

# Introduction

Please read this first

## WHY DO WE NEED CST ANOTHER BOOK ON ETHNOGRAPHY?

Social research methods texts have been growing in number incrementally in the past decades. It seems that every methodology, analytical approach, technique, and stage of the research process has its own dedicated book, and ethnography is no exception. There are books on visual ethnography, virtual ethnography, organisational ethnography, ethnography and education, ethnography and health, writing ethnography and so on (apparently ad infinitum). Perhaps this is precisely why a book like this one is called for.

*This book clearly and succinctly summarises a broad range of issues relevant to ethnography.* It is not quite an encyclopaedia but is more than a dictionary. It is comprehensive yet brief. It is small and neat and easy to hold and flick through. It covers methodological techniques, advances, debates, concepts, and research fields. Time-honoured themes traditionally explored in qualitative methods textbooks are included, such as key informants, access, participant observation, and rapport. Issues sometimes excluded from older texts, such as reflexivity, writing, fieldnotes, and ethics are also covered. But, more exciting, recent developments such as virtual and multi-sited ethnography also have their place. No other book covers all these themes of direct relevance to ethnography in one place.

*Each concept is presented comprehensively yet critically,* with examples from ethnographic fieldwork accounts, and with references for students to follow up if they want to pursue a topic in more depth. Cross-references to concepts covered in the book are indicated by the use of bold. The examples are enjoyable to read and are collated from a range of books and articles. However, I have tried to use several examples from a few of the same projects, so that as the student dips into the concepts over time, he or she will gradually become familiar with the work of a few authors in some depth.

*The book draws on my own reflexive-realist perspective.* I am a sociologist with intellectual ties to both social anthropology and human geography.

I have a background in qualitative and quantitative methods and have taught ethnographic methods for a number of years to undergraduates and postgraduates from a range of social science disciplines. This unique perspective impacts on my interpretation of the concepts addressed. I enjoy postmodern accounts for their creativity and passion but I am concerned that ethnographers should also remain faithful to what they set out to do when access was first obtained. It is crucial that we conduct ethnography reflexively with constant awareness of our role in the research enterprise. However, this does not mean abandoning any sense that there is a real world we wish to learn about, and which our research participants live in, experience, feel constrained by, and help create.

*The book can be dipped into as required, to learn about individual concepts, or consulted in its entirety, as a treatise on current issues and debates in ethnography.* I have indicated where concepts are linked or can be read together. It is a useful didactic tool for teachers, who can prepare an entire session around one, or a group of, concepts and indicated further reading. The book is for students who are learning about ethnography as part of research methods training or in order to prepare for the field themselves. And it is for practising ethnographers to take with them into the field (and back), as a sort of comfort blanket, a resource to turn to in difficult times. It is meant to be consulted at every stage of the research process, being a first port of call before taking the ideas further in your own work or by consulting that of others. Enjoy! But first I would like to clarify the distinction between fieldwork, the field, and ethnography.

### FIELDWORK, THE 'FIELD', AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The term 'fieldwork' is often confused with participant observation and ethnography, as if they were all one and the same thing. To be clear: *ethnography* is a methodology, *participant observation* is a method, and *fieldwork* refers to the period of primary data collection that is conducted out of the office or library. Fieldwork is also used in survey research where it refers to the period of data collection when questionnaires are distributed or face-to-face interviews are conducted. For ethnographers, fieldwork is the phase of data collection when the ethnographer is 'in the field'. The term 'fieldwork' also acknowledges that there is a beginning and end to the fieldwork part of the research process, and that this phase is distinct (at least to some extent) from other phases such as the research design, review of the literature, analysis, and writing stages.

Ethnographic fieldwork may involve any or all of the following elements and considerations (all covered elsewhere in this book): gaining **access**, recruitment of participants, establishing an insider role and gaining an **insider** (emic) perspective, deciding the extent to which to be overt or **covert**, building **rapport**, using gatekeepers, **key informants**, or research assistants, getting out, retaining an objective (etic) perspective, and avoiding **going 'native'**. It may draw on the following methods: participation, observation, document collection, group and individual interviews, asking questions, taking photographs, even survey research, or collection and construction of audio tape and film. What is essential is that it remains faithful to some sort of definition of ethnography.

### WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

Ethnography is a methodology – a theory, or set of ideas – about research that rests on a number of fundamental criteria. Ethnography is iterative-inductive research; that is to say it evolves in design through the study (see **analysis, coding, fieldnotes, grounded theory, and induction**). Ethnography draws on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, and **asking questions** (see **interviews, participant observation, and visual ethnography**). It results in richly written accounts that respect the irreducibility of human experience (see **writing**), acknowledges the role of theory (see **generalisation**), as well as the researcher's own role (see **reflexivity**), and views humans as part object/part subject (see also O'Reilly, 2005; Willis and Trondman, 2000). Beyond this, each ethnographer will choose whether or to what extent he or she wishes to consider historical and/or macro factors, the extent to which to be critical or to engage in cultural politics (see **critical ethnography** and **feminist ethnography**), and the range of methods employed beyond direct and sustained contact, watching, listening, and enquiring. Similarly, ethnography tends to be small-scale and tends not to include much in the way of quantification, but these are not to be taken as limitations (see **multi-sited**).

Ethnography has its roots in British social anthropology and in American cultural anthropology as well as (later) in the **Chicago School** of sociology. It has not been possible to include much discussion here of early anthropology, its development, its roots in biological field sciences and the salvage of native cultures, and its subsequent crises in the face

of postmodern and poststructuralist critiques. For more on these, I direct readers to MacDonald (2001) and Faubion (2001).

## REFERENCES

- Faubion, J. D. (2001) 'Currents of cultural fieldwork', in P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, and L. Lofland (eds) *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: Sage, pp. 39–59.
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- Willis, P. and Trondman, M. (2000) 'Manifesto for ethnography', *Ethnography*, 1(1): 5–16.