PART

1

THE WHY AND WHAT OF ETHNOGRAPHY

CHAPTER

<div align="center">1</div>

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define ethnography
- Explain the basic history of ethnography
- Track trends in contemporary ethnography
- Explore the implications of ethnography as firsthand research
- Examine the ethnographer's role as research instrument
- Consider collaboration as the foundation for ethnographic research

ETHNOGRAPHY: THE ENGAGED, FIRSTHAND STUDY OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN ACTION

Ethnography is a **research strategy** that allows researchers to explore and examine the cultures and societies that are a fundamental part of the human experience. Unlike many other scientific research strategies, the ethnographer as researcher is not typically a detached or uninvolved **observer**. The ethnographer collects data and gains insight through *firsthand* involvement with **research subjects** or **informants**. With few exceptions, the ethnographer conducts research by interacting with other human beings that are part of the study; this interaction takes many forms, from conversations and interviews to shared ritual and emotional experiences.

From the standpoint of ethnography, the only plausible way to study social and cultural phenomena is to study them *in action*. The complexity of human lives and social interaction cannot be reduced to a sterile laboratory experiment with the strict control of variables characteristic of a scientific experiment. Instead, ethnography aims to study life outside of a controlled environment. As a result, the objects of study are sometimes hard to identify and always subject to change as the result of innovation, conflict, and many other factors. Ethnographers employ a number of different research techniques and methods in a complex research strategy that matches the complexity of their objects of study.

Today, researchers employ ethnography as a research strategy in a number of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and education, and as a practical research strategy in marketing, management, and public policy arenas. This breadth of use indicates that the utility of the approach has become apparent in many different circumstances where better understanding of social and cultural dynamics is desirable. Ethnographic research encompasses a number of different research **methods** and **techniques**; this text will introduce many of these techniques and methods and will explain how to design and to carry out effective research that applies these techniques and methods in appropriate situations.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Ethnography originally developed as a research strategy in academic circles, mainly within the discipline of anthropology. Therefore, anthropology provides many of the most famous early ethnographers and many "classic" ethnographies. Names like Bronislaw Malinowski, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict, along with ethnographic subjects like the Trobriand Islanders, the Nuer, the island of Samoa, and the nation of Japan are important markers of ethnography's early history. These ethnographers and their works have given us a number of important texts and some films that are important resources for students of ethnography. Before you begin planning to carry out your own research, you should become familiar with the history of ethnography. This section will provide a very brief discussion of that history, but it

is not a substitute for exploring ethnographies and their history more deeply. A good ethnography makes for a good read, and reading the work of others broadens the ethnographer's awareness of the possibilities for ethnography as a research strategy. Anthropology and ethnography arose at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in the context of a particular set of historical circumstances that influenced early ethnographic work. These circumstances included European imperialism, American expansionist tendencies, and dominant understandings of race, ethnicity, and gender that usually placed white males in positions of privilege and power and placed others in marginalized or colonized positions of oppression and subordination. Ethnography can offer important insight into situations of suffering and disempowerment, and anthropology has a long history of using ethnography to expose human systems that are taken for granted and to offer implicit or explicit critiques of dominant systems and understandings. Nevertheless, much of early anthropology and ethnography intentionally or unintentionally supported existing systems and structures of power.

Early ethnography consisted mostly of white male ethnographers going from academic and political centers in the United States and Europe to study in geographically distant locales among socially marginalized groups. (There are many exceptions to this general statement: Margaret Mead, Zora Neale Hurston, and many other early ethnographers were not white males.) In some cases, their research projects were directly connected to political endeavors like colonialism—for instance, Evans-Pritchard's work among the Nuer (Evans Pritchard 1940). The byproduct of research in these circumstances was a research situation in which clear foreigners arrived to study the "Other." This dynamic has raised questions about the potential for mutual understanding, the importance of language, the role of intermediaries, and, perhaps most important, the role of power—political, economic, and social—in the research context. Because of the desire to present authoritative accounts that appeared to be suitably objective and scientific and for a variety of other reasons, many of these questions and concerns were not adequately addressed at the time. As a result, at least some of the potential for bias and the potential for multiple perspectives was ignored or left unexamined during an important part of the early history of ethnography.

The ethnographies that appeared in this context tended to present holistic accounts of particular groups of people—for instance, the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940), the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski 1922), and the Japanese (Benedict 1946)—that appeared to be well defined and relatively homogeneous. Most of these ethnographies provided definitive information about these groups; for example, the reader of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography learns that the Nuer have a segmentary lineage organization, and Benedict identifies the Japanese national character as Apollonian. In a time when cultural difference was the subject of much discussion, consternation, and imagination, these texts helped to establish a sense of cultural essence that defined groups of people. The reader of these texts comes away with the sense that the essence has been discovered and recorded for posterity. This tendency to essentialize cultural groups

stemmed at least in part from understandings of nationalism and cultural identity that drew upon essential characteristics and in many cases supported claims of cultural superiority and racism. Understandings of variation and conflict within groups as well as the difficulty in defining clear boundaries came to the fore only in later years.

Because of the desire to define and to describe the group under study, the most common approach to ethnography involved collecting and presenting comprehensive, wide-ranging accounts. Depending on theoretical orientations, these accounts sometimes looked like a catalog or list of cultural traits and sometimes appeared as a report of how the individual pieces worked together to form a coherent whole. Whichever style of presentation was adopted, the ethnographic data collected typically included information about topics like economics, politics, religion, rituals, kinship, and material culture. The ethnographer expected to collect information about everything pertaining to the culture under study. In many ways, these ethnographies are a wonderful testament to the industriousness of these early ethnographers as researchers, but they also sometimes cover up a lack of depth of knowledge and present an ethnographic picture that is partial or mistaken.

Many of these early ethnographies do not address the question of research methods or do so only in a very cursory manner. In other words, many of these ethnographers were not inclined to write about *how* they carried out their research. Some of this reluctance may have stemmed from an uncertainty about techniques and methods and a concern about claims to authority arising from experience-based research that did not readily meet some of the scientific conventions of the time. Still, a number of common understandings and practices emerged out of this early ethnographic work:

1. Starting with Malinowski's (1922) work on the Trobriand Islanders, there was general acknowledgment that ethnography required a lengthy stay in the field—usually a year or longer.

2. There was an increasing recognition of the importance of learning and working in local languages.

3. There was a focus on kinship as the fundamental building block of culture and the construction of kinship charts.

4. It was generally accepted that the researcher should try to become as much a part of the group being studied as possible to gain the insiders' perspective.

Many of these understandings stem from the fact that the researchers were traveling (usually long distances) to study groups that they were not a part of and with whom they therefore did not share a language or prior cultural understandings. These assumptions continue to underlie much of the current understanding of ethnography, though they have been the subject of significant critique as ethnography has evolved as a research strategy and been applied in different circumstances.

Perhaps most notably, this early mode of ethnography meant ignoring a lot of the complexity of human lives and groups. It seemed to assume that groups were well

defined and that the members of those groups generally behaved and thought in the same way. Differences between individuals and between groups defined by age and gender were most often ignored or downplayed. In many cases, an individual or small group came to represent the collective whole without proper consideration for how justified that representation was. The ethnographer often assumed that one member of a group—an elder male, for instance—could speak for everyone without questioning how that person's particular social position (and personality) would influence his thoughts, behavior, and interactions with the ethnographer. The ethnographer usually had an easier time **gaining access** and **building rapport** with certain members of a community, but this fact was seldom acknowledged. In fact, the predominance of male researchers almost certainly produced androcentric ethnographic accounts in the initial decades of ethnography. Other forms and sources of bias have also come to light.

The context of ethnography's emergence as a research strategy also meant that it was associated with the study of relatively isolated, small-scale, rural communities. The focus on these sorts of communities stemmed from anthropology's fascination with cultural difference, geographic distance, and a spirit of exoticism, but it also plugged into assumptions that the ethnographer was supposed to be studying everything in the research setting. The ethnographer could at least hope to know everybody and to keep track of events in a village of two hundred people; that goal seemed to become more unreasonable the larger the group under study.

In short, classic ethnography most often involved researchers traveling long distances to study supposedly isolated groups in small communities. (In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, 1928, Margaret Mead offers very little discussion of her research methods or techniques, but she does explain her choice of Samoa as a field site. She suggests that finding a "simple" or "primitive" field site is the next best thing to a scientific experiment. Much of early ethnography was based on assumptions about simplicity or primitiveness and the idea that these sites would offer an easier way to study human society and culture. These ideas and assumptions were fundamentally ethnocentric and have been discarded in contemporary ethnography.) Usually, the ethnographer had little prior knowledge of the group under study, and much of the early research involved learning a language, befriending a local intermediary or informant, observing and participating whenever possible, and employing research techniques like **household surveys, mapping,** and **kinship charts** that were well suited to use by an outsider researcher with limited understandings of languages and local cultural practices. Over time, the underlying approach assumed that the ethnographer's increased familiarity with the language, customs, and individuals would allow the researcher to gain more of an **insider's perspective** and a deeper understanding of behavior and thought. According to Malinowski (1922), this should be the primary goal of ethnography. This need for familiarity and the acquisition of detailed knowledge is one of the main reasons why a lengthy research project became the norm; it took time for the ethnographer to become an effective **participant-observer**.

HOW ETHNOGRAPHY HAS CHANGED: DOING CONTEMPORARY ETHNOGRAPHY

From the beginning, there were exceptions to these general trends in ethnography. For instance, Zora Neale Hurston worked in the southern United States and presented her ethnographic findings in a nontraditional format in the early 1900s (Hurston 1990a, 1990b). Close examination reveals a rich history of ethnographers experimenting with research strategies, research sites, and styles of presentation. This experimentation and variation almost certainly stems from ethnographers' awareness of the tremendous variation in their research subjects and circumstances and the challenge of studying complex social and cultural phenomena in action. Nevertheless, a sustained critique that questioned many of the underlying assumptions of "classical" ethnography did not emerge until later in the twentieth century. This critique appeared as researchers and others began to rethink when and how ethnography was a useful research tool. They began to question whether ethnographers could employ their methods in situations other than small, rural communities. Critics of classical ethnography also asked penetrating questions about ethnography's reliance on models that too often tended to assume homogeneity and stasis. The critique also focused on whether ethnography could and should make claims to **objectivity**. In many cases, the critics argued that ethnographers needed to address some fundamental problems in terms of **perspective** and **bias**, as well as their ethical obligations to the people with whom they worked.

Many of the questions and issues raised within these criticisms have been the subject of vigorous debate. Some have argued that ethnography is an inherently flawed research strategy. Others have called for radically rethinking ethnography, both as a research strategy and a means of presenting information and analysis. These debates have had a tremendous effect on the pursuit of ethnography and have produced significant variety under the umbrella of ethnography. The remainder of this section highlights the most significant and useful ways that this critique and experimentation have helped to shape ethnography in contemporary practice.

In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the Chicago School adapted ethnography to the study of American communities, especially the city of Chicago. This work produced important ethnographic findings and helped to highlight ethnography's utility in different research circumstances and sites. Most notably, these ethnographic projects demonstrated that researchers could effectively use ethnography in urban and industrialized research settings. This shift made it more acceptable to do ethnography locally. In many cases, ethnography allowed the researchers to study particular groups and topics that were not readily researched using more traditional sociological research methods, like surveys. For instance, homeless populations are notoriously underrepresented in survey data because of the difficulty in identifying them and their wariness of surveillance and intervention. An ethnographic research approach has allowed researchers to understand better the behaviors, thoughts, experiences, and extent of homeless populations. Nels Anderson's *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923) is a classic example from the early years of the Chicago School, and Mitchell Duneier's

CASE STUDY

The Ethnographer as Stripper

Strip clubs may not be the first image of an ethnographer's field site that comes to mind, and the idea of becoming a stripper in order to conduct research may be surprising to some, but Katherine Frank describes her ethnographic research as a stripper in six different strip clubs in *G-Strings and Sympathy* (Frank 2002). Her ethnographic work offers insight into the public performances of (primarily male) sexual desire and the importance of observation as a primary element of these experiences for the men who frequent strip clubs. In discussing her research experiences, Frank refers to her role as "observing the observers" (2002, 1). Feminist understandings inspire Frank's research strategies, and the choice to conduct participant-observation as a stripper allows her to engage questions of male desire in particularly interesting ways.

Frank's work is an excellent example of contemporary ethnography for a number of reasons. Her choice of strip clubs in a southern city in the United States shows the applicability of ethnography as a research strategy to an urban environment that is not necessarily geographically or socially distant from the ethnographer's origins. Because she is a female ethnographer studying mostly male patrons of strip clubs, the variety of perspectives and issues of power and gender occupy a prominent place for Frank. She assumes that the different actors involved in these strip clubs operate with a wide range of understandings and perspectives and attempts to use her ethnography to present the intricate structures and layers of erotic desire and power that she encountered in her field sites.

Sidewalk (1999) is an excellent recent example of the work that comes from this legacy. Other examples of sociological use of ethnography in urban settings include William Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943) and Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1995).

The Chicago School's embrace of ethnography as a research strategy helped make ethnography a tool that sociologists began to utilize more and more. Today one finds exciting ethnographic work in rural and urban settings across the globe coming from the disciplines of both anthropology and sociology. Ethnography no longer implies traveling to remote villages, and there is increased recognition that cultural and social phenomena are ripe for ethnographic study everywhere we find humans.

In addition to opening ethnography for use by sociologists and in urban and industrialized settings, ethnographers have also revisited the classic ethnographies and the associated field sites in the intervening years. The result has been a host of questions about the way those ethnographies were researched and the findings they presented. In some cases, there have been vehement critiques of the ethnographies and their claims.

Derek Freeman's critique of Margaret Mead's work in Samoa is perhaps the most virulent and famous of these critiques (Freeman 1983). Freeman claims that Mead was misled by her informants and therefore provided a flawed ethnographic picture of life for adolescent girls in Samoa. Freeman was able to talk to some of Mead's informants years later and obtained an understanding that seems very different from Mead's original version. In fact, Freeman's work raises a lot of questions about how informants' perspectives and understandings may change over time and how interactions with different researchers (in this case, a man or a woman) may influence the information gleaned through ethnography. Mead's work in Samoa remains an important early ethnographic source, but students of ethnography are now much more aware of the contestability of ethnographic data and the need to evaluate critically the sources of data and the methods of data collection as well as the role of the ethnographer.

Along similar lines, several decades after Malinowski's work in the Trobriand Islands, Annette Weiner returned for a follow-up study. Her ethnography *Women of Value, Men of Renown* (Weiner 1976) highlights the role of women in everyday economic activities and shows that Malinowski's famous account of the kula ring as an elaborate system of symbolic exchange provides only a partial understanding of economics and exchange in the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski's rather andocentric presentation stemmed from his focus on men and their activities. He did not pay proper attention to the important activities of women, and his authoritative ethnography failed to take full account of gender and women's roles. Many early ethnographies demonstrated similar androcentric tendencies. As more female ethnographers have conducted research and all ethnographers have paid increased attention to gender dynamics within groups and communities, some of these original shortcomings have been addressed and the character of ethnography has changed. Now ethnographers pay much closer attention to the role that gender plays in their research and the role the ethnographer's own gender identity plays.

The work by Weiner, Freeman, and others has helped ethnographers understand the importance of considering the multiple perspectives and subject positions that will almost certainly be encountered in the course of any ethnographic research. Ethnographers are much more circumspect in their claims to speak for collective groups, especially groups like "*the* Trobriand Islanders" and "*the* Nuer." Ethnographers seek to determine the extent to which individuals and groups share common behavior and thought. The result is a new type of ethnography that is much more attentive to internal divisions and different perspectives; often these ethnographies are more focused in terms of the groups and topics that they seek to examine than the earlier, more holistic ethnographies that sought to describe all aspects of the larger whole.

Along these lines, Sharon Hutchinson's *Nuer Dilemmas* (1996) is a fascinating, though often distressing, account of the impact of civil war and other major economic, political, and religious changes among the Nuer in Sudan. In many ways, her ethnography is an important update of the work of Evans-Pritchard and others who have done ethnographic work among the Nuer. She shows how the cattle that Evans-Pritchard recognized as essential to Nuer understandings remain important

but have had to be reconceptualized in new ways to meet changing circumstances; for instance, the Nuer now distinguish between the cattle of money and the cattle of marriage.

In many ways, Evans-Pritchard's classic account of the Nuer presented them as a timeless, static entity, and many other classic ethnographies adapted a similarly static approach or perspective. Ethnographies like Hutchinson's have illuminated the fact that cultural and social phenomena are constantly subject to change. *Cultures and societies are dynamic*. With increasing recognition of these dynamic qualities, ethnographies have to attempt to engage and reflect the fundamental realities of change and variation within cultures and societies. Recognition of the dynamic processes being studied has entailed rethinking ethnography as a research strategy and a style of presentation. (In his 1920 essay on the "The Methods of Ethnology," Franz Boas clearly made the case for human societies' dynamism and the need to study history and change. Thus, recognition of this fact arose early in the history of anthropology and ethnography, but it did not become central to general practice until later.)

Ethnographers now have to think about how to recognize and analyze change. In many cases, change itself becomes the research subject. With the central importance of change has come an increasing awareness of the role of history. Many recent ethnographies incorporate considerable historical components, and many ethnographers work regularly with both historical documents and oral histories as part of their research designs.

Ethnographers have also changed their styles of writing and presentation to reflect these shifts in awareness. Most ethnographers today avoid presenting timeless accounts by including historical sections or chapters and using verb tenses to show what has happened recently, what happened in the past, and what happens continuously, as well as pursuing explicit consideration of both long-term and short-term changes. These shifts in the field of ethnography have positioned it as a research strategy that provides important insight through historical comparison and through close firsthand examination of change in action.

Despite these changes and these challenges, many of the early ideas about ethnography have proved to be enduring. Ethnographers still tend to commit to conducting research over rather lengthy periods of time; they still tend to pay close attention to language and its methodological importance; and they still tend to be interested in studying the wide range of cultural and social features of human life and interaction. Ethnography is particularly well suited for researching the connections and interactions between different elements of society and culture (for instance, between economics and religion or politics and gender). In many ways, this ability to uncover and analyze these connections and interactions can be seen in the all-encompassing early ethnographies, but contemporary ethnography now begins from a foundation that recognizes and foregrounds dynamic processes, variation and variability, and the need to consider the different perspectives and biases that may influence the research. As a result, many researchers today utilize ethnography as a primary research strategy to address a wide range of questions.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS FIRSTHAND RESEARCH

From the beginning, starting with the work of Malinowski and others, ethnography has involved a commitment to "**being there**" to conduct research. (The general concept of being there is so pervasive in ethnography that at least two recent books on the subject have used the phrase as a title: Bradburd's *Being There: The Necessity of Fieldwork*, 1998, and Watson's *Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology*, 1999. See Sluka and Robben 2007 for a discussion of this concept as well.) By moving to their field sites to conduct their fieldwork, ethnographers signaled the importance of their direct connection with the research site and the research subjects. Following Malinowski's lead, these early ethnographers typically went to live in the field for a year or longer, and much of their research data came directly from experiences living in the community under study. Ethnographies are full of accounts of daily life in different communities, as well as stories of ethnographers' experiences of integration into these communities that are often quite humorous.

The underlying assumption in ethnography's commitment to being there is an assumption that certain types of information are only obtainable through firsthand research. A researcher can obtain a great deal of information about a particular place or group of people without engaging in ethnography. For instance, a survey instrument can provide information about demographics, economic activities, political opinions, and many other things. In order to yield useful data, a survey has to be well designed and administered appropriately, but it can often be carried out rather quickly and in some instances can even be conducted at a distance using telephones, mail, or the Internet.

Other disciplines that study human beings, especially psychology, occasionally use detached observation as a research technique. In this approach, the researcher is usually removed or detached (the stereotypical example is observation through glass or a video lens). Often the intent is to make sure that the researcher does not influence the situation and variables under study. Projects like these allow researchers to discover how people respond to certain stimuli, how they make decisions and solve problems, and how they interact in certain circumstances. In controlled experimental situations, the data produced can be very powerful in terms of revealing key variables and parameters for human behavior.

Ethnography, on the other hand, seeks to discover and record different types of information that are not readily obtainable through relatively detached approaches like surveys and observations. In many cases, surveys ask questions and use categories that originate in the surveyors' own cultural understandings or assumptions. Ethnography allows the researcher to discover and analyze the categories and questions that are most relevant for the people being studied and participating in the research. One of the strengths of ethnography as a research strategy is its ability to illuminate locally relevant understandings and ways of operating. In many ethnographies, these local modes of thought and behavior are the primary focus.

Ethnography also allows the researcher to observe and to *experience* events, behaviors, interactions, and conversations that are the manifestations of society and

culture in action. The controlled environments of laboratory experiments are absent; ethnography is about the messiness of human lives. This means the ethnographer has to cede a lot of control over the research situation, but it also means ethnography offers the opportunity to study real-life human behavior and to gain a unique understanding of the context and thought that informs such behavior. Ethnography allows the researcher to examine how people's actions compare to what they say about their actions in ideal situations and their thoughts or opinions on particular topics. In many cases, actions and behaviors in particular situations differ significantly from those observed or predicted by other research strategies. In situations like this, important research questions emerge as researchers try to account for apparent discrepancies. In some cases, this involves turning attention to variables or questions that did not seem relevant initially.

In the course of doing this sort of engaged, firsthand research, the ethnographer becomes a participant-observer. The term *participant-observer* emphasizes the different position and role of the ethnographer in comparison to researchers employing more detached research strategies. Detailed consideration of participant-observation as a research method appears in Chapter Six; here it is important to note that this is a distinct approach to research on the part of the ethnographer. It moves beyond observing from afar or behind the glass and moves the researcher directly into the research context as a participant. Ethnography is able to provide insight into a number of different things precisely because of this unique position. It is a powerful research strategy, but this unique approach also carries with it particular issues and questions.

The ethnographer's position in the research venue raises vexing questions about objectivity—both whether it is achievable and whether it should be the goal of ethnography; **replicability**—whether another researcher can duplicate an ethnographer's research; and **ethics**—questions about the influence the ethnographer has on the people and events being studied. All these questions are important topics for consideration both in designing and conducting the research plan. Ethnographers can and do take different stances on these topics. In this text, the goal is to provide warnings about potential problems and concerns that can and should be avoided. The goal is also to allow you to explore the questions that arise and to implement strategies that make the most sense for you and your research goals. These questions and concerns do not imply that ethnography is fundamentally flawed. Its engaged nature means that it is both very powerful and potentially treacherous.

ETHNOGRAPHER AS RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Because of the ethnographer's unique position as participant-observer, the ethnographer becomes the primary **research instrument** through which information is collected and recorded. Whereas researchers in other disciplines use instruments like micrometers, pipettes, and mass spectrometers to collect data for their research, you make yourself the research instrument. The ethnographer's five senses become the

Ethnographic Field Sites or "The Field"

The original practice of traveling to remote sites to conduct ethnographic research has given way to a much more varied collection of **field sites**, which can range from the local neighborhood or school to the corporate board-room to a small village in the rainforest to cyberspace. All these locations are legitimate sites of research that offer exciting opportunities and unique chal-lenges. In ethnographic circles, it became commonplace to talk about "the field" as a place that existed separate from the researcher's personal home or academic circles. That idea has been rightfully criticized in terms of its ten-dency to distance and exoticize the objects of study in relationship to research-ers and centers of knowledge. This critique has also raised questions about whether people perceive and act differently in "the field" compared to other human environments that they inhabit. Finally, it has raised questions about the whole idea of traveling or moving into the field and assumptions about the researcher's role as an outsider; more recently there have been a number of important calls for "insider ethnography," with the ethnographer studying a cultural or social unit of which he is already a part.

Talking about "the field" in ethnography is no longer as easy to do as it once was. In a way, the field is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This text refers to *field sites* as locations for doing research but avoids referring to the field as a monolithic place of research. You should evaluate carefully your relationship to the field site(s) in which you choose to conduct research. Why are you choosing a particular field site for research? Does it have a particular significance for you? Are you an outsider who needs to establish rapport and acquire basic local knowledge? Are you an insider who needs to investigate and question things that you have learned to take for granted? What other issues of perspective and bias might influence your ability to do research in a particular field site? Asking yourself these types of questions will help you build awareness of the field site and your relationship to it as a researcher. Reflecting critically on these ideas will help you avoid making assumptions about field sites that might hamper or limit your ability to conduct effective research.

principal avenue for collection information. For example, the ethnographer might col-lect information by observing behavior, listening to conversations or interviews, touching textiles and other forms of material culture, tasting local cuisines, and paying close attention to the smells that accompany the primary activities in a given space. You need to record what you perceive and note as relevant. Therefore, you have a lot

of responsibility for evaluating and recording information. In many cases, the ethnographer cannot determine which pieces of information will be most valuable until well after they have been recorded.

In much the same way that other research instruments must be calibrated to ensure their accuracy, the ethnographer has to be trained to collect appropriate and relevant data. Subsequent chapters will provide more detailed guidance on particular ethnographic techniques and the art of ethnographic note taking. The ethnographer should always strive to collect as much detailed information as possible while keeping in mind the specific research topic or question. Notes should be extensive and descriptive. In the course of their training, ethnographers have to learn to pay close attention and to notice details. The power of concentration required often means that ethnography can be draining physically, mentally, and emotionally. Like other instruments, sometimes you need time to download information and recharge your batteries, so to speak. These practical concerns are an important consideration when designing a research plan. Doing research is important, but so are the recording, collection, and analysis of information from these research experiences.

The ethnographer's role as research instrument again raises questions of objectivity, **replicability**, and **validity** in the language of scientific research. The information that ethnographers seek and collect is often very personal and occasionally idiosyncratic, but there are ways to counterbalance those types of information with other techniques and to draw on both the power of personal experiences that constitute participation and the more objective forms of data that might be collected through observation. One way to address some of these questions is by comparing results with those of others working on similar projects. Some ethnographers choose to work in teams so that they can pool and compare results from different researchers in similar contexts. Other researchers try to present the raw ethnographic data that they have collected for others to study and analyze. This approach attempts to make the researcher as transparent a research instrument as possible. Still, some ethnographers are more comfortable talking about the "information" they collect and analyze, as opposed to suggesting they are relying on the sort of objective "data" that might be gained through different research methods. In this text, the words *data* and *information* are mostly used interchangeably, but the reader should keep in mind that a researcher's goals or assumptions are often embedded in the words she uses to talk about her research.

COLLABORATION AS RESEARCH MODEL: ETHNOGRAPHER AS STUDENT

In order to be an effective researcher, you have to place yourself in a position to learn from others. The goal of ethnography is to gain insight into cultural and social behavior as well as the cultural understandings and underlying thought processes that produce behavior. A well-trained ethnographer will be prepared to collect different types of information with different techniques. Some of these techniques, like mapping, may

depend less on significant input from informants, but all ethnography ultimately depends crucially on the cooperation and input of others.

The people being studied by the ethnographer possess the knowledge and information that the ethnographer seeks to acquire and to record. Therefore, while you may have significant resources and occupy a position of relative social power or privilege in many cases, in the end you must place yourself in a dependent position in the course of research. In a very real way, the ethnographer is a student, and the informants are the teachers (see Spradley and McCurdy 2008). There are situations when you may become teacher or instructor, but you should be prepared to embrace the position of student. This is often a difficult stance for well-educated researchers to adopt, but it helps to highlight the value of the knowledge and information that others possess and that you are attempting to access.

The **ethnographer's role as student** is most obvious in situations when you enter your field site as an outsider without knowledge of the local language and local customs. In cases like these, ethnographers often commit serious faux pas and have to learn from their mistakes. However, even insiders or ethnographers with a strong understanding of language and custom should still seek to learn as students. Placing yourself in this position will allow you to confront your own assumptions by listening to and learning from the experts—your informants. One of the most powerful lessons of ethnography is that the researcher can learn from anyone; research design then often becomes a plan for learning from the appropriate representatives and experts. Who these people are will depend on what you are studying and what you aim to learn.

For a long time, ethnographers have tended to use the term **informant** to refer to the people they learn from and study. The use of this term is important because it distinguishes the research relationship in ethnography from the relationships that accompany other research strategies. The relationship between ethnographer and informant is typically different from that between experimenter and subject or surveyor and respondent. Compared to the terms *subjects* and *respondents*, the term *informants* implies that these individuals play a more active role in guiding and shaping the research process as teachers. The relationship is often much more personal and typically endures for longer periods of time than these other research relationships. Again, much of the power in ethnography as a research strategy originates in this unique research relationship.

Nevertheless, the term *informant* raises concern for a number of ethnographers. Critique of the term has been part of the development of contemporary ethnography mentioned earlier. Critics have pointed out that the word *informant* carries connotations that make it very similar to the idea of an informer who aids the government or the police. These similarities are troubling both in what they suggest about how research might be used against informants or other members of their communities and in the implication that these individuals are being used by representatives of structures of power as a means to an end that may not be in their best interests. In some instances

ethnography has been used by governments and others in positions of power to aid in subjecting people (the informants) to their authority and rule and to exploitation. Such outcomes should not be the goal of ethnography. Because you are dependent on others to learn and carry out research, you have a responsibility to uphold your end of the bargain. This ethical responsibility includes demonstrating respect, offering protections, and providing assistance when appropriate.

To demonstrate this different spirit of responsibility, some ethnographers choose not to use the term *informant*. In some cases, they talk about the people with whom they live and work as *interlocutors*. In other cases, they refer to these individuals as *associates, assistants*, or *coresearchers*. There has also been a move increasingly to publish with these individuals as coauthors to reflect their important role in the whole ethnographic project and the fact that much of the knowledge comes from them. This text will use the term *informants* for the sake of clarity, but it is essential to keep in mind the need for a responsible research relationship that is ethical and respectful of the shared human condition. Throughout the rest of the text, you will find consideration of ethical issues and concerns. Proper attention to these points is absolutely essential in the research process.

Whatever terminology a person chooses to adopt, the larger point concerns the unique research relationships that ethnographers develop as a matter of course. Given the need to learn from others and the accompanying dependence on others, the research process is most effectively understood and conceptualized as a collaborative endeavor. You are ultimately responsible for the research—its design, how it is conducted, and its results—but you must give appropriate respect and credit to the other participants who make the research possible. As a human being studying other human beings, you always have to negotiate and collaborate throughout the research process.

SUMMARY

The early history of ethnography as a research strategy frequently included assumptions that the ethnographer traveled long distances to study isolated groups with relatively static cultures. However, recent critiques and developments have shown that ethnography can be a viable research strategy in a wider set of circumstances, even very close to home, and that the cultures and societies that are the subject of ethnographic study are complex, variable, and contested. In order to study these complex phenomena, you will engage in firsthand research employing yourself as the primary research instrument. Your direct experiences become the lens through which ethnographic data or information is collected, but you are always dependent on your informants to guide you through the research process, and envisioning your work with your informants as collaborative partners will help ensure that your research is productive and ethical.

KEY TERMS

Ethnography	Participant-observer
Research strategy	Objectivity
Observer	Perspective
Research subjects	Bias
Informants	"Being there"
Methods	Replicability
Techniques	Ethics
Gaining access	Field sites
Building rapport	Research instrument
Household surveys	Replicability
Mapping	Validity
Kinship charts	Ethnographer's role as student
Insider's perspective	Informant

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the most important features of "classic" ethnography? What are the lasting influences of early ethnographic work? In what ways was early ethnographic work problematic or flawed?

2. How have ethnographic research and ethnographic writing changed in contemporary work?

3. What does Katherine Frank's ethnographic work represent about the nature of ethnographic research and the way ethnography has evolved over time?

4. What sets ethnography apart from other research strategies in the social sciences? Does this particular approach to research imply specific ethical or practical challenges for the researcher?

5. How does the ethnographer function as research instrument? Should all ethnographers be the same type of research instruments?

6. What is the ideal relationship between ethnographer and informant? What steps should the ethnographer take in order to create or foster such a relationship?

7. Choose an ethnography with which you are familiar. Where does it fall in terms of the categories of classic and contemporary? How did the ethnographer conduct his research in this case? What are the most positive elements of the research and the ethnographic presentation? Are there any problems or potential problems? What sort of relationship does the ethnographer have with his informants?