OPERATIONALISM

One of the more focused concepts in fieldwork is that of operationalism. A discussion of operationalism is as much a call for it as it is an indication of the direction ethnography is taking. Operationalism, simply, means defining one’s terms and methods of measurement. In simple descriptive accounts, saying that “a few people said this and a few others said that” may not be problematic. However, establishing a significant relationship between facts and theory or interpreting “the facts,” requires greater specificity. For example, the statement “Hostility increases when too many students are in the class” may be a perfectly accurate observation. Several questions arise, however: What constitutes hostility? How is an increase of hostility measured? How many is too many students in a class? On a simpler level, sentences beginning “Some of them believe” are commonplace. Yet being more specific—citing the specific sources and the exact nature of their “belief”—is not difficult and conveys more information and greater credibility and validity. Operationalism tests us and forces us to be honest with ourselves. Instead of leaving conclusions to strong impressions, the fieldworker should quantify or identify the source of ethnographic insights whenever possible. Specifying how one arrives at one’s conclusions gives other researchers something concrete to go on, something to prove or disprove. It is impossible to operationalize everything—the job of doing ethnography would never be done. But a great deal can be done to increase recording and reporting accuracy.

Many concepts in ethnography help to explain what ethnography is all about and to guide an ethnographer in the pursuit of a study. This chapter has provided a discussion of some of the most important concepts in the profession, beginning with such global concepts as culture, a holistic orientation, and contextualization and gradually shifting to more narrow concepts—inter- and intracultural diversity, structure and function, symbol and ritual, and operationalism. The next chapter details the ethnographic methods and techniques that grow out of these concepts and allow the researcher to carry out the work of ethnography.

3 Ethnography Step by Step by David M. Fetterman
(For educational purpose only)

A Wilderness Guide: Methods and Techniques

To a person uninstructed in natural history, his country or sea-side stroll is a walk through a gallery filled with wonderful works of art, nine-tenths of which have their faces turned to the wall.

—Thomas Huxley

The ethnographer is a human instrument. With a research problem, a theory of social interaction or behavior, and a variety of conceptual guidelines in mind, the ethnographer strides into a culture or social situation to explore its terrain, to collect and analyze data. Relying on all its senses, thoughts, and feelings, the human instrument is a most sensitive and perceptive data gathering tool. Yet the information this tool gathers can be subjective and misleading. Fieldworkers may lose their bearings in the maze of unfamiliar behaviors and situations. Ethnographic methods and techniques help to guide the ethnographer through the wilderness of personal observation and to identify and classify accurately the bewildering variety of events and actions that form a social situation. The ethnographer’s hike through the social and cultural wilderness begins with fieldwork.

FIELDWORK

Fieldwork is the hallmark of research for both sociologists and anthropologists. The method is essentially the same for both types of researchers—working with people for long periods of time in their natural settings. The ethnographer conducts research in the native environment to see people and their behavior given all the real-world incentives and constraints. This naturalist approach avoids the artificial response typical of controlled or laboratory conditions. Understanding the world—or some small fragment of
Ethnography requires studying it in all its wonder and complexity. The task is in many ways more difficult than laboratory study, but it can also be more rewarding.

The fieldworker uses a variety of methods and techniques to ensure the integrity of the data. These methods and techniques objectify and standardize the researcher’s perceptions. Of course, the ethnographer must adapt each of the methods and techniques discussed below to the local environment. Resource constraints and deadlines may also limit the length of time for data gathering in the field—exploring, cross-checking, and recording information.

SELECTION AND SAMPLING

The research questions shape the selection of a place and a people or program to study. For example, the probability of finding relevant data about the relationship between educational mechanisms—such as teacher expectations—and school success or failure is higher in a classroom than in a Board of Education meeting, although the latter setting has relevance as well. The ideal site for investigation of the research problem is not always accessible. In that event, the researcher accepts and notes the limitations of the study from the onset. Ideally, the focus of the investigation shifts to match the site under study. If either the match or the problem is not credible, the researcher may have to abandon the initial study and develop new research questions. In contrast, research, a contract modification might be necessary as well. This process may jeopardize the study’s funding, but in some instances it is the only intellectually honest step to take.

The next step is to decide how to sample members of the target population. There are two approaches to this decision. First, choose who and what not to study. This process of elimination is like the admissions process at topflight universities and colleges. The decision is not who shall we admit, but who must we reject—given all the people who qualify. An unwieldy number of informative people and useful events present themselves for study. The researcher must filter out those sources of information that will add little to the study. Second, select who and what to study—that is, the sources that will most help to understand life in a given community.

Most ethnographers use the big net approach conducive to participant observation—mixing and mingling with everyone they can at first. As the study progresses, the focus narrows to specific portions of the population under study. The big net approach ensures a wide-angle view of events before the microscopic study of specific interactions begins. This big picture helps refine an ethnographer’s focus and aids the fieldworker in understanding the finer details that he or she will capture on film and in notes for further analysis.

Ethnographers typically use an informal strategy to begin fieldwork, such as starting wherever they can slip a foot in the door. The most common technique is judgmental sampling; that is, ethnographers rely on their judgment to select the most appropriate members of the subculture or unit, based on the research question. This approach is quite natural, requiring the ethnographer to ask very simple, direct questions about what people do. Natural opportunities, convenience, and luck also play a part in the process if the ethnographer is savvy enough to make good use of them. Some experienced ethnographers use a rigorous randomized strategy to begin work—particularly when they already know a great deal about the culture or unit they are studying.

Using a highly structured randomized design without a basic understanding of the people under study may cause the researcher to narrow the focus prematurely, thus eliminating perhaps very people or subjects relevant to the study. Such a misdirected study may yield high reliability but extremely low validity, undermining an entire research study. First the ethnographer must ask the right questions for a given research study. The best way to learn how to ask the right questions—beyond the literature search and proposal ideas—is to go into the field and find out what people do day to day. Goetz and LeCompte (1984, pp. 63-84) provide a useful discussion of sampling and selection in ethnographic research, focusing on criterion-based and probabilistic sampling.

ENTRY

An introduction by a member is the ethnographer’s best ticket into the community. Walking into a community cold can have a chilling effect on ethnographic research. Community members may not be interested in the individual ethnographer or in the work. An intermediary or “go-between” can open doors otherwise locked to outsiders. The facilitator may be a chief, principal, director, teacher, tramp, or gang member, and should have some credibility with the group—either a member or as an acknowledged friend.
or associate. The closer the go-between's ties to the group, the better. The trust the group places in the intermediary will approximate the trust it extends to the ethnographer at the beginning of the study. Ethnographers thus benefit from a halo effect if they are introduced by the right person: Group members will give the researcher the benefit of the doubt, sight unseen. As long as ethnographers demonstrate that they deserve the group's trust, they will probably do well. A strong recommendation and introduction strengthen the fieldworker's capacity to work in a community and thus improve the quality of the data.

Unfortunately, the fieldworker cannot always find the best person to offer an introduction and must take whatever is available. In this case, the researcher must consider entering the community without assistance—simply by walking into a neighborhood store, attending church services, volunteering time in a school, or performing any other nonthreatening role in the community. However, in many instances, access is clearly impossible without some escort. Here, the fieldworker must accept a devil's bargain—a poor introduction, with all its constraints, is the only way to gain access to the community. This circumstance requires the ethnographer to begin in the hole, overcompensating to prove him- or herself worthy and to earn the community's trust and respect. This predicament forces the ethnographer to disassociate diplomatically from the intermediary once inside and yet act honorably and acknowledge the debt owed to that first contact.

Selecting an integral and powerful member of the community is useful, but establishing independence in the field is also important to avoid prematurely cutting off other lines of communication. For example, in a library study, a close link with the power brokers was instrumental in my gaining access to the organization, but was almost lethal to data collection. My alliance with a power broker created the perception that I was a spy or another power broker sitting on the wrong side of the fence. In attempting to understand how the subordinate and disenfranchised group functioned in the bowels of the library, I found myself persona non grata. Tremendous effort was necessary for me to prove myself an impartial or at least nonjudgmental witness and shed the guilt I had acquired by association.

Once in the community, specific methods and techniques will guide the ethnographer in the process of data collection and analysis. The remainder of this chapter will discuss each of these techniques in turn.

**PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

Participant observation characterizes most ethnographic research and is crucial to effective fieldwork. Participant observation combines participation in the lives of the people under study with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data. Powdermaker's *Stranger and Friend* (1966) vividly depicts this delicate role.

Participant observation is immersion in a culture. Ideally, the ethnographer lives and works in the community for six months to a year or more, learning the language and seeing patterns of behavior over time. Long-term residence helps the researcher internalize the basic beliefs, fears, hopes, and expectations of the people under study. The simple, ritualistic behaviors of going to the market or to the well for water teach how people use their time and space, how they determine what is precious, sacred, and profane.

The process may seem unstructured; in the beginning, it is somewhat uncontrolled and haphazard. However, even in the early stages of fieldwork the ethnographer searches out experiences and events as they come to attention. Participant observation sets the stage for more refined techniques—including projective techniques and questionnaires—and becomes more refined itself as the fieldworker understands more and more about the culture. Ideas and behaviors that were only a blur on entering the community take on a sharper focus. Participant observation can also help clarify the results of more refined instruments by providing a baseline of meaning and a way to reenter the field to explore the context for those (often unexpected) results.

When I lived in Israel, I saw small and large patterns of behavior that repeated themselves almost endlessly. Passengers took the presence of bombs on the buses in stride; the soldiers and their ever-present Uzis (submachine guns) became part of the woodwork. The cycle of planting and harvesting on the kibbutz was marked by sweat and blood, strained muscles, and aching joints—and by seasonal holidays and festivals.

Every day had its pattern. Kibbutzniks and the other students and volunteers in my group woke up at 4:00 a.m. and walked down to the *hader ochel*, or dining room, for a small snack, then began work in the fields at 4:30 or 5:00 a.m. Every morning (except for the Saturday sabbath), we bundled up with our kibbutz army jackets to ward off the morning chill on the way to the fields. We stripped away the jackets after half an hour or so of work, when
the sun began to heat the fresh morning air. We built up quite an appetite for breakfast by 8:00 or 9:00 a.m., but breakfast slipped by, and we were back in the fields before we were rested. When we picked peaches, the heat and sticky peach fuzz drove us crazy. Lunch and a shower were a saving grace. The break after lunch to read, socialize, or visit the children at the nursery was a pleasure to savor each day. With luck, another crisis task to work on would relieve the monotony of the morning’s job—even though such a distraction meant equally demanding manual labor. When dinnertime finally arrived, we trooped back to the hadar ochel for an unvaried dinner: fish on Sundays, chicken on Fridays, some mixture of the two in between. Even the raising of children followed a cycle on the kibbutz. Pregnant mothers who had grown up and worked together had their babies at approximately the same age, and later congregated with their strollers around the day-care facility.

In the old city of Jerusalem, other rituals took place—by the Wailing Wall and blocks away in the Arab shops. Hasidic Jews (Lubawitch rebbes) who wore long hair locks (payahs), broad black fur hats (fadoras), and long black coats and worshiped by the Wailing Wall invited me to live and study with them for a short time, to share their inner secrets and way of life. Similarly, Arab merchants who befriended me while I lived in Jerusalem often closed down their shops in the middle of a busy business day to have tea with me, bringing out all their silver-plated trappings, special glasses filled with tea leaves and two inches of undissolved sugar on the bottom, and ceremonial rugs. They enjoyed a sense of timelessness I will never forget.

All these patterns were recognizable over time; and detailed observations were possible only by living and working in these communities. I had to prepare the fields, plant the seeds, irrigate the soil, and pick the fruits in the kibbutz; study with the Hasidim; and bargain every day with the Arab merchants to understand and record these very different ways of life. Working with people, day in and day out, for long periods of time is what gives ethnographic research its validity and vitality.

Given time, people forget their “company” behavior and fall back into familiar patterns of behavior. Ethnographic research in one’s own culture may not require as much time to reach this point as ethnographic work in a foreign culture: Language and customs are familiar, and the researcher is already an insider in many respects. However, sometimes a familiar setting is too familiar, and the researcher takes events for granted, leaving important data unnoticed and unrecorded.

In applied settings, participant observation is often noncontinuous, spread out over an extended time. For example, in two ethnographic studies, of dropouts and of gifted children, I visited the programs for only a few weeks every couple of months over a three-year period. The visits were intensive and included classroom observation, nonstop informal interviews, occasional substitute teaching, interaction with community members, and the use of various other research techniques, including long-distance phone calls, dinner with students’ families, and time spent hanging out in the hallways and parking lot with students cutting classes.

Participant observation requires close, long-term contact with the people under study. In the two cases above, the time period was over three years. Often contract research budgets or time schedules do not allow long periods of study—continuous or noncontinuous. In these situations, the researcher can apply ethnographic techniques to the study, but cannot conduct an ethnography. Similarly, observation without participation in other people’s lives may involve ethnographic methods, but is not ethnography. Nonparticipant observation may take such forms as watching a school basketball game as part of data collection. Applying ethnographic techniques and nonparticipant observation are acceptable forms of research, but labeling the research method correctly is important.

The process may seem complicated, but a good ethnographer starts with the basics. Participant observation begins with the first question—even as simple a question as Aphi ha baiy shemush? (Where is the bathroom?) Finding the bathroom or kerosene for a heater can help the researcher understand a community’s geography and resources. Slowly but surely, the questions become more refined as the researcher learns what questions to ask and how to ask them.

In any case, the acquisition of ethnographic knowledge and understanding is a cyclical process. It begins with a panoramic view of the community, closes in to a microscopic focus on details, and then pans out to the larger picture again—but this time with new insight into minute details. The focus narrows and broadens repeatedly as the fieldworker searches for breadth and depth of observation. Only by both penetrating the depth and skimming the surface can the ethnographer portray the cultural landscape in detail rich enough for others to comprehend and appreciate.

INTERVIEWING

The interview is the ethnographer’s most important data gathering technique. Interviews explain and put into a larger context what the ethnographer sees and experiences. They require verbal interaction, and
language is the commodity of discourse. Words and expressions have different values in various cultures. People exchange these verbal commodities to communicate. The ethnographer quickly learns to savor the informant’s every word for its cultural or subcultural connotations as well as for its denotative meaning. General interview types include structured, semistructured, informal, and retrospective interviews. Although in practice these types overlap and blend, this chapter will artificially isolate interview types, strategies, and questions for purposes of description and discussion. Each interviewing approach has a role to play in soliciting information. However, the ethnographer should be clear on the pros and cons of each interview type in data collection and analysis before employing these approaches in the field. (For alternative approaches to classifying interviews, see Denzin, 1978; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Patton, 1980. For additional discussion about interviewing techniques, see Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Werner & Schoepfl, 1987a.)

Formally structured and semistructured interviews are verbal approximations of a questionnaire with explicit research goals. These interviews generally serve comparative and representative purposes—comparing responses and putting them in the context of common group beliefs and themes. The fieldworker can use a structured interview at any time in the study. For example, a list of questions about the educational background of the teachers in a school under study is useful in securing comparative baseline data about the teachers’ qualifications and experience. Asking those questions can also be a nonthreatening icebreaker. At the beginning stages of a study, however, structured interviews tend to shape responses to conform to the researcher’s conception of how the world works. These interviews are therefore most useful at the middle and end stages of a study for the collection of data about a specific question or hypothesis. A structured or semistructured interview is most valuable when the fieldworker comprehends the fundamentals of a community from the “insider’s” perspective. At this point, questions are more likely to conform to the native’s perception of reality than to the researcher’s.

Informal interviews are the most common in ethnographic work. They seem to be casual conversations, but where structured interviews have an explicit agenda, informal interviews have a specific but implicit research agenda. The researcher uses informal approaches to discover the categories of meaning in a culture. Informal interviews are useful throughout an ethnographic study in discovering what people think and how one person’s perceptions compare with another’s. Such comparisons help identify shared values in the community—values that inform behavior. Informal interviews are also useful in establishing and maintaining a healthy rapport.

Informal interviews seem to be the easiest to conduct. They do not involve any specific types or order of questions, and can progress much as a conversation does, following the turns of the participant’s or the questioner’s interests. However, these interviews are probably the most difficult to conduct appropriately and productively. Issues of ethics and control emerge from every informal interview. How does the fieldworker establish and maintain a natural situation while attempting to learn about another person’s life in a relatively systematic fashion? How can a completely open form, ripe for discovery, balance with an implicitly shaped structure designed to explore specific issues and concerns? Finally, when is the time to take advantage of a golden opportunity and when is it best not to pry further? Done well, informal interviewing feels like natural dialogue but answers the fieldworker’s often unasked questions.

Informal interviews should be user friendly. In other words, they should be transparent to the participant after a short period of time. An informal interview is different from a conversation, but it typically merges with one, forming a mixture of conversation and embedded questions. The questions typically emerge from the conversation. In some cases, they are serendipitous and result from comments by the participant. In most cases, the ethnographer has a series of questions to ask the participant and will wait for the most appropriate time to ask them during the conversation (if possible).

Informal interviews offer the most natural situations or formats for data collection and analysis. Unfortunately, some degree of contamination is always present. However skillful the interviewer, certain questions will impose an artificiality. An experienced interviewer, however, learns how to begin with nonthreatening questions deeply embedded in conversation before posing highly personal and potentially threatening questions and to develop a healthy rapport before introducing sensitive topics. Sensitivity to timing and to the participant’s tone is critical in interviewing—informal or otherwise. The chance to ask a gang member about illegal activities might be lost if during the interview that individual receives a phone call from another gang member warning about an unidentified informer in the community. Yet that moment might be the best time to ask about informants and the pressures of community life. An ethnographer must learn to be attentive to a person’s shifts in tone because these changes are important cues to attitudes and feelings. An elderly woman’s shift from soft, eloquent speech to frightened, quivering whispers when she mentions the death of her spouse is a cue that the questioner should proceed delicately. She may want to discuss
the topic as part of a cathartic experience or may feel pressured into divulging inner secrets. These situations are never easy. However, a sensitive and experienced ethnographer will be able to differentiate between the two situations and to act appropriately. The researcher will make mistakes along the way. (See Fetzerman, 1983, and Chapter 7 of this volume for a discussion of the ethical hazards ethnographers face in the field.)

The chance to exploit a vulnerable individual to secure invaluable data may be tempting. In fact, it may be a rare opportunity to explore an individual’s innermost secrets. However, beyond the obvious ethical considerations, the cost of exploiting an individual is too high, and the ethnographer must either wait for another opportunity to come along or create one. One benefit of spending long periods of time at a site is that other, more propitious opportunities usually come along. Oversensitivity, however, can paralyze an ethnographer, placing unnecessary obstacles in the way of data collection and analysis.

A multitude of significant nonthreatening questions can elicit the information the fieldworker seeks and create many golden moments in which to ask questions naturally, as part of the general flow of conversation. Planning and executing properly placed questions, while maintaining a flexible format, is the essence of good ethnography, ensuring the quality of the data and maintaining the participant’s right to privacy.

Retrospective interviews can be structured, semistructured, or informal. The ethnographer uses retrospective interviews to reconstruct the past, asking informants to recall personal historical information. This type of interview does not elicit the most accurate data. People forget or filter past events. In some cases, retrospective interviews are the only way to gather information about the past. In situations where the ethnographer already has an accurate understanding of the historical facts, a retrospective interview provides useful information about the individual. The manner in which individuals shape the past highlights their values and reveals the configuration of their worldviews.

Ethnographers use interviews to help classify and organize an individual’s perception of reality. All interviews share some generic kinds of questions. The most common types are survey or grand tour, detail or specific, and open-ended or closed-ended questions. Survey questions help identify significant topics to explore. Specific and detailed questions explore these topics in more detail. They determine similarities and differences in the ways people see the world. Open-ended and closed-questions help the ethnographer discover and confirm the participant’s experiences and perceptions.

Survey or Grand Tour Question

A survey question—or what Spradley and McCurdy (1972) call a grand tour question—is designed to elicit a broad picture of the participant or native’s world, to map the cultural terrain. Survey questions help define the boundaries of a study and plan wise use of resources. The participant’s overview of the physical setting, universe of activities, and thoughts helps to focus and direct the investigation.

In a study about a university, a typical survey question would be: Could you show me around the university? In responding to this question, the individual would teach about the different academic and business departments, the hospital, the church and/or synagogue, the student union, the library, the fraternities, and so on. The quality of a grand tour question determines its usefulness. The narrower the survey question, the narrower the response and, in turn, the resulting overview of a culture. At the same time, the scope of the study determines the scope at which a survey question is useful. For example, if the study includes an entire university, then the tour question above would be a good survey question. If the study comprises the whole of American culture, asking an individual to show the ethnographer around verges on the ridiculous; in limited settings, this approach can be highly misleading.

In my study of a university library, I asked one individual to show me around. I took a tour around familiar grounds: the reference desk, the electronic and hard-copy catalog files, special collections, and various graduate and undergraduate collections. I also saw the behind-the-scenes places: administrative offices, basement rooms of uncataloged books, cataloging rooms, rooms filled with computer hardware and software, and other unfamiliar locations. This information helped me to refine the scope of my study; at the same time, it provided a context within which to frame my investigation. This grand tour helped me understand how books and people flow through the library system. Parts of the library operated like a production line; others followed the model of a community of medieval scholars and illuminators. Once I had a good grasp of how much I didn’t know, I developed somewhat narrower survey questions. For example, I realized that I didn’t know what librarians did on a daily basis—so I asked.

Survey questions led to information that allowed me to construct a basic map of the place, develop a model of how it worked, and isolate preliminary topics that enabled me to use my time more efficiently and effectively. Such information also stimulated a barrage of specific, detailed questions,
followed by more survey questions, leading once more to detailed questions—until I had constructed a satisfactory conceptual framework.

Ethnographic research requires the fieldworker to move back and forth between survey and specific questions. Focusing in on one segment of a person's activities or worldview prematurely may drain all the ethnographer's resources before the investigation is half done. The fieldworker must maintain a delicate balance of questions throughout the study; in general, however, survey questions should predominate in the early stages of fieldwork, and more specific questions in the middle and final stages.

Specific Questions

Once survey questions reveal a category of some significance to both fieldworker and native, specific questions about that category become most useful. The difference between a survey question and a specific or detailed question depends largely on context. The question, What do librarians do? is a grand tour question in a library study, but it would be a specific question in a university study.

In my library study, specific questions focused on the differences among divisions within the library and among types of librarians in each division—for example, between the curator in public services and the original cataloger in technical services. More refined specific questions concerned the differences between two members of the same division and department, such as between an original cataloger and a copy cataloger in the catalog department.

Specific questions probe further into an established category of meaning or activity. Where survey questions shape and inform a global understanding, specific questions refine and expand that understanding.

Structural and attribute questions—subcategories of specific questions—are often the most appropriate approach to this level of inquiry. Structural and attribute questions are useful to the ethnographer in organizing an understanding of the native's view. For example, a series of structural questions in the library study included the following: What are the major parts of the library? How is this place organized? What kinds of departments or divisions exist in the library? The responses to these questions provided the insider's perspective on the library's structure. I learned about three major divisions: public services, technical services, and administrative services. Probing further, I elicited a detailed description of the departments within these divisions. Following up with another structural question, I asked, What types of librarians work in each of these divisions? Participants explained that catalogers and conservationists work in separate departments within one division, and curators in a completely different division. For greater generalizability, I compared perceptions of several individuals to identify similarities and differences in perspective resulting from power, status, and role differences. I also called and visited other research libraries to learn whether this structural pattern was typical of research universities across the country. (Telephone and written questionnaires are useful tools for determining how representative the particular patterns are within an organization and across organizations.) Structural questions provide the similarities that exist across the conceptual spectrum—in the native's head. (See Spradley & McCurdy, 1972, for additional information about the construction of taxonomic definitions.)

Attribute questions—questions about the characteristics of a role or a structural element—ferret out the differences between conceptual categories. Typically, the interview will juxtapose structural with attribute questions. Information from a structural question might suggest a question about the differences between various newly identified categories. For example, after learning about the various divisions and departments that constitute a research library, I could logically ask about the differences between them, using an attribute question: What is the difference between librarians who work in technical services and librarians who work in public services? In addition to learning the functional differences between these two positions, I learned a great deal about perceived discrepancies in status between catalogers who work in the "bowels of the library"—in near sweatshop conditions, unseen by the rest of the university—and curators, who work with students, staff, and faculty in plush, air-conditioned, carpeted offices with plenty of space and light. To discover more about each division and department, I followed this response with a structural question: What are the departments in technical services? Librarians eagerly taught me about the various departments in that division, including acquisitions, cataloging, serials, binding and finishing, and conservation. An attribute question was then useful in clarifying my understanding of the library's organization: What is the difference between acquisitions and cataloging? The response to this question gave me a clearer idea about the production flow of the books in this system. (See Spradley & McCurdy, 1972, for a discussion about componential analysis.)

Structural and attribute questions derive from a cognitive theory (symbolic interactionism) about how the world works (see Blumer, 1969). Clearly,
however, these question types are valuable in almost any theoretical approach, because they help to organize the fieldworker’s perception of how others define reality.

Open-Ended or Closed-Ended Questions

Ethnographers use both open-ended and closed-ended questions to pursue fieldwork. An open-ended question allows participants to interpret it. For example, in studying an emergency room, I asked a regular emergency room nurse, How do you like working with the helicopter nurses? This question elicited a long and detailed explanation about how aloof she thought they were and how unfair it was that the helicopter nurses did not pitch in during the busy periods. She said she could list five or six activities that emergency room and helicopter nurses did together during the week, but said these activities were all superficial.

This response opened new doors to my study. I followed up with questions to helicopter nurses, who indicated that they did wait around a great deal of the time waiting for a call to rush to the helicopter. They explained that they could not pitch in during regular emergency room busy periods because they might be called away at any time, and leaving in the middle of a task would be unfair to both the regular nurses and the patients. Thus an open-ended question helped to illuminate the conflicting worldviews these two sets of nurses held about the same emergency room experience—information that a closed-ended question, such as, How many times do you interact with the helicopter nurses each week? might not have elicited.

Closed-ended questions are useful in trying to quantify behavior patterns. For example, asking both sets of nurses how many times they interact with each other in a week would be a useful test of varying perceptions of reality and a means of documenting the frequency of that particular behavior pattern. Differing responses would also be a useful cue to probe further about the quality of that interaction.

Ethnographers typically ask more open-ended questions during discovery phases of their research and more closed-ended questions during confirmational periods. The most important question to avoid is the stand-alone vague question. Asking regular nurses whether they work with helicopter nurses frequently—without defining frequently—is useful to neither the researcher nor the participant.

Interviewing Protocols and Strategies

A protocol exists for all interviews—the product of the interviewer’s and the participant’s personalities and moods, the formality or informality of the setting, the stage of research, and an assortment of other conditions.

The first element common to every protocol is the ethnographer’s respect for the culture of the group under study. In an interview or any other interaction, ethnographers try to be sensitive to the group’s cultural norms. This sensitivity manifests itself in apparel, language, and behavior. Wearing expensive designer clothes to conduct an informal interview with a disenfranchised and impoverished high school student is as insensitive and inappropriate as wearing cutoff jeans and a T-shirt to conduct an interview with a chief executive officer. Inadvertent improprieties or faux pas will occur, and people will generally forgive them. However, a consistent disregard or lack of concern for the group’s basic cultural values will severely impede research progress.

Second, an overarching guide in all interviews is respect for the person. An individual does the fieldworker a favor by giving up time to answer questions. Thus the interview is not an excuse to interrogate an individual or criticize cultural practices. It is an opportunity to learn from the interviewee. Further, the individual’s time is precious: Both the industrial executive and the school janitor have work to do, and the ethnographer should plan initial interviews, whether formal or informal, around their work obligations and schedules. Later, the fieldworker becomes an integral part of the work. However, even greater sensitivity to the nuances of timing are essential at this point. The observant ethnographer responds to signals from the interviewee. Repeated glances at a watch are usually a clear signal that the time is up. Glazed eyes, a puzzled look, or an impatient scowl is an interviewee’s way of letting the questioner know that something is wrong: The individual is bored, lost, or insulted. Common errors involve spending too much time talking and not enough time listening, failing to make questions clear, and making an inadvertently insensitive comment. The ethnographer must listen to the language of the interviewees. In one fashion or another, they are always communicating.

In formal settings—such as a school district—a highly formalized, ritualistic protocol is necessary to gain access and interview students and teachers. Soliciting and securing permission may involve an introductory meeting with various stakeholders (including the superintendent and principal) to exchange pleasantries, a formal explanation of the research project
(including submission of the proposed research), letters of permission, and periodic formal exchanges, including notice of the study's termination. Similarly, structured interviews require a more structured protocol of introductions, permission, instructions, formal cues to mark major changes in the interview, closure, and possible follow-up communications.

Informal interviews require the same initial protocol. However, the researcher casually and implicitly communicates permission, instructions, cues, closure, and follow-up signals. Pleasantries and icebreakers are important in both informal and formally structured interviews, but they differ in the degree of subtlety each interview type requires. Sensitivity to the appropriate protocol can enhance the interviewer's effectiveness.

Strategies or techniques can also enhance the quality of an interview. The most effective strategy is, paradoxically, no strategy. Being natural is much more convincing than any performance. Acting like an adolescent does not win the confidence of adolescents; it only makes them suspicious. Similarly, acting like the consummate lawyer is useless during an interview with lawyers for obvious reasons. First, ethnographic training emphasizes honesty in fieldwork, including interviews. Deceptive games have no place in the interview setting or elsewhere. Second, in any data-gathering interview, the objective is to learn from the interviewee, not to impress the person with how much the questioner already knows about the area. Third, even a consummate actor is bound to slip during a lengthy interview, and thus undermine all credibility. Being natural is the best protection.

More experienced ethnographers learn when it is appropriate or possible to test their knowledge of the system by breaking a minor cultural norm—such as sitting in someone else's chair during an official meeting to test status, hierarchy, and grouping patterns. However, this knowledge development strategy requires a great deal of experience and a very healthy rapport, usually the product of much time spent with the group under study. Being cavalier about even minor cultural norms can be quite costly in hurt feelings, damaged rapport, and severely distorted lines of communication—all resulting in bad data.

A degree of manipulation takes place in any interview. The interviewer is trying to learn something about an individual's life—not everything about it, just something. Achieving this goal requires some conscious or subconscious shaping of the verbal exchange—through either explicit or implicit cues borrowed from the cues in natural conversation. For example, to borrow a strategy from courtroom proceedings, asking the same question in several different ways within one session checks both the interviewer's understanding of the response and the individual's sincerity—that is, whether the answer is what the person believes or what he or she wants the ethnographer to hear (or thinks the ethnographer wants to hear). This strategy usually provides the ethnographer with a slightly modified, refined understanding of the initial response. Often, repeated questions or variations of the same question draw responses that shed a completely new light on the topic. The interviewer should scatter these types of questions throughout the interview. Coming one right after another, repeated questions can be insulting and fruitless. Some interviews reach the point of diminishing returns more quickly than others. The interviewer must recognize when to linger and when to move on.

A similar strategy involves asking for repetition of the participant's questions. A person's questions are as informative as his or her answers. In repeating a question, the interviewee provides a broader perspective on the topic and on relevant concerns. Similarly, the interviewer can ask the interviewee to repeat or clarify an answer when the tone or manner of the answer triggers some doubt about the completeness of the response. This approach is effective in stimulating discussion with an interviewee who responds to inquiries with only terse, efficient replies.

Of the hundreds of useful interviewing strategies, the most successful place the interviewee at ease, acknowledge the value of the information, and reinforce continued communication. Many books about interviewing also emphasize control. In formal structured and semistructured interviews, maintaining control of the direction of the interview is useful to ensure that the interview produces the target information in the short time allotted. However, the ethnographer wants the interviewee to be in control much of the time. The "how" of communication is as instructive as the "what." A person's manner, emphasis, and presentation can teach much about that person's perception of time, organization of thoughts, and feelings about interpersonal relationships. Taking charge of most interviews and maintaining control of them can sacrifice too many data. The skillful ethnographer learns when to let the interviewee ramble and when to shape or direct the information flow—a decision generally shaped by the stage of research or inquiry. In exploratory work, letting the participant control the communication flow is most useful. Focused periods of formal hypothesis testing require that the ethnographer maintain greater control.

Silence is also a valuable interview strategy. Learning how to tolerate the empty space between question and reply is difficult for many Americans. However, the fieldworker learns not to jump in and clarify a question routinely whenever silence falls. The best approach is to let the participant think about the question and digest it for a while before responding. After the participant has apparently finished discussing a topic, a brief pause can
bring out more information or an important qualification to the information. The burden of silence falls on both parties. An experienced ethnographer learns how to use silence in a skillful fashion—to encourage interviewees to speak, yet not to make them feel uncomfortable or threatened. Such strategies, and those described below, will ensure a more natural and useful flow of communication, minimizing role playing, various other contaminating factors, and nonproductive time.

Key Actor or Informant Interviewing

Some people are more articulate and culturally sensitive than others. These individuals make excellent key actors or informants. Informant is the traditional anthropological term. However, I use the term key actor to describe this individual to avoid both the stigma of the term informant and its historical roots. In the social group under study, this individual is one of many actors, and may not be a central or even an indispensable community member. Yet this individual becomes a key actor in the theater of ethnographic research and plays a pivotal role, linking the fieldworker and the community.

Key actors can provide detailed historical data, knowledge about contemporary interpersonal relationships (including conflicts), and a wealth of information about the nuances of everyday life. Although the ethnographer tries to speak with as many people as possible, time is always a factor. Therefore, anthropologists have traditionally relied most heavily on one or two individuals in the group.

Typically, the key actor will find many of the ethnographer’s questions obvious or stupid. The fieldworker is asking about basic features of the culture—elementary knowledge to the key actor. However, such naive questions often lead to global explanations of how a culture works. Such responses point out the difference between the key actor and a respondent. The key actor generally answers questions in a comprehensive, albeit meandering, fashion. A respondent answers a question specifically, without explanations about the larger picture and conversational tangents, with all their richness and texture. Interviewing a respondent is usually a more efficient data collection strategy, but it is also less revealing and potentially less valid than discussions with a key actor.

Key actors require careful selection. They are rarely perfect representatives of the group. However, they are usually members of the mainstream—otherwise, they would not have access to up-to-date cultural information. Key actors may be cultural brokers, straddling two cultures, such as the dropouts in my study who had one foot in the school and one in the streets. This position may give them a special vantage point and objectivity about their culture. They may also be informal or formal leaders in the community. Key actors come from all walks of life and all socioeconomic and age groups.

Key actors are excellent sources of information and important sounding boards for ethnographers. In site visits during my study of dropouts, I often went first to one of my key actors for updating on the latest events and to sound out my newest ideas about cultural practices and beliefs. Rerun, a student in the Brooklyn program for dropouts, often invited me to his home for dinner or to listen to records. He and his grandmother told me stories about the neighborhood—how it used to be and how dangerous it had become. He also showed me around the community, so that I would learn “how the other half lived.” His hangouts included fronts for drug transactions and hotels for pimping, prostitution, and an assortment of related activities. This community knowledge was invaluable from his perspective, and he was quite willing to share it with me. This same information helped me to understand the contextual background of the school program. Rerun also gave me an insight into the school ethos, by focusing on the importance of role modeling in the school. He told me about a new teacher in the program who broke all the rules concerning appropriate apparel and tried to teach them about “liberating merchandise” using a “five-fingered discount.” He said the students rebelled. They went right to the director to complain about her. “They were here to learn,” he explained. They had already seen what that type of instruction had done for them in public schools and in the streets. The new teacher had broken such basic cultural norms in the program that the student population had her removed. I cross-checked this information with the director and various other parties. Although the director was reluctant to discuss it, he confirmed Rerun’s story and provided information that other sources had withheld because of its politically embarrassing nature.

James was a long-term janitor in the Detroit dropout program. He grew up in the local community with many of the students and was extraordinarily perceptive about the differences between the serious and less serious students in the program, as well as between the serious and less serious teachers. I asked him whether he thought the students were obeying the new restrictions against smoking, wearing hats in the building, and wearing sneakers. He said, “You can tell from the butts on the floor that they are still smokin’, no matter what dey tell yah. I know, cause I gotta sweep ’em up. . . . It’s mostly the new ones, don’t yah know, like Kirk, and Dyan, Tina. You can catch em
almost any ol' time, I seen 'em during class in the hallways, here [in the cafeteria], and after-hours [in the cafeteria]." He provided empirical evidence to support his observations—a pile of cigarette butts he had swept up while we were talking.

In a study of a gifted and talented education program, my most insightful and helpful key actor was a school district supervisor. He told about the politics of the school district and how to avoid the turf disputes during my study. He drove me around the community to teach me how to identify each of the major neighborhoods and pointed out corresponding socioeconomic differences that proved to have an important impact on the study (see Fetterman, 1986f, 1988a). He also described the cyclical nature of the charges of elitism raised against the program by certain community members and a former school board member. He confided that his son (who was eligible to enter the program) had decided not to enter. This information opened new doors to my perception of peer pressure in that community.

A key actor who provides concrete descriptions is usually more helpful than one who becomes tangled in abstractions. One key actor in another study was another anthropologist working in an educational program. At first his help was invaluable. As the study proceeded, however, his concrete descriptions and periodic symbolic interpretations gave way to full-blown theoretical propositions about the entire social system. Eventually, we both recognized that we were losing sight of the program and the individuals in the study. Highly trained, formally educated key actors can be instrumental in research, but the fieldworker should solicit their contributions with great care, emphasizing the concrete and tying abstractions down to reality.

Key actors can help synthesize the fieldworker's observations. In a university department under study, I observed a series of faculty meetings in which no one could make a decision about any issue for months. I had come to expect some ambiguity, argument, and dissension, but I couldn't make sense of this prolonged period of inaction; these faculty members were usually much more decisive. I shared my description of the faculty as a ship adrift, sailing aimlessly without a rudder, with a key actor (an emeritus faculty member from that department). He helped me to make sense of what I had observed and experienced by providing a wider context. He explained that I was experiencing the "interregnum." The former chair had been deposed, and the department had a leadership vacuum. Without this information, I couldn't have completed my picture of departmental interactions.

Key actors and ethnographers must share a bond of trust. Respect on both sides is earned slowly. The ethnographers must take the time to search out and spend time with these articulate individuals. The fieldworker learns to depend on the key actor's information—particularly as cross-checks with other sources prove it to be accurate and revealing. Sometimes key actors are initially selected simply because they and the ethnographer have personality similarities or mutual interests. Ethnographers establish long-term relationships with key actors who continually provide reliable and insightful information. Key actors can be extremely effective and efficient sources of data and analysis.

At the same time, the ethnographer must judge the key actor's information cautiously. Overreliance on a key actor can be dangerous. Every study requires multiple sources. In addition, care is necessary to ensure that key actors do not simply provide answers they think the fieldworker wants to hear. The ethnographer can check answers rather easily, but must stay on guard against such distortion and contamination. Another, subtler problem occurs when a key actor adopts the ethnographer's theoretical and conceptual framework. The key actor may inadvertently begin to describe the culture in terms of this a priori construct, undermining the fieldwork and distorting the emic or insider's perspective. (For further discussion of the role of key informants, see Dobbert, 1982; Ellen, 1984; Frelick, 1970; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Pelto, 1970; Spradley, 1979; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984.)

Life Histories and Expressive-Autobiographical Interviews

Key actors often provide ethnographers with rich, detailed autobiographical descriptions. These life histories are usually quite personal; the individual is usually not completely representative of the group. However, how a key actor weaves a personal story tells much about the fabric of the social group. Personal description provides an integrated picture of the target culture.

Many of these oral histories are verifiable with additional work. However, in some instances the life history may not be verifiable or even factually accurate. In these cases, the life history is still invaluable because the record captures an individual's perception of the past, providing a unique look at how the key actor thinks and how personal and cultural values shape his or her perception of the past. Together with observation and interviewing, taking life histories allows the ethnographer to assemble a massive amount
of perceptual data with which to generate and answer basic cultural questions about the social group.

My fieldwork on the kibbutz yielded several rich and rewarding life histories. Many of the older kibbutzniks were concentration camp survivors. Their stories about pre-concentration camp life, survival in the camps, and their experiences up to the present were riveting and powerful. One survivor, Abraham, described his family in his youth, the schools he attended in Germany, the positions he held, and the gradual change in atmosphere as the Nazi party gained power. He told me how he lost half his family in the ghetto before the remainder even reached the camps. His stories about the strategies for survival in the camp were frightening. He survived the camp because the Nazis let him live as long as he went down into the pits filled with dead bodies to pick the gold teeth from the corpses. He remembered the cold day the Nazis lined him up next to his brother and arbitrarily shot his brother, leaving him alive. We even discussed how some prisoners from a once high-status social class still felt superior to others in the camps. Svie was another Holocaust survivor. He described a young man who rebelled in the camps. Seeing a rifle standing by the corner of the building where they were to be gassed, the young man ran naked and shivering from the line to grab the rifle. He aimed it at the guards and pulled the trigger, but it was empty: The guards had tricked him. They told the young man that others would have to pay for his disobedience, and then shot 30 men, women, and children in front of him before herding him back in line to be gassed. The stories of physical and psychological terror the survivors had experienced in the past—and the guilt that many still felt simply for surviving when so many had died—were overwhelming. These stories were valuable not only as historical records, but also as keys to helping me understand the behavior, moods, fears, and values they displayed each day at work on the kibbutz.

The dropout program study also provided rich life histories. Many of the students shared their lives with me in great detail. One young woman told me that her mother repeatedly stole her boyfriends from her and left her out in the cold at night to fend for herself; a young man described seeing his best friend shot at the police and seeing his friend shot in the neck by them in return. These graphic life histories helped to explain how these individuals saw the world—why some had dropped out of school, why they were periodically late for the new program, and why they needed so many counselors in the program. Further, the life history of a secretary in one of the dropout programs—a perfect picture of a white, middle-class young woman—explained why she was in conflict with predominantly black lower-socioeconomic-class children.

The life history approach is usually rewarding for both key actor and ethnographer. However, it is exceedingly time-consuming. Approximations of this approach, including expressive-autobiographical interviewing, are particularly valuable contributions to a study with resource limitations and time constraints. In many cases, an abbreviated or focused life history is sufficient. An expressive-autobiographical interview or case history combines a structured interview with a chronological autobiography. The autobiography focuses on social, educational, or career development. Rather than learning about the participant’s life in a holistic fashion, the ethnographer learns in some depth about one facet of the participant’s life. The depth of perspective these techniques provide is invaluable in putting the pieces of the puzzle together. This approach is most likely to pay off by generating useful insights into a participant’s view of the world and relating those insights to the specific topic of study in a short period of time (see Spindler & Spindler, 1970, p. 293).

LISTS AND FORMS

A number of techniques can stimulate the interviewer’s recall and organize the data. During a semistructured interview, a protocol or topical checklist can be useful. Printed or unobtrusively displayed on a portable computer screen, these lists usually contain the major topics and questions that the ethnographer plans to cover during the interview. A checklist can be both a reminder and a mechanism to guide the interview when a more efficient approach is desirable. Similarly, after some experience in the field, the fieldworker can develop forms that facilitate data capture. For example, I developed a classroom observation form for myself and other fieldworkers in the dropout study. It consisted simply of spaces for the date, site, observer, teacher, and class subject at the top of the page, with the rest of the page divided into three sections: preclass observation, description of classroom instruction, and postclass description. The form was simple to follow and complete. It was also open-ended, allowing the observer to record any events. The only explicit structure I imposed on the form—and thus on the observation—was a categorization of the types of activities before, during, and after class, including mention of which students came to class early or remained after class and specifically what they were doing. Documenting the mood that teachers and students brought to the class through interviews and observations often helped explain classroom behavior, particularly during
periods of extracurricular activities such as election campaign periods and big games.

Checklists and forms help to organize and discipline data collection and analysis. Their construction should rely on some knowledge from the field to ensure their appropriateness and usefulness. Checklists and forms also require consistent use, thus allowing the fieldworker to compare, for example, various dropouts' views about a new rule or regulation in their system. However, such lists and forms are not cast in stone; new topics emerge that merit exploration. New conceptualizations arise, and different forms are necessary for collection and analysis of the relevant data. Thus the researcher must continually modify old lists and forms and develop new ones throughout the study.

**QUESTIONNAIRES**

Structured interviews are close approximations of questionnaires. Questionnaires are perhaps the most formal and rigid form of exchange in the interviewing spectrum—the logical extension of an increasingly structured interview. However, questionnaires are qualitatively different from interviews because of the distance between the researcher and the respondent. Interviews have an interactive nature that questionnaires lack. In filling out a questionnaire, the respondent completes the researcher's form without any verbal exchange or clarification. Knowing whether the researcher and the respondent are on the same wavelength, sharing common assumptions and understandings about the questions, is difficult—perhaps impossible.

Misinterpretations and misrepresentations are common with questionnaires. Many people present an idealized image on questionnaires, answering as they think they should conform to a certain image. The researcher has no control over this type of response and no interpersonal cues to guide the interpretation of responses. Other problems include bias in the questions and a poor return rate. Population samples derived from telephone books exclude the large number of people with unlisted numbers, without telephones, or in the process of moving. Random-digit dialing represents an improvement, but it still misses the latter two groups. Similarly, using car registrations to devise a sample will miss people who do not own or register cars. Ignoring these often discrete populations will systematically affect the data and the interpretation of the responses.

Despite these caveats, questionnaires are an excellent way to tackle questions dealing with representativeness. They are the only realistic way of taking the pulses of hundreds or thousands of people. Anthropologists usually develop questionnaires to explore a specific concern after they have a good grasp of how the larger pieces of the puzzle fit together. The questionnaire is a product of the ethnographer's knowledge about the system, and the researcher can adapt it to a specific topic or set of concerns. Ethnographers also use existing questionnaires to test hypotheses about specific conceptions and behaviors. However, the ethnographer must establish the relevance of a particular questionnaire to the target culture or subculture before administering it. In developing a brief questionnaire for two studies, I used my knowledge of the culture, reflected in cultural terms and expressions, the way questions were phrased, and the content of the questions. A pilot phase was necessary to eliminate all sorts of errors, including vague and misleading questions, inappropriate response categories, excessive size, and poor print quality. I also had to send out three waves of questionnaires to improve the response rate. Additional statistical work was necessary to account for sample bias in the returns and to resolve a number of other problems. I then compared the results of these questionnaires and tests with my descriptive findings. The descriptive findings were useful in explaining the questionnaire results, and the questionnaire results provided some insight into how widespread certain attitudes were.

Questionnaires have their place in ethnographic research: They are an efficient means of large-scale data collection. However, despite all precautions the methodological problems associated with questionnaire use—including the distance between questioner and respondent—weaken its credibility as a primary data collection technique. (See Fowler, 1988, for an excellent presentation of survey research methods; Hagburg, 1970, about the validity of questionnaire data; and Groves & Kahn, 1979, and Lavrakas, 1987, concerning telephone surveys.)

**PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES**

Projective techniques are also useful in ethnographic research. Projective techniques supplement and enhance fieldwork, they do not replace it. These techniques elicit cultural and often psychological information from group members. Typically, the ethnographer holds an item up and asks the
dreams as projective techniques. I asked students about their dreams and the dreams of others and then asked them what they meant. Their dreams of being cornered in a classroom and trapped in the principal’s office closely paralleled their feelings of being imprisoned in school. (In exchange for their openness, I often provided a classic Freudian or a pragmatic Adlerian interpretation of their dreams. They enjoyed these interpretations primarily for their entertainment value.)

Yet projective techniques, however revealing, rarely stand alone. The researcher needs to set these techniques in a larger research context to understand elicited responses completely. Projective techniques can be cues to lead to further inquiry or one of several sources of information to support an ongoing hypothesis. Only the ethnographer’s imagination limits the number of possible projective techniques. However, the fieldworker should use only those tests that can be relevant to the local group and the study.

### ADDITIONAL ELICITING DEVICES

A variety of other tools elicit the insider’s classification and categorization of a target culture. Ethnographers ask participants to rank order people in their community to understand the various social hierarchies. The semantic differential technique (Osgood, 1964) elicits an insider’s rating of certain concepts. For example, a respondent is asked to rate rock music on a five-point Likert-type scale (excellent, good, neutral, bad, awful). (The fieldworker and native share the same definitions of these ratings.) The native or participant is then asked to rate a variety of other concepts. The fieldworker can compare this individual’s ratings with those of others in the community to produce a picture of how the group thinks about certain issues. The fieldworker can thus identify patterns as well as statistical outliers or anomalies. Cognitive mapping is also useful in eliciting the insider’s perspective. Asking a student to map out his or her walk to school with various landmarks—for example, a route that identifies gang territories by block—provides an insight into how that individual sees the world.

These techniques, like projective techniques, require some baseline knowledge of the community before their design and use. Additional work is necessary after administering these devices to comprehend fully what the responses mean. These techniques can achieve the same findings that interviews with structural and attribute questions yield—the insider’s perception of reality.
UNOBTRUSIVE MEASURES

This chapter began by stating that ethnographers are human instruments, dependent on all their senses for data collection and analysis. Most ethnographic methods are interactive: They involve dealing with people. The ethnographer attempts to be as unobtrusive as possible to minimize the effects on the participant's behavior. However, data collection techniques—except for questionnaires—fundamentally depend on that human interaction.

A variety of other measures, however, do not require human interaction and can supplement interactive methods of data collection and analysis. These methods require only that the ethnographer keep eyes and ears open. Ranging from outcroppings to folktales, these unobtrusive measures draw social and cultural inferences from physical evidence (see Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966).

Outcroppings

Outcropping is a geological term referring to a portion of the bedrock that is visible on the surface—in other words, something that sticks out. Outcroppings in inner-city ethnographic research include skyscrapers, burned-out buildings, graffiti, the smell of urine on city streets, yards littered with garbage, a Rolls-Royce, and a syringe in the schoolyard. The researcher can quickly estimate the relative wealth or poverty of an area from these outcroppings. Initial inferences are possible without any human interaction. However, such cues by themselves can be misleading. A house with all the modern conveniences and luxuries imaginable can signal wealth or financial overextension verging on bankruptcy. The researcher must place each outcropping in a larger context. A broken syringe can have several meanings, depending on whether it lies on the floor of a doctor's office or in an elementary schoolyard late at night. On the walls of an inner-city school, the absence of graffiti is as important as its presence.

One young woman student wore a rabbit-fur coat, skin tight, revealing dresses, high heels, and layers of jewelry to class. Her clothes suggested a possible identification with pimps and prostitution. (Her active involvement in this lucrative profession was later confirmed—by the director and, in an unsolicited and coincidental meeting, her probation officer.)

Kirk and Dee wore special emblems on their jackets that clearly stated their gang affiliation. I learned eventually that only one of them maintained a gang affiliation. The young man was wearing his brother's jacket.

Changes in a physical setting over time can also be revealing. For example, an increase in the number of burned-out and empty buildings on a block indicates a decaying neighborhood. Conversely, an increase in the number of remodeled and revitalized houses may be indicative of gentrification, in which wealthy investors take over the neighborhood. A classroom with current and complex projects prominently displayed on the walls suggests classroom activity and learning. Academic and athletic trophies are measures of performance in these areas and tokens of school pride. The fieldworker must assess this abundant information with care, but should not ignore it or take it for granted.

Written and Electronic Information

In literate societies, written documents are one of the most valuable and timesaving forms of data collection. In studies of office life, I have found past reports, memoranda, and personnel and payroll records invaluable. Mission statements and annual reports provide the organization's purpose or stated purpose and indicate the image that the organization wishes to present to the outside. Internal evaluation reports indicate areas of concern. Budgets tell a great deal about organizational values. Electronic communications and databases not only teach the researcher about the current status of the organization but allow the computer-literate ethnographer to play what-if games with the data. For example, the ethnographer can exchange or substitute figures on a departmental spreadsheet to determine the effects of different assumptions and conditions. Electronic mail is often less inhibited than general correspondence and thus quite revealing about office relationships, turf, and various power struggles.

School records tell where the school has been, is, and plans to be in the future (or at least what the party line says school goals are). Lesson plans, homework assignments, essays, and report cards (or the absence of any of these outcroppings) are revealing sources of information about students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Minutes from board of education and faculty meetings provide useful retrospective information. The fieldworker needs permission to gain access to these types of records, particularly the more sensitive data. However, the number of written records stored in old file cabinets or files on floppy disks and mainframes can be staggering. Proper use of this type of information can save the ethnographer years of work.
Proxemics and Kinesics

Proxemics and kinesics were discussed briefly in Chapter 2 in an explanation of the difference between micro and macro studies. Briefly, proxemics is the analysis of socially defined distance between people, and kinesics focuses on body language (see Birdwhistell, 1970; Hall, 1974). Students who remain physically distant from their teachers may feel a tenuous relationship with them. In American culture, a salesperson speaking about a product two inches away from a prospective buyer's face has probably intruded on the buyer's sense of private space. A skillful use of such intrusion may overwhelm the customer and make the sale, but it is more likely to turn the customer off. Seating arrangements at meetings have social meaning. At an advisory panel meeting in the dropout study, the power brokers trying to control the meeting sat at one end of the table, and their opponents established their own territory at the other end. Shifts in the seating arrangements during the meeting evidenced shifts in power and allegiance. The relative status and social distance between interviewer and interviewee are often evident in the physical distance between them during the interview. The interviewer who sits behind a desk throughout an interview is sending a different message from the interviewer who comes around the desk and sits alongside the interviewee. This seating arrangement may indicate how the interviewer feels about dominant and subordinate relationships or it may indicate the interviewer's level of comfort or unease in this type of stressful social situation. The fieldworker should record these observations, and—as with many of the techniques in this chapter—put them in a larger context for interpretation and cross-check the findings with other data.

Sensitivity to body language can also be instrumental in ethnographic research. A clenched fist, a student's head on a desk, a condescending superior's facial expression, a scowl, a blush, a student sitting at the edge of a chair with eyes fixed on the lecturer, and many other physical statements provide useful information to the observant fieldworker. In context, this information can generate hypotheses, partially confirm suspicions, and add another layer of understanding to fieldwork.

Folktales

Folktales are important to both literate and nonliterate societies. They crystallize an ethos or a way of being. Cultures often use folktales to transmit critical cultural values and lessons from one generation to the next. Folktales usually draw on familiar surroundings and on figures relevant to the local setting, but the stories themselves are facades. Beneath the thin veneer is another layer of meaning. This inner layer reveals the stories' underlying values. Stories provide ethnographers with an insight into the secular and the sacred, the intellectual and the emotional life of a people.

Biblical myths and folktales are used today in Israel to reinforce certain national values. Similarly, folktales about George Washington and his father's cherry tree are used to instill certain values in young children and adults in the United States. Listening to community folktales about dropouts, for example, provides evidence about how community members perceive dropouts. Student folktales about gangs may indicate their attitude toward gangs and their involvement with them.

Folktales are present in all settings. In a study of a hospital pharmacy, I found folktales to be quite informative about the culture. One of the most serious financial concerns in a hospital pharmacy is loss of revenue. I identified a big hole in the operation by listening to and following up on information derived from folktales. Listening to the medical records employees swap "war" stories about patient records told me that certain departments had been hoarding records for years. Other stories depicted great fights between medical departments for possession of certain sensitive (and financially valuable) records. I learned about ancient records found behind filing cabinets in the medical records department. This story was told over and over again to comfort employees: They had an antiquated, labor-intensive, manual system and had been unsuccessful in efforts to computerize the system. The folktales reinforced their subcultural belief that they were an oppressed or neglected cog in a big, expensive machine. Their stories had more than a grain of truth. The antiquated manual system was responsible for a significant loss of revenue. The departments didn't have enough employees to process the records (converting medications administered to patients into charges) or to handle all the work, so some records just piled up until it was too late to charge the patient. Administrators used this same folktales as a scapegoating mechanism to blame the department for their losses by reinforcing an image of ineptitude. This folktales led to important insights into the organization's maladaptive behavior.

Folktales in the emergency room about heroic efforts to save patients maintained the morale of the doctors and nurses during especially difficult times. Folktales also shaped behavior in the administrative sections of the emergency room. One of the first tales I heard when talking with some of the
emergency room staff was about the supervisor. The emergency room supervisor had a reputation for reviewing every travel reimbursement to nurses and physicians. I knew the supervisor very well, and I knew that he didn’t have time to review any of these financial concerns—he relegated them to an assistant, who looked at only a fraction of the expenses incurred in the emergency room. The folklore about the supervisor’s tight controls, however, sent a symbolic message throughout the system that management controls its resources by paying close attention to detail. This folklore had an effect on petty concerns such as travel reimbursements as well as on basic medical practices in the emergency room. Once again, the perception of reality is more important than so-called objective reality in shaping behavior. (See Fetterman, 1986g, for additional details about these studies, with a focus on administrative and financial concerns.)

All the methods and techniques discussed in this chapter are used together in ethnographic research. They reinforce one another. Like concepts, methods and techniques guide the ethnographer through the maze of human existence. Discovery and understanding are at the heart of this endeavor. The next chapter explores a wide range of useful devices that make the ethnographer’s expedition through time and space more productive and pleasant.

4

Gearing Up:
Ethnographic Equipment

On smooth surfaces the staff helps maintain an easy rhythm to my walk and gives me something to lean on when I stop to stand and stare.

—Colin Fletcher

Notepads, computers, tape recorders, cameras—all the tools of ethnography are merely extensions of the human instrument, aids to memory and vision. Yet these useful devices can facilitate the ethnographic mission by capturing the rich detail and flavor of the ethnographic experience and then helping to organize and analyze these data. Ethnographic equipment ranges from simple paper and pen to high-tech laptop and mainframe computers, from tape recorders and cameras to videocassette recorders. Proper equipment can make the ethnographer’s sojourn in an alien culture more pleasant, safe, productive, and rewarding.

PEN AND PAPER

The most common tools ethnographers use are pen and paper. With these tools, the fieldworker records notes from interviews during or after each session, sketches an area’s physical layout, traces an organizational chart, and outlines informal social networks. Notepads can hold initial impressions, detailed conversations, and preliminary analyses. Most academics have had a great deal of experience with this simple tool, having taken extensive notes in classes. Note-taking skill is easily transferable to the field. Pen and paper have several advantages: ease of use, minimal expense, and unobtrusiveness. The drawbacks are obvious: The note-taking fieldworker cannot record every word and nuance in a social situation, has difficulty maintaining eye contact with other participants, and must expend a great deal of effort to record data legibly and in an organized manner.