities and distinct cultural knowledge related to the disciplines they were studying.

Material, Economic, and Political Context

Because human beings are animals, students of culture cannot ignore the material context of human lives. We must attend not only to meaning making but also to the immediate physical settings in which people live—the hard benches of the classrooms, the noisy background in the cafeteria. We must also attend to the material and economic bases of people’s lives—how people get food, water, shelter, and other animal necessities—and more generally, how the economy is organized. Javier Tapia (1998) showed, for example, that situations caused by poverty itself rather than by cultural values or motivations explained the school problems of some children in the struggling Puerto Rican families he studied in Philadelphia.

Similarly, culture cannot be studied separately from power. Cultural scenes are “the definitions of the situations held by the actors” (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972, p. 24); however, as Karabel and Halsey (1977) warned, “the question of whose definition will ultimately prevail is pre-eminently one of power” (p. 58; see also Rosaldo, 1993). Ethnographers do not ignore questions of power and inequity when we study meaning making. On the contrary, in Handicapping the Handicapped, Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls (1986) showed how a psychologist’s talk and the district’s perspective flooded out the concerns of both the mother and the classroom teacher in deciding the fate of a student during a diagnostic conference.

(In Great Britain, anthropology has generally focused on social organization rather than on culture, and therefore, begins with questions of power and status rather than with meaning making. However, just as description of culture implicitly requires attention to the material world and to power, so description of social organization implicitly requires attention to meaning making. Status and power depend on culturally constructed categories like “teacher,” “school superintendent,” “achievement,” and “college-preparatory track.”)

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY GOOD FOR?

It is important to understand what kinds of questions ethnography can address and what it cannot. Ethnography is useful, first, for discovering what meanings different actors are making of a situation. We cannot solve a problem or evaluate an attempted solution if we do not understand what the real problem is or how actors define it. As Erickson and Gutiérrez (2002) put it, “A logically and empirically prior question to ‘Did it work?’ is ‘What was the ‘it’?’” (p. 21). Second, ethnography is useful for developing a valid understanding of local situations in all their complexity. Ethnography provides the opportunity to explore actions in their wider context and thus to describe the real-world complexity of human behavior. Third, because ethnography takes time, it gives us the opportunity to observe and understand processes as they happen. In short, ethnography is good for asking, “What is going on here?” It is a good method when we are not sure exactly what the problem is. It is good for asking, “How does this happen?”, and “What does this mean?”
On the other hand, although ethnography is good for generating hypotheses, it is not a good method for testing hypotheses. Because it is too focused on complex local situations, it does not permit easy isolation of one variable for testing. In fact, some ethnographers question whether we can think of human behavior in terms of variables at all. Although it is a good tool for challenging generalizations, ethnography by itself without cross-cultural comparison is not a good method for developing universal generalizations about human behavior. It is not a good tool for cut-and-dried measures of "success," although it is a good tool for evaluation if the evaluators want to explore a reform's real consequences, expected and unexpected.

ETHNOGRAPHY FOR WHOM?

Like all researchers, ethnographers of education face ethical dilemmas, beginning with the question of what problems are worth studying. One version of that problem is where to focus the ethnographic gaze. On the one hand, ethnography is well designed to tell the stories of less powerful people. Because ethnography requires the researcher to understand how insiders make sense of a situation, ethnographers can draw attention to and express publicly points of view of less powerful players. Indeed Daniel Yon (2003) pointed to a long tradition history of advocacy for change within educational ethnography. Ethnographers have often sought to demonstrate what classrooms look like through students' eyes or what school systems look like through the eyes of disenfranchised families.

On the other hand, studying only the powerless can have the unintended consequence of making their behavior more visible to those in power and therefore easier to control; it can also unwittingly collaborate in keeping the operation of power out of sight. As Laura Nader (1969) pointed out, ethnographers ought also to "study up" (i.e., to study the operation of power). Some ethnographers of education have heeded this call by studying teachers rather than students, principals and superintendents rather than teachers, middle- and upper middle-class parents rather than poor parents and families of color.

The American Anthropological Association's (AAA) evolving code of ethics lays out two guiding principles for ethnographers. First, people have the right to know that they are being studied and to choose whether to participate. "Openness and disclosure about the intentions, procedures, results and publication of research should be communicated to those studied insofar as this is possible" (AAA, 1998, section III.A.4). Some social scientists raise the objection that people will modify their behavior when they know they are being studied and, indeed, this can happen. However, ethnography is not the same as spying. Besides, lies and idealized performances are revealing in their own right, and ethnographers who persist in the field hope to learn to distinguish idealized from real behavior.

The second principle is that "anthropologists have a major, if not primary, responsibility to the people they study" (AAA, 1998, section III.A.1). At a minimum, this means that researchers should do no harm. This requirement is more difficult to meet than one might expect, because a researcher's actions can have unintended consequences. Therefore, for example, ethnographers need to take precautionary measures such as disguising the identities of names in fieldnotes on the chance that fieldnotes could turn up in the hands of an unintended reader or even be subpoenaed by a court. Responsibility also usually implies that ethnographers owe reciprocity to the people studied, compensating them in an appropriate way for their part in the research. However, the principle of responsibility has more wide-reaching, and ambiguous, implications.

As mentioned, ethnography may give researchers the ability to speak for people who have not had a public voice. However, do we then have the responsibility to speak for them?
Sometimes ethnographers feel ethically compelled by what they learn from their research to take a stand, even if it jeopardizes the possibility for future research or causes colleagues to question their "objectivity." Donna Deyhle (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000), for example, reported the racial discrimination against Navajos practiced in communities and schools where she did research; in response, the local school district tried to get her fired from the local university.

At the same time, ethnographers have come to recognize the dangers of speaking for those they studied, particularly because within the community studied there may be contested views. For example, Lisa Rosen (2003) studied both "sides" in California's "math wars." Ethnographers ask not only, "Do I have the responsibility to speak for these people?," but "Do I have the right to speak for these people?" Sometimes the answer is to speak alongside the people as Deyhle did. Sometimes the answer is to help people gain access to public forums so they can speak for themselves. A different problem with honoring responsibility to the people studied emerges when ethnographers study up. When we turn our gaze, for example, to officials of the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development, what is our responsibility to those powerful actors with whom one has developed trust, as opposed to the less powerful teachers, parents, or students whose lives they affect?

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

Designing an ethnographic study ordinarily begins a question that, as we saw, may be as broad as, "What is going on here?" A more specific original question may be generated by a problem to solve or by a theoretical issue. However, because ethnographers study people in everyday life, they often discover situations they were not expecting and must be ready to redefine or expand their research questions accordingly. For example, when Kanuri Okano (1997) set out to study school-to-work transitions in Japan, she discovered that six students in her much larger sample turned out to be invisible minorities, third-generation Koreans. She seized this opportunity to study how school personnel both fought and participated in employers' discriminatory hiring practices. When Amanda Datnow (1997) was studying efforts to de-track a high school, she stumbled on the workings of gender within the hierarchy of teachers at the school and made this one focus of her research.

On the other hand, a study may remain focused on a predetermined question and not develop a full-blown description of culture, yet draw fruitfully on ethnographic goals and methods. For example, Na'ilah Suad Nasir (2000) used ethnographic methods to explore a focused question: What kinds of mathematics do high school and middle school basketball players want and need to do, and how do they do it? Her observations zeroed in on practices and games, and she focused her interviews on such topics as how players understood averages and percentages.

**The "Field"**

It is often difficult to know where the field is. Some classic ethnographies focused on a village, an island, or a school (physically bounded places); however, cultures are not bounded, and one may find multiple cultures in the same site. Student ethnographers sometimes make the mistake of thinking that they have to study a named group (usually a named ethnic group) like "the Japanese" or the local "Black community." However, to study meaning making, there is no need to look for a named group. Moreover, as already argued, there is no reason to expect one-culture-per-group, assuming you can identify a bounded group at all.

Spradley (1980) recommended that ethnography in a complex society (and all societies are complex) starts with a social situation—"the stream of behavior (activities) carried out by people
(actors) in a particular location (place)” (p. 86). The ethnographer can then focus on the same activity carried out by various actors in various places; for instance, one can ask what a reading lesson looks like in different classrooms across a school district. Or, the ethnographer can focus on an actor or actors moving through different activities in different places, as Alan Peshkin (1972) focused on a Kanuri schoolgirl moving through her day in Nigeria. Alternatively, the ethnographer can focus on a particular place, such as a school building or a community center, as actors come and go carrying out different activities. Similarly, George Marcus (1998) recommended that the ethnographer follow the people or a person’s life or biography. He further suggested that we follow not just the activity, but also that we that we follow a conflict or follow the plot or story of an unfolding event. He suggested following a thing or a metaphor. For example, my colleague and I followed a thing, the ideal of “good reading instruction,” as expressed by different actors located at different levels of interconnected hierarchies across national borders—teachers and teacher educators and Ministry of Education officials and international donors (Anderson-Levitt & Alimasi, 2001). Such strategies allowed us to cross borders and to recognize and describe conflict as well as culture sharing.

How to Look: Participant Observation

As the phrase participant observation suggestions, ethnography takes a dualistic approach. Because culture is about meaning, ethnography requires eliciting the insiders’ views and thus the researcher to participate to some degree in the situations studied. However, because insiders cannot articulate the tacit levels of culture, the ethnographer must also observe from an outsiders’ perspective to make visible the invisible.

Seeking the Insider’s Perspective. To grasp how insiders make sense of their world, we need to engage with them as human beings. Ethnographers cannot help but participate in the scene to some degree. Discovering culture is partly a matter of learning by doing—learning to greet people in an appropriate way, to eat and drink in appropriate ways, to carry on conversations in appropriate ways, to carry your body appropriately, to notice what the locals notice, and so on.

Outsider ethnographers begin by negotiating entrée into the situation and seek to establish rapport with the insiders. The hope, of course, is that people will let ethnographers witness what really goes on rather than putting on a falsified performance. Establishing rapport can take a long time. For instance, only because the White working-class boys she studied had already known Julia Hall (2000) for over 2 years were they willing to talk with her and let her observe them in and around a neighborhood youth center. In his study of race, social class, and gender in a Newark high school, Cousins (1999) chose to live in the community with his family for 2 years.

As mentioned, spending a long time in the field also allows ethnographers to witness processes unfolding, including sequences of events that suggest (although they do not prove) cause and effect. Being there long enough also lets ethnographers witness entire cycles of activities that take a week, a month, a semester, or a year or more. Long-term studies and repeat visits over the course of years or even a lifetime allow the ethnographer to track cultural changes and the socialization of children into adults and parents. Other studies, including some of Margaret Mead’s (1928, 1930) classic work, have been conducted in less than 1 year, and research that uses ethnographic methods can sometimes be accomplished in a matter of weeks. Multi-site comparative studies may require shorter stays in any individual site. However, the researcher must be aware of what can and cannot be accomplished in a shorter period of time.
Listening is probably the most important activity of an ethnographer during fieldwork. It is crucial to the research philosophy behind ethnography: If we seek to understand how local participants make meaning, we cannot begin the research with a pre-formed set of questions. Predetermined questions reflect your meaning making, not theirs. For example, I went to France expecting to study teachers’ conceptions of “reading readiness,” but I listened first. I did not hear very much talk about “readiness” (until I had been listening for a long time), but by listening and by asking much more open-ended questions (How is Marie doing? How can you tell?), I learned what issues preoccupied these teachers (Anderson-Levitt, 2002).

Asking questions—after having listened to the language used by local people and to the issues that they raise on their own—is the next most important way to participate. Asking is so important that ethnographic interviews are usually listed as a method of equal importance with participant observation.

Sometimes the ethnographer begins as an insider, as a full participant in local cultures. This position gives the ethnographer a much deeper, lived understanding of local meaning making, but also creates additional challenges. For example, Bryan Brayboy (1999) chose to study the strategies for success of people similar to himself, Native American students at elite colleges. In some of his writing, he discussed the practical and ethical dilemmas of being an insider and yet, by virtue of his role as a researcher, an outsider. Ethnographer Sofia Villenas (2001) played complex roles as both insider and outsider to two different groups; middle-class health and education service providers on the one hand and immigrant, Latino, low-paid mothers on the other.

Sometimes the fieldwork consists of the everyday life of the researcher–insider, examined reflexively and supplemented by interviews and other data gathering. For example, Ouyang (2000) built on his experiences as an English-language educator in a Chinese institution to study the experience of teachers trained there. As an insider, he had a particular point of view in favor of “progressive” methods for language instruction, which he made clear, but he also forced himself to use the research to turn a critical eye toward the application of those methods.

Seeking the Outsider’s Perspective. Outside observers may be mystified at first by insiders’ behaviors, but they have the advantage of noticing what insiders do not notice. Implicit or explicit comparison with their own insider knowledge makes cultural meaning making visible to them. For example, Margaret Finders’ (1997) perspectives as a literacy educator and an adult feminist made her much more conscious of what her teenage girl informants (with whom she spent time at the mall and at slumber parties) noticed and did not notice about teen magazines. For instance, she recognized, as the girls did not, the difference between ads and articles in the magazines. Benjamin Hill’s (1996) perspective as an American observer made him acutely aware of teachers’ relative indifference to “cheating” in Japan; this awareness gave him an angle from which to analyze academic competition in Japan and, indirectly, in the United States.

Even outside their own countries, however, ethnographers of education who study schooling are insiders to some degree, because formal schooling is now ubiquitous and more uniform than you might think around the globe (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). The biggest challenge for us as insider researchers is to make the familiar “strange” so as to make it visible, a task rendered doubly difficult when studying schooling in one’s home society. It requires distancing ourselves as observers, sometimes by using particular techniques.

The first and most crucial technique is to record observations in writing, on the spot when possible, or at least immediately after the event. Ethnographers must practice making distinctions in their fieldnotes between accurate and detailed description, on the one hand, and their own interpretive comments on the other. Several guides to fieldwork, such as Carolyn Frank’s (1999), Ethnographic
Eyres, provide tips on how to recognize and remove over-interpretation from description. Regular rereading and coding of fieldnotes while still in the midst of fieldwork, as a first step in analysis, can help an ethnographer recognize and remove bias from observations.

At first, many ethnographers try to take notes on everything, forcing themselves to see and record the larger context in which situations take place. Eventually, however, the research question, whether predetermined or emerging, will require more focused observation and more structured notes. For example, it may make sense in the context of a particular study to inventory all the books in a child’s home or to follow the activities of a particular child in a school. Spradley’s (1980), Participant Observation, and Bernard’s (2002), Research Methods in Anthropology, offer guides for structured and systematic observations. Still, writing fieldnotes is an art as well as a science; Sanjek’s (1990), Fieldnotes, demystified the task by sharing the sloppy and imperfect fieldnotes generated by many experienced ethnographers.

Tak ng, and studying photographs helps ethnographers see what at first they did not notice. Drawing maps and sketches, such as a map of a classroom or a sketch of a school courtyard, helps even more. Taking a census forces observation that is more systematic. Conducting a survey, usually toward the end of the research after the important questions are well understood, also forces the ethnographer to record variation and complexity across a population. Recording and analyzing episodes of social interaction in detail is a particularly effective way of distancing oneself from a familiar scene.

Locating Culture With Different Research Tools

The insider–outsider paradigm is one crucial framework for approaching fieldwork and analysis. Another useful framework derives from the question, “Where is culture?”; that is, “Where do people make meaning?” For the purposes of doing ethnography, meaning making can be located “in the head,” in social interactions, or in artifacts. (For a theoretical discussion of culture as both private or in the head and as public, see C. Strauss & Quinn, 1998; for a discussion of culture as “in” tools or artifacts as well as in public interaction and private thinking, see Cole, 1996, and Wertsch, 1998.)

In the Head. To say that cultural meaning making happens “in the head” is to recognize that people sometimes interpret situations and generate behaviors privately. For example, when a principal encounters a parent, she may make a mental note categorizing the parent as future friend or foe. Similarly, a teacher working alone to plan the year’s lessons is doing cultural meaning making. Of course, researchers can infer private meaning making only when it is made public, either in the form of social interactions or in the form of artifacts, such as written lesson plans. Interviewing is the most obvious technique for making public and accessible some of what people are thinking; hence, the central place of interviewing in ethnography.

Ethnographic interviews range from conversation-like interactions to focused, structured interviews. James Spradley’s (1979), The Ethnographic Interview, is still a good source of guidance on how to be systematic and thorough in your interviews without imposing your own categories. Bernard (2002) outlines practical techniques such as kinds of probes. Other tools that ethnographers use to elicit private meaning include card sorts and various tests and probes, including asking people to sketch their cognitive maps or visual models. Ethnographers listen for and systematically collect stories, metaphors, proverbs, and terminology. We sometimes collect information using questionnaires, if people are comfortable with literacy and we are sure we know the right questions to pose. We probe insiders’ ideas and feelings by collecting life histories and sometimes by using psychological tests (redesigned to suit the local context).
In Social Interaction. To say that culture happens in social interaction is to acknowledge that much of human meaning happens between people, in discourse and in unspoken interaction. Therefore, ethnographers often record and analyze face-to-face interaction. Indeed, Norma González (1999) recommended “a focus on the interactions between people (often in unequal circumstances)” (p. 433–434). It is often in social interaction that we see power imposed and the work of hegemony accomplished, as in the study of how students come to be labeled as learning disabled cited earlier (Mehan et al., 1986). Social interaction also includes the production and interpretation of texts that communicate from one actor to another and, again, may seek to control, such as students’ files, notes sent home, and memos from the district office.

However, face-to-face interaction moves rapidly, and fieldnotes often fail to capture its subtleties. Therefore, ethnographers of education often rely when they can on audiotaping or videotaping interactions. Recording is far from a cure-all, and technology fails to capture many things that only fieldnotes can record, such as the identity of speakers on an audiotape or events off camera. The equipment can be cumbersome and intrusive, and it will break down when most needed. Nonetheless, such records do sometimes allow us to document, as fieldnotes cannot, the changes in intonation and shifts in posture and repaired sentences with which people construct and contest everyday reality.

In Artifacts. Finally, as the reference to written texts suggests, the ethnographer can look for the traces of cultural meaning making left in artifacts, that is, things people have created. Artifacts include both material objects like a school building and social institutions like the current American system of schooling (Cole, 1996). Even when we cannot witness the teacher filling in the report card and the family reading it at home, we can learn something about the construction of meaning by looking at the layout of the card itself. Ways of thinking about children and about school have been crystallized into certain categories and certain symbols for grades. Similarly, although teacher and students may not choose to use classroom furniture as it was intended, the design of the furniture—rows of desks screwed to the floor or large circular tables, multiple blackboard surfaces, or individual study stations—crystallize certain meaningful habits of teaching.

Michael Cole (1996) and James Wertsch (1998) offered extended discussions of cultural artifacts or tools, and their reflections can inspire ethnographers to look more closely at artifacts as simple as a hammer or a note or a single word. Both of them include language among the most important of human artifacts or tools. Indeed, language is critical to meaning making at every level, even if not all meaning is expressed in language. Interviews and other probes of what is in people’s head depend on language; most social interaction involves talk; and terminology, metaphors, proverbs, and formulas are among the artifacts that crystallize and institutionalize cultural meaning. No wonder that Norma González (1999) argued for a focus on language, and Stanton Wortham and Betsy Rymes (2003) argued for a linguistic anthropology of education.

ANALYSIS

Ongoing analysis and redesign of the study begins from the first day of fieldwork. As ethnographers write fieldnotes, they also jot down analytic notes—puzzlements, questions to follow up, initial hypotheses about what is going on. They attempt to periodically reread notes looking for repeated terms and statements and behaviors, as well as for examples that contradict their emerging hypotheses.

Analysis is about making sense, both from the insiders’ perspectives and from an outsider’s perspective. In analysis, we seek the logic and rationality of insiders’ perspectives and behaviors.
We also try to make sense of behaviors by looking at the larger context made visible by distance and comparison.

Indeed, comparison and contrast are key techniques of analysis, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) pointed out (see also A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I suggest keeping an ongoing inventory of your research, noting what kinds of information (interviews, participant observations, artifacts, recordings) you have collected about whom, during what kinds of events or activities, and in what kinds of places. You can then compare across different dimensions of this inventory. Do you find evidence of the same theme or the same pattern of behavior across, for example, the same actor in both interviews and observations? This kind of comparison is one way to get at cultural ideals versus cultural realities. It also forces you to calibrate the insiders’ perspective with the outsiders’ perspective. Do you find evidence of the same theme or the same pattern of behavior across different actors in the same setting? This kind of comparison helps you recognize variation or even conflict among actors. Do you find evidence of different patterns of behavior across different activities or places? In such patterns you find evidence of how context matters.

Deliberately seek out contrary cases. Where you do not find the same pattern or theme, then either your hypothesis that this is a general cultural pattern is wrong, or you have found a nuance in the pattern. You may have identified a moment where actors contest meaning or where the same actor fluctuates between different meaning systems. Look also for blank spaces in your analysis—for what was not said that might have been said or what was not done that might have been done.

Writing ethnography is a challenge. Presenting the full picture requires reporting a great deal of contextual information. Staying true to the local scene requires concrete detail and verbatim quotes. Ethnographies usually work best, then, as full-length monographs. However, articles in academic journals are often the best way to communicate with colleagues. Journal articles, unlike an ethnographic monograph, should make just one point. Therefore, the authors of article-length ethnographic reports find themselves referring to their other articles, their dissertation, or their forthcoming book to acknowledge the broader context.

Ethnographers sometimes find that other formats succeed better at conveying the sight and sound and emotional tone of a setting. Ethnographic film has a long history within anthropology, although it is underused in the ethnography of education. Photo essays such as the series at the end of Robin Alexander’s (2001), *Culture and Pedagogy*, communicate something that words cannot. Some ethnographers feel that a fictional writing style or even poetry best communicates the meaning making at the core of ethnography. Marjorie Wolf’s (1992) book, *A Thrice Told Tale*, lets us judge for ourselves the different kinds of truth conveyed by raw fieldnotes, an article-length ethnographic analysis, and a fictionalized short story all depicting the same episode from her fieldwork in Taiwan.

**BEYOND ETHNOGRAPHY**

Although ethnography has drawn more attention in recent decades, anthropologists have another even older research tradition that builds on and supplements ethnography. It is cross-cultural comparison. Given the intimate familiarity ethnographers enjoy with schooling on their own countries, it is very difficult to take an outsider’s perspective; thus, the importance of cross-national comparison for opening our eyes to the entire range of meaning making that goes on in and around our schools (Tobin, 1999).

However, the worldwide expansion of Western-style schooling means that even cross-national comparison does not make visible some invisible parts of schooling culture. Only
historical analysis—comparison across time—can challenge what we now take so much for
granted. For example, although teachers around the world now value student “attention,” it was
not an issue until the development of whole-class instruction; although educators in many parts
of the world now claim to value student participation, it was not a reasonable goal until the intro-
duction of mass secondary education (Anderson-Levitt, 2002).

SUMMARY

Ethnography is an approach to the study of people in everyday life. It focuses on culture, that is
on people making and sometimes contesting the meaning of their experiences, but without igno-
ring the material, economic, and political contexts of that meaning making. Ethnography requires
a dual perspective: understanding the insiders’ points of view to grasp the logic of their actions,
but stepping back to take the outsiders’ distanced perspective that makes visible what insiders
would otherwise take for granted. Ethnographic research is time-consuming and unpredictable,
and it is inappropriate for straightforward tasks like testing a hypothesis. However, it is an ideal
research strategy for seeking to understand real human behavior in all its complexity and, there-
fore, provides important background for any research that seeks real and lasting solutions to
human problems.

FURTHER READING

Agar, M. H. (1980). The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography. New York:
Academic.
A readable and practical reflection on fieldwork. Includes discussion of ethnographic research pro-
posals and funding.
Becker, H. S. (1998). Tricks of the trade: How to think about your research while you’re doing it. Chicago:
University of Chicago Press.
Valuable insights on how to do ongoing analysis from a master of qualitative sociology.
Bernard, H. R. (2002). Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches
(3rd ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
A bible of anthropological research.
River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
This is a how-to textbook with lots of useful exercises. Heavy emphasis on the writing process and on
U.S. settings.
Researcher, 30(8),16–27.
Attempts to tidy up three “muddles” that affect the way we do research. See particularly the discussion
of the meaning of culture.
Good and succinct. Includes discussion of analysis.
Pennsylvania Press.
Tracks the new discussion of ethics in anthropology prompted partly because of new job market out-
side academia.
A readable guide to ethnographic methods that help teachers and education students gain insights into
students’ lives outside as well as inside class.

Classic sociology text on how to conduct and analyze qualitative research, focusing on case studies and comparisons.


Practice in observing and interviewing, beginning with tasks that are harder than you would think, such as describing a "still life" and observing a stranger.


These editors have selected some of the best chapters or appendices describing the research process from previously published ethnographies, including Whyte's classic, *Street Corner Society*; MacLeod's high school ethnography, Ain't No Makin' It; and Lareau's study of home and school. Some selections include discussion of data analysis and write up.


Six short, well-focused volumes lay out the philosophy and how-to's of ethnography with special attention to applied settings in medicine and education.


The introduction to this study published in 1922 offers the first account, and a lucid one, of how to do ethnographic fieldwork.


Notable for including illustrations of real fieldnotes.


A much-cited and very practical reference.


Overlaps a lot with *The Ethnographic Interview*, but focuses on social situations.


Research suggestions directed at undergraduates but useful for everyone, illustrated with brief ethnographies of cultural scenes written by undergraduates.


A feisty discussion of the difference between "real ethnography" and other fieldwork or qualitative research.


One of relatively few books on analysis.


A thoughtful and honest account of the human side of doing fieldwork, rather than a how-to book. Perhaps especially valuable for those who have already started and have run into trouble. Based on the author's experiences studying a Kwakiutl village and school, "the man in the principal's office," and African beer gardens.


A thoughtful meditation and guide, probably more useful to the beginner than *The Art of Fieldwork*.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

Because ethnography is essentially a philosophy of research, it raises many philosophical questions worth pondering before beginning a study. Here are some of them:

1. What problems do you foresee in your responsibility to "the people you study"? For example, do you best serve your informants by telling the truth or by protecting their image?
2. Investigate how research on "human subjects" is reviewed at your university and fill out a request for approval of research involving human participants. Consider what risks a study you have in mind could pose for participants. What problems do you anticipate in informing people honestly and accurately about your study? What problems do you anticipate when asking for consent? Is written consent appropriate for an ethnographic study?

3. Watch *The Ax Fight* (Timothy Asch & Napoleon A. Chagnon, Watertown, MA: Center for Documentary Anthropology, 1975), a 30-minute film that nicely illustrates the difference between raw experience and ethnographically analyzed experience. The film begins with unedited footage of a fight in a Yanomamo village; one can sense the confusion about what is happening and hear the ethnographer expressing to the filmmaker his inaccurate on-the-spot hypothesis. The scene is replayed with explanation in the context of complex analysis of kinship ties and past village history.

One learns to do ethnography by doing it. Many books on ethnography and other qualitative methods suggest exercises that help you learn by doing. What follows are some of the exercises that my students and I have found most useful. In every case, you will learn a lot more if several of you do the exercise independently and then compare what you produced and what you learned.

**Observing**

1. Observe a social situation for 2 to 5 minutes (or watch 2–5 minutes of an ethnographic film without narration). Take notes in two columns, one labeled "description" and one labeled "interpretation," leaving plenty of blank space. After the observation ends, fill in with expanded notes. Adapted from Frank (1999).

2. Observe the same film or assign one person in your group to observe the same social situation while focused on a particular actor instead of the scene as a whole. What insights do you gain by attending to one person's point of view? What information do you lose by narrowing your focus?

3. Make a map or sketch of a physical space with attention to the people present.

**Interviewing**

4. Grand tour interview (from Spradley, 1979). Select one insider, and conduct an interview that thoroughly explores a single question seeking an overview of a place, an activity, or actors in a particular setting. For example, ask, "What are all the places here?" while touring a school, a classroom, a child's bedroom, or another physical space; "What are all the activities that take place here during a typical day (or week, or month, or year)?"; "Who are all the actors (people) who come here in a typical day or week or month or year?"

5. Focused interview (from Spradley, 1979). Focus on one particular place, activity, or actor, and ask one specific question until you have exhausted all the answers. For example, "What are all the steps in getting a student officially labeled as learning disabled?"; "Who are all the people who must be involved to get a student officially labeled as learning disabled?"
Analysis and Writing

6. Identify an episode described in your fieldnotes and ask the "null hypothesis"; that is, suppose this was random behavior. Is that possible? Alternatively, test the "craziness hypothesis": Suppose these people are just plain crazy. Is that possible? If not, how does their behavior make sense? (from Becker, 1998).

7. Sort through your early fieldnotes and identify verbatim terms that people have used more than once. What definitions are implied by their particular use of the term? What questions will you need to ask to learn more about what the term does and does not entail?

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REFERENCES


