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Book Author(s): Roger Sanjek

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PART II

Ethnography, Past and Present

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Chapter 4

Ethnography

The word “ethnography” has a double meaning in anthropology: ethnography as *product* (ethnographic writings—the books and articles written by anthropologists) and ethnography as *process* (participant observation or fieldwork). The product depends upon the process but not in any simple $A \rightarrow B$ relationship. In constructing ethnographies, anthropologists do more than merely “write up” the fieldnotes they record as part of the process of doing fieldwork. If ethnographies can be seen as the building blocks and testing grounds of anthropological theory, then it must also be accepted that ethnographies and the ethnographic process from which they derive are shaped and molded by theory.

Ethnography (in both senses) may profitably be envisioned as one side of an anthropological triangle. The other two sides are *comparison* and *contextualization*. Together, the three sides of this triangle define the operational system by which anthropologists acquire and use ethnographic data in writing ethnographies. Fieldnotes are filtered through and interpreted against comparative theory and contextual documentary materials. As they are read, ethnographies stimulate comparative theoretical thinking, which in turn suggests new problems and interpretations to be resolved through further ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographies, and the comparative theoretical reflection they spur, also regularly lead to new demands and rising standards for documentary contextualization (more history; more ecological or demographic backgrounding; more attention to state policy, economic trends, and the world system). This anthropological triangle of ethnography, comparison, and contextualization is, in essence, the way in which sociocultural anthropology works as a discipline to explain and interpret human cultures and social life.¹

Ethnographies as they have evolved over the past hundred and sixty years constitute a genre, a form of writing conditioned by the process of knowledge construction epitomized in this anthropological triangle. Ethnographies consequently differ from travel writing, gazetteers, interview-based surveys, or even the personal fieldwork accounts of anthropologists (which form a separate genre). Ethnography, both product and process, has a history and pattern of development of its own.

A Brief History of Ethnography

As a written account, ethnography focuses on a particular population, place, and time, with the deliberate goal of describing it to others. So, often, did the writings of nineteenth-century explorers, missionaries, military agents, journalists, travelers, and reformers, and these contain much information useful to anthropologists. What distinguishes the first ethnography, Louis Henry Morgan's *The League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois* (1851), from these other writings are two qualities: its attempt to depict the structure and operation of Iroquois society from the Iroquois viewpoint (the ethnographic side of the anthropological triangle) and its grounding in the monogenist anthropological theorizing of its time (the comparative side of the triangle), ideas to which Morgan would make major additions and reformulations. Morgan's book detailed Iroquois matrilineal kinship, political and ceremonial life, material culture, and religion, the ethnographic basis for this information being Morgan's partnership with the Western-educated Iroquois Ely S. Parker, his translator and cultural interpreter. The book's attention to history, geography, the impact of white settlers, and contemporary land-rights issues also established standards for pre- and postfieldwork contextualization (the third side of the triangle) that anthropologists continue to heed.

Morgan's ethnography, still authoritative and readable, was not joined by comparable works until the 1880s. What ensued instead were increased efforts to provide standardized guides for gathering ethnographic data to local "men on the spot" (few were women) in accord with the comparative goals of armchair theorists. Although Morgan did collect kinship data himself from American Indian groups on field trips during the 1860s, much of the material he used in later writings arrived from missionary and other amateurs in India, Australia, and elsewhere who filled in and returned his

kinship schedules. In England, E. B. Tylor played a key role in drafting *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, first published in 1874 for use around the globe; he and other comparativists, such as James Frazer, helped shape up the resulting local work for publication, often first as articles in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, which dates to 1872. Through these efforts, ethnographic standards slowly improved, and theoretical perspectives became more overt, but contextualization retreated, a victim of anti-historical and ethnocentric evolutionism or diffusionism.

The fieldwork of Frank Cushing among the Zuni Indians in the early 1880s made a great leap forward in ethnographic method. Cushing learned to speak Zuni, resided at the pueblo over a four-year period, and combined observation of ongoing events with the seated-informant questioning more typical of anthropological guide-users. Cushing's sensitive *Zuñi Fetiches* (1883) revealed the inner world of these people's cosmology, mythology, and symbolism and its connection to practical activities. So did his major work *Zuñi Breadstuff* (1920), but its initial publication during 1884–1885 in an obscure journal insulated its impact at the time. Cushing's lack of influence on students and his death in 1899 combined to make his ethnographic advances a false start for anthropology.²

Franz Boas's ethnographic research among the Inuit in 1883–1884 moved less thoroughly in the participant observation direction than Cushing, and his subsequent fieldwork through the 1890s among the native Americans of the Northwest Coast consisted mainly of the transcription of texts recited by seated informants.³ It was this approach that he taught his cohorts of students during the first three decades of the twentieth century at Columbia University, and they took it with them as anthropology departments sprouted in the United States. Their goal was the “salvage ethnography” of “memory cultures” and not the direct participant observation of human life as it is lived. In view of the devastated circumstances of Native American reservations, the Boasians recognized no alternative until acculturation and community studies became acceptable choices in the 1930s. Until then, American ethnographies increased in number and improved in contextualization as historical interests supplanted evolutionary theory. But they stultified in method as participant observation regressed, and in theory as well, with little invigoration from the ethnographic side of the anthropological triangle.

In British anthropology, the division of labor between the armchair theorist and the person on the spot, already dead in the United States, entered

obsolescence in the 1890s when Tylor and Frazer's Oxford-trained protégé Baldwin Spencer collaborated in participant observation with a seasoned local expert on Aboriginal life, Frank Gillen. Their *Central Tribes of Native Australia* (1899) provided a vivid and detailed view of cosmology, ritual, and social organization that not only revealed unheralded cultural complexity amid technological simplicity but sparked new theoretical currents in the work of Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud.

Even before Spencer and Gillen's work was published, in 1898 a team of Cambridge scientists arrived on the spot themselves in the Torres Strait islands just north of Australia. Though less theoretically or ethnographically provocative, their results moved fieldwork practice beyond even the Australian ethnographers via crystallization of the genealogical method of anthropological inquiry by team member W. H. R. Rivers. Rivers demonstrated that systematic collection of genealogies could produce far more than kinship terminologies. Community history, migration trajectories, marriage patterns, demography, inheritance and succession, and the relation of rules to actual occurrences could all be studied. With his application of this method in *The Todas* (1906), an ethnography of a South Indian group, Rivers also found that prior knowledge of kinship connections enriched his understanding of Toda participation in ongoing ritual events.⁴

These British ethnographic innovations were incorporated into a 1912 revision of *Notes and Queries*. Novice ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski carried this with him to New Guinea in 1914 but soon became discouraged with the limits of even this more sophisticated use of the seated informant. In his groundbreaking Trobriand Islands fieldwork of 1915–1918, Malinowski bettered Cushing. Not only did he learn the language, he more actively entered the scenes of daily life and made the speech in action he heard and recorded there the basis of his ethnography. Moreover, he maintained detailed fieldnotes that he analyzed topically while still in the field and constantly reread to plan further research activities.⁵ He found that topics such as economics, law, land use, and magic intruded on each other—the events recorded in his fieldnotes could be analyzed from several of these institutional perspectives. Thus was his functionalism born, “the mass of gears all turning and grinding on each other,” as his American contemporary Ralph Linton put it.⁶

Malinowski's students, a robust and gifted group, produced dozens of classic ethnographies during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Perhaps the most influential is E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940). Rich in ethnographic

details, it is nonetheless highly selective in their presentation, subordinating them to a powerful theory of how descent ideology organizes group life and cattle management against the vagaries of annual ecological transformation and population movement. In this work, influenced by the thinking of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, a strong relationship was evident between the comparative and ethnographic sides of the anthropological triangle, and its impact was marked over the next quarter century. As critiques of *The Nuer* later mounted, it was the historical-contextual side of the triangle that was seen as most in need of bolstering.

In the United States, Malinowskian-style ethnography took hold and Boasian fieldwork methods were largely superseded. Margaret Mead, one of Boas's later students, independently invented an ethnographic approach equivalent to Malinowski's, against her mentor's advice.⁷ From the 1940s, on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, a combination of strong ethnography but weak contextualization was widely visible in both anthropological theory and in ethnographies themselves. New demands for improved contextualization arose with the impact of ecology, regional analysis, history, and world systems in the 1960s and thereafter. Today, there are hundreds of classic ethnographies, although perhaps none since *The Nuer* would be as readily so designated by a majority of anthropologists or has been as widely read.

In sociology, there is less agreement about the disciplinary origin of ethnographic research methods. Conventionally, the monographs of the University of Chicago sociology department during the 1920s and 1930s are cited: studies of itinerant "hobo" workers, youth gangs, dancehall employees and patrons; Italians, Poles, Jews, French Canadians, Mexicans, and Chinese; and central city "gold coast" apartment, artist colony, and rooming-house dwellers.⁸ Two decades before this research, however, W. E. B. Du Bois used similar methods (both he and the Chicago school were inspired by British and American survey and settlement house movements) to produce *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), which depicted life in an inner-city neighborhood of southern migrant and northern-born African Americans. Even earlier, Frederick Engels in 1844 studied new classes, Irish labor migration, urban spatial arrangements, symbolic attachments, and modes of observable behavior in Manchester and other rapidly industrializing British cities, although his *Condition of the Working Class in England* was not published in English until 1892.

Since the 1920s, there has been much cross-fertilization between anthropological and sociological ethnography. A few of the “Chicago school” studies were conducted by researchers identifiable as anthropologists. Moreover, both the Lynds, authors of *Middletown* (1929), a study of Muncie, Indiana, which credits anthropologists Rivers and Clark Wissler, a Boasian, for methodological inspiration, and William Foote Whyte, author of *Street Corner Society* (1943, 1955), a study of Boston’s Italian North End influenced by Harvard anthropologists, are considered major figures in the development of American sociology.⁹ In England, Max Gluckman, a Manchester social anthropologist who did fieldwork in Africa, was influential in the development of ethnographic fieldwork by British sociologists in schools, gangs, and workplaces during the 1950s and later.¹⁰

In recent decades, both anthropologists and sociologists have undertaken ethnographic research in a wide range of traditional and innovative settings, at home and abroad. So, increasingly, do scholars from folklore, education, environmental psychology, political science, and other disciplines. Ethnography, however, remains central to credentialing, teaching, publishing, and theory construction in social and cultural anthropology, and it occupies a more marginal position in other fields.

Selection, Access, Rapport

The selection of a particular population or site for ethnographic research is ordinarily related to some unanswered question or outstanding problem in the body of comparative anthropological theory. Personal connections or predilections of researchers also shape this selection, but the fieldworker still must justify his or her choice in terms of some significant theory to which the project is addressed. Usually this is made explicit in a written proposal for funds to underwrite the fieldwork.

Although ethnography is thus lodged from conception in comparative anthropological theory, the comparative side of the anthropological triangle molds the ethnographic process in two further ways. First, anthropologists are imbued with a cross-cultural perspective by training and career-long reading. When addressing any aspect of social life—marriage, leadership, ethnicity, television viewing—they recall and refer to examples of similarities and differences in the global range of societies with which they are familiar. Unlike other social sciences that see Western experience as the

center and as the norm, anthropology fixes each case within the widest coordinates—social formations globally, throughout human history.

Second, the comparative perspective focuses ethnographic attention on trends and transitions, not just on similarities and differences at random (which are infinite). Rather than treating each ethnographic instance as unique (which in terms of extreme cultural relativism, it is), ethnographers place the social phenomena they observe within comparative frames (foraging, horticultural, agricultural, pastoral, industrial, colonial, neocolonial economies; cooperative, competitive, individualistic societies; gender subordination, complementarity, or equality; etc.). Ethnographic results in turn provoke debate, revision, and innovation in such theorizing. And behind this, and behind the ethnographic process itself, lies the problem of identifying what is most deserving of close attention within the flux of daily life—the patterns of behavior and change that effect shifts in the social order at large.

Significant theories bring ethnographers to particular locations, actors, and activities, and once they arrive, they begin to observe and listen. Often they must learn to listen—learn the language, the local vocabulary, and current verbal conventions. Ethnographic fieldwork now turns away from theoretical discourse to the viewpoints and concepts of the people (informants, subjects, actors, consultants) themselves. Ethnographers aim to document how the people see and talk about their everyday social activities and groupings and about the wider worlds they live in. Their normal scenes of activity, topics of conversation, and standards of evaluation are the objects of ethnographic fieldwork.

This does not begin by announcing “I’m your ethnographer; when can I interview you?” Ethnographers must be honest about their role and sponsorship (covert fieldwork remains controversial and rare), but their paramount aim is to listen and to move as quickly as possible into the natural settings of social life, the places people would be, doing what they would be doing if the ethnographer were not there. This involves a continuing process of requesting and obtaining access to the many locations, activities, and groups that comprise the overall fieldwork arena. As ethnographers observe and listen in a wide-ranging manner, within parameters set by the significant theories that bring them there, they begin to understand culturally meaningful behavioral conventions and to formulate culturally appropriate utterances. This indexes a second continuing process: building

interpersonal rapport with informants, a topic that preoccupies many autobiographical accounts of ethnographic fieldwork, one of the most instructive being Whyte's 1955 Appendix to *Street Corner Society*.

As the ethnographic process unfolds, the fieldworker must constantly make decisions about where to be, who to listen to, what events to follow, and what to safely ignore and leave out. These decisions are guided both by the significant theories prefiguring fieldwork and by new theories of significance that arise in the field. These latter theories—hunches, hypotheses, ideas about connections and relationships—emerge as listening and observation proceed. They suggest which persons and activities to focus upon, what places and events to attend to, and which objects and their circulation to follow.

As this occurs, the fieldwork “funnel” narrows, to use Michael Agar's apt metaphor.¹¹ The early phase of securing access and building rapport is wide, open, and nearly all encompassing. As theories of significance emerge, pan out, or are discarded, the funnel of informants, events, and activities narrows. Goals crystallize. Research design sharpens.¹²

Discovery Procedures: Listening

Ethnography's greatest strength is situated listening. Interviews become useful at later stages of fieldwork, but ethnographic research begins by listening to what British anthropologist Audrey Richards called “speech in action.”¹³ Here the actors control topicality—talking to each other about what they usually do—and the researcher secures access to their turf—the locations they usually occupy. Early on, as rapport begins to be established, fieldworkers deliberately place themselves in a wide range of such situations so that they can sample widely. Then, as the research funnel narrows and other methods are deployed, the ethnographer becomes more selective about where to listen.

The importance of situated listening was emphasized memorably by Whyte. After he asked an intrusive question during illicit gambling activities, stopping the ongoing flow of behavior, Whyte's key informant Doc told him, “Go easy on that ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘why,’ ‘when,’ ‘where’ stuff, Bill. You ask those questions and people will clam up on you. If people accept you, you can just hang around, and you'll learn the answers in the long run without even having to ask the questions.” Whyte said, “I found that this

was true. As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to questions that I would not even have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interview basis.”¹⁴

Situated listening becomes the basis for understanding both what can be talked about in later conversations and interviews and what categories and evaluations the actors use to observe and interpret ongoing behavior.

Discovery Procedures: Observing

Many veteran ethnographers bristle when they are told that their methods are not quantitative. Using both emic categories articulated by the actors and etic categories formulated by the community of social science observers, ethnographers count, sample, and calculate ratios, proportions, and probabilities as part of their fieldwork activities.¹⁵ These countable quantities include numbers of people in events, their positions, their comings and goings; objects and inventories; and exchanges, movements, orderings, sequences, associations, assemblages, and arrangements of many sorts.

Malinowski's classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) incorporated his numerous observations of the inter-island *kula* exchange of seashell valuables—necklaces traded for armlets—as canoes from one community arrived at another, exchanges were conducted, and then additional exchanges of foodstuffs, timber, greenstone, pottery, and other items followed. Who exchanged what, the order, etiquette, volume, frequency, and other variables were all counted and analyzed. In Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943), the size, composition, duration of activity, and initiation of interaction were recorded and analyzed for numerous group events. Whyte even demonstrated quantitatively a relationship between hierarchical group leadership structure and bowling scores.

Discovery Procedures: Interviewing

Interviewing is problematic.¹⁶ Human beings are apt to reinterpret or reformulate the past to make it conform to their ongoing sense of the present. Moreover, the ever-present danger of an observer effect in fieldwork—that the presence of the ethnographer affects and reshapes an actor's behavior and response—is especially difficult to control in an artificial one-to-one interview situation, where normal social activity is suspended.

Still, interviews are essential in ethnography. They are best left for later stages of the ethnographic encounter, when, to use Agar's funnel metaphor, the speech events of fieldwork move from wide and open to narrow and more focused. After the investigator has become at ease with the language and local codes and references and has successfully gained access to natural conversations and amassed a stock of cultural knowledge via situated listening, deliberate intervention into speech events may begin. These steps may be graded from least to most intrusive and controlled.

1. Still on the informants' turf and still in the accustomed activities of daily life, the ethnographer begins to enter natural conversations as a speaker and begins to shift topicality to her or his own interests. This process starts gently, with the ethnographer moving appropriately into rounds of chatting, gossiping, and ordinary comment. As cultural competence increases and as theories of significance emerge, the ethnographer attempts to direct conversations by introducing questions and suggesting topics for responses from informants.
2. After an initial period of fieldwork—a few months, perhaps—arranged interviews may begin. This class of speech events is disruptive: the informant is removed from her or his turf to the ethnographer's household or office, or an everyday location is transformed into a scene of ethnographer-informant dialogue, an activity that would otherwise not be occurring there. Typically, the earliest of these deliberate breaks in time-place behavioral flow reserve topicality for the actor. In such open-ended or discovery interviews, the informant is encouraged to move the conversation according to his or her own interests.
3. In later and more productive interviews, the ethnographer begins to assert control. General topics are introduced, allowing informants to expand freely upon their own points of view and knowledge. In more structured ethnographic interviews, topicality is more firmly shaped and directed by the fieldworker. Informant responses now move away from orations and free commentaries and to more specific responses to questions.
4. In the most focused forms of interviewing, the ethnographer controls both turf and topicality as fully as possible. Questionnaires and interview schedules may be used, and the objective is to obtain particular types and pieces of data. These may include household interviews,

psychological tests, and reports of disputes or may encompass repeated interview sessions to secure lengthy life histories, with the ethnographer guiding the subject according to preset standards of scope and comprehensiveness.

5. Though not a major part of ethnographic practice, in some instances, and when still on the informants' turf, the ethnographer may ask direct and pointed questions and attempt to secure precise pieces of data for his or her records. Interventions of this sort are especially dangerous—the inappropriateness of such seizures of topicality in everyday settings may be jarring to the actors. Typically, speech events of this sort occur in the final phase of fieldwork, when local rapport is at its peak, research goals are most pressing, and the fieldwork funnel approaches its vanishing point.

Notes and Records

The production of notes and records begins to move ethnographic research toward its ultimate written products. Focused interview sessions with seated informants often permit direct transcription of verbal statements. In open-ended and ethnographic interviews, brief written notes—what Simon Ottenberg terms “scratch notes”—are taken during the session, and these form the basis for the construction later of fuller written fieldnotes.¹⁷ Fieldworkers often go through this two-step process even when interviews are tape recorded, both as a backup to and index of the taped session and because of the analytic gains many ethnographers note in transforming their scratch notes into fuller descriptive fieldnotes.

During ethnographic research in natural behavior stream settings, similar brief jottings may be inscribed, but major attention is directed to observing the event in progress. Often it is not even possible to record scratch notes, and both they and fuller fieldnote description follow later. Margaret Mead wrote about the nagging pressure to type up fieldnotes from scratch notes and about the danger of scratch notes growing “cold” when this was delayed, even by one day. She also wrote of the satisfaction of being caught up in this work and of the importance for later ethnographic writing of the insights gained in expanding scratch notes into descriptive fieldnotes.¹⁸

Ottenberg sees this process as the interaction of scratch notes and “headnotes”—the stored memories and interpretations that arise from

direct participant observation as filtered by the ethnographer's overall theoretical stance. Headnotes form an essential complement to fieldnotes (and to more formal fieldwork data sets or records). Headnotes are employed to make sense of one's fieldnotes when they are re-read later for ethnographic writing projects. The importance of headnotes is particularly evident when one ethnographer attempts to use another's fieldnotes and quickly realizes how difficult it is to understand them without headnotes of one's own.

Fieldnotes typically are kept in running chronological order and may be (minimally) indexed separately by actor and topic. Additionally, ethnographers usually generate various records—well-defined sets of data organized by topic, person, or other category. These may include records of household composition, land holdings, ritual performances, life histories, folktales, and so on. Sometimes, decisions to collect sets of records are part of the initial research design, and pre-set forms to enter such data may be brought with the investigator to the field setting. In other cases, a decision to collect a systematic body of records develops during fieldwork, often emerging within general running fieldnotes and then being separated out in new record files.

Fieldnotes and records present ethnographers with great masses of information—hundreds, even thousands of pages—that while accumulating may be arranged only by chronological order or by topic. Malinowski urged that ethnographers constantly re-read and begin to organize and analyze their notes while still conducting fieldwork, but commonly the more focused work of indexing them occurs when fieldwork is over. As ethnographers then turn to ethnographic writing, they readdress the theoretical discourse they turned away from in fieldwork.¹⁹ Fieldnotes and records must now be related directly to the comparative and contextual sides of the anthropological knowledge-construction triangle.

The Ethnographic Writing Process

On paper, two types of documents (each with many iterations and subdivisions) link fieldnotes and ethnographic writings. Book or article *outlines* key the writing process to comparative theoretical ideas and contextual data sources against which fieldnote evidence will be weighed and interpreted. *Indexes* of fieldnotes and records are developed and refined to locate relevant data for the topics of concerns in the writing outlines.

The ethnographer then works back and forth along the fieldnote-index-outline-ethnography continuum.

At the same time, considerations are made as to format, style, readership, manner of presentation, and direct use of fieldnotes and informant statements. These issues are considered both through emulation of admired models of ethnographic writing and through attention to a critical literature on ethnographic writing that arose in the 1980s.²⁰ This postmodernist concern with “the crisis of representation” adds to earlier forms of ethnographic criticism that focus mainly on faults of contextualization and that have produced ever-higher standards in historical, political economic, ecological, demographic, statistical, and legal backgrounding.

Conclusion

Ethnographic research produces results that can be obtained in no other way. The ethnographic tradition entails “the description of people’s activities, their interactions with each other, [and] their verbal behavior[, which should be] copious and detailed. Cumulative development consists above all in the fact that such data, provided they are adequate, never become obsolete and can be used by analysts in researching questions not visualized by the researchers who collected them.”²¹