

## Producing Data I

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### Participating, Observing, and Recording Social Action

*The cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field of adventure . . .*

—Schutz (1944, p. 506)

*Since we can only enter into another person's world through communication, we depend upon ethnographic dialogue to create a world of shared intersubjectivity and to reach an understanding of the differences between two worlds.*

—Tedlock (1991, p. 70)

### Introduction: Fieldwork, Ethnography, and Participant Observation

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In this chapter, we build on our previous discussion of research design to explore qualitative methods that are used to create a record of communication and to prepare for its analysis as “data.” The general ethos of these methods is evoked in the two passages that open the chapter. The first quote from Alfred Schutz expresses the dislocation and excitement typically felt by persons seeking to enter, grasp, and live in a different culture. Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock reminds us in the second quote that strangers learn by

*communicating* with others—by asking questions, negotiating understandings, and forming relationships. This condition is particularly acute for qualitative researchers, who are in a sense “professional strangers” (Agar, 1996). That is, social processes are not just *something they study in others*. These processes can also be *something they personally experience, so they can better understand the experience of others*.

The means qualitative researchers use to accomplish this goal are known as “fieldwork.” This term derives from anthropological and sociological traditions that direct qualitative researchers to travel to unfamiliar research sites, to develop successful relationships with their inhabitants, to engage with them in activities yielding relevant information, and to create records of that interaction required for subsequent phases of the research project.

The fine print in this definition of fieldwork reads: *somehow*. That is, actual fieldwork presents challenges that test researchers’ ability to cope with ambiguity, adapt to change, improvise plans, and adequately reflect on their role in co-creating social worlds. Somewhat disconcertingly, fieldwork requires researchers to deliberately abandon their certainty and expertise. Instead of relying on taken-for-granted assumptions and predetermined rules, they get to adopt a stance of curiosity and openness to the unexpected—a kind of epistemological vulnerability that can be frustrating and humbling (McCall, 1984; Wolcott, 1999). Fieldwork also requires patient and focused attention to the routine features of social action. This work can sometimes be draining. We mention these challenges *not* to discourage you from engaging in fieldwork. Instead, we want to reassure you that such reactions are normal, unavoidable, and temporary. They are also, we’ll see, *valuable*.

In this chapter, we focus on a subset of fieldwork methods concerned with participating in, observing, and recording communication. We begin by discussing *ethnography*, which is the genre of qualitative research most closely associated with these methods. Technically, ethnography does not imply the use of any single qualitative method. Indeed, some ethnographers (particularly the postpositivist variety) use quantitative methods such as surveys and statistical procedures to analyze patterns, determine who or what to sample, and compare findings (e.g., Silverman, 1985). Nonetheless, ethnographers typically share a distinctive goal: *describing* and *interpreting* the *observable relationships* between *social practices* and *systems of meaning*, based upon “firsthand experience and exploration” of a *particular cultural setting* (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001, p. 4). This commitment is encoded in the term’s etymological roots: *ethno-* (people) and *-graphy* (describing). Conducted in the anthropological tradition, ethnography provides a *holistic* description of a culture’s material existence and meaning systems and depicts

how its members achieve, maintain, and change their status. Another valued feature of ethnography is “thick description”—that is, of *the contextual significance of social practices for their performers* (Geertz, 1973). In this view, the more empathetic detail that goes into an ethnographic description, the richer our understanding will be and the more valuable that account will be for its readers.

It is beyond our scope here to review ethnography’s rich and controversial history in the academic disciplines of modern Western societies. Suffice to say that its famous nineteenth- and twentieth-century practitioners contributed to an exotic image of researchers “living intimately and for a prolonged period of time within a single native community whose language [they] had mastered” (Wax, 1972, p. 7). As a result, the norms of anthropological ethnography came to include intensive engagement with a remote culture, culminating in the production of a lengthy written account addressing the theoretical significance of documented observations. In sociology, alternately, ethnography took the form of a series of more frequent and brief encounters by researchers with the members of domestic communities, subcultures, and social movements (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Sanday, 1983; Vidich & Lyman, 2000).

For both traditions, however, the process and the product of ethnography are closely joined. Ethnographic claims about social action are highly contingent and are mediated by the “soft” (embodied habits and professional techniques) and “hard” technologies (mechanical and electronic devices) that researchers use to perform and record their research activities (see Weick, 1985). As a result, what is included in ethnographic accounts and what is left out, whose point of view is represented, and how scenes of social life are depicted become very important for assessing their “poetics and politics” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

From this discussion, we can derive an image of *participant observation* as the craft of experiencing and recording events in social settings (Gans, 1999). Although this term is sometimes misused to characterize the *gestalt* of qualitative research, it actually refers to specific practices. These practices involve one’s being in the presence of others on an ongoing basis and having some status for them as a witness and a co-participant in a significant part of their lives (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). The motive here is intimate curiosity:

[Participant observers] need to discover what “their” people believe; what they do at work and in their leisure time; what makes them laugh, cry and rage; who they love, hate, and fear; and how they choose their friends and endure their relations. (Delamont, 2004, p. 206)

In any particular qualitative study, participant observation may or may not be combined with other methods such as interviewing and document analysis. Its use enables researchers to discern how a social world appears to its participants—principally, by eliciting through sustained and mindful interaction the interpretive schema they use to construct and associate meaningful phenomena (Lieberman, 1999). As noted, participant observation centrally involves discursive practices of *speech* and *writing*. This condition is particularly relevant for communication scholars: in fieldwork, *the thing that we study (communication) and the way that we study it (by communicating) converge*. As a result of interacting with other members of their chosen site, participant observers draw on their own experience and knowledge to imagine what their motives might be for performing particular actions. What they end up with are descriptive records of these interactions. These records document various practices and constructs: how participants account for each other's presence in a particular scene, how they evaluate each other's related performances, and so on. In this way, the success of observing depends on what observers *learn* through their participation and the uses to which they put that knowledge.

## Successful Participant Observation

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The value of participant observation derives from researchers' having *been there and done that*. Observing and participating usually complement each other, although this relationship may not be seamless. Typically, the use of participant observation in a study develops along two parallel paths: (1) researchers become increasingly skilled at performing routine practices in ways that are honored by other group members, and (2) they create increasingly precise, vivid, detailed, and theoretically relevant accounts of this experience. Surviving this growth curve is not guaranteed, however, and fieldworkers have traditionally downplayed their inevitable false starts, misfires, and setbacks in final publications. (An unknown number of failed projects sink without leaving a trace.) However, there are certain attributes and skills we can develop that increase our chances of success in fieldwork. Here are four that we believe are especially important.

### Tolerance for Marginality

In research sites, typically, participant observers occupy *liminal* positions, in which they are situated *between* various social groups, psychological states, and research goals. This experience can be filled with contradictions, and the process of working through them can significantly shape the outcome of a

study (Eastland, 1993). Working from the margins of a research site isn't necessarily a bad thing, however: it can offer a broad perspective on key events and reasonable demands for participating in them. In these cases, researchers are relatively minor players who periodically arrive at a site to conduct brief sessions of fieldwork and then leave for home, class, or work. Sometimes, however, they adopt a more central role in their chosen group, and this can affect events in ways that must be carefully monitored and documented. Even when researchers hold prominent status, the duration of their membership at a site may be only temporary. Finally, as researchers move between the center and the margins of a site, the nature of their commitment to a group's goals may change accordingly (discussed further shortly). It's harder for a researcher to express reservations about a group's ideology, for example, when all of the parties appear to be benefiting from their relationship (whether evenly or not) (Adams, 1999).

Researchers can also feel their marginality internally. Over the course of a project, they can experience identity conflicts that arise from attempting to honor both their professional commitments and the norms of their chosen group. Sometimes this tension produces significant identity change (e.g., Robbins, Anthony, & Curtis, 1973). Below, we'll discuss how these problems often depend on the type of role that a participant observer adopts at his or her chosen site. In almost every qualitative project, researchers negotiate their commitments to a world that is considered "home" and their adopted and temporary "field." Although the boundaries drawn between these sites are often arbitrary and unstable (Taylor, 1997b), the field is uniquely selfish in its demands. Because researchers regularly encounter professional challenges in the field, it tends to prey on their thoughts and feelings even when they are physically "away." As a result, participant observers must learn to tolerate the disappointment and discomfort arising from their marginal status and treat it as an opportunity for learning how groups develop and manage their membership.

## Embodiment

A modernist bias toward *vision* pervades both the practice of fieldwork and methodological writings about it. The very terms we use to describe fieldwork—such as *observation* and *watching* (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973)—imply that researchers are primarily engaged in looking and fixating. Some participant observers have even tried to mimic the behavior of a camera, as if doing so could purge their findings of undesirable mediation by human consciousness. This visualist discourse has been thoroughly critiqued for its connection to the masculine fantasy of disembodied and omniscient knowledge (feminist philosopher Donna Haraway [1991] calls this "the God trick"). Postcolonialists have

also condemned Western practices of visual objectification for contributing to a repugnant history of colonial oppression (Rusted, 1995).

These are serious claims, but the primary *methodological* problem of visualism is that it represses a whole range of other sensory modes that can be used in fieldwork. Recently, for example, communication scholars Daniel Makagon and Mark Neumann (2009) have promoted *audio documentary* as a mode of *recording culture* that stimulates audience contemplation of its unique aural features and that offers an alternative to the traditional form of *written* ethnography. As we consider such alternatives, we are reminded that qualitative researchers are *bodies in fields* (Conquergood, 1991).

The implications of this insight extend beyond the issue of what media channel we will emphasize in our fieldwork. More broadly, the legacy of Cartesian philosophy has encouraged us to detach our sensual, visceral, and emotional experiences from our (supposedly rational) cognition. This legacy claims that the latter is more valuable for generating knowledge than the former, but that claim is dubious at best. Rejecting this claim does not mean that we should include every stomach gurgle we experience in our final reports. Instead, we should appreciate that researchers have been socialized by various cultural institutions to inhabit and perform their bodies in preferred ways. These hygienic regimes often encourage us to ignore or stigmatize phenomena that seem “dirty,” “noisy,” and “smelly.” These codes often embody racism, sexism, and class discrimination. As a result, we should carefully monitor how sensory bias shapes our perception and interpretation of events. Noted sociologist Patricia Adler, for example, requires her fieldwork students to complete a “sight without sound” assignment, in which they record all the details yielded by a scene that they can *observe* but not *hear*. A second “sound without sight” exercise reverses these conditions. Afterward, students reflect on how the availability of some channels of information (but not others) shaped their inferences about what was going on in the scene. This learning experience can be powerful, and it also suggests how our norms for producing knowledge discriminate against disabled fieldworkers.

As a result, distinctive experiences of embodiment may be *exactly* what fieldworkers should appreciate in documenting a scene. In a classic example, anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1978) was so moved by the frailty of the older adults she was studying at a Venice Beach, California, community center that she conducted a personal experiment to achieve greater empathy. She donned thick glasses to distort her vision, earplugs to impair her hearing, weights to bend her posture, and bulky orthopedic shoes to slow her gait. As a result, her writings were informed by an ethical awareness of how frailty affected interaction with older adults. A more recent example in communication is Tillmann’s (2009) account of how women struggling with eating disorders recognize and respond to each other as they are working out in gyms.

The visual bias in fieldwork tends to convince us that our gaze can reveal objective truths about how a scene is organized. As a result, careless researchers may forget that we always choose how we will see an event and that this choice influences our explanation of it. There are at least two implications here for conducting successful research. The first is that fieldworkers should open up their senses to experience and record the aesthetic and nondiscursive textures of their chosen sites, including flavor, scent, color, light, shape, tone, volume, and rhythm (Stoller, 1989). Effective observers become connoisseurs of the particular sensory combinations that are valued by the members of their chosen group. In the United States, for example, young men engaged in marathon gaming sessions often favor artificial light, headset audio, brilliant graphics, loose and casual clothing, hunched postures, repeated exclamations of frustration and vindication, caffeinated beverages, and delivery pizza. The second implication is that fieldworkers' bodies are important research instruments and should be carefully maintained (e.g., through adequate rest, a healthy diet, and regular exercise) so that their sensitivity is not compromised.

### Spontaneous Decision Making

Successful fieldworkers develop a talent not only for noticing things, but also for noticing them *as evidence of something* (e.g., a particular pattern). These decisions are complex and instinctive. For example, one of our mentors once disclosed to Bryan that he considered himself an effective soccer referee only after he had learned to “see” fouls *before* they occurred and blow his whistle *as they were being committed*. This capability of rapid recognition is developed through constant practice of curiosity and reflection. Ultimately, researchers use it to generate the best possible explanations for what they observe—even if doing so challenges their initial assumptions. This process unfolds as observers experience and reflect on events happening in real time. One challenge of participant observation is that these events are ephemeral; we can only distinguish their relevance as they disappear and are immediately replaced by other events. Observers never get a chance to notice any particular event twice. To be effective, then, you must be able to spontaneously decide what is and is not important. In this process, you will draw upon criteria that may themselves still be unclear. These criteria should eventually develop, however, through this kind of regular testing.

### Being an Ethical Person

Like medical professionals, fieldworkers should seek to “first, do no harm.” But this is harder than it sounds. Fieldwork typically involves conflict

between researchers and participants over whose interests should be more important at a particular moment. This kind of tension is ongoing, but it is not necessarily destructive. It can also be subtle, occasional, and even productive for our relationships with site members. But whatever form it takes, fieldwork conflict generates *ethics* as the norms and values that we use to resolve it. Canella and Lincoln (2007, p. 316) list several questions that suggest the scope of critical research ethics:

Whose knowledge is this? Why (as a researcher) do I choose to construct this problem? What assumptions are hidden within my research practices? How could this work produce exclusions? What do I do as I encounter those unexpected exclusions . . . ? What is my privilege (or power position) in this research?

Confronting these questions can be quite challenging. In her ethnography of Australian nursing homes, for example, Tinney (2008) recounts her ongoing struggle to develop a researcher role that could balance her competing desires to assist the isolated residents and overworked staff and to protect herself from exploitation and emotional burnout. As they negotiate these kinds of conflicts, fieldworkers confront the gap between their *professional myths* about ethics and their *actual practices* (Clark & Sharf, 2007; Fine, 1993; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Rambo, 2007; Ryen, 2004). The former depict fieldworkers as conforming to various cultural ideals and institutional regulations, such as rational planning, universal informed consent, unobtrusive observation, consistent empathy, honest disclosure, accurate reporting, and preservation of participants' confidentiality and anonymity. The latter, however, yield an image of fieldworkers and their research participants engaged in less virtuous (but more interesting) pursuits, including improvised consent, mutual dislike and exploitation, strategic flirting and deception, creative reconstruction, intentional shaping (and even staging) of events, and "accidental" exposure of participants' identities. The former is a world of clarity; the latter, ambiguity. The risks associated with being ethical, then, do not lie in aspiring to ideals: they are in assuming that achieving those ideals is easy or guaranteed.

To help fieldworkers anticipate ethical challenges, Punch (1986) listed a number of temptations they commonly face. These include (1) claiming to have witnessed an event that they did not; (2) claiming to have either observed or participated in an event, when the opposite was the case; (3) claiming to have direct knowledge of events, when that knowledge was developed indirectly; (4) depicting contrived events as if they were spontaneous; and (5) misrepresenting calculated acts as if they were authentic. To these, Shulman (1994, p. 249) adds ethically "gray" practices such as using ambiguity to create a desirable impression and avoid difficult questions, "accidentally" viewing and hearing otherwise-restricted information, and provoking informants to respond by claiming, "Others have said that. . . ."



Punch (1986) acknowledges that, as a matter of self-protection, all fieldworkers will inevitably practice *some* deception, although the types, extent, and frequency will vary. What is more important, he concludes, is that fieldworkers *continuously reflect* on their motivations for doing so and carefully monitor the consequences created for their participants, their conscience, and the study's goals. When it seems likely that a particular choice will injure participants or spoil the opportunity for future researchers to study a site, fieldworkers should *always* take the high road. In fieldwork, we are often guests, and our goals do not justify exploiting the generosity and vulnerability of our hosts (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000). When we fail this test, we create deep and lasting consequences for our reputations, our careers, our sponsors, our employing departments and institutions, and the communication discipline itself (see Allen, 1997).

Generally, fieldworkers can avoid (or at least minimize) these dilemmas by acting in an open, warm, and unpretentious manner. Being an ethical person means giving people the benefit of the doubt, getting along by going along, and not being overly contentious (Fine, 1993). These are all time-honored strategies for creating mutual trust and goodwill, and they may inspire our site members to include us more in their activities and develop mutually beneficial relationships. In this sense, "friendship" can be a useful model for fieldwork ethics because it values the practices of inclusion, affection, dialogue, collaboration, and accountability (Brooks, 2006).

## Difference Matters

The impact of researchers' cultural identity on the conduct of fieldwork has become a popular topic of qualitative inquiry (De Andrade, 2000; Stanfield & Dennis, 1993; Veroff & DiStefano, 2002; Warren, 1988). Here, the term *identity* refers to multiple, simultaneous, and competing cultural categorizations that are used to construct fieldworkers as particular types of human beings. These categories are invoked implicitly and explicitly in the interaction between fieldworkers and their participants. These invocations attribute value and status to fieldworkers by objectifying their race and ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and so on. Much of the recent scholarly discussion about this situation has been spurred by critical and cultural theories that view identity not as a stable "individual" essence but as a process and product of interaction. In this view, identity is symbolically constructed as participants in fieldwork draw on available evidence and cultural traditions to make attributions about themselves and each other. The issue is not so much whether these attributions are objectively accurate but *that they are*

*made* and *that they influence participants*. For better and worse, they help fieldworkers and participants to resolve the ambiguity of situations and stabilize their relationships.

It is useful, then, to view fieldwork as a process in which researchers and participants put the various components of their identities into play as tokens of status and as bids for others to notice and include them in activities. In this process, the meanings of these components are placed up for grabs; some interactions will serve to affirm a researcher's preferred identity, while others will challenge and subvert those preferences. This process is not conducted, however, on a level playing field of ethics and politics. Instead, it is highly charged by power relations in which some groups have historically defined and enforced their identities in ways that have secured their social, political, and economic advantage over others. These conditions should lead *all* researchers to account for how their knowledge claims are shaped by historical and cultural conditions (e.g., of privilege and entitlement). In this process, the fantasy of a unitary, unique, "individual" researcher is discarded. In its place arises another image of identity, one that foregrounds the attributions that fieldworkers and participants make in order to understand and manage each other. These identities are contingent and often conflicted; the knowledge they generate is partial—but no less useful.

How should fieldworkers operate in light of this situation? First, you should inventory the ambiguous gifts of your physical characteristics (e.g., height, skin color, hairstyle, body type), social attributes (e.g., education level, personal networks), and "cultural capital" (i.e., insider knowledge of group meanings and practices). Working from this list of traits and characteristics, you should consider how they correspond to cultural categories that are relevant for the group members you are studying. In this way, fieldworkers and participants read each other as texts. As they interact, their interpretations contact, question, and transform each other. The condition of "being" a certain age, gender, or ethnicity, for example, may determine the possibility of your even *entering* a scene. Although cultural power is not a simple phenomenon, it is undeniably true that the forces of whiteness, wealth, and masculinity have historically operated to protect elite groups from scrutiny—particularly when that research is conducted by members of "other" groups (Hertz & Imber, 1995). And sadly, elites have no monopoly on the practice of exclusivity; marginalized and oppressed groups may have good reason to closely monitor and defend their boundaries.

Potentially, a fieldworker's identity creates the basis for affiliating with others who share those attributes. This potential has often led researchers to consider studying groups and topics that are familiar to them (and, conversely, to avoid the extremely unfamiliar). In this logic, women should study women's issues, Islamic researchers should study scenes dominated by

Muslims, and so on. Such pairings of researcher and site can smooth entry, promote empathy, and enhance the quality of recorded data. If they are willing to surface it through reflection, researchers in these situations can benefit from their detailed and intimate knowledge about a scene, which can help them to anticipate related opportunities and challenges.

For several reasons, however, similarity is no guarantee of success. First, we should remember that there is often as much difference *within* cultural groups as *between* them. Indeed, fieldwork may challenge us to manage both sets of differences at once. In attempting to conduct a public health survey at the 2002 North American Indian Games, for example, Jacob (2006) found her “Indianness” challenged both by other indigenous peoples who were suspicious of her research motives, and by Whites who believed that their liberal sympathies qualified them for inclusion in her survey’s related gift raffle. Second, some components of our identities will always be more important for our chosen group members than others—we may or may not have similarity on these. Third, apparent similarity between researchers and group members on any *one* component (e.g., race) can lead to expectations about how that component is, or should be, configured with *others* (e.g., political ideology). Even after you have been accepted as a group member, then, you should anticipate how you will respond to the following questions posed (often implicitly) by your site members: “*What kind of member* are you?” and “*Are you my kind of member?*” You should treat these moments as opportunities to map the internal complexity of the group’s identity that is often glossed by its official rhetoric.

Additionally, fieldworkers should view the apparent distinctiveness of a group’s identity as a particular set of skills and understandings that they *can* learn, if given the opportunity. It is an ethnographic truism, for example, that research performed by cultural outsiders can generate unique (and perhaps superior) understanding of a culture’s taken-for-granted elements. In this sense, *some* form of difference between fieldworkers and group members is inevitable, and there are many different (and useful) ways to be an outsider. Indeed, researchers often choose a particular site because they are interested in these very topics of identity, borders, and conflicting loyalties (e.g., among cultural members who leave their original home but later return to study those sites).

To summarize, the identity politics of fieldwork can be just as volatile as they are in other social settings. Here, we have no surefire prescriptions to offer. Qualitative researchers should case themselves just as they case the scenes of a potential study. You should carefully consider the possible consequences of your culturally ascribed identities for the process and product of fieldwork. One example of this kind of reflection is Sherman’s (2002) account of a White, Jewish male researcher interviewing African American female managers on the topic of the organizational glass ceiling.

## Adapting Roles

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As they become involved in the daily life of their chosen group, fieldworkers try to perform their roles in ways that make sense to other members. They notice what is going on, what it seems to mean, and they try to join in as responsible and contributing members. Sometimes, researchers enter the field thinking they should become the proverbial fly on the wall: they plan to see and hear events without being seen or heard by others. These kinds of researchers “blend in” to public events by practicing civil inattention, or they deliberately remain passive in the middle of a busy scene. These plans reflect lingering positivist concern about influencing events by observing them, but we argue that this concern is not accurate and does preclude successful fieldwork. Even the fly on a wall has a role in the overall ecology of a social scene, as do novices and innocents, who inevitably bump into someone else and generally *get noticed* while trying to blend in.

Here, we emphasize that participant observation is, at its core, *a role that is negotiated and performed*. By this, we mean that participant observation has a *generic* and *semiscripted* character as a related set of strategic practices. It involves developing *typical* relationships with others that are governed by a consistent range of obligations, permissions, and prohibitions. This role also has a uniquely *situated* and *improvisational* character, however, that involves specific people interpreting and responding to each other in unique situations. As participant observers, we often start by taking on a role that is already available in our chosen setting or by modifying one of these for our own purposes (Olesen & Whittaker, 1967). Sometimes our chosen group members will create an entirely new role for us to occupy. In any case, however, this role adoption should not be confused with operating under false pretenses. Instead, it is only by *performing this role*—that is, living it and working through its associated responsibilities and dilemmas—that we are able to *accomplish* our observation and participation. This image may become clearer if we consider two classic schemes for distinguishing various types of research roles.

### Roles Based on Degree of Participation

Our first typology is based on the degree to which researchers actively intervene in their chosen scenes. For example, Schwartz and Schwartz (1955) distinguished between the “passive” participant observer who tries to operate as anonymously and unobtrusively as possible and the “active” participant observer, who tries to interact with participants as much—and as openly—as possible. These two roles involve different assumptions about the nature and consequences of our presence in a scene. On one side of this debate,

passive observers believe that high levels of participation provoke “unnatural reactions” from participants and so should be avoided or minimized. On the other, active observers accept that some reactivity is inevitable and that acting passive is as artificial and influential a performance style as any other. These types of fieldworkers believe, by decreasing their status and activity differences with participants, they can gain a better understanding of what is going on. A related, and more refined, typology was developed by Gold (1958), who proposed four “master roles.”

In Gold’s first role, *complete participants* operate under pretense (and perhaps deception). They are fully recognized and functioning members of the scene, but they are not known by others to be acting as researchers. Their role has no revealed purpose other than the one that is immediately understood by other participants. In communication, a classic example of this role involves a study by Benson (1981), who was invited by a former student to serve as an informal consultant for a film crew shooting political campaign commercials. When Benson arrived in “Sunbelt City,” he began meeting other people with whom he would be working. When they asked him personal questions, however, he instinctively responded with vague and general answers that maintained his anonymity and obscured his research motives. Because the other participants did not press him further, he chose to maintain this pretense.

The complete participant role thus positions us to use our empathetic and sensemaking capabilities to understand social action as it “naturally” occurs in a setting. In this way, it illuminates the qualities of subjective experience that are required for meaningful communication. Adopting this role may also be the only way that we can gain access and inclusion in research sites marked by high degrees of suspicion and antagonism.

In any event, once they are “inside,” complete participants will often become involved in situations that are not usually available to outsiders. Researchers and participants may personally disclose to each other because the latter will *assume* they are engaged in a private relationship. It is important to note, however, that complete participants *do* influence what goes on in a scene: their anonymity is not inconsequential. Other participants in the scene simply respond to them as a fellow member, rather than as someone with a research agenda.

For four reasons, contemporary fieldworkers do not embrace the role of complete participant. First, it restricts our freedom of movement at a site and our ability to negotiate customized relationships with other members. We can *only* go where those members typically go and *only* do what they do, when and how they do it. We cannot openly interview other members or ask for their feedback on our working hypotheses. Second, the compartmentalization required by this role is a difficult and precarious achievement. Complete participants must constantly worry about having their cover blown. They must retreat outside the group to cope with their frustration

and distraction. Even for disciplined fieldworkers, the associated stress may undermine their ability to focus on and understand events. In this sense, complete participation does indeed produce reactions—for the researcher. Third, complete participants who are deprived of the opportunity for extensive and collaborative reflection may lose their analytic detachment. The extreme form of this condition is famously known as “going native.” Its symptoms include overidentifying with a group’s ideology; participating unreflectively in its rituals; uncritically advocating its interests; failing to document what is happening; and (in some rare cases) choosing not to return “home.” Finally, it should be obvious that complete participation creates ethical “problems” that are unlikely to be condoned in the current regulatory climate. Although there is continuous debate among fieldworkers about the necessity and appropriateness of conducting covert research (Punch, 1986), it is increasingly seen as a violation of formal research ethics and as posing unacceptable risk of litigation to sponsoring institutions. While researchers will continue to justify their use of deception by invoking situational ethics (for example, when group members practice secrecy, evasion, lying, and/or outright hostility) (Douglas, 1976; Fielding, 2004), its sphere of legitimacy is shrinking (Anderson, 1987; Dingwall, 1980). Suffice to say that fieldworkers considering this role should, first, thoroughly consider their motives and weigh the potential benefits of deception against the consequences. Then they should consult trusted advisors, colleagues, and willing members of their institutional review boards for a second opinion.

In Gold’s second master role, the *participant-as-observer* openly acknowledges his or her professional motives to site members. As a result, these types of fieldworkers are able to study a scene from the vantage point of one or more positions within its membership. As the name implies here, *observing* in this role flows from the perspective of *participating*. Researchers complete the prefieldwork activities outlined in Chapter 4 and check out available positions to determine which ones provide them with the best view of the culture. In contrast to complete participation, our performance of this role can reward us with expanding and deepening involvement at our sites. Everyone who interacts with this type of researcher knows to engage them in a negotiation of interests. Potentially, this ongoing negotiation can deepen and sustain our legitimacy at the scene. Another difference is that the participant-as-observer need not pretend to be fully integrated into the routines and interpretive constructs of the group. The “deal” they negotiate usually involves their assuming some type of special status—for example, as a part-time, temporary, voluntary, and/or apprentice member. As a result, they are not obligated to meet the stringent standards of complete and constant membership. They have more freedom to make and learn from mistakes (Gold, 1958, p. 221).

For researchers adopting this role, their status with other members shapes participation. Typically, that status involves a mixture of discretionary autonomy and light supervision. Under normal conditions, group members might not gladly suffer “foolish” participation from us. But these rules don’t apply to the participant-as-observer. In this role, we are permitted to act like naïve visitors and inept novices (Weick, 1985, p. 585). This appearance (which may not have to be faked) can be particularly useful at the beginning of a study, because it induces other members to teach us “how things work around here.” It is best not to play this card for too long, however: group members may decide that a hopelessly inept researcher cannot be trusted with important information or tasks. Instead, as time goes on, we should try to make ourselves increasingly useful to the group. If we are successful, they may reward us with greater access to complex and interesting areas of their shared life. When the learning curve becomes too steep, or when real-life responsibilities call, participants-as-observers can exercise their right to step back, check out, and cool down.

For fieldworkers adopting this role, becoming an insider can get complicated. Here, we are continually required to assess our evolving relationships with group members and to adjust the quantity and quality of our participation, as needed. When these changes occur, group members should be updated about our evolving status. If they are unpleasantly surprised, they may be less willing to trust us and to admit us to observe protected, core scenes.

To summarize, then, a greater degree of informed reciprocity between researchers and group members characterizes the participant-as-observer role. Partly because it facilitates authenticity and accountability, qualitative researchers have increasingly come to prefer this role (Angrosino & Mays de Peréz, 2000; Tedlock, 1991). Having rejected traditional myths of objectivity, we now largely accept the pragmatic benefits of achieving immersion and inclusion in our chosen sites. In this view, participation facilitates—not subverts—our recording of useful data.

In a third master role, the *observer-as-participant* is primarily invested in observing group members but may still interact with them casually, occasionally, and indirectly. This role is sometimes endorsed as an acceptable compromise between the competing goals of researcher detachment and familiarity with participants (Angrosino & Mays de Peréz, 2000). But there are also drawbacks: the brief and superficial mode of interaction associated with this role may lead us to overestimate the accuracy of our impressions (Gold, 1958, p. 221). For these types of fieldworkers, achieving *verstehen* with group members may be more of a means than an end; it allows them to enter a scene, to foster goodwill, and to validate the explanations they generate. Observers-as-participants will negotiate with site gatekeepers

differently than do participants-as-observers. They can often describe in advance what kind of information they are seeking and what resources they need to obtain it. Gatekeepers can be relatively confident that granting access to these researchers will not prove overly disruptive for group life and that their project will not stray into unexpected areas.

Because they have made decisions in advance about what counts as data in their study, observers-as-participants commonly favor *interviewing* as a method. Here, they can efficiently administer their questions with a clear purpose and resolve misunderstandings with relative ease. Researchers adopting this role are often able to sample a larger number of incidents, time periods, persons, or groups than can those in our previous two roles. In the subsequent stage of data analysis, they apply these findings about observed patterns of communication to their questions.

Nonetheless, as noted earlier, these benefits involve tradeoffs. The observer-as-participant cannot, for example, engage in an intimate, prolonged study of a culture. The constraints placed by this role on our participation and reflection create a risk that we will unreflectively read our own conceptions into what we see.

The final master role in Gold's typology can be summed up in a famous saying by the baseball great, Yogi Berra: "You can observe a lot just by watching." This kernel of semiwisdom suggests how *complete observers* take this role to its logical conclusion; that is, they remotely observe social actors without being present to or known by them. Here, it is not just that research participants do not recognize complete observers as researchers; they do not recognize them as part of the scene *at all*. This role is least preferred by contemporary qualitative researchers because it runs counter to their dominant ethic of accountability. It is also rarely used for other reasons. One is that it requires us to hunker down and lay low: the absence of meaningful contact with participants denies them the opportunity to influence our evolving interpretations. In contrast to "going native," the risk involved in performing this role is going *solipsistic*.

Complete observers operate best in free-access settings that encourage anonymity. Crowd scenes and public websites offer excellent opportunities for them to operate without the risks of revealing—or having to account for—their purposes (e.g., Lang & Lang, 1953). Technologies of photography, video, audio, and computing enable them to remotely sense and record events with slim chance of detection (see, for example, Knuf, 1989–1990). In these situations, complete observers have *no* identity that is explicitly recognized by participants. As a result, they may have little incentive to reflect on how they come to interpret the actions they observe or on the potential consequences of publishing their findings.



## Roles Based on Social Function

Partly due to its simplicity, Gold's typology has influenced more than one generation of qualitative researchers. However, it has also been criticized for not distinguishing more precisely between the types and degrees of participation fieldworkers perform. Adler and Adler (1987), for example, believe that drawing a distinction between "overt" and "covert" research is not as useful as it seems. This is because it arbitrarily divides the researcher's performance into a *participant* role that involves interacting with members and an *observer* role concerned with "gathering" data. Instead, the Adlers believe we should categorize fieldworkers' involvement in a scene according to their differing degrees of *committed membership*. Essentially, their scheme recasts two of Gold's roles—complete participant and participant-as-observer—into three new ones: *complete member*, *active member*, and *peripheral member*. These new roles are distinguished by the type of event that researchers participate in, the mode of their participation, and how influential it is for an event's outcome:

*Peripheral-member-researchers* participate as insiders in the activities of the group they are studying, but they refrain from engaging in the most central activities. . . . [*Active-member-*] *researchers* participate in the core activities in much the same way as members, yet they hold back from committing themselves to the goals and values of members. . . . *Complete-member-researchers* study their topics from the perspective of full members by either selecting groups to study in which they have prior membership or by converting to membership in these groups. (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 35, emphasis added)

We can see that the roles in this scheme relate to each other through an overarching logic of *member positioning*. This logic helps us to see how a researcher's role might, over the course of a study, evolve from one position to another. Because it emphasizes the *social functions* that are performed through fieldwork roles, this scheme can guide researchers "on how to proceed once they enter a field setting" (Snow, Benford, & Anderson, 1986, p. 378). This practical orientation to the functions fieldwork roles perform can help researchers to accomplish their goals. Anderson (1987, pp. 315–317), for example, describes several generic strategies that fieldworkers can use to learn about the activities of group members: becoming an apprentice, "playing" at the activity, taking a course, and using past experience or present involvement to reflect on the requirements for participating in activities. Fieldworkers can also adjust functional roles to fit the demands of a specific field site—for example by varying the balance between ardent *embracement* of, and skeptical *distancing* from, the official ideology of their chosen group

(Snow et al., 1986). By treating research roles as having real functions, then, we can better anticipate the kinds of information and forms of experience they will generate.

Most recently, postmodernists have critiqued these typologies for presuming a singular observer-subject that occupies a fixed location and for privileging the goals of researcher efficiency and analytic validity (Angrosino, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 2, these critiques view subjectivity as a relational accomplishment that is contingent, fluid, fragmented, and multivoiced. As a result, they endorse *dialogue* as not merely an *ethic* of observation but its very *ontology*. In this view, “data” are not objects that we “collect” through participant observation, and we should not be trying to configure them as a complete account of timeless cultural truth. Instead, in this view, *all* knowledge of cultural groups is partial, temporary, and contested and is generated within a radical encounter between contradictory and unfinished subjects. For many contemporary ethnographers, then, the post-positivist project of categorizing researcher roles has been replaced by the critical project of adequately narrating the ethics and politics of fieldwork encounters.

## Tactical Observing

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By now, you should be ready to begin observing. Although this experience can feel like sprinting from the starting blocks, a more accurate analogy might be running one leg of a relay race. That is, the work you have completed in casing your scene and choosing an initial role has already set you in motion toward its relevant communication. In starting to observe, you will now let this momentum carry you *into* that scene, via the openings created by performing your chosen role. As we’ve discussed, the logic of your specific role will shape your possibilities for participating and observing.

You’ll recall from our discussion in Chapter 3 that initial observation involves understanding where and when your field is occurring and distinguishing its related sites and scenes. Typically, researchers begin with an intuitive preference for a particular site but an underdeveloped sense of its scenes and how they operate. Group members, on the other hand, are intimately familiar with their own scenes, but they are often unaware of (and indifferent to) how researchers view those scenes as part of a scholarly field. Over time, researchers and participants try to bridge these gaps in understanding, but the flow is usually one way from the latter to the former. And even as qualitative researchers try to increase their transparency and collaboration, they may find that participants do not desire or benefit from continuous discussion of their evolving knowledge (Ceglowski, 2000).

This process of identifying relevant phenomena and tracing their relationships can be challenging, but it is the heart of responsible participant observation. The first task of observing, therefore, is simply to notice as many persons, objects, and events that are “happening” in a site as possible. Try to observe these phenomena in a nonjudgmental fashion. Avoid prematurely declaring the existence of a pattern, and resist invoking a theory to explain how or why events occur the way they do. At this early stage, you should just embrace the exciting and disorienting experience of novelty. Try to be patient, not clever (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, p. 54).

As you develop a perspective on your site from your chosen role position, take direction from other group members graciously. Implicitly and explicitly, they will teach you where to sit, stand, and move. They will also model when, how, and to whom you should talk and listen. As a reward for your initial tolerance in performing an adopted role, you may be permitted by group members to perform more varied, naturally occurring, and advanced roles.

In noticing the full range of people, objects, and events at a site, you should try to adopt site members’ perspectives on what is relevant and how. That is, *you should notice how other members notice things*. The sampling strategies we reviewed in Chapter 4 will help you here by identifying the times and places where important events are likely to occur. Two questions you should try to answer at this stage include, “*What* is going on here?” and “*How* is it going on here?” Because the scene is new for you, these puzzles may arise naturally. The challenge is to move from noticing something to successfully describing it (Spradley, 1980). Six questions follow that can help you achieve this goal.

## Who Are the Actors?

You should begin by learning the status of various actors in your chosen scene. What are their names? What are the titles of their positions? What *formal* responsibilities are tied to those position titles? How do the role occupants perform these responsibilities? How do others in the scene respond to these performances? What do these interactions suggest about the *informal* and *unofficial* dimensions of these roles? These questions can go a long way toward mapping communication dynamics in various settings ranging from work organizations to families. By answering them, you should be able to begin unpacking the structure of your chosen scene. As a result, you will learn more about what participants believe they are supposed to be doing and how they see their actions fitting together. Even if you are offered this kind of information by a sponsor prior to entering the site, you should also generate your own independent account and compare it with the official one. For example, most members of large, formal organizations know that official charts depicting their positions and reporting structures obscure as much as they illuminate

(e.g., the open secret of managerially placed informants). What this means is that learning a figure's status is necessary—but also insufficient—for developing a complete understanding of how the individual actually performs a role, what his or her experience is of that performance, and how it is received by others. Developing this kind of knowledge requires us to observe more closely how certain norms, expectations, rules, and taboos influence these performances. You should start, then, by noticing any significant differences displayed in your chosen scene among (a) the formal role status that members hold, (b) typical expectations for the communicative performances of those role-occupants, and (c) and how they *actually* communicate.

## How Is the Scene Set Up?

In observing your chosen scene, you can focus on how its participants select and display various artifacts to signify what they find important and how they wish to be viewed by others. Here, one classic site of study is the customization of organizational work spaces by their occupants (Goodall, 1991, pp. 91–92). For example, Bryan used to work for a university in Texas where, according to legend, one of its presidents casually left a pistol out on his desk during meetings he held during a period of faculty protest. In this way, examining the décor and furnishings of a given scene can help you to understand the relationships between its actors. You may notice that certain props are needed for certain events of work and play to occur at all. Here, you should focus on who has responsibility for keeping and using these props and how they are used to accomplish the event in question (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). We will discuss related aspects of “material culture” more fully in Chapter 7.

## How Do Initial Interactions Occur?

Observing persons interacting for the first time (e.g., in coffee-shop meetings between the users of online dating services) can indicate which norms they view as relevant for that situation (e.g., shake hands or hug, but don't kiss). When these interactions occur in formal groups and organizations, we can learn how they serve to socialize newcomers, police boundaries, and generally enforce preferred styles of communication. Here, you should be concerned with how participants organize their available resources to conduct these critical moments. *Who* speaks first and to whom? *How* do they speak (e.g., what tone, rate, volume, and type of vocabulary do they use)? *What do they accomplish* by speaking in that way (e.g., greeting, challenging, and warning)? *How long* does the interaction occur? How do the participants *decide when it has ended* (Ellis, 1980)?

In this process, you won't just be observing others. As a new researcher at your site, you will meet many people for the first time. These minidramas are opportunities for you to establish your researcher role. You can also view these encounters (with their sweaty handshakes, genuine hospitality, bored indifference, and passive-aggressive remarks) as texts to be interpreted. They represent opportunities for you to generate background information about site members and to develop additional relationships that may prove valuable. For example, while interviewing Mexican *mestizos* at home about their television viewing, Murphy (1999a) found that other family members would chime in and argue with the interviewees about their answers to his questions. These "interruptions" helped him to better understand those responses and also the social context of media use in these homes.

### How Do Actors Claim Attention?

As the previous anecdote suggests, the veteran members of a group are often experts on each other's habits, mannerisms, and commitments. For this reason, they normally don't need to explicitly reflect on the core assumptions that underpin their relationships. Instead, their exchanges are often highly coded and nuanced. Here, you should not assume that what appears routine is unimportant. Instead, you should appreciate that the members of your chosen scene have internalized a script for how their lines of responsibility will operate. As a result, you should focus on how they generate, circulate, and consume information. For example, how do they determine when information is relevant for consideration by the whole group, opposed to a subgroup? How do these subgroups benefit by obtaining, processing, and sharing information?

These questions point you toward the larger theme of how members at your site make claims on each other's attention. Why do some topics stimulate them to argue and discuss, while others are ignored and forgotten? How, typically, are influential messages developed and circulated within their networks? How do members engage, interpret, and respond to these messages? How do they know what to pay attention to and when? Once group members have deemed something worthy of their attention, how do they maintain and resolve that status? How do they conclude and evaluate their responses to problems?

Here, you should carefully notice events that are confusing for you but that *seem* clear to others (you may find out later they were just as mystified as you). You should focus on how group members define and respond to problems by using distinctive vocabularies, procedures, and nonverbal behaviors. When necessary, you should ask them to brief you on the meaning of particular terms. Don't worry if their responses don't make sense right

away; you can always follow up later about incomplete, ambiguous, and idiosyncratic explanations.

## Where and When Do Actors Interact?

In trying to understand communication occurring at your site, you should note who associates with whom and under what conditions. The ways that group members assemble, conduct their business, and then disperse should be a recurring theme in your observation. You should note the temporal and spatial patterns in this process—the dancelike moves and rhythms through which participants express and co-orient their bodies (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1989; Meyer, Traudt, & Anderson, 1980).

It may take more time for you to develop another topic: how participants coordinate their actions to achieve specific purposes (e.g., flirting, job interviews, bail hearings, etc.). Here, it's very important that you note where and when certain kinds of interactions occur among certain members. You can safely assume that most of them do not happen randomly. Their location and timing provide you with evidence for understanding how they function *as* communication. Their observable aspects can also tell you about the relationships among the participants. Here, two important concepts for identifying the public performance of relationships include “markers” and “tie signs” (Petronio & Bourhis, 1987). *Markers* are interactional behaviors that situate bodies in ways that signify a particular type of relationship. For example, “family members” in mainstream North American culture typically express that status by holding hands, interlocking arms, hugging, some forms of kissing, and exclusively orienting their bodies to each other. Alternately, *tie signs* are material symbols and artifacts that indicate a type of relationship. Tie signs for “family” include engagement and wedding rings, small children (particularly when they command the attention of adults present), parental gear (like strollers, diaper bags, or toys), and the use of nicknames or terms of endearment (“Meemaw!”). Of course, these concepts assume that your participants are performing in ways that permit you to make valid inferences (as opposed to, for example, the deception practiced by co-workers who are attempting to conceal their romance). You need to understand, then, the potentially subtle ways that group members use signs to disclose, obscure, and transform their relational status. You may be tempted here to rely on secondhand accounts of scenes that you do not directly witness (“You should have *seen* what she was wearing!”). If so, you should remember that such accounts will *always* reflect the partial and biased perspective of your informants.

## Which Events Are Significant?

Here, you should focus on defining the communication events that constitute your chosen scenes. Different scenes can accommodate—often simultaneously—a variety of events (e.g., bars that are used by locals as a meeting place and by business travelers as an impromptu workspace). Recognizing significant events requires you to decide whether and how they *count as* examples of a relevant concept in your study (e.g., “the appropriation of public space”). Over time, you will build up a record of motives, accounts, feelings, and actions that you can use to describe the properties of these events. These properties include how events are initiated and concluded, how they evoke categories of group membership, how speakers conduct sequences of turn taking, and how they use conversational devices to initiate, maintain, and change topics (Speier, 1973). Observation involves noticing the form and content of these events for the purposes of recording them as data.

As an observer, you will also learn, over time, to recognize significant events by performing in them in ways that make sense to their other participants. You will learn how these events express the social realities of their associated scenes by displaying preferred styles, cultural beliefs, and so on. In recording your observations, finally, you will learn to *narrate* communication processes about which you were previously unaware or inarticulate. We turn now to this related craft.

## Writing Fieldnotes

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Conducting fieldwork produces detailed knowledge about our chosen scenes of social life. This knowledge is based on our observation of social action and our reflection about what it was like to be a participant. These practices create the foundation on which our analytic claims are subsequently built. But this creation is not automatic. To achieve the status of evidence, participant observation must first be recorded by researchers—traditionally, by having them write down (or up, whichever you prefer) their related experiences. In the ethnographic enterprise, this process produces textual artifacts known as *fieldnotes*. We use the term “textual” here for two reasons. First, fieldnotes are concerned with *describing* and *interpreting* the symbolic (i.e., textual) qualities of communication as social action. Second, fieldnotes *display* textuality when they are subsequently “read” by researchers as evidence of significant phenomena and by critical scholars who scrutinize their inscription of ideology. We turn now to this initial phase of data construction, noting that the formal process of data analysis is treated in Chapter 8.

## Scratch Notes and Headnotes

Fieldworkers write *scratch notes* (Sanjek, 1990b, pp. 95–99) in the midst of their participant-observation sessions or soon after leaving them. These notes are often recorded hastily, covertly, and in improvised privacy (e.g., supply closets, bathrooms, and parked cars). They include brief notations about actions, statements, dialogue, objects, or impressions that the researcher will later elaborate. The actual practices of scratch note taking vary. Some researchers carry small notepads on which they write in shorthand and other codes. It is common here to use acronyms, mnemonic devices, abbreviations, and key words. If the norms of your chosen group permit, you can record these notes openly. Still another option is to wait until a stretch of fieldwork has ended and write scratch notes at the first available moment.

In some research sites, scratch note taking may be physically impossible or, due to participant sensitivity, ill-advised. In these situations, *headnotes* may suffice (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001, p. 356). This term describes how fieldworkers can resolutely focus their attention on specific events and the associations they evoke. They then commit these impressions to memory through an act of will. Some researchers have impressive memories and do not need to engage in much scratch note taking. Others rely on a combination of headnotes and scratch notes, but even scratch notes do little more than anchor a large mass of material that resides in our memory of fieldwork events. For both forms of notes, it is crucial that you reconstruct your experience as quickly as possible in order to stabilize and expand their features. You should not expect to “download” headnotes all at once. Instead, you should begin recording them as soon after a fieldwork session as possible. Even so, it may take days for all of your residual headnotes to surface. Some impressions may even return to you in dreams as metaphors and allegories. Inevitably, there may be elusive images and impressions that cannot be recovered. Don’t agonize over this—just keep doing the best you can.

## Fieldnotes

We cannot overstate the importance of fieldnotes for studies using participant observation. Without them, that work will fade from your memory and will become invalid as a source of evidence for your final claims. What are fieldnotes? They have been defined in a variety of ways, including, “shorthand reconstructions of events, observations, and conversations that took place in the field” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 123); “a body of description, acquired and recorded in chronological sequence” (Sanjek, 1990b, p. 99); and “the product of observation and participation at the research site and considered reflection



in the office” (Anderson, 1987, p. 341). Why is there no single, official definition? In a revealing study, Jean E. Jackson (1990) interviewed anthropologists about their experiences in recording fieldnotes. Surprisingly, she found that these qualitative researchers had little agreement—and strong ambivalence—about writing fieldnotes. They differed over when they should be written, what form they should take, what kinds of topics and themes they should include, and whether they were a source of “raw” data requiring further development or “cooked” analysis of preliminary observations (pp. 6–7).

Beyond a vague consensus among qualitative researchers that fieldnotes should document and (at least initially) interpret the experience of participant-observation, it is less clear what they should contain and do. Traditionally, the mystique around fieldwork, the absence of any formal mechanism for sharing fieldnotes, and the intensely personal feelings that researchers attach to their notes have obscured our understanding of this vital practice (J. E. Jackson, 1990). More recently, however, several commentators have attempted to outline specific procedures for composing and organizing fieldnotes (e.g., Anderson, 1987; Ellen, 1984; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001; Sanjek, 1990a; Spradley, 1980). Generally, these authors agree that fieldnotes constitute a permanent record that verifies field events did in fact occur as the researcher has otherwise stated. This documentary function, however, is not as straightforward as it sounds. This is because fieldnotes objectify and interpret events that are otherwise situated, ambiguous, and fleeting. We can write notes at any point, and as many times as we please, but we cannot rewind an actual event, wipe out our original impressions, and *directly* re-experience it. As a result, fieldnotes tend to assume the aura of the events they record, because they permit researchers to revisit and reconstruct a related experience. That experience, however, is now permanently mediated by the discursive (e.g., writing) and nondiscursive sign systems (e.g., camera angle) that fieldworkers use to document their observations. Additionally, raw fieldnotes are generally not available to anyone but the researcher, because of the privacy promised to research participants. As a result, these notes are seldom seen or critiqued. These overarching conditions of contingency and privilege mean that we are responsible for writing fieldnotes with great care.

Several principles can guide your success here. First, as we have already mentioned, you should write your fieldnotes as soon as possible after each fieldwork session. The more time that elapses after your observation, the greater the chance that your memory will dilute and distort the fidelity of your account. Even scratch notes lose their significance if you do not use them quickly (and there are few experiences more frustrating than trying to decipher these notes after their “expiration date”). Therefore, you should regularly schedule a block of time after your fieldwork sessions to write your

fieldnotes. Some researchers prefer an interim period that allows both them and their fieldnotes to “breathe,” but this delay should not be much longer than 24 hours. You might also consider—unless you are engaged in team fieldwork, and perhaps even then—*not* discussing your session with anyone until after you have written the related fieldnotes. This will protect you from compromising your hard-won, personal understanding of events. Second, regarding length, a standard rule of thumb is 10 double-spaced pages of writing for every hour of participant observation. Although this may sound like a lot, fieldnote writers who embrace the challenge of description will quickly leap this psychological hurdle, will write until they feel they are done, and will (sometimes) even enjoy the process!

Third, fieldnotes should create a *chronological* record of your involvement in the scene. They should record important details about all the phases of your project, from initially awkward negotiations with gatekeepers to teary-eyed farewells (Pacanowsky, 1988a). How participants responded to your arrival on the scene and to your evolving performance of the researcher role are both opportunities for you to reflect on how your chosen group assimilates a foreign body and tolerates external curiosity about its operations. Adhering to a chronology can ensure that your fieldwork record will reflect the specific changes that occurred in your own life, and in the lives of your participants, and how these changes affected your decision making.

Fourth, fieldnotes should display a commitment to *preserving* the situated character of observed communication. During the first days and weeks of your study, you may find yourself recalling preferences and agendas for observation that you had previously developed. In some cases, these may include inventories of specific communication behaviors and events. Nonetheless, you should resist the urge to apply these checklists to what you observe. Instead, your first order of business is to *inductively* develop a working grasp of key elements of your chosen scene: the identities of its key participants, how they organize its activities, the location and function of key artifacts, the felt experience of performing important activities, and the implicit codes of cultural knowledge. In this process, you will learn how to act *as if* you were a member.

Fifth, because they happen only once in the life of a study, it is imperative that you record these early experiences in your fieldnotes. In describing your initial learning curve, you should concretely note *all* the significant details of the relevant scene. Although the potential list is endless, we have offered in this chapter several questions you can use for this purpose. The goal here is not to find a single right question whose answer will magically solve the mystery of your site. Instead, the point is to *keep developing and asking questions* in order to spur your fieldnote writing. In that writing process, you will quickly determine which of them are worth preserving for further use.

Sixth, your fieldnotes should display *extensive* (if not exhaustive) *description* of appearances and activities. In the beginning, you should not try to write beyond your experience of being a novice, apprentice, or tourist in your chosen site. Avoid posing “Why?” questions—that kind of explanation can wait. Instead, you should use the reliable tools of “Who?” “What?” “When?” “Where?” and—especially—“How?” to unpack your observation of a scene. You should avoid describing events by using superficial, vague, exaggerated, or clichéd terms and phrases. Rather, you should break events down into their relevant components and consider how they interact to produce those very events. Initially, nothing should be too trivial or too obvious for you to notice and document. We cannot repeat it enough: the goal here is to provide *rich, specific detail* about the communication you observe. As noted earlier in this chapter, you should pay special attention to its sensuous textures: urgent voices, pungent odors, garish colors, bitter flavors, delicate touches, and so on.

Finally, we recommend several conventions for the form and style of your fieldnotes. For example, you should create wide left- and/or right-hand margins on the pages of your fieldnotes. During the upcoming stages of data analysis, this feature will allow you to make necessary annotations and coding marks. In the content of your fieldnotes, you should record participants’ remarks and conversations as close to verbatim as possible. You should not enclose depicted speech in quotation marks unless you are certain you have faithfully captured its grammatical form. Instead, you should paraphrase that communication to depict its *semantic* (what was meant by an utterance) and *pragmatic* (how it functioned in the related episode) dimensions. Because it forces you to specify the subjects who perform actions, you should use the active voice in fieldnotes as much as possible.

It may help you to think of this kind of writing as an attempt to *teach* someone who is unfamiliar with your chosen site how to understand one of its distinctive events and to successfully participate. Accordingly, you should write your fieldnotes (especially the early ones) in clear, uncomplicated language. In this process, you should develop a useful form of split consciousness. Some ethnographic traditions view fieldnotes as personal expressions of a private language that is, by definition, incomprehensible to others. We disagree, however. Instead, we view fieldnotes as the means through which researchers develop two important forms of intersubjectivity: (1) empathetic understanding of their participants’ experience and (2) successful representation of that understanding for others. As a result, it is useful to think of yourself as both the author of your fieldnotes and also their first audience. In writing them, you are trying to explain things to yourself. You are the reader of a story that you are also writing and in which you appear as a central character. You wonder how it will all turn out. . . .

Finally, you should experiment with different styles of language use that can expand and refine your understanding of the scene (note: good fieldnote writers display a love of language). For example, in depicting the nuances of observed communication, you should carefully choose the adjectives and adverbs you use. They will serve you in the same way that melody serves a songwriter and color serves an oil painter. Additionally, there are also several options for the form of your fieldnotes: You can *sketch* a scene by narrating its concrete images (like a verbal photograph). You can recount a typical *episode* of interaction, from its beginning through the middle to its end. You can try assuming different *points of view* (e.g., first, second, or third person; limited or omniscient); each will uniquely constrain the range of thoughts, feelings, and motives you can depict (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). However you practice it, the discipline of fieldnote writing—performed for its own sake, day after day—will strengthen your ability to observe, discern, and faithfully recall the important details of communication. You will be rewarded with a dense, fact-filled archive that you can later use to ground your explanations.

Your fieldnote writing should also capture your personal and emotional reactions to the process of learning how to fit in at your site. Although these reactions can be recorded in other genres and media (such as journals and diaries, discussed shortly), you should document your authentic experience of confusion, insight, misunderstanding, and so on. This kind of introspection can help your audience to understand the truth of a particular event at a particular moment for its author. Generally, however, your fieldnotes should display the *stance*, or underlying orientation, of someone who is socially engaged with *others* (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). In this sense, we prefer use of the first-person voice in fieldnotes because it is relatively direct and accountable. But this does not mean that fieldnotes are only (or even primarily) about *the writer's* experience.

## Fieldwork and Fieldnotes: An Exemplar

Let's look at a demonstration of how the issues we've been discussing get worked out in practice. Kiri Miller (2009) is a professor of ethnomusicology at Brown University. She is also an ethnographer interested in *Rock Band*, a video game that allows its players to simulate the performances of popular music groups by manipulating console peripherals resembling musical instruments. Whenever they perform, *Rock Band* players are scored by the program based on their ability to follow musical notes that scroll down the screen and to match the recorded pitch of the original singer's performance. Recently, Professor Miller (2009) posted a fieldnote on her research to *FlowTV*, an online journal focused on television and media studies. In this fieldnote, she records her arrival at a college bar located in

Boston, Massachusetts, and her first meeting with a local organizer of Rock Band game nights. Since it is early evening on a summer night, the bar is relatively empty, and Miller has an opportunity to assess the setup of this event:

[It] wasn't quite what I had expected. I had assumed the players would face an audience, as at a karaoke night—perhaps even standing on some kind of stage, with a projector screen across the room so they could read the game's musical notation. Instead, the instruments were only a few feet from the TV; the players would have to look in that direction, with their backs to the rest of the bar.

This association leads Miller to ask the organizer about his perception of the differences between karaoke events and Rock Band nights. He responds that the latter type of event appeals to a wider age range of participants and that its audience members are more susceptible to spontaneous performance:

We'll be right by them, side by side, they'll watch. They'll be sitting around, being like, oh, that's not my thing. And then they see how much fun, that everybody's getting into it, and then, eventually, they'll even do it and they'll have a blast.

After a further discussion of performers' self-consciousness, and the organizer's strategies for reducing audience members' inhibitions, he and Miller get down to their respective business. Miller's is to sample the uniqueness of this scene. First, however, she must overcome her concern that its members might be competitive experts. After claiming one of the simulated instruments, she is pleased to be joined instead by a low-key group of other players. As her group and others perform, she also takes an inventory of the action:

Those waiting to play were chatting and getting drinks, but they paid enough attention to the game to shout encouragement now and then and clap at the end of each song. Other patrons ignored the game entirely, treating it like a pool table or pinball machine—though the music was turned up loud enough to required [sic] near-shouted conversation. As players took their turns, they kept their eyes focused on the screen but got physically involved with their performances. Guitarists played standing up and moved to the music, and drummers often twirled their sticks or tapped out the tempo at the start of songs. These weren't showboating, spectacular performances like the ones that circulate on YouTube, but they were physically and musically engaged.

Miller proceeds to interview two regular players, focusing on their prior musical experience and its role in shaping their interaction with this multimedia program. She concludes by noting that “the sense of openness, community, and passion for collaborative music-making” found at this scene is more reminiscent of participatory, drop-in performance groups (e.g.,

in the tradition of American “Sacred Harp” singing) than of the commercialized spectacle typically associated with rock music performance.

There are several features of this fieldnote that we might discuss, but four seem particularly interesting. The first is to mark how Miller organizes this fieldwork session: the fieldnote chronologically recounts her entry into (and implies her exit from) this scene. It is not episodic, however, in the sense of recording the participants’ felt sense of event timing, such as local norms (and organizer rules) for the period that any single performer or group may legitimately occupy the stage or the number of cycles between audience and performer roles that attendees might perform before they call it a night. The second is to note Miller’s thorough attention to the various stances toward this event displayed by those present and also the range of performance styles displayed by the members of any single group (game players) and their subgroups (guitarists). Third, the fieldnote displays not only how ethnographers alternate between the roles of participant and observer, but how each role involves multiple responsibilities. That is, Miller is “participating” as a game player here, but she also shifts (rather effortlessly) between that activity and spontaneous conversation with others present (which we recognize as informal interviewing). A final element (discussed further shortly) is this fieldnote’s appropriate form as a record of a multimedia event. That is, even though its print elements have been emphasized in this discussion, the actual post of this note on the *FlowTV* website includes photographs (e.g., of game players at this bar oriented toward the program’s large-screen display) and hyperlinks to other audio, video, and written texts (e.g., to the bar’s website, a YouTube posting of a song demo mentioned by an interviewee, and to Miller’s other published work). Additionally, the format of the *FlowTV* website partly solves the problem of fieldnote secrecy we have discussed, allowing readers of this post to respond with comments and questions. As of May 2010, Miller’s respondents had explored the relevance of her observations for other research on gaming and on bars, and elaborated the unique situation of singers in the Rock Band performance context.

Now let’s wrap up this discussion of fieldnotes. Over time, as a result of growing familiarity, fewer events in your fieldwork will take you by surprise. Your fieldnotes will document recurring patterns in how group members participate in and understand the events you observe. Gradually, you will focus your attention on situations that resist explanation and on how you should respond to them. Your fieldnotes will become an ongoing conversation between your persistent questions and your evolving answers. Managing this conversation will become a familiar—and often enjoyable—part of your fieldwork experience. The level of painstaking detail you provided in your initial fieldnotes will no longer be necessary. Instead, you will become more *selective* and *intensive* in your writing. *Now* you can start to ask “Why?”

questions and fully develop the apparent connections between events. If you move into a different research role at your site, however, or enter a new scene, your note taking and fieldnote writing should revert to emphasize tentative and broad description. Before long, though, the process we've described will repeat itself: patterns and themes will become familiar, and you will adjust your focus to engage those that are most interesting and significant. .

Ultimately, your fieldnotes should be carefully organized and protected. Qualitative researchers usually make multiple hard and electronic copies of their fieldnotes. This is so they are protected against the loss of any single copy. Be aware, however, that this practice also increases the risk that loose copies will find their way into unauthorized hands and affect your valued relationships. As a result, ensuring the security of your fieldnote archive should be a continuous priority. You should organize its hard copies in folders or binders reflecting chronologies or topical categories. Over the course of your study, this archive may grow quite large and unwieldy. If so, you should respond by creating an index that lists your notes according to relevant categories such as site, date, scene, event, and/or theme.

## Journals and Diaries

Fieldworkers often need companions even when there are no colleagues around in whom to confide. Journals and diaries fill this need. As Sanjek (1990b) states, "Chronologically constructed journals provide a key to the information in fieldnotes and records; diaries record the ethnographer's personal reactions, frustrations, and assessments of life and work in the field" (p. 108). Despite this apparently clear distinction, there is diversity *within* these genres of writing, as well as blurring of boundaries *between* them (Janesick, 1999). Keeping a *journal* can be a highly practical project: it can help you to manage a rising tide of data by recording the dates of your fieldwork sessions, the names of the people you meet and interview, and so on. It can also provide you with a means of reflecting about the problems you encounter and ways you might solve them. Potentially, you can adapt a journal to enhance collaboration with your participants: you can all keep a journal *together*, creating an informal dialogue (and useful "member checks") concerning the goals, procedures, and emerging findings of your project. Keeping a *diary*, alternately, creates an outlet for you to express turbulent emotions, doubts, personal prejudice, and other kinds of meditation. Being alone is not the only reason to keep a diary, however. It is also a place for you to vent feelings about the relationships you develop in the field, where you normally must keep a tight lid on impulsive reactions.

In practicing these supplemental forms of writing, you can create a sanctuary for cultivating your unique "voice." Over time, writing should become less of an alien, obligatory, and mechanical task, and more of an

opportunity for you to practice vivid, graceful, and compelling self-expression. In this way, diaries and journals have historically been the gnostic gospels of qualitative research—alternate, heretical narratives that were suppressed for the sake of professional image. Their occasional publication has created controversy by revealing the flawed, complex human beings who live behind the ethnographic mask (Lévi-Strauss, 1955/1974; Malinowski, 1967). As we will explore in Chapter 9, however, the boundaries between “personal” and “professional” voices in qualitative research are increasingly becoming less clear and stable.

## New Media and Participant Observation

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Many qualitative researchers, we believe, would agree that fieldwork isn't what it used to be. That is, while human communication has *always* been mediated (Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996), and media systems have long been a focus of communication research, contemporary sites are awash in “new” technologies. “Web 2.0” artifacts such as the iPhone, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have modified and replaced original Internet media such as telephone modems, text-based chat, and static webpages (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 247–278). While fundamental elements of that earlier technology endure (e.g., hypertextuality), its current forms are marked by continuous increases in the richness of multimedia content, the immediacy of user interactivity and collaboration, the transmission capacity and speed of broadband and wireless networks, and the interoperability of devices and programs across converging media platforms. The consequences of these developments for human communication are a source of ongoing debate, but we are narrowly concerned here with two sets of implications for conducting fieldwork.

The first involves the *growing use of multimedia devices for recording fieldwork activities*. Here we emphasize that this usage is not novel: early ethnographers did not limit themselves to writing and also used photography, mapping, and drawing to record significant figures, artifacts, and events. During the twentieth century, the growing portability and fidelity of first analog, and then digital, recording technology led fieldworkers to employ related devices in data “collection.” As a whole, these audio, video, and computing technologies have held various forms of appeal: they offer evocative alternatives to the rational formats of writing and print; they appear to objectively document cultural practices; they facilitate the storage, organization, and retrieval of data; and they allow fieldworkers to record



their immediate impressions of events outside of participant awareness (Gravlee, Zenk, Woods, Rowe, & Schulz, 2006; Makagon & Neumann, 2009; Patton, 1990, pp. 248–249). While qualitative researchers still debate the value of these affordances, they have also continued to cultivate the use of technology to ensure that their methods match the complexity of the communication they encounter (Dicks, Mason, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2005).

Practical decisions about using these kinds of recording devices follow logically from decisions about conceptualizing research fields and their related sites and scenes. Communication occurring in these contexts is increasingly distributed, networked, fluid, and multimodal (Murthy, 2008, p. 849). As qualitative researchers, we use new media to follow our chosen group members as they conduct their personal and professional lives in and across these contexts. In this process, we must choose which media channels, contexts of use, genres of content, and forms of practice are most relevant for our research purposes. In making these selections, the traditional conception of “scenes” as clearly bounded spaces to be sampled must be revised to accommodate the simultaneity of mediated and virtual contexts. Again, it is better here to focus on developing a reasonable case for your choices, rather than presuming that a single right choice exists. No one can record all of the communication occurring in all the scenes at a site (however it is mediated) or in all the sites that compose a field. As a result, you should focus on the questions of how to commit your limited resources to increase your chances of a successful study and how you can justify these choices to those they will affect.

As we choose which contexts to engage, we must also consider how the use of audio, video, and computing technology *constructs the event that it appears to record*. That is, we reject here the positivist image of data “collection,” as if communication phenomena were fixed objects lying around, waiting to be discovered and harvested. Instead, every choice we make about selecting and using a recording device reflects our (culturally influenced) orientation to its particular media codes (e.g., camera angle and lighting) and shapes the status of its product as a representation (but not a mirror) of social action. Here are some questions that lead to those choices: What do I believe are the significant communicative modalities of this event (e.g., gesture, voice, color), such that the use of this device seems appropriate for recording its occurrence (Dicks et al., 2005)? Where in the scene will the device and the participants be located? Where will the device’s sensors be directed? How will the scene’s participants orient to this use of the device and to each other as co-performers in the meta-event of recording the event? What empirical features of the event will be preserved and emphasized in this mode of recording? Which will be minimized or obscured? How will these “missing” features (as well as the event’s felt significance for its

participants) be recorded by other means? How will this form of recording enable and constrain its subsequent analysis as “data”?

Regarding this last question, we are particularly struck by arguments that, as data, audio and video recordings are an entirely different animal than are written accounts (Dicks et al., 2005, p. 123). Despite our earlier claim that fieldnotes *can* assume the aura of events they record, these notes are not presumed to *directly* capture those events (technically, argue poststructuralists, they symbolize its absence). Instead, fieldnotes are continuously subject to rewriting (e.g., as exemplars) and are typically subordinated within final research publications (e.g., as offset quotes of dialogue) to other “superior” forms of analytic writing. The format of audio and video recordings, alternately, places greater constraints on their use in analysis and representation. These records *are* presumed to directly record the actuality of events, and while their basic units (e.g., video frames) can be combined in various ways (e.g., through editing), they cannot easily be disassembled or recoded (and unacknowledged manipulation of audio and video data poses obvious ethical problems). Finally, these recordings create an ethical challenge for researchers: their realistic qualities require additional work to preserve the anonymity of their depicted participants. For all these reasons, we should use recording devices in fieldwork only with careful planning and continuous reflection.

The second set of implications involves *the conduct of participant observation in online settings*. In the previous edition of this volume, we noted four distinctive characteristics of fieldwork in initial Internet contexts. The first was their convenient objectification (e.g., in website discussion threads) of the very communication performances that researchers hoped to document. Even better, researchers could record these displayed exchanges with relative ease (e.g., as session transcripts) by using logging programs. A second condition involved the relative disembodiment, anonymity, and accessibility of communication in public websites. These qualities offered fieldworkers the opportunity to practice covert observation through “lurking” (with all of the related dilemmas discussed earlier in this chapter). Third, Internet researchers faced a unique responsibility to reflectively conceptualize the relationship between “online” and “offline” communication as a guide to their study. The question was not which one was more “real,” but how the significance of communication occurring in one type of context was associated by participants with communication occurring in the other. Consider, for example, how high school students who fail to answer text messages sent by leaders of their cliques may experience derision and shunning in subsequent face-to-face interaction among their members. Finally, we noted practical and ethical problems associated with researchers conducting Internet research through the proxy

identity form of “avatars”—most notably, the verification of participants’ authenticity. The implication here was that, for better and worse, Internet users could only manage their mutual impressions through the forms and codes available within a particular “new” medium. As a result, researchers were advised to constantly reflect on their naturalized beliefs about what communication is and how it is accomplished (Markham, 2004, p. 114).

In the intervening years, these issues have been refined as qualitative researchers have developed further wisdom and best practices and have reacted to the rapid evolution of media and technology (Beaulieu, 2004; Broad & Joos, 2004; Garcia et al., 2009; Markham & Baym, 2009). Here, we can identify three claims that are particularly useful for fieldworkers. The first is that, because online and offline activities have only become more simultaneous and interdependent, it is no longer useful to view them as occurring in separate, distinct spheres. Instead, we should conceptualize our research sites as dynamic ecologies of mediated communication, focusing on their holistic, multimodal, and multisited properties (Hine, 2009). While we may desire to punctuate in advance the spatial and temporal boundaries of these “rowdy hybrids” (Bakardjieva, 2009, p. 58), it is important to view those boundaries *inductively*, as the ongoing, practical accomplishments of their participants (Kendall, 2009). The question thus becomes this: how should we conceptualize the relationship between online and offline communication in order to achieve the goals of our study (Orgad, 2009)?

The second claim implicates the limitation of communication researchers familiar only with verbal and written discourse. Increasingly, the development of a credible, online role requires us to first master the unique, *nondiscursive* codes of multimedia data characterizing our chosen sites and the distinctive practices by which their participants produce, circulate, and interpret related texts (e.g., mash-up videos).

Third, in this process, traditional fieldnotes become something else: an opportunity for researchers to leverage the benefits of written expression to supplement, expand, and interpret automatically generated records of interaction (e.g., by providing reflective and experiential accounts of participation) (Markham, 2009). The electronic and digital capacities of new media allow this writing to be associated with “captured” data in a variety of ways (e.g., integrated as a single, multimedia text; hyperlinked as a separate text). And, as we saw earlier in discussing Keri Miller’s fieldnote, new media practices such as blogging permit researchers to archive and display their recorded data online. These researchers will no doubt vary, however, in their limitation of public access to—and interaction with—these records.

## Conclusion

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We have covered a good deal of ground in this chapter, and we hope it has helped you to feel less confused and anxious about conducting fieldwork. Participant observation and fieldnote writing are as much an art as a science, but this does not mean that their performance is arbitrary—far from it. These are disciplined activities that draw on your uniquely human capacities for noticing, wondering, and understanding. If you perform them faithfully and systematically, they will generate data that serves your quest to better understand the significance of communication for those who perform it. If you accept this responsibility, you can be reassured that—however chaotic things may become in your fieldwork—you have honored your end of the professional contract.

In our next chapter, we will turn to a second process of producing data in fieldwork. This method is known as *interviewing*, and it involves eliciting others' significant experiences by engaging them in strategic conversation. As we'll see, interviewing can either stand alone as a research method or complement participant observation.

## Exercises

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1. As we have discussed in this chapter, fieldworkers are constantly tempted to act in ways that differ from their official contracts with group members and institutional regulators. Recount an ethical dilemma that you have faced involving ambiguity, deception, distortion, evasion, and/or secrecy. How did this dilemma arise? How did you respond? What happened as a result? What does your story tell us about the difference between professional “myths” about qualitative research ethics and their actual practice?

2. Conduct the “sight-without-sound” and “sound-without-sight” exercises described in this chapter. Go with a group of fellow students to a public place. Choose a scene or event where one group can observe its participants engaged interaction but cannot hear its related conversation of other types of sound. Position the members of a second group so that they can hear this sound but are restricted from visually observing the interaction. Have each group record its impressions of what is happening in this event and how. Afterward, the two groups should compare notes. How are the inferences that each group drew similar? How are they different? What does this tell you about the role of vision and hearing in participant observation?

3. If you are currently engaged in fieldwork (and are not already doing so), keep a journal for a week. You can do this instead of writing fieldnotes or in addition to that writing. Make at least three entries in this journal. They can be as short or as long as you wish. Choose from the following list of topics:

- Make a list of questions that you would like to have answered before your fieldwork is finished.
- Compose a portrait of a key actor in the scene who is particularly interesting or significant. Focus on the person's appearance, style, and habits.
- Imagine that you are a member of your chosen group who is observing you conduct your fieldwork. Write a narrative of that person's likely impressions of you.
- Write a letter to someone who is involved in your fieldwork, either directly (e.g., a member of the group) or indirectly (e.g., a teacher or advisor). Focus on the aspects of your relationship with this person that you would like to remain the same and also those that you would like to see change. (Do *not* send this letter.)
- Imagine that your body can talk about how it is being affected by your emotional experience of performing fieldwork. Focus on different locations, sensations, and behaviors that indicate how your body is generating, processing, and "storing" these feelings (e.g., shortness of breath, muscle cramps, fatigue, nail biting). Try to recall exactly when and where these "symptoms" began during your fieldwork. What are the events that are inducing them? What are the feelings that are being induced? How might you use this information as you continue your fieldwork?