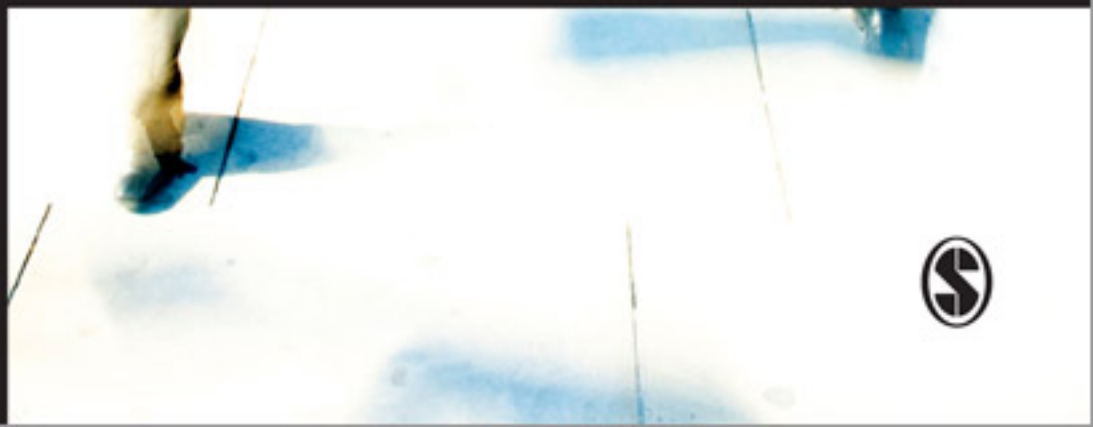**SAGE**

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KAREN O'REILLY

Key Concepts in
Ethnography

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key concepts in
ethnography

Introduction
Please read this first

WHY DO WE NEED 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).

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Access

Ethnographic research properly begins once one has entered the field. This involves gaining access to the people and places being studied.

Outline: First steps in ethnography. The general gathering stage. Deciding where to study. Introductions and 'recruitment', and persuading participants to take part. Negotiating sensitive access. Deciding whether to be overt or covert. Choosing a role and presentation of self. Getting out, and avoiding 'a case of the Pyles'.

GENERAL GATHERING

One of the first steps one has to consider when embarking on a piece of ethnographic research is how to gain access to people and places in such a way that the ethnography successfully achieves its outcomes. However, I think it is important to note that most research projects actually begin in the library and surfing the Internet, with what Paul Thomson (1988) has called the 'general gathering stage'. Here the ethnographer swots up on his or her topic, collecting background information, reading substantive and theoretical works related to the field and, of course, learning more about the research participants themselves. This might involve, for example, collecting background statistics on migration for ethnography with a migrant group, or learning about policies towards homelessness for an ethnographic study with homeless women. The next step is actually getting into the field and this involves gaining access to the group or setting.

FIRST STEPS

Though it may seem a simple point, it is actually crucial to take this first step tentatively and carefully. Many an ethnographer has been hampered or curtailed by the means of direct access to the group. The means through which access is gained will affect whom the ethnographer can

access

speak to about what, and how the research participants respond. The knock-on effects of the way the initial approach is handled can be devastating and long-lasting, barring the ethnographer forever from certain aspects of the group or from addressing certain questions or issues. More than this, access is not something achieved once and for all. It has to be negotiated and renegotiated all along to different groups, different people, for different topics (Berg, 2004). It is not always obvious where to do the research, and as Laud Humphreys (1970: 18) points out, there is often a tendency to avoid difficult access issues by simply using 'that beleaguered, captive population, students in our classrooms'. It is far better to begin with a research interest or intellectual puzzle and then to ask where the action is. For his study of behaviour in *'certain men's conveniences in an American city'* (tearooms, in American slang), Humphreys says he did not want to simply research homosexuals but 'participants in homosexual acts', which was an important distinction for him and helped him think about where to begin. First of all he had to find out which tearooms, or public lavatories, were actually used in the ways he was interested in.

Some researchers are already members of the group they are studying or are already familiar with the people. Patricia Adler (1985) and her husband, in their study of a community of drug dealers and smugglers, sort of fell into their research through having inquisitive minds, wanting to get to know the neighbours and, rather sensationally, through their own use of recreational drugs. Their research then simply followed instincts and developed leads in an ongoing process driven by the pursuit of meaning. Matthew Desmond (2006) had worked as a wildland firefighter in northern Arizona for several seasons prior to collecting data on why people choose such high-risk occupations. And Jason Ditton (1977), when he began work on his study of fiddling and pilferage, was already working in the bakery where he did ethnographic fieldwork.

Others will set off to distant places to do ethnographic research amongst people who are completely unknown to them. For example, in order to explore the simple, everyday acts of resistance such as foot dragging, false compliance, pilfering, and feigned ignorance that are used by relatively powerless groups in their everyday struggles against dominance and exploitation, James Scott (1985) spent two years living in a small Malaysian village. In such circumstances, and even in more familiar surroundings such as a school or factory, persuading people to accept a researcher into their daily lives, to live amongst them, to spend time watching, listening, and asking questions, can be daunting. Paul Rock (2001) says it can feel awfully like cold calling; like trying to sell

something to those who neither need it nor can afford it. On the other hand, generally speaking, most ethnographers have found it surprisingly easy to gain access. People generally have accepted the presence of a researcher hanging around with them, asking them questions, as long as they understand why and are permitted to offer insights of their own. Indeed, many are flattered and will enjoy taking part. Sue Estroff (1981: 8), in her research on psychiatric outpatients, found respondents surpassed her expectations with their helpfulness, allowing her to observe and take part in their lives often under extreme and unhappy circumstances.

Of course, ethnographers are now conducting ethnography in multiple locations, online, virtually or historically (**multi-sited and mobile ethnographies**, **virtual ethnography**). These each raise their own issues for access, but it remains useful to distinguish between public and private settings. In public settings it is easier in some ways to gain access but more difficult to engage in-depth with participants and to be entirely overt about the study. Private settings require more careful negotiation but are likely to yield more interesting and rich data. Humphreys (1970) began his research in public settings but as he became more familiar with the gay scene, he wanted to understand the individuals on whom more conventional studies were based. As he conducted interviews and built relationships with participants, so he came to understand how their activities are driven underground but are not so seedy or dangerous as they first appear to an outsider.

INTRODUCTIONS AND RECRUITMENT

A good way to begin what we might call recruitment is to provide participants with a brief explanation of the research and the reasons why it might be important. This could be written down or spoken, or both. I like to offer participants a written explanation that they can take home with them and read at their leisure. When this is nicely presented on headed paper, people realise they are taking part in something the researcher, at least, feels is worthwhile. It is important to present this explanation in a way the participants can understand; that is, in language they are familiar with. In any attempt to emphasise the value and relevance of the research, we should avoid intimidating the very people we hope will participate in it. When Daniel Murphy (1986) did his ethnography of shoplifting, he used to first write to shop owners, personnel, or police to ask for a meeting at which the research could be discussed. I have found this approach very useful in my own work, and I tend to follow up my

letters with a phone call asking if the letter arrived safely. Murphy also suggests ethnographers construct some sort of *cover story* for their work. This is not so much meant for deceit as an attempt to describe loosely, and in a language participants can relate to, a research proposal that may be quite complex or that may actually evolve in practice. Murphy also says he used a 'rhetoric of science' to gain authority for his work, especially when presenting it to officials. I think this might be a useful technique for some participants but I would not want to take it so far as to be intimidating, because of the ethical implications (**ethics**) as well as the likely impact on the quality of relationships we can then build.

In some approaches to ethnography, such as action research, participants can be assured that the work will have direct impact, but not everyone needs or can be given such firm assurances. Murphy used to take the opportunity to point out that at least his research can do no harm and that it was possible, at some stage, it might even do some good! Similarly, William Foote Whyte (1993: 293) told his key informant that the best he could hope for was that when he wrote up his research someone might read it and act on it later. That, it seems, was good enough for Doc, who replied, 'I think you can change things that way. Mostly that is the way things are changed, by writing about them.'

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

It is important to remember that the researcher's own personal attributes – gender, age, religion, ethnicity – may affect access. Bernadette Barton (2007) found it very difficult as a woman alone to gain access to clubs for her study of exotic dancers. One bouncer told her: 'we don't want any hookers here'. Becoming part of a group, participating in their daily activities, and attempting to blend into the background are not easy when the one thing that sets the group apart from other groups is skin colour or sex. This is not to say one has to be the same as the research participants. Difference can be a resource in ethnographic research, enabling the researcher to ask naïve questions that an insider (**insider ethnographies**) would never consider. The point is only that there will always be some places and groups to which some people will never gain access. However, this need not mean abandoning one's research interests. Stephen Moore (2000), for example, employed younger, what he calls 'cool' researchers, to do the fieldwork for his ethnographic study with youths who 'hang around' street corners, because he did not imagine he would gain access to rural gang life himself.

Sometimes a setting or topic can be very sensitive and access has to be negotiated carefully. It is always important to demonstrate empathy and understanding with the group, and to understand that occasionally access will not be permitted for reasons of privacy. Elite or powerful groups can be particularly difficult to access because they have the power and knowledge to obstruct access in subtle ways, and perhaps have more reason than others not to want to be exposed.

BEING COVERT OR OVERT

One decision that has to be made is the extent to which one will remain covert. Overt research means openly explaining the research to the participants, its purpose, who it is for, and what will happen to the findings. It means being open. **Covert** research is undercover, conducted without the participants' knowledge or without full awareness of the researcher's intentions. Patricia Adler's (1985) research in a drug dealing community involved juggling covert and overt roles; a balancing act that was both difficult and dangerous.

Many ethnographers believe that for ethical reasons no one should do covert research unless it can be completely justified. Others ask that we consider carefully whom we protect when we always protect anonymity and confidentiality. How else can covert and illegal activities be researched other than through covert means (see Scheper-Hughes, 2004)? However, **participant observation** is very often undertaken in such a way that we are open about our research plans (open at the point of gaining access) but hope the participants will forget we are studying them and will 'act naturally'.

Gaining access, then, will usually involve explaining about the research overtly and then settling in to a semi-overt role, where participants know what we are doing but do not always have it in the forefront of their minds. Alternatively, some ethnographers begin in a covert manner, gathering information in a range of settings in a passive way, then becoming overt later on in the study as they explain their research to participants from whom they need a longer time commitment or some more in-depth involvement (see Estroff, 1981).

CHOOSING A ROLE

It is important to carefully consider, prior to accessing the group, what role the researcher will take. This can affect how people see us and therefore how they act towards us, and it may also affect whom we subsequently

gain access to. When doing research in a school, for example, a potential role might be as a support teacher, with daily access to the classroom, to teachers and pupils, to the playground and staffroom. However, once the role of teacher is established, informal access to student groups may prove problematic. Sometimes a role is chosen by gatekeepers (**key informants and gatekeepers**), but it is possible to learn from this experience about the culture and unwritten codes and rules of the group we are studying.

Implicit attitudes, about gender and age for example, are often revealed when one is assigned to a role. Jason Ditton (1977), whose research began in a bakery, changed his role during his research in order to improve access. He became a salesman in order to ask more questions and delve more deeply. Sue Estroff (1981) wanted to understand the way of life of psychiatric outpatients both inside and outside of institutional settings. She began by spending time in the clinical setting, joining in therapy sessions and recreational activities in the hospital, where access was granted by the clinic staff not the patients. As they got to know her better, she gradually gained overt access to the patients as they lived their lives out of the clinic. Gaining access for her involved thinking very carefully about how she would be seen by the patients, and considering not only her dress but also her manner of speech, posture, and general presentation.

People often find it much easier to relate to someone in terms of a role they understand and which is accepted in the setting. This role may be that of ethnographer, or it may be as mother, daughter, or stranger. It may well change during fieldwork or as one moves through different settings within the overall place or organisation. Lee Monaghan (2002) studied bouncers, or door security staff, in Britain's night-time economy. As a body-builder in a previous life and study, he adapted quite easily and comfortably to the role of bouncer, to the extent that his participants, though they knew full well he was doing academic research, found it easier to relate to him as a bouncer than an academic.

PRESENTATION OF SELF

An ethnographer may also have to think about how to present his or her ideas and opinions on given topics, as this will affect the quality of access to others. This leads to worries about deception, that are discussed more under **ethics**. But always there is some control or thought about our presentation of self. The best approach is to appear both naïve and knowledgeable.

Knowing too much can foreclose in-depth conversations; knowing too little can appear rude and disinterested. In Monaghan's participant observation as night-club and pub doorman, he says that his physical capital and informal local networks were far more important and relevant than formal qualifications, signed contracts, and pre-arranged interviews. In other words, the fact that he was male, young and muscular turned out to be the best resource for 'getting in and getting on with the study' (2002: 409). These attributes could just as easily be a hindrance in other settings.

It is always important to consider the impact of your own attributes. When Joan Gross (2001) set out to undertake an ethnographic study of Walloon Puppet theatres (in Belgium), she discovered that it was not just her age, gender, and perceived class background that influenced people's relations towards her, but also the historical and political relations between her country and theirs. In other words, as the daughter of an American soldier, people related to her in terms of the nation she represented and her family background rather than simply her own personal attributes.

As discussed briefly above, there are some places that will never be accessed. An ethnographer who is determined to access difficult places should be sure whose interest it is in. It is not necessary to insist on gaining access to a given group or event, when often other approaches or other places would yield similar information. I do not believe an ethnographer should insist on getting access as if it were an inalienable right. The best approach is to consider why anyone should participate and use that to try to persuade them. An ethnographer should check the approach is not biased in anyone's favour and should show due respect. Always remember that, if we are lucky, our participants will tell us about and show us their lives. They are only likely to do this if we appear interested in them and open-minded about their way of life.

GETTING OUT

Finally, it may be worth our while to think a little about how our ethnographic research is completed, or how indeed we get out at the end. This can raise all sorts of interesting issues. In my own research in Spain, going home was a bit like letting the side down. I had shown a lack of commitment to the group by admitting I was going home at the end of my research period. This mistake, if you like, revealed to me the importance of a sense of continuity for migrant groups whose lives were essentially temporary, their futures uncertain, and their pasts severed

(O'Reilly, 2000). On the other hand, if we don't go home, we run the risk of going 'native', of losing all sense of distance or objectivity, or of forgetting why we went there in the first place. Many ethnographers find they do not want to go home because they have adapted so well and the participants have become their friends. Ditton (1977: 5) humorously calls this 'getting a case of the Pyle's'. He draws on a discussion by someone called Pyle, to explain his own yearning to get back into the field after he left, which was exacerbated by their furious pleas to him to stay on and help them during the summer labour shortage period. The lure of acceptance in the field, the dangers of over-rapport and the lack of objective distance, and the problem of getting out when research is conducted on your own doorstep are discussed under the concepts of **going 'native'** and **insiders**.

See also: covert; ethics; participant observation; the participant observer oxymoron

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Analysis

Ethnographic analysis is not a stage in a linear process but an iterative phase in a spiral where progress is steadily made from data collection to making some sense of it all for others.

Outline: The messy business of making some sense of it all. Analysis as an iterative-inductive, reflexive process. The spiral approach to analysis in which further data are collected as analysis proceeds. The search for insider perspectives and broader patterns, for meaning and process. The role of theory.

analysis

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THE MESSY BUSINESS OF MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

Ethnographic analysis is something of a messy business that ethnographers learn through practice and experience. Largely, it comes down to having an inquisitive mind and imaginative sensibility, as well as a strong desire to explore various aspects of the social world and *make some sense of it all*. Making sense of it all is the stuff of analysis, and involves summarising, sorting, translating, and organising (**coding**). Analysis means moving from a jumble of words and pictures to something less wordy, shorter and more manageable, and easier for an outsider to understand. It involves exploring

deeply to see what is there that might not be obvious; standing back to see what patterns emerge; thinking and theorising to draw conclusions that can be generalised in some way or other, and **writing**.

THE REFLEXIVE PROCESS OF ANALYSIS

Broadly speaking, ethnography is about exploring, uncovering, and making explicit the detailed interactive and structural fabric of the social settings that social researchers suspect to be sociologically interesting. This is a reflexive process where we often find ourselves assuming, to begin with, a naïve, almost childlike perspective, as we gather information from everything we encounter to build a stock of detailed knowledge, accounts, events, and so on, as a means of enhancing our own understanding of the setting and presenting this to others.

During fieldwork we participate and observe, we note conversations we have both engaged in and overheard; we record (in writing, on tape, or even in photograph and video, see **fieldnotes**) activities, events, stories, formulae; we collect news articles or anything of interest that tells us more about our topic; and we conduct interviews for subsequent transcription. This is done reflexively (**reflexivity**), with a research puzzle guiding us, and with constant reflection on what we are seeing and hearing. But, at some point we eventually reach a stage where we feel we have collected enough information to say something significant about our findings, and where we feel we have sufficiently explored the various issues that excited our interest.

We then turn our attention to organising and presenting the data in a form that is both accessible to the reader and which provides them with both detailed information and some general observations, usually of a theoretically relevant nature, regarding the significance of what we have uncovered. In ethnographic research this process is rarely as linear as the use of such terms as 'data collection', 'analysis', and 'writing up' suggest. Ethnographic analysis presents us with some distinctive theoretical and practical issues when compared with other approaches, such as survey research.

A SPIRAL APPROACH TO ANALYSIS

In survey research the usual aim is to provide some fairly broad generalisations regarding some clearly defined issues which, in many instances, have been identified in advance of the data collection. In short, researchers often have a theory or hypothesis, a 'hunch', that they wish to test to find out whether their assumptions are supported by evidence. In this type of

study, a data set is summarised, reporting how many respondents of certain ages did certain things or had certain attitudes, for example. In this way, a mass of information is summarised to offer some broad generalisations. However, a good deal of survey data is also analysed in greater depth. For example, researchers may look at a number of variables together and see how they correlate (doing multivariate analysis), as a means of providing some insight with respect to the complex interaction of factors that combine to influence social phenomena.

In ethnographic research, in very general terms the process is somewhat similar, given that all social research, to greater or lesser extent, follows the general 'scientific' model of collecting data, analysis, and then presentation suggested above. However, for ethnographers, this straightforward formula is often applied very flexibly in practice. This is because though an initial idea will inform data collection, the collected data will then raise questions about theory, which in turn leads to more data collection, analysis, writing, and the ongoing development of ideas. A fieldworker is able to be much more flexible than a survey researcher. The focus of the research does not have to be predetermined as the questions are designed and set. Different people can be asked different questions depending on the emergent analysis. People, settings, groups, and themes can be included or excluded as the research develops. Unlike in much survey research, the data collection phase of the research is not a discrete phase. Indeed, analysis is so tangled up with every stage of the research process that it is difficult to talk of an analysis phase. Rather than proceeding in a linear fashion, it is far more likely that the ethnographer will progress as in a spiral, moving forward from idea to theory to design to data collection to findings, analysis, and back to theory, but where each two steps forward may involve one or two steps back (**inductive and deductive**). In other words, we analyse and collect data almost simultaneously.

This, to a large extent, is consistent with the specific theoretical and epistemological perspective from which qualitative investigation generally, and ethnographic study specifically, is associated (see **interpretivism**). This type of progressive spiral approach is common in ethnographic work, where the very broad straightforward progression, from initial interest, recording, analysis, and writing up, is constantly interspersed with periods where we turn back on ourselves, retrace our steps, and mix one stage with another (Ezzy, 2002). In one sense we move from the naïve, childlike perspective of the initial exploration to gradually become more like detectives, systematically sifting through very general evidence, looking for clues and reflecting on their significance. The aim is to narrow the scope of our enquiry to

the most significant issues, whilst constantly retracing our steps where some-thing of interest becomes evident and where greater exploration might provide dividends. All of this is consistent with what has been referred to as the *iterative-inductive* approach to ethnographic analysis (O'Reilly, 2005; see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Gary Shank (2006) has labelled it 'abduction'. See the discussion in **inductive and deductive**.

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Many quantitative and, to some extent, survey approaches are informed by a positivist standpoint, where social life is believed to be governed by vari-ous structural patterns and even general laws (**positivism**). By contrast, ethnographic research and analysis emerge from the interpretive, phenom-enological, and hermeneutic traditions within the social sciences (**interpre-tivism**). This latter perspective takes greater account of the reflexive and highly variable nature of human existence and seeks to *understand* the motivations, thinking, and ideas that generate the patterned mosaic of social life. In a very general sense, quantitative and survey methodologies tend to focus on reporting, summarising, and analysing *what* people do and say, to identify broad patterns; on the other hand, qualitative and ethno-graphic research tends to probe more deeply into *why* people act and talk about the things that they do. However, in practice, most social science research mixes elements of both of these approaches and merely leans, to greater or lesser extent, towards either end of the spectrum.

As ethnographic research leans towards the latter, however, the approach to both study and analysis is highly sensitive to the malleable and, often, idiosyncratic nature of social life. For example, the influence of the *phenomenological* perspective is integral to the way in which we gather accounts and seek to uncover the ideas and meanings, the common-sense knowledge (*first-order categories*), that inform the activities of indi-viduals and groups within social settings (Schutz, 1972). A key task of the ethnographer is to make explicit the ways in which people draw upon and deploy this social knowledge, as well as documenting the out-come of ensuing social action in the research setting.

THE SEARCH FOR PATTERNS

However, the ethnographer within the social sciences must be more than merely a biographer or diarist, as another key aim of this type of research is to identify and comprehend some of the recurrent patterns

and relationships that emerge from the web of specific events. Thus, we look to identify structured routines and relationships in the hope of identifying a framework that might be relevant to understanding similar settings or which, in some cases, may be broadly generalisable (**generalisation**). As we uncover information and insights with respect to specific occurrences, we seek to identify patterns within them that might increase our understanding of what we are observing, and revise these assumptions in the light of continuing observation and data collection. If we are successful, we find ourselves applying increasingly sophisticated classifications (*second-order categories*) that fit well with what we observe and that provide us with the means to gain deeper insights which, in turn, further advances the sophistication and efficacy of our theoretical framework. This is the essence of what theory is about: rationally and objectively defined models are developed that can be applied to aid our exploration and understanding of the social world. Thus, we move back and forward between applying theory and observation and data collection, and even theorising ourselves, and reflect upon the fit and usefulness of this theoretical framing with respect to what we experience and observe. For some interesting discussions about analysis and theory development see Whyte (1993), Becker et al. (1961), and Fine (2003).

See also: coding; generalisation; grounded theory; writing

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analysis

Asking Questions

Asking questions, and listening, are central to ethnography and can involve bringing a discussion around to your topic, opportunistic questioning, or simply taking an interest.

Outline: Interviews need not be formal, pre-arranged meetings between two or more people but can simply take the shape of informal, opportunistic questions and answers. Taking time and beginning passively. Direct and indirect questions. Responding to emergent themes and becoming more directed and focused. Factist versus interactionist approaches. Who to talk to.

BACKGROUND

There may not always be a clear distinction between doing **participant observation** and conducting an interview (**interviews and conversations**). Ethnography not only involves participating and observing, watching and hearing, but also asking questions and listening to the answers. Conversations are a normal part of daily behaviour and talk goes on around us all the time, in a variety of contexts. Ethnographers in search of respondent understandings and interpretations of events and actions will take every opportunity to listen in to ongoing conversations, to slot in relevant questions that address their research questions, or to gradually and subtly bring a conversation around to their topic of interest. Interviews need not be formal, pre-arranged meetings between two or more people but can simply take the shape of informal, opportunistic questions and answers. An ethnographer will find that things they are interested in are discussed in the field all the time and they should take the opportunity to ask people to elaborate and explain, to reflect on what they are doing, or to describe how they feel about it. The ethnographer should not be surprised to find others chipping in, offering their little bit of information or their own opinion. In fact, fieldwork is really one long conversation with people and 'a field' you are fascinated with.