

## UNIT TWO

### What is an Ethnographic Approach?

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# **SECTION ONE**

# 1. Introduction

Ethnographers are noted for their ability to keep an open mind about the group or culture they are studying. However, this quality does not imply any lack of rigour. The ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, not an empty head. (Fetterman 1989:11)

This unit introduces students to the fundamental method of anthropology: ethnography. Firstly, it provides some definitions and examples of what ethnography is. Secondly, it introduces some of the basic techniques of ethnography and finally it discusses the notion of 'reflexivity'. The course does not purport to train students as 'anthropologists' but to develop enough understanding of anthropological ways of seeing and of ethnographic method to carry out an ethnographic study while abroad. The principles involved are drawn from anthropology: both traditional anthropology which involved making the strange familiar, and modern urban ethnography which involves making the familiar strange. These perspectives allow us to gain a better understanding of the nature of cultural patterns and practices.

Field work, which involves prolonged periods of contact and interaction with, and observation of, the groups of people being researched, is essential to anthropology as a means of obtaining data for analysis. In fact, it could be said that it is the social relationship between the fieldworker and their informants which is *the* research tool in ethnography. In other words, how the language student as ethnographer relates to the people and events around them and how they come to an understanding of these relationships is central to cultural learning. This unit, therefore, introduces some of the key ideas with regard to the role of the researcher and its application in the context of language students' work.

For most students, the period abroad will be their main opportunity to do fieldwork, although the course does incorporate small-scale fieldwork experience at home, through assignments. These assignments are important in helping the student to acquire expertise and confidence about going into a fieldwork situation.

## 2. Links with other units

In this unit, many of the recurrent themes to be developed through the course are introduced and signalled as fundamental principles. None of them are covered in depth, since the aim is to begin to define what is characteristic and unique about an ethnographic approach. So this unit links with all the subsequent units, both the more conceptual units such as Unit 6 *Gender*, Unit 15 *Local Level Politics* and Units 16 and 17 *Belief and Action* and those that deal with ethnographic methods such as Unit 8 *Participant Observation* and Units 9 and 10 *Ethnographic Interviewing*. It has particularly close links with Unit 4 *Shared Cultural Knowledge* which introduces some of the basic concepts that underpin ethnographic method.

### 3. Background notes

There is much disagreement about how to define ethnography and how to use it in practice. This section will not enter into the debate (see the texts cited in the readings section) but will indicate some of the basic theoretical and practical aspects of most relevance to non-anthropologists intending to make use of ethnographic methods. 'Ethnography' is a unique and distinctive approach and is one of the fundamental methods used in anthropological research, although it is not exclusive to that discipline and others such as sociologists, sociolinguists and educationalists also use it. In contrast to other social and behaviourist sciences, it focuses on the 'micro' rather than the 'macro', using qualitative rather than quantitative data collection and analytic procedures (although some of the accessible introductory texts such as Agar's *The Professional Stranger* do suggest ways of using some semi-formal quantitative data). In that sense, ethnography is more suited to the detailed study of the constituent groups within a society than to the study of, for example, national societies as a whole. Ethnography is both a method, widely used in many disciplines, and a product, the written account of some aspects of social and cultural practices. In both cases the overriding aim is to make intelligible to others a set of cultural practices (beliefs, values, meaning systems etc.) shared by a group, in a way that presents the insider or native view *in its own terms* and not just in those of the researcher. As Hammersley (1992) explains, it is perhaps most useful initially to look at what ethnographers do rather than try to define the characteristics of ethnography in the abstract.

#### 3.1 Studying People

Ethnography involves the study of a relatively small number of people in their 'natural' setting, over a lengthy period of time (usually months, sometimes years). Again, it is useful to make a contrast with the more familiar social science methods involving surveys, laboratories, questionnaires and other positivist instruments of enquiry involving large numbers of people, often in artificial settings and situations.

In ethnographic enquiry, people are studied in groups, or in contexts involving social interaction, rather than in terms of their individual psychology. Although part of the aim is indeed to 'get inside people's cultural norms', this is done largely through observation of and interviews about their social and cultural environment and behaviour. This is because anthropologists and sociologists believe that most individual perceptions, actions, etc. are the product of social and cultural forces. For example, what ambitions parents have for their children, the power fashion has over us or our views about what is edible, morally acceptable and so on are very largely the result of social and cultural influences. From our earliest moments, we learn certain ways of acting, believing and communicating as we become members of a particular cultural community. This process of *socialisation* continues throughout our lives as we become members of new groups – as school pupils, students, workers, parents and so on. For language students, it is this social and cultural level which is the most useful. Individual psychological differences are interesting but do not help with understanding foreign cultural processes and differences at a national level are stereotyping and frequently misleading.

That does not mean that an individual is what the social psychologist Howard Giles calls 'a sociolinguistic automaton'. An individual's talk and action is not totally determined by society's norms and conventions. Individuals do have some control over their lives, they are active agents, and can make some choices. However, much of what makes people part of a group is constituted in the cultural and social patterns of their lives.

An ethnographer will spend a large amount of her time *in the field*, a metaphor referring to participation in the interactions of a local cultural group to gain familiarity with the ordinary, everyday life of the members of that culture. In the past, ethnographers studied traditional societies in some remote part of the world or rural societies in Europe (Delamont 1995). But in the last thirty years or so, there has been a vast increase in the amount of urban ethnography. The kind of groups that have been studied by ethnographers in their own society include: junkies, cleaners in a university, cocktail waitresses, medical students, workers in an operating theatre, long distance truckers and many others. One of the criteria for choosing such a group is the existence of shared cultural knowledge among them, a shared set of codes and values, or a shared way of talking about the world. However, apparently homogeneous groups, who are categorised in terms of shared class, ethnicity, occupational roles, etc. may prove to be quite heterogeneous – have many voices – and cannot be summed up in any totalising way as being part of a group because of shared beliefs and practices. These different voices refer to differences in ways of seeing the world and constructing it linguistically, as later units will show.

As well as a group, a theme may also be studied and can involve people from discrete or overlapping groups. The focus of interest may be, for example, the cultural factors shaping gender relations; identity and personal boundaries; or the role of reputation within a community, in which case the point of departure may be an event or a ceremony such as a festival or wedding, from which the roles and relationships extending outwards may be studied (see the list in Unit 1 for examples). *The Motorway* study discussed in this unit is an example where an activity, working on the motorway, and a group, the workers, are studied together. Notions of identity and reputation are useful in understanding the social and cultural patterns which define them as a group.

### 3.2 Fieldwork and Participant Observation

There are a wide range of techniques for data collection and analysis but they all assume that the ethnographer will go out into the field. The choice of which techniques are to be used will depend largely on the particular circumstances of research and the research questions asked. The main tool of ethnographic enquiry is Participant Observation (see Unit 8).

Although ethnography has a long history, one of the most crucial steps in defining it was taken by the anthropologist Malinowski. At the beginning of the First World War, he chose to be sent to the Trobriand Islands for two years, rather than be a prisoner of war. He turned his exile there to advantage by deciding to live with and get to know 'the natives'. Up to this point, much anthropological research had been done in libraries (also known somewhat pejoratively as 'armchair' or 'veranda' anthropology) or through general and regional surveys. Under Malinowski's

influence, the idea of doing anthropology by living with local people, participating and observing, came to represent the hallmark of ethnography. Participant Observation was born. The ethnographic fieldworker both participates as an 'insider' and observes as an 'outsider'. As an insider, she tries to understand the group's meanings as if she were one of them but as an outsider she is observing and analysing the group in order to make sense of their lives as different or 'other'.

Through engaging in participant observation, the ethnographer accumulates what Geertz (1973) termed a 'thick description' as the basis for cultural interpretation. A thick description is obtained by gathering data on the fine-grained details of people's everyday lives and then interpreting this data in order to draw out the deeper meanings underlying people's actions and words (see Unit 4). So thick description is both description and interpretation. Geertz calls this a 'thick description' to contrast it with any superficial account of behaviour or belief systems. The thickness relates to the exploration of the layers of meaning to be found in everyday life:

Thus, ethnographers identify and explore the cultural patterns of everyday life and the consequences for participants of being members of a particular cultural group (e.g. religious, social, ethnic, educational [...]) Ethnography, therefore, is a deliberate inquiry process guided by a particular point of view (i.e., cultural theory) (Green and Zaharlick, 'Ethnographic Research', 1993: 206).

Green and Zaharlick also point out that ethnography is more than a set of fieldwork techniques and a set of analytic procedures. Decisions need to be taken about *selection* of data. Since it is impossible to see and hear everything, it is important to know what kind of description and analysis is appropriate in any given research situation. This is what the term "methodology" refers to: not just a list of methods but rather the questions that are to be asked about which methods are appropriate to the research problem being posed. One cannot, then, learn or teach "ethnography" in the abstract: it is always related to sets of questions or theories, which is why this course covers a number of theoretical issues such as 'local level politics', 'socialisation', etc. as well as training students in specific research techniques.

The ethnographer does not go into the field with a clipboard and a questionnaire to prove or disprove a theory. One of the characteristics of the ethnographic approach, is flexibility and open-mindedness:

Ethnographers are noted for their ability to keep an open mind about the group or culture they are studying. However, this quality does not imply any lack of rigour. The ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, not an empty head. (Fetterman 1989:11)

Nevertheless, given the problem of trying to capture everything, it is important that the researcher develop what Malinowski termed a 'foreshadowed problem', that is, an idea of a research problem to be explored (for example: how children in a particular family or neighbourhood are socialised into gender roles, how decisions are taken on academic policy committees or the meaning given to dance in the construction of local identity). As Malinowski suggests, these are 'foreshadowed problems', not a form prediction and in ethnographic research the original problem may change or a new problem may

emerge. Other decisions will also need to be made, such as how to locate a good informant, when to observe, and what a representative sample of people might be. All of this is part of the methodological aspect of a study.

Of course, once a group or theme has been chosen, there is plenty of room (if not always time) to change and adapt. For example, Shirley Jordan went into her study of cleaners in a university with a 'foreshadowed problem' about notions of cleanliness and rubbish. But she soon had to change her focus to what concerned them: their own status and their relationships with the large community within which they worked. Her focus also had to include their relationship with her as an outsider observing them. As Hammersley and Atkinson point out in the introduction to *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*:

In many ways, ethnography is the most basic form of social research ... [Ethnography] bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life. Some commentators regard this as its basic strength, others see it as a fundamental weakness ... 'Artificial' methods such as experiments and survey questionnaires are rejected on the grounds that these are incapable of capturing the meaning of everyday human activities. (1983, p. 2)

This reinforces the idea expressed by some ethnographers (e.g. Hymes) that in a sense, we are all born ethnographers but lose some of our ethnographic abilities as we grow up. A training in ethnographic method simply makes our way of acquiring cultural knowledge more self-conscious, purposeful and systematic. And, as Hammersley and Atkinson point out, in seeking understanding and explanation, ethnographers are not looking for one or a simple set of causes. Instead, they are trying to interpret the multiple relationships between people, ideas and feelings which make at least one kind of sense to them.

### 3.3 Reflexivity

'Reflexivity' is another key principle of ethnography. This involves a recognition on the part of the researcher that we are part of the social world we study, and that we are also culture bound. In other words, we cannot take part in and observe the world around us as if we are neutral and objective outsiders. Nor can we step outside our own culturally and socially constructed selves. So, when we look at how others greet each other, perform a wedding or make a business deal, we see it through our own cultural 'lens'. Reflexivity also involves engaging critically with one's own thinking and one's own role in attempting to understand and interpret other social groups. It means questioning what you notice and what you don't notice, questioning your judgements and how you come to make them and trying to see things from the inside while recognising that you are not totally within. *Making Strange*, which involves consciously distancing oneself from the familiar and not taking anything for granted, is an essential part of the process of becoming more reflexive.

Reflexivity has become of increasing importance in the recent history of anthropology, (see in particular Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983), and sits comfortably with the philosophical debate fuelled by post-structuralist and post-modernist thinkers concerning the recognition of the open-endedness of meaning, and the notion that there can be no single, true or objective representation of reality. Post-modernism rejects the Enlightenment view of the supremely rational human individual and the authoritative "I" who can generalise about others, and puts in its place a multi-voiced reality in which meanings change and are contested. In some respects, post-modern thinking connects with the notions of cultural and linguistic relativity, best known as stemming from what is called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in its less strong form. The connection lies in the ideas, developed by Sapir and then Whorf, that the language of a particular group constructs a particular way of looking at the world for that group. The grammar and lexis, and discourse more generally, tend to make us take notice of some things and pass over others. This means that differences between groups and sub-groups are inevitable and no one group can ultimately have rights over the 'inherent' or 'literal' meanings of language. Similarly, reflexivity makes you question your habitual ways of thinking and the assumptions about how others think.

Reflexivity engages with the fact that we, as culture-bound individuals, are part of the shared culture(s) we study and that this has important implications for the practice of ethnography. The Observer's Paradox (the fact that studying a person or a setting will cause them to change) leads us to recognise that the 'fly on the wall' approach is not possible. So terms such as 'objectivity', 'representativeness' and 'bias' miss the point. There is no such thing as objectivity, we are all in subject positions vis-a-vis each other and the society we live in: in other words, we have to recognise the 'inter-subjectivity' of all social life. That is not to say that anything goes, or that one study is always as good as another. There are systematic and rigorous ways of taking account of observer situatedness.

For example, one of the students, Rachel, did an ethnographic project on blind students at Marburg University in Germany. She had assumed that blind students would be quite dependent on their families and look to them for support. But her habitual ways of thinking about disability were challenged by the data from her informants. She found that many of them resented what they saw as over-protectiveness from their families and some had cut free from their families all together. But she also had to be reflexive about herself as a double outsider – both sighted and non-German and had to question the data. Were the students presenting a stronger case than they would to other insiders? Was the language of the interviews through which they presented themselves different from their self-presentations in other contexts? Was she thinking about blindness in 'English' ways and were there different associations in this part of Germany? And so on.

So:

[T]he over-arching theme of reflexivity is 'making strange': being able to observe another group as if they were strange, not taking them for granted, and in the process reflect on one's own cultural and social assumptions and take account of them. Even where he or she is researching a familiar group or setting, the participant



observer is required to treat it as 'anthropologically strange' in an effort to make explicit the assumptions he or she takes for granted as a culture member.

(Hammersley and Atkinson op.cit. p.8)

Reflexivity is both an integral part of the process of studying and writing about another cultural group and a means of reflecting on so-called objective facts and stereotypes. If a group is stereotyped as 'rude' because they are too direct, then such a judgement reflects on one's own degree of directness. An activity that is judged as bizarre or even wrong appears as such because one's own beliefs are assumed to be appropriate and right. So, in order to learn about 'the other', a constant reflexive process is necessary in which your 'personal anthropology' (Pocock) - your personal set of beliefs, values and actions - is scrutinised. This scrutiny helps students think about the claims they make and whether there is the evidence for such claims. To say that a group is 'very direct' is a strong claim. Where is the evidence for it and is the claim more of a comment on one's own assumptions about directness, as we have just suggested?

### **3.4 Frames and Framing**

The first assignment introduces students to this fundamental ethnographic method 'making strange' or bringing to the surface and making visible the 'invisibility of everyday life'. It also introduces them to an important sociological and anthropological concept, 'the frame'. This concept draws on the anthropologist Gregory Bateson's notion of 'interpretive frames' (Bateson 1972). These are used to delimit and evaluate what is going on in an interaction. They provide a boundary within which it is possible to interpret the messages of an activity in a particular way. For example, when two children are wrestling together, are they playing or fighting? And at what point do they stop playing and start fighting or vice-versa? The sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) also used the term 'frame' to define a particular moment of social reality. The 'frame' here, in face to face interaction, is created by the activity itself. So, for example, when a lecturer formally opens the session with a device such as 'Right' or 'Let's begin' and the chat dies down, she has constructed a new frame, the one routinely used for a formal lecture with its associated structures of participation. The previous frame which both constructed and defined the activity of 'waiting for the lecture to begin' has now been replaced (see Unit 3 for further discussion). For students, the ability to understand the frames by which interactions are bounded is an important component of seeing things from an insider perspective and so developing intercultural competence.

### **3.4 How ethnographic approaches maintain systematic and rigorous principles of enquiry**

We can sum up the points made so far as follows:

- ◆ the researcher reflects critically on his or her own thinking and experience; 'making strange' means not taking the familiar for granted, and in general not accepting things at face value, e.g. how a student manages the potentially embarrassing situation of arriving late for class involves a complex set of discourses about politeness, self-presentation and so on.

- ◆ while the aim of ethnography is to seek out patterns of meaning, no single interpretation can be finally accepted as the truth (see Unit 9: *Ethnographic Conversations*).

The ethnographic study allows multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data throughout the study. ... The ethnographer is both storyteller and scientist... (Fetterman, 1989:12)

- ◆ by getting inside the meanings of others' cultural selves i.e. beginning to see things the way they see them, we also learn about the meaning of our own cultural identity.
- ◆ field relations, e.g. choosing an informant, getting close to a group of people, are to be carefully considered in terms of: ethical issues, trust, avoidance of ethnocentricity or reductionism (i.e. reducing the other to a distorted version of ourselves) etc.
- ◆ different types of fieldwork are useful for different kinds of observation.
- ◆ it is important to be explicit about the circumstances in which data were collected, including depth and breadth of relationships with informants. This allows the reader to judge the meaning of the data.
- ◆ in general, care needs to be taken regarding the relationship between claims and evidence. In asking what is occurring and why, the researcher is constantly engaged in inference and analysis and in questioning the adequacy, e.g. On what basis can a non-Sevillano write about the passion of the Sevillano dance? Who claims such passion? And does 'passion' mean the same to informants and ethnographers?

In sum, ethnography is a reflexive and qualitative approach which seeks to uncover general patterns of action that underpin social meaning. This means producing highly focused accounts, describing and interpreting **in context** and trying to describe in as complete a way as possible the detailed practices of a particular group.

### References

- ◆ Bateson, G (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine
- ◆ Goffman, E (1974) *Frame Analysis*. New York: Harper and Row
- ◆ Green, J & Zaharlick, A (1993) 'On Ethnographic Observation', in *Handbook of Methods and Research on English Language and Arts Teaching*. NCTE
- ◆ Hammersley, M (1992) *What's wrong with Ethnography?* London: Routledge

## **SECTION TWO**

# 1. Outline of a session

1. Introduction

2. Assignment feedback (Observing Yourself)

Concepts of: 'Micro' description; Observing patterns; 'Frames' and 'Making Strange'

3. Class discussion: 'Making strange'

Concepts of: problematising 'objectivity'; thick description; Cultural relativity

4. Reflexivity

Concepts of: Position of ethnographic researcher; Observer's Paradox; Evidence and interpretation

5. Class discussion: Feedback on 'Motorway' reading

Concepts of: Micro description; Fieldwork and field relations

## 2. Description of a session

### 2.1 Introduction

Explain that the aim of this session is:

- ◆ to begin to understand the fundamental principles of ethnography
- ◆ to explore the challenges of observing oneself as a researcher
- ◆ to begin considering what is involved in 'making strange'
- ◆ to analyse a text that will enable them to see how an ethnographic approach works.

### 2.2 Assignment framework

This assignment relates back to the sections in the introduction on 'making strange' and 'frames'. There are two possible assignments to be completed before this session (see Section 3 below): Assignment A or B. Students work in pairs or in threes, and compare each other's timelines (Assignment A: see Section 3 for an example) or the data they collected whilst negotiating their way from the University buildings to the station (Assignment B). They may be asked to select three or four 'frames' from their notes and to think about what these frames tell them.

Then, comments are elicited from students for analytic leads which are written up onto an overhead transparency. Initially, it is helpful to focus on the following questions:

- ◆ what was noticed? what not? how often did you write a card?
- ◆ when did you not write a card? What made you decide not to?

- ◆ what factors caused a change of 'angle' or 'frame'?
- ◆ how do you define a period of time?

Finally, students should be asked what they learned from the exercise. Why do they think we asked them to undertake this activity?

Useful points that may emerge in the discussion on the activity include:

- ◆ subjectivity of interpretation, or even description; as one student asked, "how would it be different if someone else was doing the note taking?"
- ◆ the act of observing yourself makes you change your behaviour (or not get as much work done in the case of the timeline exercise). (This relates to the notion of reflexivity)
- ◆ framing an activity, or a period of time (e.g. lighting a cigarette or having a coffee as 'relaxation') is problematical because situations overlap. There is usually more than one possible description. They are socially marked and separated by often small symbolic details of language and action.
- ◆ generally, what is involved in trying to see anything and describe it in detail.

### 2.3 Discussion: Making Strange

Students will be encouraged to 'make strange' throughout the course as they observe and try to interpret aspects of their own cultural environment. The concept is therefore a key one for ethnography. Points to make in this initial discussion of the concept are:

- ◆ making strange means not taking anything for granted. It is not enough to say that something is 'obvious' or 'common knowledge'.
- ◆ the same events can mean different things to different people, yourselves included. It is impossible to give an 'objective' account of reality. What counts is to obtain 'thick description' before you can begin to interpret. (Refer here to the Background Notes, particularly those concerning the position of the observer). It is also important to take account of cultural relativity and of the problems associated with it.
- ◆ the difficulty students experienced when attempting to 'chunk' time, space or activities for their assignment.
- ◆ the importance of close attention to, and recording of, fine-grained detail.

### 2.4. Discussion: Reflexivity

This is a key concept on the course and includes certain basic ideas which should become almost like second nature by the end of the course. A brief exposition can be given, based on the background notes. It should include the following issues:

- ◆ we are part of the social and cultural world we study. Ethnography is not about being a fly on the wall, however tempting that may sometimes seem. Instead, it is about recognising the limitations of such an approach, and using your awareness of your own role to your advantage. It may be useful to draw a distinction here between ethnography and investigative journalism, for instance. Although there are certain similarities, which students may comment on, ethnography is far more systematic about using the Observer's Paradox to advantage, rather than trying to eliminate or disguise it. In addition, of course, ethnographers have a 'foreshadowed problem' which they hope over time to understand, and which may change, whereas journalists are investigating a particular incident with a view to getting a dramatic story on it as quickly as possible.
- ◆ as you reflect on your experiences, keep checking them; they are a product of your own learned ideas and values and it is important to remember this.
- ◆ safeguard against jumping to conclusions, be flexible, do not finalise any single interpretation but keep checking.
- ◆ be explicit about how you arrived at your ideas, why and how you inferred such and such a point, and in particular, where generalisations came from; what is your evidence for saying what you say?
- ◆ always ask: 1) what is happening? (description); 2) why? (analysis); 3) how do I know? (methodology)

To be able to ask the right questions, making strange and reflexivity are vital principles, elements and procedures. Start from a position of open-mindedness, almost like a child, rather than setting out to prove your point. You continually work out your ideas and assumptions by asking people and by comparing with other data you got. But also make explicit that you do have a starting point (a foreshadowed problem).

At this point, it is useful for students to sum up the key words encountered so far. These are:

DESCRIPTION  
 INTERPRETATION  
 MAKING STRANGE  
 REFLEXIVITY  
 EVIDENCE

## 2.5 Class Discussion: Feedback on 'Motorway' reading

This will be the students' first opportunity to examine a written ethnography and assess to what extent it illustrates aspects of ethnographic enquiry to which they have been introduced. Explain to students that an ethnography is both method and written account. The 'Motorway' was written by an anthropology student at Sussex University. It was chosen because it is easy to read and yet raises a number of key questions for beginner ethnographers. As is the case with most units, readings and data are in English first, to establish key concepts and methods and then can be followed up by texts in the target language where the student group is drawn from

similar target language backgrounds. A few target language texts are suggested in the course and some come from the students' own interviews but staff may want to add a lot more of their own.

The questions that accompany the text (see Section 3) should be used as guidelines. If there is time, students may initially be asked to discuss, in groups of three, what they found interesting or surprising in the reading. The discussions of *Motorway* should help students to think of people as part of a socially and culturally defined group, *socialised* by their experiences to define themselves in certain ways and share ways of doing things.

Feedback may then be elicited, using the following key ideas to guide the discussion:

- ◆ doing ethnography is similar to the ways we make sense of everyday life but it is more analytic and systematic
- ◆ ethnography is small-scale (micro not macro)
- ◆ greater emphasis is given to groups and interactions and connections between them, rather than to individual psychology
- ◆ fieldwork and field relations are at the heart of doing ethnography;
- ◆ consider the role of the researcher in dealing with and challenging preconceptions
- ◆ research is done over an extended period, often by hanging around (Participant Observation as the hallmark of ethnography, in contrast to a clipboard and survey approach)
- ◆ hanging around is a method, not an accident and can be extended and developed by the ethnographic interview; it is not 'armchair anthropology' but a method such as participant observation can't be used for its own sake. It is a tool for understanding the group from a particular point of view.
- ◆ think about looking for patterns in context, derived from observation and description
- ◆ interaction is of prime importance
- ◆ a wide range of types of data is employed
- ◆ consider the importance of asking the right questions, which can only be focused questions after some initial hanging around to get to know the setting and the people involved. Rob Raeburn highlighted one particular aspect of the lives of motorway workers: i.e. why people choose the job, which is *one* way of looking at a particular group and by no means the only possible one.

Then, elicit the key *themes* of the Motorway ethnography. Students might want to think about what the 'foreshadowed' problem might have been. Possible themes are: the illusion of freedom shared and maintained by the group; how they express their group identity, which is a macho identity, with an accompanying set of 'rules' of acceptable standards of behaviour; how their identity is celebrated as part of their reason for taking on the job. Highlight also how all these themes fit into an

'ideology', i.e. the values and assumptions which legitimise a group's social position in the struggle for power and a place in society. (see also Unit 7, which includes excerpts from Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* and Units 11 and 12 which deal with similar themes to the *Motorway*.)

Criticisms of the text may include the following:

- ◆ it does not really explore key terms fully enough (i.e. the terms that the people use and the meanings they attach to them)
- ◆ it is perhaps not reflexive enough. It would have been interesting to have the author's reflections on his fieldwork experience from a more personal point of view.

### 3. Advice and comments

For students used to lectures and set texts or specific language exercises, there may be some feeling of insecurity or frustration. At this stage, a degree of disorientation is common, so it is important to create a comfortable but challenging atmosphere, discouraging students from going for 'glib' or easy conclusions, but encouraging classroom debate and participation. It is particularly useful to let them get a sense of what an ethnographic approach is through class discussion of an ethnography. Some of the concepts discussed may seem too abstract or philosophical, so it is important to relate them to texts and to the students' own experiences where appropriate. Giving brief definitions of key terms and writing them on the OHP gives a sense of security, and a feeling that something 'tangible' is being learned. A summary of the main points should also be given at the end of the session, based where possible on student's observations and comments.

It is important that students understand why they are being asked to do the tasks we set them, and that little by little they will build up confidence in collecting and analysing data. They should analyse data before coming to the sessions, and again in the sessions where they compare their own findings with those of other students. This stresses the importance of reading texts (and data) several times.

The self-observation tasks may seem strange to students. Initially they may find it difficult to see patterns, or to actually say what factors caused a change of 'angle'. It may help to bring in the idea of 'frames'. Students may also question the purpose of doing the exercise, and it should be related to the concepts and methods introduced in the unit to make the connection explicit.

The *Motorway* text usually elicits a lively response. Some students may be reminded of George Orwell's *Down and out in Paris and London*, or may not have come across this kind of writing before, which uses snippets from Grateful Dead songs, and the language of the informants. One student for instance remarked that "It's like finding a really interesting answer to a boring question". Another said "It challenged your stereotypes". Frequently, students also comment on the issue of whether a student can really be accepted by a group such as this, which can lead into a discussion of 'going native' and the potential problems involved.



## Student Comments

Today's session taught me that it is not wrong to compare other people's perception with one's own. Instead, that it is positive and important, and it must be done to enrich our own experience. Only, I would maintain, not labelling it as better or worse than our own life, for **each** person's perception is bound only by **their own** experience of life.

... in this lesson, I realised just how differently everyone perceives their time, and how much more importance/emphasis they put on certain activities, how much I take for granted, all the 'little' things I do without realising.

I feel that the class fills in a gap in our college curriculum. Students like to discuss their views and as language students we don't have time set aside to do it (where we can express ourselves fully that is). I know that this course has had an effect on me because I cannot sit in the library and study without making a mental note of everything happening around me as it happens. I wonder if I will be writing out mental cards forever now e.g. A man with a Marks and Spencer bag walks past .... A woman starts reading The Independent ...

# **SECTION THREE**

# 1. Assignments

## Assignment A: Observing Yourself: Making Strange (1)

Social situations are among the most basic units for analysis in fieldwork research. All human beings, operating within their own culture and range of experience, are capable to some extent of telling what situation they are in; we all have some sense of what counts as appropriate behaviour in that situation. We are also capable of learning when a situation is changing, and what changes in our behaviour are necessary in the new situation. This ability to "read" and interpret situations is learned within the framework of one's own culture. When we go somewhere unfamiliar, for example to another culture, we often behave inappropriately until we learn new rules for what the situations are and for how to behave in them. Thus, the aim of the assignment is to help you understand the constructed, patterned and variable nature of apparently 'natural' events.

The purpose of this assignment is for you to reflect on your own culturally patterned and intuitive ways of perceiving situations. We would like you to look at a small 'uneventful' segment of your everyday life through the eyes of a stranger, i.e. to make the familiar unfamiliar. Try and observe what is really going on.

What might seem one continuous, unchanging activity could in fact be a sequence of sometimes disparate events and situations (making a cup of tea, or speaking on the phone while you are "working", for example).

In the cinema and on television, film-makers have developed the convention of making a major change in camera angle when a situation changes. You can think of this assignment as analogous to making a home-movie of your own daily life; you will be making a note of each time you feel you should change the camera angle in order to film a new situation.

### Procedures

1. Buy a pack of index cards. Number about twenty of the cards in advance. On this set of cards keep track of all the situations which you encounter during a two hour period, which you have set aside to do some University work. Before you start your two-hour 'work' session, please spend a few minutes describing on (a) separate card(s) the setting you are in, the 'main frame', so to speak. Consider location (the room you are in, sitting at a desk etc.), any company you might have (don't forget your dog/cat/budgie), anything else going on at the same time (e.g. TV, radio, stereo). Each time a new situation occurs during the two hour period, jot down on a new card the time it occurs and a brief note about the situation. You will probably write about 10-29 cards over the two hour period.
2. As soon as you stop writing cards, when the two hours are up, go through your set of cards. On the back of each card, copy the time and make a note that will remind you later of the specific features according to which you defined the situation. (If you are wondering at this point, "What do you mean by specific features?" our answer is "That's up to you. We want you to use

your own intuitive judgement"). Write only enough to remind yourself, but write it in a way that someone else would know roughly what you meant. You will exchange your cards with a partner in the class.

3. Next look through your cards. How often did you write? When did you not write a card for a while? What was happening when you did not write a card? Do you see any patterns in what made you write a new card? How did you decide that one situation had ended and the next one had begun?
4. There is one more thing we would like you to do. Using the information on your cards, draw up what is called a 'time-line' as shown on the attached example. Bring all your material to the next session.

**PLEASE NOTE THAT THERE IS NO SINGLE CORRECT WAY TO DO THIS ASSIGNMENT!**

Based on *Situational Frames Activity* by D. Campbell, Michigan State University

**Assignment B: Observing yourself: Making Strange (2)**

A recent television advertisement for private medical insurance shows the intricate complexity of the simplest action e.g. blinking an eye. This involves us in performing numerous physical actions of which we are unaware. There is an analogy to be made between this and the 'invisible' side of our lives, the socio-cultural knowledge required for us to function. Whereas blinking is physiological, the knowledge required to carry out everyday actions (e.g. walking from the University buildings to the station) is largely the result of cultural and social learning. In each case, we make the assumption that what we do is 'automatic', 'normal' and 'natural'.

The medical insurance advertisement 'makes strange' by revealing to us how 'amazing' something as apparently simple as blinking actually is. In the following assignment, we ask you to look at your everyday actions in a new way and to 'make strange' your own lives.

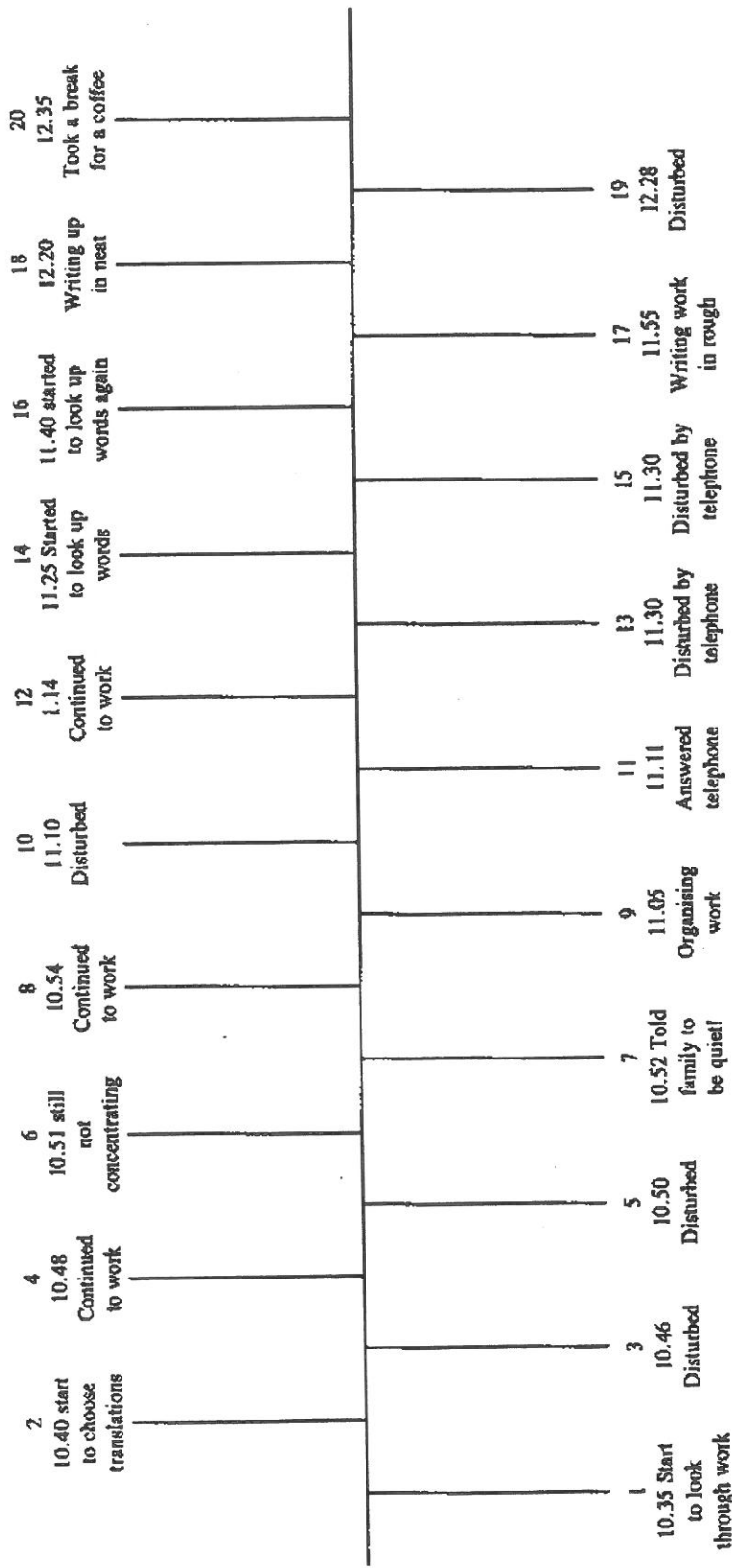
**Procedure**

1. Take a walk from the University buildings to the station through the shopping centre. Take a pen and some index cards or a notebook.
2. You are to 'make strange' and look at all the different things you need to get from A to B. For example: 'traffic rules' (trying not to collide with others, etc.), 'politeness rules', rights of way and inappropriate behaviour etc.
3. Every minute or so, stop and take rough notes on what has happened so far and what you need to know.
4. Later, look at your notes and try to order and analyse them for presentation in class. Try to define the shifts in 'frames' that occurred. It may help to imagine that you had to explain how to get from A to B without major mishaps to a visiting Martian.

UNIT TWO – What is an Ethnographic Approach?

Handout 1 – example of a time line

EXAMPLE OF A TIME LINE



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## UNIT TWO – What is an Ethnographic Approach?

### Handout 1 – readings

#### General Introductions

- ◆ Agar, M (1980) *The Professional Stranger*. New York: Academic Press  
(Gives examples of techniques used in his own research. A lively and useful introduction. Some of the more formal techniques relevant to Unit 10).
- ◆ Fetterman, D (1989) *Ethnography Step by Step*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage  
(A useful general introduction on the key elements of ethnography with descriptions of the main methods used from a sociological rather than anthropological perspective).
- ◆ Delamont, S (1995) *Appetites and Identities*. London: Routledge  
(An introductory book on the anthropology of Europe written by an anthropologist for non-specialists on European Studies courses. Good on the traditional themes and perspectives in anthropology which means that rural rather than urban studies are the focus. Deals with content areas but not methods).
- ◆ Geertz, C (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.  
(A classic text by a highly influential anthropologist. The opening chapter is very useful but the rest may seem rather heavy going to those new to anthropology. Geertz's work is particularly relevant to Unit 4)
- ◆ Hammersley, M and Atkinson, P (1983) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. New York: Tavistock Publications
- ◆ Spradley, J (1980) *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.  
(Good on ethnographic methods and examples from his own ethnographic studies in urban America)
- ◆ Spradley, J and McCurdy, D (1972) *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in complex society*. Illinois: Waveland Press  
(A good general introduction to some of the key concepts in anthropology but with rather a cognitive bias. The second part of the book consists of student ethnographic writing but these are definitely not to be taken as models as they are of very variable quality.)

#### Two Classic Ethnographies

- ◆ Malinowski, B (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- ◆ Whyte, W (1981) (3rd edition) *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press