

How To Write Field Notes:

*(500 words, a hard copy to Prof G and a copy for your journal)

Ethnographers engage in participant observation in order to gain insight into cultural practices and phenomena. These insights develop over time and through repeated analysis of many aspects of our fieldsites. To facilitate this process, ethnographers must learn how to take useful and reliable notes regarding the details of life in their research contexts. These fieldnotes will constitute a major part of the data on which later conclusions will be based.

Fieldnotes should be written as soon as possible after leaving the fieldsite, immediately if possible. Even though we may not think so when we are participating and observing, we are all very likely to forget important details unless we write them down very quickly. Since this may be very time-consuming, students should plan to leave a block of time for writing just after leaving the research context.

Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (1997) have developed a list of what should be included in all fieldnotes:

1. Date, time, and place of observation
2. Specific facts, numbers, details of what happens at the site
3. Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, taste
4. Personal responses to the fact of recording fieldnotes
5. Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language
6. Questions about people or behaviors at the site for future investigation
7. Page numbers to help keep observations in order

There are 4 major parts of fieldnotes, which should be kept distinct from one another in some way when we are writing them:

1. Jottings are the brief words or phrases written down while at the fieldsite or in a situation about which more complete notes will be written later. Usually recorded in a small notebook, jottings are intended to help us remember things we want to include when we write the full-fledged notes. While not all research situations are appropriate for writing jottings all the time, they do help a great deal when sitting down to write afterwards.

2. Description of everything we can remember about the occasion you are writing about - a meal, a ritual, a meeting, a sequence of events, etc. While it is useful to focus primarily on things you did or observed which relate to the guiding question, some amount of general information is also helpful. This information might help in writing a general description of the site later, but it may also help to link related phenomena to one another or to point our useful research directions later.

3. Analysis of what you learned in the setting regarding your guiding question and other related points. This is how you will make links between the details described in section 2 above and the larger things you are learning about how culture works in this context. What themes can you begin to identify regarding your guiding question? What questions do you have to help focus your observation on subsequent visits? Can you begin to draw preliminary connections or potential conclusions based on what you learned?

4. Reflection on what you learned of a personal nature. What was it like for you to be doing this research? What felt comfortable for you about being in this site and what felt uncomfortable? In what ways did you connect with informants, and in what ways didn't you? While this is extremely important information, be especially careful to separate it from analysis.

Methods of writing fieldnotes can be very personal, and we are all likely to develop ways of including and separating the above four parts which work for us but might not work for others. However, to give an idea of how some others have done it, included here are excerpted examples of actual fieldnotes written by students.

Example #1: an ethnography of waitresses in an all-night diner. Notice how the writer, Reah Johnson, keeps description separate from analysis by italicizing the analysis of this specific incident. Further analysis of the entire sequence of events (only a portion of which are included here) are kept separate from description and analysis by adding an extra section at the end.

"Two men came into the restaurant with the intent of trying to sell things to the customers. They each have plastic sacks filled with random objects that they are showing to the customers in the bar area. Bernie sees them from where she is sitting with Jay. She stands up and asks one of them, 'Are you buy'n somethin' baby?' The man gives Bernie a mean look and she tells them they both can leave, adding, 'I done you a favor.' The man Bernie spoke directly to turns to his friend and says something negative while making a gesture towards Bernie. 'Don't take it personal,' she tells him. 'Well I did,' he yells back. As the two men walk out of the diner, Bernie warns them not to get her upset. After they are gone she lights a cigarette and says out loud, 'I ain't gonna be get'n hurt by this dumb shit.' Jay has been sitting still and has said nothing throughout this entire encounter. I was amazed at how Bernie handles the two men and she did so entirely by herself, without the help of any male employee in the diner. Her language accomplished two things. Firstly, she avoided taking the role of an uncompassionate member of her establishment by claiming, 'I done you a favor.' In this respect it might also be argued she was protecting her reputation. Secondly, her language managed to serve as self-protection when she said 'I ain't gonna be get'n hurt by this dumb shit.' Bernie, like Debbie also revealed in

her interview, doesn't let herself get hurt by others."

Further analysis: "A lot took place in regards to protection. ... I have heard many of the graveyard shift waitresses at St. George's comment on how the cooks are always there to protect them, but in this case it seems they were there solely to take the credit for protecting the waitresses. Bernie is, however, a very unique waitress in the way she powerfully expresses herself. Perhaps the events of this evening unfolded the way they did because of Bernie's strong and unyielding character."

Example # 2: an ethnography of an adult English as a Second Language class by Hallie Mittleman. Hallie, too, chooses to italicize analysis.

"In order to encourage the other students to speak, Karen (the teacher) asks them about their favorite American movies, or alternatively their favorite American tv shows. ... Borach (new class tonight, Turkish) says that he feels that American movies are very important in portraying American relationships and politics for the world. But Alison, motioning to Joanna when she speaks, points out that the difference between TV and real life is significant. She speaks of the glamour and wealth portrayed on *Dynasty* and describes how this is definitely not real life and Joanna nods her head in agreement. Borach attempts to illustrate this point by describing a movie he watched about Vietnam. He says that watching this movie was key in his understanding of American history. He then speaks to Memet, who is Turkish, in Turkish and says (to the group that) only one or two Turkish movies are produced and released internationally every year. Joanna is asked about Polish movies and their international release, and together Joanna and Alison say, 'of course, Roman Polansky'." "Discussion of material culture is often, as in this case, labeled 'American.' These goods enforce a 'here vs. there' dichotomy, because if something is labeled as 'American' there must be a contrast to what is not American. Although there could be multiple constructions of what is 'not American' through constantly asking students to define the American product in terms of 'what x is like in your country', categories of what culture can be are defined in terms of American cultural categories. Additionally, a notion of difference is always implied if something is labeled 'American'; because there is something (product z) American, there must therefore be a corresponding, but necessarily different product z in 'your' country. 'Your country' is becoming a category possessing something analogous but different."

References

Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth and Bonnie Stone Sunstein 1997 *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*. Pp. 73. Blair Press: Upper Saddle River, NJ.

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