

Fieldnotes and Ethnographic Research

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What are fieldnotes?

Fieldnotes, put simply, are a record of experiences and observations “in the field.”

What contributes to high quality fieldnotes?

Timing

You should carry a small notebook with you at all times during fieldwork. Ideally, you will be able to jot down observations in a small “*jot book*” during your time at the site. You will later use these preliminary notes to reconstruct a record of your experience. Don’t “sleep on your notes.” Studies have shown that increasing levels of detail are lost as time elapses.

Candor

Field notes are intended to be a somewhat private account of your experiences. In some cases, your field notes will also be reviewed by your instructor or research supervisor. This should not deter you from being as candid as possible in your field notes about your observations. While the fieldnotes need to be intelligible, they do not have to be perfect in terms of grammar and spelling. In general, it’s a good idea to not edit “mistakes” out of your field notes, as these initial misperceptions can be instructive.

Detail

The more detail you can include in your fieldnotes, the better. During fieldwork, you don’t know what will become important when you later analyze your notes. Write down even the details that seem *unimportant*.

Labeling

You need to label your field notes in some way. One example (particularly if a class is pooling field notes for some sort of team project) is:

[name] (yours)

[obs] **Observation Date** (when you visited the neighborhood)

[notes] **Notes Date** (when you wrote up your notes)

[arr] **Arrival Time** (arrival at site)

[dep] **Departure Time** (departure from site)

[topics] **Topics** (general categories under which you could place your observations, i.e. Sculpture Park, neighbor relations, schools, bus routes, etc.). This is a form of preliminary coding, and you should generate categories as you deem appropriate.

Organization and Length

One way of organizing field notes is to divide each entry into two sections: **Description** and **Reflections**. The **Description** section should be a detailed narrative of all that you experienced--saw, did, observed, heard, smelled. The **Reflections** section is the place to assert your opinions, note connections between course material and your field experiences, and pose questions for yourself about the process. These questions often become a point of departure for your next site visit or interview.

The length of your field notes should be a minimum of 2-3 pages for every 2 hours at the field site.

¹ Some of the material in this handout is adapted from Bernard, H. Russell. 2002. *Research Methods in Anthropology. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Third Edition. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.

The following is an excerpt from anthropologist Herve Varenne's field notes in an alternative New York high school. Read more at: (http://varenne.tc.columbia.edu/class/common/flndt/wsh_fdn.html).

I enter WSH at about 8:25 with Susan. We try to wave ourselves through the security guards whose two desks define a narrow corridor as one moves through the door. The guard on the left stops me and, nicely but firmly, and with a not quite apologetic explanation, asks me to sign in and calls "BASE" on his walkie-talkie when I explain that I am a guest of the principal. BASE (Ed Redford's voice) gives O.K. and I am told to go to teacher's room.

{E.R. will explain to me later that this is indeed his code and that the kids delight in figuring this out.}

8:30 I enter teachers' room. E.R. is sitting at the main table apparently filling forms (?attendance or grade). He does not pay explicit attention to me besides a hello. Susan introduce me briefly to one or two persons. She goes to sit at the round table. I sit on the couch under the window. Perhaps half a dozen person are in the room.

8:32 E.R. moves to another room, along with all the other teachers for the morning meeting. Eventually about 25 persons sit around a set of table arranged in a big square. I sit myself at the back, outside the square. Susan introduces me to two or three persons. Harry pulls a chair and organizes himself so that he can talk to me. We talk about sociologists and anthropologists studying New York City (a take off from an article in New York Magazine).

8:37 E.R. starts the meeting. He introduces me with the usual "anthropologist" joke (we are his tribe, he should remember what natives to missionaries).

Mention of the birth of a teacher's child.

Mention of Jean McClintock's birthday

Exchanges about the success of a school team.

Reminder that green sheets must be turned in. Confusion about what they are and explanations.

E.R. looks at his watch: "It's 8:43, Let's roll!"

Everyone moves out. I follow E.R. as he walks to the class room where his "family group" meets. As we move through the corridor, he has at least two overlapping conversations with staff members. The room has chairs neatly arranged in rows. It is empty. E.R. reorganizes most of them into a circle. I help and he asks me to sit within the circle. He sits on the desk and checks some paper. He gives a form (about ethnic composition of classroom) with a comment about the many forms that people in NYCPS have to fill out. A girl appears at the door, E.R. walks out into the corridor with her. {Susan has told me at other times that he prides himself on the fact that he has more students there than any other faculty--something like 30.}

8:53 A boy comes in (new red coat with new white cap). He sits outside the circle on one of the few chairs that have not been reorganized.

8:55 E.R. comes back in, addresses Nicky about sitting outside the circle. Nicky does not move. {I think that, quite later he will reorganize his chair to face the circle.}

8:57 E.R. makes a comment about the fact that he had been out the day before and "I have a theory that the kids are punishing me" by not showing up today. Two girls walk in (one of them is Tracy). {This is the Tracy that Susan has had problems with.}

Tracy walks out again. E.R. makes a comment about "you girls are dressing in black today." He turns to the other girl (who sits within the chair, by the desk) and comments that she looks sad. He asks about the problem, she denies there is any. He persists. Eventually a long sequence is started that has to do with credits needed to graduate and the impact of a job. E.R. introduces me as "Susan's husband"--no particular reaction. He returns to Sophie's problem and gets her ("you figure it out"), in spite of her resistance ("I am not that good at math", E.R.: "that's why you figure it out"), to calculate the exact number of credits she is going to get (this involves some fractional numbers which she eventually always get, though sometimes after mistakes).

