

Writing Up Fieldnotes I: From Field to Desk

After hours participating in, observing, and perhaps jotting notes about ongoing events in a social setting, most fieldworkers return to their desks and their computers or typewriters to begin to write up their observations into full fieldnotes. At this point, writing becomes the explicit focus and primary activity of ethnography: momentarily out of the field, the researcher sits down to the task of turning recollections and jottings into detailed written accounts that will preserve as much as possible what she noticed and now feels is significant.

In this chapter, we are concerned with the processes of writing up full fieldnotes; we focus on how ethnographers go about the complex tasks of remembering, elaborating, filling in, and commenting upon fieldnotes in order to produce a full written account of witnessed scenes and events.

AT THE DESK

Writing up fieldnotes requires a block of concentrated time. Incidents that span a few minutes may take the ethnographer several hours to write up; she tries to recall just who did and said what, in what order, and to put all that into words and coherent paragraphs. Indeed, an ethnographic maxim holds that every hour spent observing requires an additional hour to write up. Over time, fieldworkers evolve a rhythm that balances time spent in the field and time writing notes. In some situations, the field researcher may put a cap on time devoted to observing in order to allow

a substantial write-up period on leaving the field. Limiting time in the field in this way lessens the likelihood that the fieldworker will forget what happened or become overwhelmed by the prospect of hours of composing fieldnotes. For beginning ethnographers, we recommend, when possible, leaving the field after three to four hours in order to begin writing fieldnotes.

In other situations the fieldworker might find it more difficult to withdraw for writing. Anthropologists working in other cultures generally spend whole days observing and devote evenings to writing. Field researchers who fill roles as regular workers must put in a full work day before leaving to write notes. In both cases, longer stretches of observation require larger blocks of write-up time and perhaps different strategies for making note-writing more manageable. For example, once having described basic routines and daily rhythms in the first sets of notes, the ethnographer who spends hours in the field may focus subsequent notes on significant incidents that occurred throughout the day. At this stage longer periods spent in the field may in fact prove advantageous, allowing greater opportunities for observing incidents of interest.

Alternatively, the field researcher with regular workday responsibilities may find it useful to designate certain hours for observing and taking jottings, giving priority to these observations in writing up full fieldnotes. Varying these designated observation periods allows exploration of different patterns of activity throughout the day. Of course, while using this strategy, the fieldworker should still write notes on important incidents that occur at other times.

Perhaps more crucial than how long the ethnographer spends in the field is the timing of writing up fieldnotes. Over time, people forget and simplify experience; notes composed several days after observation tend to be summarized and stripped of rich, nuanced detail. Hence we strongly encourage researchers to sit down and write full fieldnotes as soon as possible after the day's (or night's) research is done.

Writing fieldnotes *immediately* after leaving the setting produces fresher, more detailed recollections that harness the ethnographer's involvement with and excitement about the day's events. Indeed, writing notes immediately on leaving the field offers a way of releasing the weight of what the researcher has just experienced. It is easier to focus one's thoughts and energies on the taxing work of reviewing, remembering, and writing. In contrast, those who put off writing fieldnotes report that

with the passage of time the immediacy of lived experience fades and writing fieldnotes becomes a burdensome, even dreaded experience.

Often, however, it is impossible for an ethnographer to find time to write up notes immediately upon leaving the field. Long or late hours, for example, may leave him too tired to write notes. Under these circumstances, it is best to get a good night's sleep and turn to writing up first thing in the morning. Sometimes even this is impossible: a village event may last through several days and nights, confronting the anthropological researcher with a choice between sleeping outside with the villagers or taking time out periodically to sleep and write notes.

Whether written immediately or soon after returning from the site, the fieldworker should go directly to computer or typewriter, not talking with intimates about what happened until full fieldnotes are completed. Such "what happened today" talk can rob note-writing of its psychological immediacy and emotional release; writing the day's events becomes a stale recounting rather than a cathartic outpouring.¹

Ethnographers use a variety of different means to write up full notes. While the typewriter provided the standard tool for many classic ethnographers, some handwrote their full notes on pads or in notebooks. Contemporary ethnographers strongly prefer a computer with a standard word processing program. Typing notes with a word processing program not only has the advantage of greater speed (slow typists will soon notice substantial gains in speed and accuracy), but also allows for the modification of words, phrases, and sentences in the midst of writing without producing messy, hard-to-read pages. And fieldnotes written on the computer are easily reordered; it is possible, for example, to insert incidents or dialogue subsequently recalled at the appropriate place. Finally, composing with a word processing program facilitates coding and sorting fieldnotes as one later turns to writing finished ethnographic accounts.

The researcher who has been in the field for a long period and has limited time immediately afterward for writing full fieldnotes has several alternatives. First, he may make extensive, handwritten jottings about the day's events, relying on the details of these notes to postpone writing full fieldnotes, often for some time.² Secondly, she may dictate fieldnotes into a tape recorder. One can "talk fieldnotes" relatively quickly and can dictate while driving home from a field setting. But while dictation preserves vivid impressions and observations immediately on leaving the field, dictated notes eventually have to be transcribed, a time-consuming, expen-

sive project. And in the meantime, the field researcher does not have ready access to these dictated notes for review or for planning her next steps in the field.

In summary, beginning ethnographers should not be surprised to experience deep ambivalence in writing fieldnotes. On the one hand, after a long, exciting, or draining stint in the field, writing up notes may seem a humdrum, extra burden; on the other hand, writing fieldnotes may bring expressive release and reflective insight. Having seen and heard intriguing, surprising things all day long, the fieldworker is finally able to sit down, think about, and relive events while transforming them into a permanent record. Writing fieldnotes may bring on an outpouring of thoughts and impressions as the writer reviews and re-experiences the excitement and freshness of the day's events.