

# The Promise and Pitfalls of Going Into the Field

Firsthand reports from the field comprise some of the most valuable work in the social sciences. But findings are often controversial. Understanding how fieldwork is carried out can help readers assess ethnographic research.

BY PATRICIA A. ADLER AND PETER ADLER

Barbara Ehrenreich, a white, divorced Ph.D. in her 50s, spent a year working low-wage jobs as a waitress in Florida, a housecleaner in Maine and a Wal-Mart sales clerk in Minnesota. Her detailed ethnography, the best-selling *Nickel and Dime*, reveals how physically demanding and personally demeaning these jobs are, and how workers are trapped in them. Ehrenreich's book has received wide critical acclaim, a typical book review in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* calling it "piercing social criticism backed by first-rate reporting."

Some ethnographies are, however, more controversial. William Foote Whyte, then a young, Protestant graduate student at Harvard, wrote a classic ethnography of Italian-American youth in the early 1940s, *Street Corner Society*, describing the "corner boys" who hung around the neighborhood and participated in illegal activities. He described them as a "gang." Yet Marianne Boelen, an Italian immigrant to America who years later revisited his setting and re-interviewed his subjects, asserted that Whyte had made methodological and substantive errors in his work. These boys were not a gang, she claimed, but rather followed a typical Italian pattern: women occupied indoor space and men claimed the outdoors. He might have realized this had he paid greater attention to gender. His errors also resulted, she alleged, from relying too closely on one key informant, "Doc," whose role he exaggerated.

That two important ethnographies can produce such different reactions, from critical acclaim to academic controversy, raises several questions about ethnographic methods. How can readers know if researchers have gotten the evidence and its interpretation right? What kinds of stories should we believe? We need to be able to assess the validity and value of ethnographic work, just as we do

with other methods. Herbert Gans, in *The Urban Villagers*, notes that "every social research method is a mixture of art and science," but that participant observation is the best empirical research method available because it allows us to study, firsthand, what people do, think, and believe, in their own groups. While all methods may be subject to problems such as shaping findings to fit preconceptions, Gans continues, "ethnography is most successful when it becomes an all encompassing 14- to 16-hours a day experience, with at least a year's full-time fieldwork, and a good deal of additional time to analyze and think about the data."

Ethnography, as we defined it when we edited the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, includes observing social activities as an outsider, observing while participating in the activities, and conducting intensive interviews. Considered the most accessible to readers of all the social scientific methods, ethnography draws on the language and perspective of everyday members of society, and is often written like investigative journalism. A successful ethnography captures readers' fancies, bringing them closer to the lives of others, and, like a good movie or book, offers insight into people's ordinary worlds. Literally translated as a "portrait of the people," ethnography describes and analyzes the beliefs, motivations, and rationales of a people in a particular setting or subculture. It makes the familiar distant and the distant familiar,

Although ethnography resembles journalism, it differs by requiring the systematic long-term gathering of data and by engaging general theories of human behavior rather than simply reporting the news. Ethnography resembles literature as well, but differs in focusing on social trends and patterns rather than character development. Finally, ethnography differs from common sense interpretations by

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drawing on meticulous field research rather than popular stereotypes. But as the controversy around Whyte's classic ethnography teaches us, it is not always obvious which ethnographic reports are sufficiently systematic, sufficiently accurate or sufficiently useful.

### THE ETHNOGRAPHIC GENRE

Ethnography can be divided into three crucial stages: data gathering, data analysis and data presentation. One might be an exemplary field researcher, able to fit into myriad social settings and to elicit the insiders' view from a variety of people, but this is not enough. Ethnographers need to step back as well, to take a detached look at people's worlds so they can analyze underlying patterns of behavior. These careful observations and astute interpretations must be backed up by prose that brings readers into people's complex lives. We will see how exemplary researchers optimize the rewards of fieldwork while avoiding its pitfalls.

#### Data Gathering

Good ethnography takes time. The strength of ethnographers' data depends on the quality and depth of the relationships they forge and the rapport and trust they establish with the people they study. Superficial relationships yield superficial insights. Researchers sometimes spend up to several years in the field, as we did in our studies of drug dealers and smugglers in *Wheeling and Dealing* and elite college athletes in *Backboards & Blackboards*.

Ethnographers, in having to gain people's trust, require highly developed social skills. They must be able to get along with all sorts of people, from powerful managers to weak employees. For instance, in an outstanding ethnography of the homeless, *Down on Their Luck*, Leon Anderson and David Snow spent parts of two years under bridges, in Salvation Army shelters and plasma centers, at the city hospital and police department, and on the streets of Austin, Texas (see "Street People," *Contexts*, Winter 2003). Ethnography also requires intimacy and commitment. For example, in studying drug traffickers, our long-term relationships with central figures were often tested by crises or suspicions of betrayal, and loyalty was expected on both sides during the six years of explicit research and for many years afterwards.

According to current thinking, ethnographers should get as near to the people they are studying as possible. Even studying one's self (auto-ethnogra-

phy), as Carolyn Ellis did in *Final Negotiations*, where she documented the changing emotions she and her partner experienced as he was dying of emphysema, or as Carol Rambo Ronai did in her writings on incest, has become acceptable. Some ethnographers combine the intimacy of autobiography with the more general approach of talking to others who have gone through similar traumas or events. Best illustrated by David Karp in *Speaking of Sadness*, a study of manic-depressives, the author recounts his own bouts with depression as well as data gleaned from numerous observations and interviews with self-help groups for this illness. Karp's own experiences helped him gain participants' trust and gave him a deeper understanding of the emotional complexity of mood fluctuation. In evaluating ethnography, then, readers should pay attention to not only the length of time researchers spent in the field (a year or two tends to be the minimum depending upon the locale and topic of study), but also the depth of involvement they established with their subjects.

Sometimes problems arise when researchers are either too close or similar to their subjects or too distant or different from them. Researchers who are too close may "go native," uncritically accepting their subjects' perspectives. Researchers too distant may fail to penetrate beyond the fronts people design for public presentation. For example, Richard Mitchell, in *Dancing at Armageddon*, a study of survivalists, became involved with people whose behaviors evoked some repugnance. To forge the necessary rapport, he had to overcome his initial feelings of alienation, to spend time getting to know participants, and to establish friendship and trust on other planes. Readers who suspect ethnographers may have such problems should look for frank and personal methodological discussions that specifically address how they encountered and dealt with these issues.

Good ethnography is systematic, rigorous and scientific. One of the chief criticisms leveled at ethnography is that it is anecdotal, careless, and casual, depending too much on researchers' subjectivity. Poor ethnography may result when researchers are biased by their own opinions or history, or when they carry their preconceived attitudes, either personal or professional, into the field and cannot transcend them. Derek Freeman aimed this charge against Margaret Mead, claiming that in *Coming of Age in Samoa* she uncritically accepted the assertions of a few adolescent girls about their uninhibited sexuality to support her mentor's views that nurture trumped nature. Bias may also result

from researchers' poor location or sponsorship in the field, where their access to the group is somehow impeded. And researchers can generate problems when they fail to gather multiple perspectives or prefer their own beliefs to the beliefs of others. (Recently, some "post-modern" ethnographers have concluded that the process is so idiosyncratic that there should be no claims to describe the world, only to describe researchers' reactions to the world.)

To overcome these problems, ethnographers should include the voices of a full spectrum of participants, not just the ones they can easily reach. Generally it is easier for researchers to "study down," looking at the downtrodden, the powerless, and the underclass, who, unlike the powerful, do not have the ability to insulate themselves. Researchers may also more easily gather data from people like themselves, overlooking members of dissimilar groups. Part of Boelen's allegation against Whyte was that his perspective was skewed toward "Doc," his key informant, a man much like himself. Good ethnography gains the perspectives of all involved, so that the ultimate portrait is rounded and thorough. In Jack Douglas and Paul Rasmussen's study, *The Nude Beach*, the voices of the nudists, other beachgoers, residents, and police are all heard, providing this sort of completeness. An ethnography that only privileges some voices and perspectives to the exclusion of others may not be as representative.

An array of methodological tactics may help to generate the multiple perspectives required. Ethnographers may combine direct observation, participation, interviewing, and casual conversation to triangulate their findings. For instance, in researching drug traffickers, we cross-checked our observations against our own common sense and general knowledge of the scene, against a variety of reliable, independent sources, and against hard evidence such as newspaper and magazine reports, arrest records and material possessions. Similarly Judith Rollins, in her study of domestics and their employers, *Between Women*, worked as a domestic for ten employers. In studying human-canine relationships for *Understanding Dogs*, Clinton Sanders not only drew on his own love of dogs and experiences as a dog owner, but also participated in the training of guide dogs and their owners, a "puppy kindergarten," observations of dogs and their owners in public settings, participant observation at a veterinary hospital for 14 months, and formal interviews with dog owners, veterinarians and trainers.

To help readers assess what role the researchers' personal views played in their reports,

an ethnographic report should include methodological reflections. Researchers use these "confessional tales" to explain problems, and then describe the ways they overcame them. Alan Peshkin confessed the problems he faced studying Bethany, a Christian fundamentalist community and school, for *God's Choice*: "I discovered, so to speak, that being Jewish would be the personal fact bearing most on my research... They taught their children never to be close friends, marry or to go into business with someone like me. What they were expected to do with someone like me was to proselytize... To repeat, Bethany gored me." Yet, Peshkin was able to surmount his role as "odd man out" and to forge close research ties by living in the community for 18 months, attending all regular church and school activities, dressing and speaking as a member, and interviewing a significant portion of the school's teachers, students and parents.

Ethical concerns are often raised about ethnography, since researchers interact so closely with their subjects and could potentially deceive or harm them. A maelstrom of controversy surrounded Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade*, a study of impersonal homosexual encounters in public restrooms, partly because he was covert, observing without telling the men he watched that he was a researcher. Humphreys rejoined that he caused no harm to his subjects, and would not have been able to conduct the research under the strictures of "informed consent" rules that require the permission of those studied. New "Institutional Review Board regulations at universities now require researchers to relinquish their data to the authorities, often raising conflicts between their loyalty to the people they studied and to the government. When faced with this dilemma, Rik Scarce went to jail for six months rather than turn over his field notes on environmental activists in the state of Washington to the police. Not everyone will take such drastic steps, though, and recent guidelines have been designed to safeguard subjects from their researchers by making sure people know that what they say cannot be protected.

Some feminist and "activist" ethnographers believe researchers improve their ethical stance by eschewing the traditional "value neutral" position and openly aligning themselves with their subjects, "making the personal political" and working for social change. Others seek an ethical stance in taking their findings back to the field," showing their writings to subjects and asking for feedback. At the same time, however, some ethnographers believe this leads researchers to censor themselves from writing things their subjects might interpret as too

## NOTABLE ETHNOGRAPHIES

Ethnography's vitality and breadth is shown by the number of awards given to books employing this approach in the past decade. Some recent titles have garnered special attention:

Anderson, Elijah. *Code of the Street*. New York: Norton, 1999. An examination of inner-city black America, this book describes the complex code of rules governing violence in urban areas.

Bourgois, Philippe. *In Search of Respect*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. A provocative account of crack dealing in Spanish Harlem.

Casper, Monica. *The Making of the Unborn Patient*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998. Discusses controversies in biomedical experimentation by looking at doctors who perform surgeries on unborn babies.

Duneier, Mitchell. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999. An ethnography of poor black men who make their living selling magazines and secondhand goods on the streets of Greenwich Village.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Morel Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. An insider's look at the subculture of mushroom collectors.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Doméstica*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

An excellent portrayal of the new immigrant women in Los Angeles who serve as housecleaners, nannies and domestics.

Karp, David. *Speaking of Sadness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Using autobiographical and participant observation data, this book examines the lives of people who live with depression.

Miller, Jody. *One of the Guys*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Drawing on comparative research in two Midwestern cities, this book looks at the underlying causes and meanings of female gang membership.

Mitchell, Richard. *Dancing at Armageddon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. A rare look at a secretive group, survivalists, who inhabit the backwoods of America and prepare themselves for civilization's collapse.

Sanders, Clinton. *Understanding Dogs*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999. Explores the everyday experiences of living with canine companions.

Snow, David, and Leon Anderson. *Down on Their Luck*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Provides one of the most trenchant accounts of the problems involved with living on the streets of America today.

critical, pushing them toward "going native" in the field.

Perhaps most importantly, good ethnography conveys what it is like to "walk in the shoes" of the people being studied. No other method lets researchers adequately study hidden, secretive, and sensitive groups, since deviants, criminals, and others with something to hide are unlikely to talk to strangers. Jeffrey Ferrell's work on illegal graffiti artists and Jeffrey Sluka's investigation of violent political combatants in Ireland, for example, provide insightful ethnographic research into subterranean worlds. Readers should understand people's joys, feel their frustrations and sorrows, and know their problematic, complex and contradictory worlds. For instance, Karp's *Speaking of Sadness*

delves deeply into the poignant fears and frustrations experienced by people who suffer from depression. One person Karp interviewed described the way depression stole away who she was and replaced her life with a black hole: "Depression is an insidious vacuum that crawls into your brain and pushes your mind out of the way. It is the complete absence of rational thought. It is freezing cold, with a dangerous, horrifying, terrifying fog wafting through whatever is left of your mind," In *Sidewalk*, Mitchell Duneier explains some of the practical problems that Greenwich Village African-American street vendors encounter in doing what we all take for granted: going to the bathroom. In the words of one of his informants: "I gotta get me a paper cup and I'm gonna be all right.... Now everybody out



here gets a cup. You can't go to the bathroom in the stores and restaurants, because they don't want you in there if you ain't got no money to spend. So how you gonna piss? You gotta get a cup." Thus, we learn about not only the vernacular of the men themselves, but also the everyday turmoil that they encounter.

## Data Analysis

Ethnographers begin forming their analyses early in their fieldwork, testing and refining them over time. Researchers usually remain near, or connected to their settings throughout the time they write up their data, to fill in holes they discover and to check their interpretations against their informants'. Yet their observations about the specifics of a particular time and place must be joined by more far-reaching, general analyses. They want for example, to speak about not just a poor neighborhood, but poor neighborhoods in general. One test of how well ethnographers have succeeded in capturing more general patterns comes when people in comparable settings recognize the descriptions they read. For instance, in our college athlete study, we were frequently satisfied when we gave lectures at universities and athletes in the audience came up afterwards to say that we "got it right."

Good ethnography generates, modifies, extends, or challenges existing understandings of social life. For instance, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's study of immigrant domestic workers in Los Angeles, *Doméstica*, is powerful because it shows that American husbands' failures to share household duties and the influx of immigrant workers have combined to create a pattern in which housekeepers work in affluence but live in poverty.

## Data Presentation

Ethnographers must write clearly and actively avoiding jargon, highly technical terms or obscure phrases. Ethnography also should "give voice" to participants, enabling readers to get a sense of how people converse and what language they use. In *Code of the Streets*, Elijah Anderson uses a voice from the neighborhood to explain why low-income African-American girls in vulnerable situations may become pregnant early: "I done see where four girls grow up under their mama... Mama working three to eleven o'clock at night... Can't nobody else tell 'em what to do. Hey, all of 'em pregnant by age sixteen. They can get they own baby, they get they own [welfare] check, they get they own apartment. They wanna get away from Mama."

What anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "thick description" is another hallmark of ethnography. Good ethnographies vividly present participants' stories, using colorful words, adjectives, or other literary devices to highlight the vibrancy of group culture. With sounds and action, Philippe Bourgois brings readers into the midst of the scene in this excerpt from *In Search of Respect* his ethnography of Puerto Rican crack dealers in East Harlem: "But then when we stepped out of the room, she turns to me and whispers [snarling], 'You mother-fucker.' She like turns on me again. And then I went [burying his head in his hands], 'Oh, my God.' And I got mad [making exaggerated whole-body wrestling motions], and I grabbed her by the neck, and I threw her to the sofa. [pounding fist to palm] BOOM... and I WHAAAAM, POOM [pounding again], smacked her in the face with all my might." Even when the subject matter is disturbing, it should be easy, not hard, to read this type of social science.

Successful ethnography elicits the "uh-huh" effect in readers, presenting subjects' everyday behavior in ways that people can recognize. Lyn Lofland, an observer of public places, succinctly summarized behavior that we all do, but rarely acknowledge. She described how people get ready to enter a public space: they "check for readiness" (clothes, grooming, mirror glances), "take a personal reading" (pause, scan the area, check the layout) and "reach a position" (find a secure location or niche). These sorts of rich and resonating descriptions serve to authenticate ethnographic presentations.

## THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

In making the familiar distant, researchers find new ways of looking at what we think we know and bringing the unknown to light. Weak ethnography runs the risk of rediscovering the obvious. Poorly presented ethnography may stop at subjects' understandings of their worlds, or may analyze these in mundane, trivial or superficial ways. Gary Alan Fine's work is notable for introducing readers to the nuances of unusual subcultures, such as mushroom collecting, or taking familiar worlds, such as the Little League, and providing a framework for a much broader understanding of children's culture.

Good ethnography may also be socially influential. It may speak to social policy and public awareness as well as to scholarly knowledge and theoretical understanding. For example, Arlie

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Hochschild brought recognition to contemporary working women—who still do most of the housework and child care—with her research on *The Second Shift*. What seemed to be individuals' personal problems, she showed, emerged from social changes affecting many families. In the 1990s, government agencies implemented programs to distribute condoms, clean needles, and bleach after ethnographies of the drug world exposed the HIV dangers in the practices of street people. Whether or how ethnographic findings are used depends on the administration in power and the tenor of the times, however. The traditionally liberal leanings of sociologists have made their suggestions more appealing to Democratic politicians. Others believe, however, that ethnography should take theory-building, not political activism, as its goal. As famed ethnographer Erving Goffman put it: "I can only suggest that he who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not intend to provide a lullaby, but merely to sneak in and watch the people snore."

Ethnography has the power to incite, infuriate, enthrall and excite. Ethnographers need to be careful in their representation of others, scrupulous in how they relate to informants in order to obtain data, and true to their own integrity in not violating others' privacy. However, their stories are vital, allowing readers insight into worlds to which they will never be privy or to ones that they would otherwise never understand. The great ethnographies

endure for decades because the evidence is accessible, the messages remain critical, and the stories of people's complex worlds continue to be fresh and insightful.

### Recommended Resources

Atkinson, Paul, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland, and Lyn Lofland. *Handbook of Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001. A useful resource on the history of ethnography, its current disciplinary borders, substantive foci and methodological advances.

Denzin, Norman K., and Yvonna Lincoln. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000. A definitive source on controversies, nuances, and new directions for all qualitative research, but particularly focused on ethnography.

<http://www.soc.sbs.ohio-state.edu/rdh/welist.htm>. A comprehensive website that lists workplace ethnographies. This inventory of articles and books includes ethnographic research on organizations, cutting across a wide variety of disciplines.

Lofland, John, and Lyn Lofland. *Analyzing Social Settings*. Third Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995. First published in 1971, this is the longest standing primer on doing ethnography, covering data gathering, data analysis and data presentation.