

ethnographic methods

second edition

karen o'reilly



Ethnographic Methods

This new edition of Karen O'Reilly's popular *Ethnographic Methods* provides a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the technical, practical and philosophical issues that arise when employing traditional and innovative research methods in relation to human agents.

Using a wide range of case studies and source material to illustrate the dilemmas and resolutions that an ethnographic researcher may encounter, this textbook guides the reader from the initial design and planning stages through to the analysis and writing up. It explores the historical and philosophical foundations of ethnographic research and goes on to cover a range of relevant topics such as participant observation, qualitative interviews, (focus) group interviews and visual data collection and analysis.

Following substantial revision and updating, the second edition includes new discussions of emerging practices such as reflexive ethnography and autoethnographic accounts, as well as an entire chapter dedicated to new directions in the field – including virtual, mobile, multi-sited and global ethnography.

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Ethnographic Methods

Second edition

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Preface to the second edition

I agreed to write a second edition of this book thinking it would not involve much more than a bit of updating. However, the field has developed to such an extent that the revisions and modifications I have made and the developments I have discussed have resulted in a much more extensive revision than I had imagined at the outset. It has been exciting work. Relatively little was published in the field of qualitative methods, still less ethnographic methods, when I prepared the first edition. Especially in anthropology, there was an implicit understanding that writing about methods was somewhat banal, inferior to other things academics should be doing, and certainly tedious. In the past few years, this situation has changed to such an extent that at times I felt completely overwhelmed with material. Textbooks, specialist literature, disciplinary tomes, analytical and descriptive articles, debates, new approaches and 'innovative' methods abound as authors find ever new ways to make the same (or similar) argument in such a way as to warrant yet another publication. I therefore sympathise with students, and those new to ethnography, who have to find some way of filtering this mass of material for their own purposes.

Nevertheless, I believe this book can offer something unique because my work is theoretically informed yet accessible. It is interdisciplinary, based on many years of using and adapting ethnographic methods in diverse settings, and on teaching the approach to students with very diverse disciplinary backgrounds, from all over the world. I am both a sociologist and a social anthropologist, whose work also overlaps with human geography and politics. I have applied ethnography in a fairly conventional way to undertake a 15-month community study of British people living in Spain, and a year-long in-depth analysis of change and continuity in an English town; and I have used ethnographic methods more flexibly in shorter periods in schools, business organisations, at public events and in private settings, through the use of ethnographic, life-story, and email interviews, the analysis of weblogs ('blogs') and more. Finally, as a sociologist, my approach to ethnography is heavily informed by social theory, especially theories of practice (see chapter 1) and theories of knowledge (see chapter 2).

The second edition has made a few changes to which I would like to draw readers' attention. Overall the book is much longer, with many more recent examples and illustrations; arguments, debates and references have been updated;

and I have introduced Key ideas (in boxed text) and provided exercises at the end of each chapter. In chapter 1, I make the case that ethnography should be perceived as *practice*. I thus spend time elaborating ideas that are implicit in some definitions of ethnography that perceive human beings as part object and part subject. These are based on (often implicit) assumptions about the extent to which humans are free agents or are determined by structures. There has been a tendency in more recent ethnography to focus on individuals' and groups' opinions and feelings, or on their cultures, while forgetting to look at the wider structures that frame and inform their choices. Here, I propose that ethnography should be informed by a theoretical perspective that understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; that also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and that determines the methods on which to draw and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography. I thus outline some of the social theories of practice that can be drawn on by ethnographers to inform their own work. Chapter 1 now introduces William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* as an example of a Chicago School style of ethnography. The discussion of contemporary uses of ethnographic methods now introduces the notion of reflexive practice, and specifically covers developments in health and medicine, human geography and education. Several of the key principles of ethnographic practice are introduced here.

Chapter 2 introduces the notion of 'guiding theoretical problems' that inform iterative-inductive research and provides examples of these. There are plenty of references for readers to pursue for examples of inductive research questions and design, and for the role of the literature review in ethnographic research. I have included an extended discussion of sampling strategies. The section on philosophies of social science has been updated and expanded and linked more overtly to ethnographic methods; it is summarised with the use of Key ideas and includes a clear statement of my own position: that many of the debates about philosophy are resolved through ethnographic practice and that the role of philosophy is as under-labourer not master builder.

Chapter 3 is little changed, but examples and debates are brought up to date and more case studies are used to bring it all to life. This chapter has made some special consideration of ethical issues for virtual, sensual, critical and autoethnographies. I have also included some discussion of the ethics of ethical committees and reflected on issues of embodiment, field relations, power and engagement. I end the chapter with a clear statement of my own ethical position: that ethical dilemmas must be resolved on a case-by-case basis as ethnography takes place. Ethical research is therefore an essential and ongoing component of ethnographic practice.

The advantage of chapter 4 is that it discusses what one actually does in the field, which so many textbooks fail to consider in much depth. It now has more

up-to-date examples and case studies and has been updated in line with recent debates about reflexivity, insider ethnographies, field relations, and the embodied practice of ethnography. I have also extended the chapter with some discussion of rapport, intimacy and conflict, teamwork, and much more on note-taking. I cover field-walking, the role of participation in contemporary ethnography, and the limits of ethnography. The discussion about the participant observation continuum has been reworked into a discussion about the useful and essential dialectic of participation and observation.

Chapter 5 has been updated and there is more emphasis on asking questions within participant observation and on defining an ethnographic interview. I have changed the first section of the chapter to focus more broadly on the distinctive nature of interviews and conversations within ethnography, and on a discussion about passive and active interviewing and the importance of listening. I have included some description of autoethnographic accounts. The sections on group interviews have been reworded to discuss 'group interviews' rather than discussion groups, and some new examples and references have been added.

Chapter 6 links practical issues in interviewing more explicitly than previously to the nature of the ethnographic interview (as discussed in chapter 5). The chapter has more up-to-date examples and lots of references that students can follow up for more in-depth discussion of key points (such as the implications of transcription, and understanding what might be going on when an interview is refused). There is an example of an interview guide, and references to archived ethnographic studies and to previously collected interview data. Discussion of the interpretation of narratives has also been extended a little.

Chapter 7 (previously titled 'Visual data and other things'), now addresses 'New directions in ethnography'. There is still quite a good coverage of visual ethnography, but the chapter has been considerably updated to include autophotography, and virtual, mobile, multi-sited and global ethnography. Most of these are also covered in my *Key Concepts in Ethnography* (O'Reilly 2009), but the coverage here is broader with lots of references, examples and case studies. These are exciting advances that are covered in disparate texts, monographs and journal articles, so discussing them here in a single text on ethnographic methods is invaluable as well as novel.

Chapter 8 now has more, up-to-date, examples of published work to illustrate flexibility and reflexivity in analysis. I have included some discussion of the role of thinking for analysis, and how analysis should focus on action and structure and their interaction in the practice of daily life and ethnography (with reference back to chapter 1). I have extended and updated the discussion of grounded theory and outlined some of the key concepts and the history of the approach in more depth. The section on computer software has been updated, recognising the ways in which use of these programs can be interactive and creative, and how they have adapted to new developments in ethnographic methods. There are improved examples for using concepts in analysis, the relationship between ethnography and theory has been updated a little and a relevant up-to-date example added. There is also some discussion of the role of key events in analysis.

Finally, chapter 9 now overtly makes the case for a subtle realist approach to representation informed by the philosophical approaches discussed in chapter 2. This is particularly revealed through the use of Key ideas. I have added references that illustrate contemporary writing which finds ways to acknowledge the tentative, provisional nature of the interpretation of events without abandoning all attempts to write a somewhat realist account. The chapter concludes with reflection on the validity of ethnographic accounts and an extended discussion of the relevance of ethnography beyond the specific case. There is an extended discussion of generalisation and ethnography, and some further reading for those interested in applied ethnography.

To illustrate the arguments made in the book, I have used a combination of the stories of the experiences of students and people with whom I have worked closely, my own work, and some published works. I often use first names to indicate a personal relationship and intimate knowledge of the ethnographic experience. Published reflections of fieldwork experiences have become far more numerous since I wrote the first edition and it is now much easier than previously for students of ethnography to read about the trials and tribulations, stops and starts, excitements and lessons of others. I have relied quite heavily here on just a few key texts and journals so that readers can follow up examples for themselves. I especially recommend: the journals *Ethnography* and *Contemporary Journal of Ethnography*; *Ethnographic Research. A Reader* edited by Stephanie Taylor (2002); the famous *Street Corner Society* by William Foote Whyte (1993); and *Journeys through Ethnography*, edited by Annette Lareau and Jeffrey Shultz (Lareau and Shultz 1996). These are enough to get any newcomer to ethnographic methods started on the right foot.

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1 Introduction

Ethnography as practice

Key idea: ethnography should be informed by a theory of practice that: understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; that also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and that determines the methods on which to draw and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

I am still, as I write the second edition of this book, very enthusiastic about ethnographic research. Over the decades, ethnography has been shown to involve the application of any number of the full range of methods available to a researcher in a way that is close to the way we all make sense of the world around us in our daily lives – by watching, experiencing, absorbing, living, breathing, and inquiring about a culture, lifestyle, event, or even object – while it can also be, if undertaken carefully, scientifically rigorous, systematic, and at least to some extent objective. Ethnography has proven to be the best way to learn, in detail, about a diverse range of complex social phenomena from personal experiences of self-harm (Adler and Adler 2007) to the globally-structured network of organs trafficking (Scheper-Hughes 2004). Nevertheless, ethnography is difficult to define because it is used in diverse ways in a wide range of disciplines drawing on different traditions. This chapter will first examine how ethnography has been defined by a range of other authors before explaining my own definition of ethnography as a methodology informed by a theory of social life as practice. I will trace some of the historical development of ethnography, especially within anthropology and sociology, before looking at more contemporary approaches in other disciplines.

Defining ethnography

Exemplifying the breadth of ethnography within the social sciences, Stephanie Taylor (2002) brings together a collection of ethnographic studies, including an engaging and critical work on schoolgirls' friendships by Valerie Hey (1997) and Lesley Griffiths' (1998) interpretive study of how humour is used as a strategy by healthcare workers to mediate instructions from powerful professionals. The studies range methodologically from what Taylor calls a conventional ethnography, 'for which the ethnographer makes the enormous personal investment of moving into a community for an extended period' (2002: 1) to a team project drawing on several discrete methods of formal data collection. However, for Taylor, ethnography essentially involves empirical work, especially observation, with the aim of producing a full, nuanced, non-reductive text, in 'the ethnographic tradition', however that is defined or interpreted by each author.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) acknowledge that the term ethnography is variable and contested, overlapping with qualitative research more broadly, with 'fieldwork', case study, and even life histories (see Heyl 2001). In their search for a definition they focus on what ethnographers do, recognising that in terms of data collection:

ethnography usually involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.

(Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3)

Beyond this, they also acknowledge that the research is usually small in scale, undertaken in everyday contexts, using various data sources and methods, and they draw attention to the inductive and interpretive nature of ethnographic inquiry.

David Fetterman, an applied anthropologist, focuses more on the real-world applications of knowledge produced using ethnography, and calls it 'more than a 1-day hike through the woods. It is an ambitious journey through the complex world of social interaction' (Fetterman 2010: xi). Ethnography, for him, involves telling 'credible, rigorous and authentic' stories from the perspective of local people, and interpreting these stories in the context of people's daily lives and cultures (2010: 1). This involves both phenomenological and hermeneutic interpretations (as I discuss further in chapter 2).

In the *British Medical Journal*, Jan Savage (2000) argues the case for using ethnography as a qualitative methodology for the in-depth study of health issues in context. She recognises that there is no standard definition of ethnography, but argues that the defining feature is often participant observation entailing prolonged fieldwork, and that:

Most ethnographers today would agree that the term ethnography can be applied to any small scale research that is carried out in everyday settings; uses several methods; evolves in design through the study; and focuses on the meaning of individuals' actions and explanations rather than their quantification.

Jan Savage (2000: 1400)

We therefore begin to see a few essential components of ethnography emerging, and these are not so much to do with methods of data collection as a methodology, or an approach to research. These are summarised very well in the eclectic approach of Paul Willis and Mats Trondman (Willis and Trondman 2000: 5), the first editors of the journal *Ethnography*, who in their introduction to the (then new) journal, describe ethnography as 'a methodology that draws on a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and on richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing, *at least partly in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience'. Crucial elements are: the understanding and representation of experience; presenting and explaining the culture in which this experience is located, but also acknowledging that 'experience is entrained in the flow of history' (2000: 6). Human beings are therefore part subjects and part objects. For Willis and Trondman, ethnography should also be theoretically informed, with a critical focus, and should have relevance for cultural politics.

It is the contention of the present book that ethnography is a practice that evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive and credible stories. Ethnography should be informed by a theory of practice that: understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and determines the methods on which to draw and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

The chapters

It is not essential to read this book in order. It should be treated as a handbook that can be taken into the field with you and consulted at various stages of your journey through ethnography. I firmly believe that the best way to learn about ethnography is to do it, but this book should raise awareness and a critical reflexivity in you, helping you make informed and considered decisions at various junctures. I am proposing that ethnography is best viewed using the concept of practice. This first chapter therefore goes on to discuss what I mean

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by the *practice* of ethnography, and sketches out the theoretical framework for a theory of practice. I then describe the origins of the methods of ethnographic fieldwork within social anthropology and sociology, in which disciplines ethnography arguably has its roots. We especially examine the work of Bronislaw Malinowski who is considered by many to be the founder of contemporary ethnographic fieldwork methods. Then we are introduced in depth to the work of William Foote Whyte, who has contributed so much to debates in ethnographic methods through his famous methodological appendix. This chapter concludes with the range of contemporary uses of ethnographic methods in social science, especially in health and medicine, geography, and education.

Chapter 2 explores more practical issues as to how one might approach a piece of ethnographic research. It includes the iterative-inductive nature of much ethnography, defining a guiding theoretical problem, reviewing the literature, starting out and selecting cases. The chapter then takes an in-depth look at the role of the philosophy of social science and theories of knowledge for ethnography. This examines positivism, interpretivism, realism, critical approaches, relativism, post-modernism and post-positivism/subtle realism and their implications for ethnographic methods in practice.

Chapter 3 explores the myriad ethical considerations raised while conducting ethnographic research, including: the difficult distinction between overt and covert ethnography; gaining consent; disclosure and confidentiality; issues of power and control; and how to balance rights, responsibilities and commitments. This chapter features a transcript of a group discussion about ethics between existing researchers. It also considers ethical issues for some of the newer approaches in ethnography, such as autoethnography, performance and virtual methods.

The main method of ethnography is known as participant observation, and it is very distinctive as a method. The advantage of chapter 4 is that it discusses what one actually does in the field – which so many textbooks fail to consider. Key elements of participant observation explored here are gaining access, taking time, learning the language, participation and observation, and taking notes. We also address field relations, reflexivity, the notion of ethnography as embodied practice, the building of trust and rapport, and the use of gatekeepers. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the dialectic relationship between participating and observing.

Ethnographers conduct interviews as well as participating and observing. Interviews can take the shape of opportunistic chats, questions that arise on the spur of the moment, one-to-one in-depth interviews, group interviews and all sorts of ways of asking questions and learning about people that fall in between. It is therefore quite difficult to prescribe how an ethnographer should do an interview. Nevertheless, there are some quite distinctive features of an ethnographic approach to interviewing, so chapter 5 deals with that first, before going on to explore the different types of interview available to an ethnographer, including oral-history interviews, autoethnographic accounts and group interviews.

Ethnographic interviews are shown to be collaborative rather than interrogative, guided rather than structured, flexible, and usually informal.

Although I prefer not to be too prescriptive about interview styles and techniques, chapter 6 offers some practical guidelines for interviewing, addressing questions such as: how do I get someone to agree to an interview? What is an interview guide? What do I do if they wander off the point? Should I transcribe? How do I test for validity? It includes an example of an interview topic guide, and lots of illustrations of interviewing practice.

Chapter 7 explores some of the ways ethnography is responding to changes in the world around us as well as to theoretical, conceptual and thematic developments in the disciplines that guide our work. The chapter therefore introduces advancements in visual, mobile, multi-sited, global and virtual ethnography.

Ethnographic research is iterative-inductive. This is a practice of doing research, informed by a sophisticated inductivism, in which data collection, analysis and writing are not discrete phases, but inextricably linked. Nevertheless, we do reach a point where we move more towards analysis and representation and leave data collection to one side (if only for the moment). Chapter 8 deals with this final phase. It explores the spiral model for ethnographic analysis; using computer software; sorting, classifying and describing; the role of concepts and theories; and how to analyse the interaction of structure and agency. It concludes with an in-depth description of the methodology and techniques of grounded theory.

Since the reflexive turn of the 1980s, the production of ethnographic texts has come under careful scrutiny. Ethnographers must now think critically and reflexively about writing and about the contexts of research and writing. Chapter 9 thus explores modernist (traditional), post-modern and post-post-modern (or subtle realist) writing styles and their attempts to construct, or to think critically about the construction of, authoritative texts. Through the use of the arguments outlined in the Key ideas, it makes the case for a subtle realist approach to representation informed by the philosophical approaches discussed in chapter 2. The chapter concludes with some reflection on the validity of ethnographic accounts and on the relevance of ethnography beyond the specific case.

Each chapter ends with suggestions for further reading and recommends exercises for readers to undertake on their own or in small groups (perhaps in classroom settings). If students work through the classroom exercises for each chapter, they will be equipped to undertake independently a theoretically-informed ethnographic study, to analyse and write it up with a critical reflexivity towards representational forms, and be in a position to defend the validity and reliability of their work.

The practice of ethnography

I would like to spend a little time here elaborating on some of the ideas implicit in the definition of ethnography proposed by Willis and Trondman

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(discussed above). Their call to perceive human beings as part object and part subject is based on some assumptions about the extent to which humans are free agents or are determined by structures. There has been a tendency in more recent ethnography to focus on people's opinions and feelings or on their cultures, while forgetting to look at the wider structures that frame their choices, or at least with very little theorising about how agency and structures interact. In this second edition of this book, I propose that ethnography is best viewed using the concept of practice. By this I mean it should be informed by a theoretical perspective that:

- understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life;
- examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time;
- examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds;
- determines the methods on which to draw and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

There are some useful threads in social theories of practice we can draw on to inform ethnographic practice. I will very briefly examine the work of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Rob Stones, Etienne Wenger, Jean Lave and a few other authors.¹ Structuration theory was a social theory of practice proposed by Anthony Giddens via various publications (especially Giddens 1976, 1979, and 1984). It argues that we should not see objects (structures) and subjects (agents, individuals) as distinct entities, but as interrelated in the everyday playing out (or practice) of everyday life. Giddens insists that social life is neither the outcome of individual actions, determined by how individuals feel, what they intend, or plan to achieve; but nor is it determined by social structures (institutions, rules or resources). Indeed, social structures limit what people can and cannot do, what they even try to or wish to do, but agents do have some free will; and the very social structures that enable or constrain in some situations are made and remade by individuals in the process of their acting (or their agency). For Giddens, we therefore cannot even think of agency and structure as (ontologically) distinct; they are a duality – always interdependent and interrelated: 'structures are constituted through action and [...] action is constituted structurally' (Giddens 1976: 161). But Giddens did not give us much in the way of methodological tools for applying this theory, so people have applied it rather loosely. He tends to be voluntaristic (and so do those who use his theory). He does not very clearly specify what he means by structures and perhaps leaves them too tangled up with agency. However, he does make the important point that social life is an historical process: it therefore cannot be studied by taking a snapshot. This is an important point for ethnographers.

Key ideas: *objectivism* in social science is the idea that social structures, laws, institutions, systems of relationships, etc, have a reality that is ‘independent of individual consciousness and wills’ (Bourdieu 1990: 26). *Subjectivism* concentrates more on the way the social world is perceived by individuals, and sometimes portrays society as nothing more than the outcome of individual actions.

Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory (again elaborated via many publications, but especially Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1985, 1990, and Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), similarly opposes a crude distinction between objectivism and subjectivism, ‘while preserving the gains from each of them’ (1990: 25). For him, people’s tastes and preferences, choices, desires and actions cannot be separated from structural constraints. Subjectivism, Bourdieu (1990) contends, views agents as free-floating subjects who can choose to do what they will, as if their actions are not at all circumscribed by what has gone before. Objectivism, on the other hand, reduces all actions and subjects to the mere outcomes of structures, and thus history to a process without a subject. He proposes the concept of *practice* (e.g. 1990) as a way of thinking through those same processes that Giddens refers to as structuration. His notion of the practice of social life rests on a few key concepts – especially habitus, capital, the field and the game. These are all elaborated in depth in Bourdieu’s various publications. Very crudely, the term *habitus* refers to the dispositions, habits, ways of doing things, ways of thinking, and ways of seeing the world that individuals acquire, singly and in groups, as they travel through life. They are therefore structures that have become embodied and are enacted. People are always in practical relations to the world: ‘the habitus is constituted in practice and is always oriented to practical functions’ (Bourdieu 1990: 52). Practices, Bourdieu argues, are reasonable adjustments to the future; not rational calculations, and not necessarily the product of an identifiable plan, but the outcome of the interaction of habitus with external conditions, in the given field and dependent on available forms of capital. However, Bourdieu tends to be deterministic and so do those who use his work, and there is a tendency to rely on the concepts without referring to the overall theory of practice.

It is possible to conceptualise practice by drawing from the work of both of these authors as well as that of some others. Rob Stones (2005), for example, has developed a stronger version of structuration theory that builds on the work of Giddens, responding to criticisms of Giddens and drawing on strengths from other work. Elsewhere (O’Reilly forthcoming), I have proposed an approach that combines the work of Stones with further insights from the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, where they describe communities of practice and situated learning, and the elaboration of the concept of agency as proposed by Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The important bridge between macro and micro perspectives, missing in so much empirical research, is

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provided by analysis of the interaction, through *practice*, of individuals (with desires, goals, expectations and habits) and the wider structures, as enacted by people in positions, roles or statuses, in relation to each other.

I found the work of Etienne Wenger (1998) on communities of practice a useful way to think about the various contexts within which agency and structures are enacted, and within which ethnographic research might be undertaken. Communities of practice are the coming together of groups of individuals; people engage in practice, in the negotiation of meaning, in communities. 'The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do' (Wenger 1998: 47). Practice is the acting out of social life (not to be confused with the adjective 'practical' or the verb 'to practise'). Practice, Wenger says, includes what we might recognise (traditionally) as structures – codes, rules, regulations, procedures – but also:

all the implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognizable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions, and shared world views. Most of these may never be articulated, yet they are unmistakable signs of membership in communities of practice...

(Wenger 1998: 47)

In other words, practice is about knowing (and working out) how to go on in given circumstances, suspended within networks of other people and groups, each with their own habits, rules, norms and constraints. Not only do individuals each have their own desires and habits, but also ways of knowing how to go on that are continually learned and relearned within communities where others are all doing the same (including ethnographers).

A community of practice is not just a group or network, it involves sustaining 'dense relations of mutual engagement organized around what they are there to do' (Wenger 1998: 74), be they those of families, friends, a workplace, a school or even an online community. Here, in all these situations of everyday life, individuals need to negotiate their way forward, each bringing to the situation their own internalised structures (or *habitus*) and adapting their own goals and expectations in line with the experiences, norms and practices of others. Communities of practice are not homogeneous, Wenger notes; participants have different roles, backgrounds, identities, histories, goals, statuses, power. Crucially, communities of practice are interrelations that arise out of engagement in practice rather than entities an ethnographer might try objectively to describe as a community.

The theory of situated learning, proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991), is also useful in helping to make sense of how individuals actually engage in social life – negotiating external structures, embodied structures in the form of *habitus*, and the expectations and habits of those within our communities. Based somewhat loosely on the general theories

of practice outlined briefly above, in which wider structures are both preconditions and variable outcomes of action (the wider, sociologically-informed theoretical framework is spelled out more fully in their footnotes), Lave and Wenger suggest that learning is not a specific action, but something we all do all the time while co-participating in everyday situations. Here, we are not so interested in what we learn as how we adapt what we think we know, how we feel, or what we do in order to co-participate within communities of practice. Another way to think about this might be as the strategies people learn and internalise as ways to get by in the practice of everyday life within communities, as they adapt their expectations, desires, goals and dreams to the practical context and the norms, rules and resources of those around them (see de Certeau 1984 and Scott 1985 for some more discussion of these strategies).

For Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963, and thanks to Ewa Morawska for bringing these authors to my attention), human agency is:

a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

(Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 963)

Agency thus consists of three elements: the iterational, the projective and the practical. Their discussion around the iterational does not add anything beyond what is already provided by Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Their discussion of the practical element of agency contributes to the theory of situated learning described above. It involves making sense of problems based on what is known (characterising), adjusting habits consciously in changing contexts (deliberation), more or less conscious decision-making, and execution. The projective element, on the other hand, recognises that the concept of habitus can be overly deterministic and that humans do have the ability to create and to pursue goals. Social life, Emirbayer and Mische suggest, includes challenges and uncertainties to which actors respond. Of course, actors' desires and dreams are culturally embedded, but they are not predetermined. Actors plan and project, as the Chicago School pragmatists and interactionists (Dewey, Schutz, Mead, Wiley) taught us; drawing on what they know, they imagine alternatives to current situations, visualise proposed solutions (and how they might be achieved), test out their ideas (perhaps moving temporarily or going somewhere on holiday, or just finding out from others who have done the same), and modify them constantly as they 'move within and among ... different unfolding contexts' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 964).

I am proposing these various theoretical perspectives on practice as a means to start thinking theoretically about how social life unravels in practice. Methodologically, this involves conceptualising and learning about the wider structures that frame the practice of a given community or group. This can use

both grand theorising as well as learning practically about the smaller, local, relevant context. But such abstract-level arguments should always be linked overtly to the analysis of the practice of daily life. Practice theory views individuals as knowledgeable, which calls for empirical research to pay attention to their perspectives, thoughts and opinions. Practice also often involves doing things without being aware of it, in the context of constraints and opportunities of which people may not be conscious. It is essential, therefore, to find ways of studying the practice of daily life and understanding it without relying solely on the views of agents. Ethnography that pays attention to both wider structures and the thoughts and feelings of agents, within the context of action, is thus an ideal approach to research practice.

Key idea: ethnography that pays attention to wider structures and to the thoughts and feelings of agents, within the context of daily life and individual action, is an ideal approach to research the *practice* of social life.

Rob Stones (2005) says that his strong version of structuration theory has a normative commitment to studying the complexity of people's daily lives, a desire to understand cultural differences, to challenge stereotypes and typifications, and not to reduce such complexity. Life history and narrative research that examine individuals' personal stories also offer promising and fruitful approaches for the study of practice. But structures are both internal and external, so agents' perceptions can never be divorced from structural contexts. Furthermore, a researcher might understand aspects of the context not perceived by the agent. Some methodology that enables a perspective beyond just that of the agent seems crucial.

Finally, an empirical study informed by a theory of practice will always be temporal. Giddens (1979: 3) says we must 'situate action in time and space as a continuous flow of action'. We should avoid snapshots of society, on the one hand, and equating time with social change on the other; social reproduction and continuity also take place over time (and space). The gaze of the researcher cannot be restricted to the 'present moment' or to 'individual action'. We have to study broader institutional systemic and structural frames and wider forces, but the focus is on how these are manifested in practice (Giddens 1979). This, of course, depends on the collection of adequate empirical evidence.

Ethnography: a critical definition for practice

Ethnography is then more a theory about how research should be conducted than a recipe for techniques that can be employed. It draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation, in-depth interviews and conversations.

It gains its understanding of the social world through involvement in the daily practice of human agents, and it involves immersion in the context, the building of trust and rapport with agents, both phenomenological and hermeneutic interpretations, and recognition of the complexity of the social world. It does not attempt to reduce this complexity to a few statistical or typological representations. It is reflexive about the role of the researcher and the messiness of the research process. Also, if it is faithful to practice theory, then it will ensure that it employs a macro approach to gain knowledge of the wider context of action, as well as maintaining a close eye on the various ways that social structures are taking effect within and through agents in the practice of daily life.

Key idea: *a critical definition of ethnography.* Ethnography is a practice that: evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive and credible stories.

If we are true to a theory of practice for ethnography, then we also need to acknowledge that as individuals taking part in the daily lives of the individuals we are interested in, we are also subject to our own wider structures of opportunities and constraints, we have embodied our own set of expectations from diverse sources, and we will bring those ideas and assumptions to the setting with us. We will also have an impact on the practice of daily life as well as on our understanding of that practice, and we will be implicated in the outcomes of that practice in terms of actions, attitudes and in the (re)production and transformation of social structures. I discuss all these issues further in subsequent chapters, when I discuss reflexivity, and in chapter 2, when I look at some of the philosophical perspectives informing ethnography. Therefore, as I have said earlier, ethnography should be informed by a theory of practice that: understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; that also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and that determines the methods on which to draw and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

This is not a recipe book. I do not pretend to teach readers how to do ethnographic research through a step-by-step guide to techniques and procedures. This book aims to sensitise you to the issues involved when making decisions about specific methods. Because ethnography is a practice, it is not possible to predetermine what should be done and how in a given set of circumstances.

Every decision is a matter of weighing up a multitude of factors so that I cannot tell you what to do, but what choices there are and how others have resolved various problems, describing the array of methods available in order to encourage you in what Plummer (2001a: 118) calls ‘a self-consciousness about method’ and what Brewer (2000) refers to as analytical reflexivity. However, you can only give free rein to the ethnographic imagination (Willis 2000) if you are aware of techniques and procedures as well as the shared methodology of ethnography. I recommend reading published ethnographies as a route to understanding what it is and how it is done, what kinds of uses it is put to, what sorts of findings it generates, and the broad range of styles used and methods employed. Throughout the rest of this book, I will refer at times to published work that you can search out for yourself, but will also use examples of students’ work to demonstrate methodological dilemmas and resolutions (even now, published work rarely explicates the myriad decisions, turn-arounds, heartaches and enlightened moments that constitute the ethnographer’s daily fare).

Ethnography and anthropology

This section explores the work of Bronislaw Malinowski quite closely as a means of introducing almost all the issues relevant to this book. Malinowski is often considered to be the founder of modern social anthropological methods of fieldwork and participant observation (Macdonald 2001). A Polish man, born in 1884 of aristocratic parents, who studied maths, physics and philosophy at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, he was inspired to take up anthropology after reading Fraser’s *The Golden Bough*, and in 1910 went to study in England at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He gained the financial support to undertake field research in New Guinea, but war broke out while he was in Australia. However, though legally an ‘enemy’ in Australia, he was able to move freely about the Pacific islands for the duration of the war as long as he reported his movements to the Australian government. His most famous research was carried out in the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia, off the north-east coast of Australia, where he picked up the Kiriwinian language and was able to dispense with an interpreter within four months (Gerould 1992). Malinowski was not the first person to use fieldwork methods, but was the first systematically to record and later to teach his students the canons of the method. His work helped establish the fieldwork principles that anthropologists adhere to today (Eriksen 1995, Urry 1984). For social anthropology, the theories and theoretical orientation may change but the methods of approach stay more or less the same. Indeed this is the case to such an extent that many anthropologists seem to believe that the methods of doing ethnography cannot and need not be taught (Johnson 1990). Clearly, I do not agree!

Prior to the early 1900s, most ethnographic information had been collected by what Malinowski referred to as ‘amateurs’ – missionaries, colonial administrators and travellers – and survey work of sorts had been carried out, measuring skulls and charting physical traits for example. Nineteenth-century researchers delighted

in collecting artefacts and descriptions of the exotic and supposedly backward peoples they came into contact with and were obsessed with charting and classifying their collections (see Banton 1977), while the anthropologists who analysed the data brought back by such researchers mostly engaged in 'armchair theorising'. By the early 1900s, academics had begun to discuss the idea of going out and talking to people and learning about these 'natives' at first hand. So Malinowski did not invent fieldwork all alone, but, if you look at the first chapter of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1922), you will see that what he did was spell out, fairly polemically, his methods. So what was Malinowski's special methodology?

Malinowski's methodology

Malinowski's monographs include an account of the system of ceremonial exchange known as the *kula* (in which bracelets and necklaces made from shells seemed invested with power and status far beyond their intrinsic worth); a study of Trobriand courtship, marriage and domestic life; and studies of gardening and magic, crime, spirits and social control (Malinowski 1922, 1926, 1935, 1960). Above all, Malinowski writes polemically about the methods he employed in his research. Malinowski insists that scientific fieldwork has three aims:

- to describe the customs and traditions, the institutions, the structure, the skeleton of the tribe (or what people say they do);
- to give this flesh and blood by describing how daily life is actually carried out, the *imponderabilia* of actual life (how they do it);
- to record typical ways of thinking and feeling associated with the institutions and culture.

At first, a new culture or society seems to an outsider unruly, disordered or chaotic, but when we look closely and carefully we begin to see that everything is carefully structured and organised, controlled by rules and laws, customs and traditions that help to make sense, at least for those taking part, of the activities that at first seemed so strange. In order to understand this we have to spend time watching events and asking people about them, and about what they do in certain circumstances. Much of this sort of information, Malinowski suggested, could be obtained through survey work. Survey work can tell us much about the framework of the society we are interested in, it gives us the skeleton, but this lacks flesh and blood. Hence the second aim.

Of course, we must remember, Malinowski and his colleagues at the time were trying to understand 'natives', tribal peoples with cultures and lifestyles (and even appearances) very different from their own. It was very easy to see these as exotic and strange and for the researcher to focus on these aspects. But Malinowski wanted to make sure people understood that was not what proper scientific research is all about. One should not focus on these things only, but

should explore closely and carefully the daily habits and customs that might seem boring and routine. These, as much as those things that seem strange to us, can enlighten the observer about the group's way of life. Similarly today, an entire group we thought were familiar can seem strange and exotic when we apply the ethnographic gaze and when we closely explore all the little habits and customs that people take part in. Take Christmas in the West, for example, and the strange compulsion people have to get into all sorts of debt buying gifts no one needs, or the compulsion Shetland Islanders have to engage in a dangerous ball game (The Ba', see chapter 2 and www.bagame.com) that can end in broken legs and arms and can cause rifts between groups of people who normally coexist contentedly.

Finally, we need to understand the 'natives' own views of what they do, 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, *his* vision of *his* world' (1922: 25) (note, the sexist language Malinowski uses is his, not mine). This does not involve getting inside the heads of *individuals* but beginning to understand the *group's* views, feelings and sentiments. For example, a 'man who lives in a polyandrous community cannot experience the same feelings of jealousy as a strict monogynist' (1922: 23). In addition to these main aims, there are a few key elements to Malinowski's ethnography. These are that data are collected in context, over a period of time, using participant observation as well as other data collection techniques. I will look at each of these in turn.

Ethnographic data is collected in context

For Malinowski, the ethnographer should not sit in 'his' armchair theorising, but should get out there and spend time learning about different peoples from within their own natural surroundings. Nor should we remove people from their natural setting in order to analyse them, observe them, measure and weigh and assess them as objects for research, as was popular at the time. It is unscientific to do this. We cannot trust the reports of others. We, as trained scientists, must use our senses to collect empirical data (sense data) and we must do this within the naturalness (laboratory-like setting) of the surroundings. 'Proper conditions for ethnographic work ... consist mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which can really only be achieved by camping right in their villages' (Malinowski 1922: 7).

It is only by being in context, being there to talk with and listen to the people you are researching as they experience things and as they go about their daily lives, that you can get them to tell you about how they feel and think. In this way, Malinowski says, you get so much more from people than you would if they were 'a paid, and often bored, informant'. It is worth noting here that much of the survey data, interviews, life histories and other sociological data is information collected out of context and should always be analysed as such. What people say they do is not always the same as what they do. What they do varies with circumstance and setting. The other reason for collecting the research in context is so

that you can observe the *imponderabilia*, and can find out how people think and feel as things happen rather than after or before the event. Daily quarrels, jokes, family discussions, all are significant. All give you an insight into the way of life. However, this is not some woolly method involving hanging around and making sweeping generalisations pulled from who knows where. For Malinowski, this was a scientific method, which should be approached with due rigour. The context needs to be described, the methods used as well as the setting, the moods and so on. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski prescribes that an ethnographer should describe his methods just as a scientist would explain the conditions of an experiment.

No one would dream of making an experimental contribution to physical or chemical science, without giving a detailed account of all the arrangements of the experiments; an exact description of the apparatus used; of the manner in which the observations were conducted; of their number; of the length of time devoted to them, and of the degree of approximation with which each measurement was made. In less exact sciences, as in biology or geology, this cannot be done as rigorously, but every student will do his best to bring home to the reader all the conditions in which the experiment or the observations were made. In Ethnography, where a candid account of such data is perhaps even more necessary, it has unfortunately in the past not always been supplied with sufficient generosity, and many writers do not ply the searchlight of methodic sincerity, as they move among their facts but produce them before us out of complete obscurity.

(Malinowski 1922: 3)

Malinowski deals with this difficult demand by offering a 'brief outline of an Ethnographer's tribulations' which he hopes will shed more light on the question than an abstract discussion would do. In other words, he describes his methodology, his attitude to his methods, and his reasons for doing what he does and how. He also gives an outline (1922: 16), in a table, of what expeditions took place where, and for how long, and lists some of the events that took place during that time. Unfortunately many contemporary ethnographers seem not to have learned this lesson, and nowadays, every ethnographer has to decide for him or herself how much information is necessary for the reader to be able to evaluate the results of the research (see chapter 9).

Time

As Ball and Smith (2001: 307) have noted, 'what distinguished Malinowski's ethnography was the time he devoted to it, and its quality: between one and two years in the field, alongside the obligation to acquire competence in the vernacular'. For Malinowski an ethnographer needs to spend a considerable amount of time actually in the company of the people he or she is studying for the following reasons:

- to become part of the daily routine so as to limit the effects on the research subjects of your presence as an outsider;
- time to learn and understand as an insider;
- time to add to your questions and to guide your research in alternative directions.

Whenever you begin a new ethnographic study and enter the field for the first time, not only will you feel strange and obtrusive, but so will you affect those you are spending time with. Trying to learn about people by spending time living or working alongside them has one obvious problem: they know you are there and this might affect how they behave. How can you know if they are doing the same things in the same way as if you were not there? Well, one way around this is for you to be there long enough for the people to get used to you and to stop feeling strange about you being there. You have to become part of the natural surroundings, to blend in. He says:

It must be remembered that as the natives saw me constantly every day, they ceased to be interested or alarmed, or made self-conscious by my presence, and I ceased to be a disturbing element in the tribal life which I was to study.

(Malinowski 1922: 8)

This is one reason why an ethnographer needs time. However, time also allows the researchers to settle in themselves and to begin to feel part of things and to understand them from the point of view of those being researched. When you begin, everything looks strange and inexplicable. As time goes on and you begin to understand the society better, as Malinowski says, you acquire the ‘feeling’ for good and bad manners, for how to behave in this new culture and thus learn it better than if you had merely asked questions about it. The third reason for needing to spend time doing ethnography is that you might not know what you want to explore at the outset. Malinowski’s approach was informed by inductive reasoning (see chapter 2), where theory flows from data, but also informs research questions. He explains this better than I can:

If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings into the field, the more he is in the habit of moulding his theories according to facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped with the work. Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies.

(Malinowski 1922: 9)

This development of theory in context takes time. It is not the kind of research where one goes out with a fixed idea of what one wants to study, collects the data and returns to analyse it. The data collection and analysis go hand in hand (this will be discussed further in chapter 8). For Malinowski, it is even likely you would have to return to the field a few times to do more observations once you started to try to write up your research.

Participation

A crucial element of ethnographic research for Malinowski is participation in the lives of the people being studied. As with the importance of spending time with the group (as opposed to simply making brief visits), participation is important for the ethnographer to become part of the natural surroundings or the setting, so that the people being researched cease to be affected by his or her presence. If you take part in things then everything you want to study becomes within easy reach, rather than you having to renegotiate access over and over again. But more than this, participation helps you to experience things as the insiders do and thus understand them better:

... in this type of work, it is good for the ethnographer sometimes to put aside his camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on ... Out of such plunges into the lives of the natives – and I made them frequently not only for study's sake but because everyone needs human company – I have carried away a distinct feeling that their behaviour, their manner of being, in all sorts of tribal transaction, became more transparent and easily understandable than it had been before.

(Malinowski 1922: 21–22)

As an aside, since the publication of his diary in 1967, Malinowski has been criticised for not really taking part in things at all, and there have been debates within ethnography about how much you can actually experience things as an insider and remain objective. Indeed, the publication of Malinowski's diary (Malinowski 1967) placed a mark of interrogation beside any overly confident and consistent ethnographic voice (Clifford 1986). Contemporary ethnography is often described as, or attempts to be, *reflexive*: that is to say it is conducted in full awareness of the myriad limitations associated with humans studying other human lives (these issues are discussed more fully in subsequent chapters).

Key idea: *reflexivity*. Contemporary ethnography is often described as, or attempts to be, *reflexive*. That is to say it is conducted in full awareness of the myriad limitations (and advantages) associated with humans studying other human lives.