Box 17.1 A definition of ethnography

'[Ethnography is] a particular method or set of methods which in its most characteristic form ... involves the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of research.' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 1)

The definition in Box 17.1 describes the essence of ethnography, showing it to be based in what is known as **participant observation.** This makes the researcher, as participant observer, the primary research instrument. Ethnography, then, contrasts with 'scientific' methods of social science research which, based upon a universalistic model of science, emphasize its neutrality and objectivity, attempting to generate data untouched by human hands. Ethnography belongs to the theoretical tradition which argues that the facts of society and culture belong to a different order from those of nature (see Chapters 2 and 4).

Theoretical foundations

Anthropologists developed ethnography to become their primary and almost exclusive method. Faced with non-Western societies that largely possessed an oral culture, anthropologists were encouraged by a perception of their diversity to take an attitude of **cultural relativism,** whereby the values and institutions of any given society were seen to have an internal logic of their own. Any attempt to judge other societies as inferior or superior, in this view, is condemned as **ethnocentric.** Eventually this attitude was to lead to the view, amongst some, that rationality itself was simply a value position promoted by Western societies. Anthropologists took the view that society and culture could only be studied from inside by the immersion of the researcher in the society under study.

Later, sociologists pursuing *action theory* and *symbolic interactionism* came to use the method, as you saw in Chapter 4. It is, however, in *phenomenology* that we can see the most evocative conception of the ethnographer's role. Phenomenology, as was explained in Chapter 4, focuses on the inter-subjective constitution of the social world and everyday social life. Schutz (1964), in a seminal essay on *The Stranger*, shows how a social group has its own cultural pattern of life – folkways, mores, laws, habits, customs, etiquette, fashions and so on – that, as far as its members are concerned, are taken for granted, are habitual and almost automatic (see Box 17.2).

Schutz's stranger provides a model for the ethnographer using participant observation. The ethnographer tries to treat the familiar world of 'members' as **anthropologically strange,** to expose its social and cultural construction. This is particularly demanding when a researcher is studying a group with which he or she is familiar, but represents an ideal attitude of mind for the researcher to pursue nevertheless.

Box 17.2 Members and strangers

Members living inside the culture of their group treat it as simply how the world *is* and do not reflect upon the presuppositions on which it is based or the knowledge which it entails. But the *stranger* entering such a group does not have this insider's sense of the world, and instead finds it strange, incoherent, problematic and questionable. Yet the stranger can become a member of the group through *participation,* becoming transformed into an insider, inhabiting it in the same taken-for-granted way as existing members. At the same time, being a stranger creates an attitude of objectivity because the stranger must carefully examine what seems self-explanatory to the members of the group. The stranger knows that other ways of life are possible.

(*Source*: summary of Schutz, 1964)

Constructionism is the view that society is to be seen as socially constructed on the basis of how its members make sense of it and not as an object-like reality (see also Chapter 4). It is latent in *symbolic interactionism* but more apparent in *phenomenology*. It has now become the primary theoretical foundation of contemporary ethnography. Indeed, one can see *ethnomethodology* as forming a part of this constructionist approach. Ethnomethodologists, though, are less interested in how people *see* things than more conventional ethnographers, and are more interested in how people *do* things, particularly in their uses of language. Chapter 28 shows how the method of *conversation analysis* has arisen from these concerns. Although such approaches share a view that the subject matter of social and cultural research is different from that of the natural sciences, they are nevertheless characteristically committed to a *realist* and scientific view of the world.

However, an altogether different version of ethnography has also emerged out of constructionism which urges a radical break with all ideas of objective scientific inquiry. This position involves not simply seeing ethnography as a revelation of social construction but seeing ethnographic research as *itself* participating in the construction of the social world. Bauman (1987) has summarized this by distinguishing a traditional form of social research which is legislative, in that the ethnographer rules some accounts of the world true and others false, and a newer form that is more genuinely interpretive. This view involves seeing social research as one possible interpretation amongst many (see also Chapter 7 for a discussion of this distinction). The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has played an important part in forming this different sense of ethnography. Geertz argues that:

> man [*sic*] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun and I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical. (1973: 5)

This leads Geertz to the view that the task of ethnography is to produce its own distinctive form of knowledge, which he calls **thick description.** Although the ethnographer continues to use the same techniques of data collection as conventional ethnographers, the focus of analysis turns much more to seeing culture as a system of *signs*. Here, the ethnographer comes close to doing a *semiotic* analysis (see Chapter 20). The easiest way to understand this is to imagine the ethnographer as being like a literary critic attempting to understand the organization, construction and meaning of a literary text. The ethnographer then finds a whole web of cultural structures, knowledge and meanings which are knotted and superimposed on to one another and which constitute a densely layered **cultural script.**

Famously, Geertz analyses the many layers of meaning involved in Balinese cockfights in a demonstration of this approach. He sees the event of a cockfight as an example of a cultural script being written, or enacted. Through an intensive and dense description of a cockfight, Geertz makes broader cultural interpretations and generalizations. Yet Geertz understands his own analysis of the various meanings of the event as a reflexive interpretation of it, rather than an objective description. This, of course, raises the issue of *validity.* If ethnographers are simply in the business of introducing new texts into a society and culture that is little more than an interplay of 'texts', we must give up any notions of science or truthfulness. As was shown in Chapter 4, this is Foucault's position, suggesting that the 'human sciences' are 'regimes of truth'.

There have been some very interesting deconstructions of ethnographic writing (reviewed in detail in Chapter 29). These emphasize that ethnographers are story-tellers and, like all such, create narratives of tragedy, irony and humour which make their writing a literary activity. They use the same fundamental resources of literature and the same sorts of recipes and material in conveying arguments and persuading readers that their accounts are plausible reconstructions of social actors and social scenes.

But it seems wrong for social researchers wholly to accept this postmodern discourse, to abandon all forms of realism as the basis for doing ethnography, and to accept that all is textuality and construction. It could be argued that this takes *reflexivity* too far and shuns the empirical too much. The rhetorical strategies of ethnographic writing should be acknowledged, but this cannot be the end of the story. The social and cultural world must be the ground and reference for ethnographic writing, and reflexive ethnography should involve a keen awareness of the interpenetration of reality and representation.

Doing ethnography

Quantitative research committed to a *positivist* vision of the unity of science (the philosophical term for this is **naturalism** – see Chapter 2) attempts to establish correlations between objectively defined variables as a basis for explanation. This proceeds through a research design that is organized as a logically sequential and separate series of stages, beginning from theory and going through hypothesis generation and data gathering to hypothesis testing. Frequently, one-off interviews or questionnaires are used. Ethnography departs from this. First, ethnographers study people in their natural settings (also said to be **'naturalistic'**, somewhat confusingly), seeking to document that world in terms of the meanings and behaviour of the people in it. It places in doubt the variables that quantitative research analyses, examining instead their sociocultural construction. Secondly, it does not follow the sequence of deductive theory testing because it is in the process of research itself that research problems come to be formulated and studied. Often these prove to be different from the problems that the ethnographer had initially intended to study. Theory is often *generated* rather than solely tested. Indeed the 'discovery of grounded theory' during fieldwork has been the subject of much debate in the literature on ethnography (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and is discussed in Chapter 18.

Ethnography is distinctive in three ways.

- First, as stated above, there are *no distinct stages* of theorizing, hypothesis construction, data gathering and hypothesis testing. Instead the research process is one of a constant interaction between problem formulation, data collection and data analysis. The analysis of data feeds into research design; data collection and theory come to be developed out of data analysis and all subsequent data collection is guided strategically by the emergent theory.
- Secondly, ethnography brings a *variety of techniques* of inquiry into play involving attempts to observe things that happen, listen to what people say and question people in the setting under investigation. So it involves, as McCall and Simmons put it:

> genuinely social interaction in the field with the subject of study … direct observation of relevant events, some formal and a great deal of informal interviewing, some counting, [the] collection of documents and artifacts, and open-endedness in the directions the study takes. (1969: 1)

- Thirdly, *the observer is the primary research instrument*, accessing the field, establishing field relations, conducting and structuring observation and interviews, writing field notes, using audio and visual recordings, reading documents, recording and transcribing and finally writing up the research.

So ethnography has a large constructional and reflexive character. It is essentially the observer who stands at the heart of ethnography and of its open-ended nature.

The observer position

Observation, inquiry and data collection depend upon the observer gaining access to the appropriate field and establishing good working relations with the people in it. They need to be relationships that are able to generate the data the research requires. The identity that the observer assumes determines the success of this.

A first issue is whether to take an **overt** or **covert** role in the setting. This, in turn, very much depends on the situation and on the **gatekeepers** who control access to it. Gatekeepers are the sponsors, officials and significant others who have the power to grant or block access to and within a setting. Sometimes, the ethnographer is faced with situations in which relevant gatekeepers are unlikely to permit access, so that covert or secret research is the only way of studying them. This has been done, for example, in studies of the police (Holdaway, 1982), religious sects (Shaffir, 1985), organized crime (Chambliss, 1975) and right-wing political movements (Fielding, 1981). Here, the observer seeks to present himself or herself as an ordinary, legitimate member of the group. This may solve the problem of access and observation as long as the covert role can be maintained, but successful maintenance produces major problems of an ethical and practical kind and a massive problem if the cover is 'blown'. Normally, then, totally covert research is rare in ethnography. More commonly the researcher lets some people know about the research and keeps others in the dark or only partially informed about the purposes of the research. Some ethnographers argue on ethical grounds that the researcher should always adopt a completely overt role in which the purposes of the research and its procedures are explained to the subjects under study. But Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue that, whereas deception should be avoided if possible, telling the whole truth about research may not be wise or feasible. Since research problems will change over the course of fieldwork, what the researcher can say about aims is often little more than speculation. Additionally, to produce too much information ahead of time may influence the behaviour of the people under study in such a way as to invalidate the findings.

Generally, then, a series of potential observer roles are open to the ethnographer. Junker (1960) identifies four.

First, there is the *complete participant*. This entails complete covert research. Although it seems to carry the attraction of generating a complete knowledge of the situation, apart from the problems outlined above it produces others too. It can place a severe restriction on the character of the data collected because the observer, as a completely participating member of it, becomes hedged in by the expectations of the role he or she has adopted. So many lines of inquiry will be missed and optimal conditions for data collection may not be available. Finally, it carries the risk of 'going native', where the observer abandons the position of analyst for identification with the people under study.

Secondly, Junker describes the role of the *complete observer*. Here the researcher simply observes people in ways that avoid social interaction with the observed, as Corsaro (1981) did in a study of nursery school children in the classroom which involved observing them through a one-way mirror. This reduces the possibilities of people reacting to being observed (known as **reactivity**) or of 'going native', but introduces the potential problem of *ethnocentrism* instead, in which the observer, by not interacting with the people under study, cannot get at their meanings and so imposes an alien framework of understanding on the situation. Moreover it places severe limits on what can be observed, although it can be a valuable supplement to other forms of ethnographic research.

The third role is that of the *participant as observer*. Here, the observer and the people being studied are aware that theirs is a field relationship, which minimizes the problems of pretence. It

Box 17.3 Four roles in participant observation

1 Complete participant
2 Complete observer
3 Participant as observer
4 Observer as participant

(*Source*: Junker, 1960)

involves an emphasis on participation and social interaction over observing in order to produce a relationship of rapport and trust. The problem is that it carries the danger of reactivity and of going native through identification with the subjects of study, unless the intimacy created in social interaction is restrained by attempts to maintain the role of the stranger on the part of the observer.

The fourth role is that of the *observer as participant.* Here the balance is in favour of observation over participation. This prevents the researcher from going native but restricts understanding because limited participation in social activities heightens the possibilities of superficiality, so that important lines of inquiry may be missed or not pursued, things go unobserved and the activities of participants are not properly understood. Typically most overt ethnography takes up a position somewhere between the third and fourth roles. Overt observer roles can never be entirely fixed and can and do change (the opposite is true if research is covert). Indeed, changes in the observer's role in the field over the course of fieldwork may be vital in producing new information, generating new data and creating new and fruitful problems and lines of inquiry that extend the scope of the research. In the end, however, the best observational position for the ethnographer is that of the *marginal native,* which will be described later in the chapter.

Beginning an ethnographic study

Although ethnography does not work with a logically sequential research design that compartmentalizes it into distinct stages it does have phases and activities that give it a **funnel structure** in which the research is progressively focused over its course. At the start of this funnel the researcher will be involved in formulating ideas about the sort of problem to be investigated. In ethnography, however, what the researcher initially sets out to investigate may change over the course of fieldwork, as problems are transformed or emerge in the field. The process of observation itself establishes problems and the possibilities of inquiry into them. Yet all ethnography begins with some problem or set of issues, which some call **foreshadowed problems,** that are not specifically formulated hypotheses and which can have many sources. As is shown in Chapter 11, the requirement to write a research proposal may be the opportunity to lay out the nature of such foreshadowed problems. At the same time it is important not to let such an exercise close down avenues of inquiry that deviate from the proposal. One of the strengths of ethnography is its open-ended nature.

To begin with, the ethnographer needs to consult relevant *secondary sources* on the problems and issues under consideration, which can range from allied research monographs and articles through to other sources like journalistic material, autobiographies and diaries and even novels (see Chapter 12). But the focusing of research problems cannot really be started until initial data have been collected. As Geer says, one begins with early working hypotheses but ultimately goes on to generate 'hypotheses … based on an accumulation of data … [that] … undergo a prolonged period of testing and retesting... over the period of [research]. There is no finality to them. They must be refined, expanded and developed' (1964: 152). Even at the early stage theory enters into the selection of research problems, as was shown in Chapter 5. Moreover, the initial consideration of foreshadowed problems has to begin a process that moves between the immediate empirical situation and an analytical framework.

However, the research problem is very much shaped by the nature of the setting chosen for study. Choice of setting may have arisen on an opportunistic basis. For example, a natural disaster may have occurred, or the researcher may come across the reconstruction of an organization, or the replanning of a city, or may find an entry opened through personal contacts. In choosing a setting the researcher may then need to 'case' it, with a view to assessing its suitability and feasibility for research purposes. This will involve assessing the possibilities for access to it, collecting preliminary data on it, interviewing relevant participants and finding potential gatekeepers. Finally, the practical issues of the time and money needed to do research will need to be considered.

It is important that the setting is a *naturally occurring* one, although it need not be geographically self-contained. It can be one that is constituted and maintained by cultural definitions and social strategies that establish it as a 'community'. For example, a study of green political movements would be like this. It may be necessary to go outside the setting to understand the significance of things that go on within it.

If the setting is a single case, this can pose problems of representativeness and therefore of the *external validity* of the study (see Chapter 7). This, though, can be circumvented by selecting on the basis of intrinsic interest and theoretical usefulness. Sampling *within* settings also occurs so it is important to make decisions about what to observe and when, whom to talk to, and what to record and how. Here three dimensions of sampling are relevant:

1. *Time:* attitudes and activities may vary over time so a study may have to represent this.
2. *People:* people vary so a range of types should be investigated.
3. *Context:* people do different things in different contexts so a variety of these will have to be studied. Such **contextual sensitivity** is vital to ethnographic study.

Access

Initial access to the field is essential but is also an issue to be resolved throughout the whole of the data collecting process. There are numerous aspects to the problem. At a first level, gaining access to a situation is an entirely practical matter which entails using the ordinary interpersonal resources, skills and strategies that all of us develop in dealing with the conduct of everyday life. But access is also a theoretical matter in ethnography because, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue, the discovery of obstacles to access can help one to understand the social organization of a setting, showing, for example, how people respond to strangers.

'Public' settings (for example, the street, a beach), although seeming to offer no difficulties of access, are, in fact, difficult for research. This is because deliberate and protracted observation can place the observer in a potentially deviant position, perhaps appearing as someone loitering with the intent to commit a crime. More typically, access to 'private' settings is governed by gatekeepers who are not always easy to identify, though common sense and social knowledge can provide the vehicles for doing so. In formal organizations the gatekeepers will be key personnel in the organization, but in other settings the gatekeepers may be different. Whyte's (1943) classic study of slum ghetto life and its gang structure depended on his finding and being befriended by 'Doc', a leading gang leader, who provided the **sponsorship** through which the ghetto was studied. But whoever the gatekeepers are, they will be concerned with the picture of their community, subculture, group or organization and may want it and themselves painted in a favourable light. This, in turn, means they are likely to keep sensitive things hidden. They may also prevent the study of mundane matters because they take them for granted and see them as uninteresting.

Access affects the accuracy of ethnographic study because it determines how and where fieldwork can be organized. Relations with gatekeepers can either be facilitative, because friendly and cooperative, or the reverse and so obstructive. But even facilitative relations with gatekeepers will structure the research since the observer is likely to get directed to the gatekeeper's existing networks of friendship, enmity and territory. It may not be possible for the observer to become independent of the sponsor so the observer can be caught in a variety of webs of client–patron relationships in which all kinds of unsuspected influences operate. The observer must find a way of using this to get relevant information. For example, Hansen's (1977) study of a Catalonian village in Spain became possible only when he accepted aristocratic sponsorship and worked with the aristocrat–peasant hierarchy since the assumptions and interactions of village life were based on this.

Gatekeepers will have expectations about the ethnographer's identity and intentions, as will other people in the field. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue that it is particularly important as to whether the host community sees the researcher as an expert (and thus a person to be welcomed because he or she is helping to sort things out) or a critic and very unwelcome. On the other hand, if the researcher is defined as an expert this may conflict with the cultivated naivety involved in being a stranger. Moreover, even with a friendly gatekeeper, the researcher will be faced with the fact that not everything is equally available to observation. People will not or cannot divulge everything, or may even be unwilling to talk at all. So access to data is a recurrent problem that only subtle negotiations with gatekeepers and careful manoeuvring of the researcher into a position to get data can resolve. This requires patience and diplomacy.

Internet ethnographies pose unusual access issues to consider, which centre not so much on the difficulties of gaining access, but on the consequences of access that, initially at least, seems almost too easy. Christine Hine explains the thinking behind this in Box 17.4. Chapter 21 explores these issues in more detail.

Field relations and observation

Essentially ethnography entails a learning role in which the observer is attempting to understand a world by encountering it first-hand. Once access to a setting has been achieved, the success of observational work depends on the quality of the relations with the people under study.

First the researcher needs to consider the initial responses of people in the field and how to gain their trust. People will inevitably try to place the researcher within their own experience because they need to know how to deal with him or her. If they know nothing about research, they are likely to be suspicious and wonder if the researcher is acting as some kind of agent or spy for an outside body. For example, Kaplan (1991) reports that the New England fishermen she studied thought she was a government inspector at first. On the other hand, if people are familiar with research and so view the researcher in a favourable light, there may be a mismatch between their expectations of what a researcher should do and the eventual research product. This can lead to a challenge to the legitimacy of the research and the credentials of the researchers. For example, Keddie (1971), although originally welcomed by teachers to do research within classrooms, was denounced later by them when her findings conflicted with their claims not to have streamed pupils in their mixed-ability curriculum. In the face of this the researcher needs to create a professional front.

But this raises a second issue in field relations, concerning **impression management** by the researcher. What is needed is a impression that facilitates observation and avoids producing obstacles. This, in turn, will require dress that is familiar to the people in the setting and the cultivation of demeanour, speech and habits that fit. The researcher must be able to create different self-presentations for different settings. Above all, the researcher must establish a large degree of ordinary sociability and normal social intercourse. Without this, pumping people for information can become threatening. Most anthropological field studies show that the researcher must meet local customs and decorum before research can be done at all. Yet the researcher must prevent sociability, rapport and trust from deteriorating into exploitation or 'going native'. This means some degree of frankness and self-disclosure on the part of the researcher is needed. This is not easy. The researcher will have to suppress some things as he or she will have to interact with people whose views he or she disagrees with but cannot challenge. Rapport, then, is a delicate matter to be decided by progressive initiation into the field.

Box 17.4 Access in virtual ethnographies

'What makes using the Internet a sensible thing to do?... answers to this question can fruitfully draw on a reflexive perspective on the experiences of the ethnographer both on-line and off-line ... Recently, the Internet explosion has provided an apparently natural "field" for ethnographers. ... The accessibility of the Internet attracts ethnographers to a field site which lives on the desk top, and a community which can apparently be joined without complex rituals and access negotiations. This very accessibility, however, tends to focus attention on the on-line community, to the exclusion of links with off-line lives, identities and activities. It also tends to leave unquestioned the status of the Internet as a communication medium and as a technology.' (Hine, 1998)

Box 17.5 Issues in conducting relations in the field

- Gaining trust and managing initial responses
- Impression management
- Awareness of the consequences of non-negotiable characteristics
- Dealing with marginality
- Deciding when to leave

Thirdly, the researcher will not be able to negotiate all aspects of his or her personal front and these non-negotiable characteristics of identity will have to be monitored for their effects on the research. Such characteristics are largely the *ascribed* ones of gender, age, ethnicity and race which tend to be institutionalized in society in terms of style and expected forms of social interaction. In the early stages of research, the researcher will simply be like any other stranger in the setting who watches and asks questions to make sense of it. But gradually the researcher will establish a version of himself of herself as a naive participant. In doing this, he or she must retain a self-conscious position in which incompetence is progressively substituted by an awareness of what has been learned, how it has been learned and the social transactions that inform the production of knowledge. Complete participation in the situation is impossible; such immersion would risk going native, and so a degree of **marginality** in the situation is needed to do research. Marginality is a poise between a strangeness that avoids over-rapport and a familiarity that grasps the perspectives of people in the situation. Thus the researcher can be understood to be a *marginal native*. This position creates considerable strain on the researcher as it engenders insecurity, produced by living in two worlds simultaneously, that of participation and that of research. The researcher will be physically and emotionally affected by this.

Finally, the researcher has to take a decision as to when to leave the field. This can be decided on the basis of the necessary data having been collected. Glaser and Strauss (1967) offer the concept of **theoretical saturation** to indicate the state of affairs that suggests that it is time to leave the field (see also Chapter 18). As a part of their scheme for generating theory they say that saturation occurs when no new ideas are generated by empirical inquiry, after the researcher has made strenuous efforts to find instances in the field which might contradict, or help develop further, the emergent theory. Leaving the field will have to be negotiated, as it entails closing relations with participants that may have been firmly established and which they may not wish to relinquish.

Interviewing

Interviewing has a particular character in ethnography. Some ethnographers, following the dictates of *naturalism*, argue that people's accounts should always be unsolicited, so as to avoid the *reactivity* of formal interviews. But interviewing may be the only way of collecting certain data, in which case the researcher needs to decide whom to interview. People in the field may select themselves and others as interviewees because the researcher has used them to update himself or herself on events. Or again gatekeepers may try to select interviewees, either in good faith or to manipulate the research. The researcher may have to accept both because access to data is not available otherwise. The researcher may consider that conventional notions of representativeness should dictate the selection of interviewees. Alternatively, informants may be selected on the basis of their particular value to the investigation: people who are outsiders, naturally reflective, or who have strong motives to reveal inside stories for a variety of personal reasons. Another principle may be that based on *theoretical sampling* (see Chapter 18): the selection of informants whose information is more likely to develop and test emerging analytical ideas.

Largely speaking, *depth interviews* are done (Chapter 14), requiring active listening on the part of the researcher to understand what is being said and to assess its relation to the research. The ethnographic analysis of interviews should focus on the context in which the interview occurred. All of the considerations about the analytic status of interview data raised in Chapter 14 apply.

Documents

Most settings in contemporary society are literate and much of everyday life in them is organized around the production and use of documents. These are a valuable resource for ethnographic study. Official statistics, for example, are documents. But from an ethnographic point of view they are often understood in terms of their social production rather than their truth. Another kind of key document is the official record. Records are central to work in large organizations and are made and used in accordance with organizational routines. Such records construct a 'privileged' reality in modern society because they are sometimes treated as the objective documentation of it. But like official statistics, such records should be interpreted by the ethnographer in terms of how they are written, how they are read, who writes them, who reads them, for what purposes, with what outcomes and so on.

Yet other documents, too, of a literate society are relevant for the ethnographer. Fiction, diaries, autobiographies, letters, photographs and media products can all be useful. These can be a source of sensitizing concepts and suggest foreshadowed problems largely because they recount the myths, images and stereotypes of a culture. But as accounts biased by social interests and personal prejudices such documents can be used only to sensitize the ethnographer and open up potential worlds for scrutiny. (Approaches to the analysis of texts are described in Chapter 27.)

Recording data

The typical means for recording observational data in ethnography is by making **field notes** which consist of fairly concrete descriptions of social processes and their contexts and which set out to capture their various properties and features. The initial principle of selection in this will be the foreshadowed problems of the research, and in the beginning of inquiry this requires a wide focus in selection and recording. The systematic *coding* of observations into analytical categories comes later (see also Chapter 23). The central issues for making good field notes concern:

- *What* to write down,
- *How* to write it down
- *When* to write it down

In terms of *when*, field notes should be written as soon as possible after the events observed. Leaving this to a later point produces the problem of memory recall and the quality of the field notes deteriorates. But note taking has to fit in with the requirements of the setting under study, so the researcher must develop strategies for doing this. Buckingham, for instance, who adopted a secret observational role in a hospital by posing as a terminally ill patient, told anyone who inquired that he was 'writing a book' to explain his note-taking activities (Buckingham et al., 1976).

As to *how* to write down observations, field notes must be meticulous. This raises simultaneously the issue of *what* to write down. As social scenes are inexhaustible, some selection has to be made. At the beginning this must be wide, but as research progresses the field notes need to be relevant to emerging concerns. This requires focusing on the concrete, the detailed and the contextual. So the researcher should try to record speech verbatim and to record non-verbal behaviour in precise terms. Notes can then later be inspected in the secure knowledge that they give an accurate description of things. Field notes should also, wherever possible, record speech and action in relation to who was present, where the events occurred and at what time. Final analysis of data will draw on this knowledge of context. With interviewing, audio recording and with observation, visual recording can be used as an additional and valuable aid (see Chapter 16). But audio and visual recording are still selective and so is the transcription of tapes. This is partially resolvable by following the now well-established rules of transcription that conversation analysis has produced (see Chapter 28). But to transcribe at this level of detail is really only practicable for very short extracts. Documents can be collected and photocopied but they too will involve note taking in terms of indexing, copying by hand and summarizing. In all, the primary problem of recording is always the same: as literal data are reduced, more information is lost and the degree of interpretation is increased.

Additionally, the researcher should write down any analytical ideas that arise in the process of data collection. Such **analytic memos** identify emergent ideas and sketch out research strategy. They provide a reflexive monitoring of the research and how ideas were generated. Ultimately analytic memos may be best assembled in a fieldwork journal which gives a running account of the research.

All data recording has to be directed towards the issue of storage and retrieval. This usually begins with a chronological record, but then moves to the conceptualization of data in terms of themes and categories to create a coding system that actively fosters discovery (see Chapter 23). This provides an infrastructure for searching and retrieving data, providing a basis for both generating and testing theory. Here, computers often prove useful.

Data analysis and theorizing

In ethnography the analysis of data can be said to begin in the pre-fieldwork phase with the formulation and clarification of research problems. It continues through fieldwork into the process of writing up reports. Formally it starts to take place in analytic memos and fieldwork journals but, informally, it is always present in the ideas and hunches of the researcher as he or she engages in the field setting and seeks to understand the data being collected.

The fragmentary nature of ethnographic data introduces problems. Checking the *reliability* of a particular interpretation may be difficult because of missing data. *Representativeness*, the typicality of crucial items of data, may be hard to establish. It may not be possible to investigate comparative cases in order to demonstrate *validity*. The generation of theories may not be the main aim of the researcher: many early Chicago School ethnographers (see Chapter 4), for example, were theory-free, at least in the explicit sense. The procedures of *coding*, whereby devices like *typologies* or *careers* may be developed, is the start of generating theory from data. Thus ideally theories are *grounded* in the data. Highly abstract theorizing, where concepts are not exemplified with data extracts, goes against the spirit of most ethnography.

In the funnel structure of this type of research, the initial task in the analysis of fieldwork data is to establish some preliminary concepts that make analytic sense of what is going on in the social setting. These can arise in a variety of ways. One is a careful reviewing of the corpus of the data in which the researcher seeks patterns to see if anything stands out as puzzling or surprising, to see how data relate to social theory, organizational accounts or common-sense expectations, and to see whether inconsistencies appear between different people's beliefs in the setting or between people's beliefs and their actions. Concepts can be generated in terms of *observer categories* derived from social theory, or from *folk categories*, terms used by participants in the field. But this initial conceptualization cannot be anything but sensitizing, a loose collection of orienting categories which gives a general sense of reference and guidelines in approaching the field.

The second stage is to turn such *sensitizing* concepts into *definitive* concepts, a stable set of categories for the systematic coding of data. These will refer precisely to what is common to a class of data and will permit an analysis of the relations between them. Glaser and Strauss (1967), describing the 'discovery of grounded theory', argue that the method for this in fieldwork should be that of **constant comparison** in which an item of data that is coded as a particular category is examined and its similarities with and differences from other items in the category are noted. In this way categories can be differentiated into new and more clearly defined ones and subcategories established. So this method, through its systematic sifting and comparison, comes to reveal and establish the mutual relationships and internal structure of categories. An example of the use of the constant comparative method is given in Chapter 18.

The discovery of grounded theory supplies a logic for ethnographic research, helping it gain scientific status. But whether this process of systematization is an entirely *inductive* and exclusively data-based method of theory generation, as Glaser and Strauss argue, is problematic. If the role of theory in structuring observation is recognized (see Chapter 2), then theory, common sense and other various assumptions precede theory generation, so grounded theory has a constructive character and not simply a data-based one. Whatever level of systematization takes place in the direction of theory construction, it is of value only if it offers a revealing purchase on the data.

Validation and verification

Ethnographic research has produced two suggested forms of validation: respondent or 'member' validation and triangulation. These are both discussed in Chapter 7 so will not be discussed at length here, except to point out some limitations of these techniques. **Member validation** consists of the ethnographer showing findings to the people studied and seeking verification in which the actors recognize a correspondence between the findings and what they, the actors, say and do. Thus verification is largely reduced to a matter of authenticity. But there are problems with this. Actors may not know things; they may not be privileged observers of their own actions or consciously aware of what they do and why. They may have an interest in rationalizing their beliefs and behaviour and so reject the ethnographic account of these, or indeed they may have no interest at all in the ethnographic account! So respondent validation cannot be a simple test of ethnographic findings, but it can be, as Bloor (1983) argues, a stimulus to generate further data and pursue new paths of analysis.

On **triangulation** it is worth noting the experience of West (1990), who used triangulation in a study of what mothers said to him in interviews about medical consultations. West wanted to know whether the accounts given in interviews were true or not. He therefore observed actual consultations and compared these with the interview accounts. Broadly speaking, he found the mothers' criticisms of the doctors to be supported. But this method of triangulation has its problems too. West's validation exercise is potentially limitless, as the next question to ask is whether his observations were true. At most, if different data tally, the observer can feel a bit more confident in his or her inferences, but can hardly conclude that a final truth has been reached.

Indeed, if we apply the perspective of constructionism to ethnographic writing itself (as was suggested earlier in the discussion of theoretical foundations for ethnography) the whole issue of the 'validity' of the method becomes more complex. Ethnographers in recent years have become very interested in this perspective on their own work and have experimented with a variety of reporting forms that attempt a more self-aware approach towards ethnographic authority. Chapter 29 covers these issues in more detail.

Box 17.6 Web pointers for ethnography

Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi's 'Anthropologist in the Field' website:
www.melanesia.org/fieldwork/tamakoshi/

How to do ethnographic research: a simplified guide
www.sas.upenn.edu/anthro/CPIA/methods.html

Ethnography (journal site) – use the search facility on the following site to find this journal
www.sagepub.co.uk

Forum Qualitative Social Research – use the search facility with the words 'ethnography' and 'participant observation'
www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm

Visit the website for this book at www.rscbook.co.uk to link to these web pointers.

Conclusion

Ethnography presents both problems and opportunities for social and cultural research because of its largely qualitative character and its essential basis in the participant observer as the research instrument itself. The problems are not entirely analytical but are ethical too. The fact that ethnographic research depends on building up relations of rapport and trust with people in the field, whilst using this to generate and collect data from them, raises issues of manipulation, exploitation and secrecy. These are maximized in covert research but exist even in overt research because of the degree to which the researcher must withhold disclosure about his or her activities in order to maintain sociability in the situation and to gain access. These ethical considerations also affect the publication of research. There may be political implications which damage the people whose lives have been investigated. Yet ethnography, through participant observation of the social and cultural worlds, opens out the possibility of an understanding of reality which no other method can realize.

Further reading

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) is the best textbook-length introduction to doing ethnography. Atkinson et al. (2001) is an edited collection that outlines a broad range of approaches to doing, writing and reading ethnography. Coffey (1999) discusses the researcher's position in relationship to both ethnographic fieldwork and writing.

Student Reader (Seale 2004): relevant readings

29	Alfred Schutz: 'Concept and theory formation in the social sciences'
30	William Foote Whyte: 'First efforts'
31	Buford H. Junker: 'The field work situation: social roles for observation'
32	Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss: 'Theoretical sampling'
33	John Lofland: 'Field notes'
34	Clifford Geertz: 'Being there'
35	Martyn Hammersley: 'Some reflections on ethnography and validity'
36	Howard S. Becker and Blanche Geer: 'Participant observation and interviewing: a comparison'
43	Robin Hamman: 'The application of ethnographic methodology in the study of cybersex'
57	James Clifford: 'Partial truths'
58	Paul Atkinson: 'Transcriptions'
59	Renato Rosaldo: 'Grief and a headhunter's rage'
61	John D. Brewer: 'The ethnographic critique of ethnography'

Key concepts

Analytic memos
Anthropological strangeness
Constant comparison
Constructionism
Contextual sensitivity
Cultural relativism
Cultural script
Ethnocentricism
Field notes
Foreshadowed problem
Funnel structure
Gatekeepers
Impression management
Marginality
Member validation
Naturalistic
Overt *versus* covert role
Participant observation
Reactivity
Sponsorship
Theoretical saturation
Thick description
Triangulation