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# The Ethnographic Method in Sociology

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*This article calls attention to the basics in ethnographic fieldwork and points out how they fit together to form the ethnographic method in sociology. The various requirements that must be met to achieve reliability and validity of fieldwork data are discussed. They include adequate and appropriate sampling procedures, systematic techniques for gathering and analyzing data, validation of data, avoidance of observer bias, and documentation of findings. The article shows the novice and reminds the experienced field-worker that the ethnographic method is a singularly dynamic and fruitful way of studying the human scene, offering, as it does, unique investigative, substantive, and theoretical contributions to social research.*

Several versions of this article have been written since the early 1970s to try to explain ethnographic reports to sponsors of environmental impact assessment projects and to social and other scientists involved in these projects who found it difficult to understand qualitative social research and even more difficult to accept it as scientific. In recent years, as more and more sociologists and their students have become comfortable with the idea of ethnography and with its procedures and findings, the original purpose of this article to serve as a largely project-specific, defensive primer on ethnography has changed. Now that ethnography has found a place in the discipline's methodological comfort zone, it is time for this article to take this change into account.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the present version continues to be a primer, but it is now addressed to all who have occasion to read about and/or use ethnography's tools. Its purpose is to call attention to the basics of this kind of fieldwork and to point out how the basics fit together, both logically and practically, to form the ethnographic method in sociology.<sup>2</sup>

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Ethnography is a fieldwork method that has been used by sociologists since at least the early 19th century.<sup>3</sup> It enables investigators to gather valid and reliable qualitative data through the development of close and continuing

contact with those being studied. Initially, ethnographers had no systematic and effective scheme for avoiding the imposition of their own views on the data they collected. This methodological deficiency was addressed by Max Weber early in this century. Weber (1947) argued that, to understand human society, social scientists are obliged to refrain from wittingly or unwittingly imposing their own views (or the views of any professional, scientific, religious, or other group or authority) on whatever processes they use to gather, analyze, and report data (Abel, 1948; Weber, 1947). He concluded that one could best understand society for what it is—not for what one thinks it might, should, or must be—by studying it from the points of view of its members. In effect, he required social researchers to become personally and deeply acquainted with their informants' experiences and views. Accordingly, ethnographers were able to deal with the natural human tendency to be blinded by their own lifestyles (i.e., to be ethnocentric) when trying to become intimately acquainted with the society and way of life of their research subjects by using a method that Weber called *verstehende sociologie*. This method is now usually called *verstehende sociology*, translating as a sociology of knowing or a sociology of meaning.

Verstehende sociology is a firm, useful, and desirable foundation for ethnographic fieldwork because it shows researchers how to avoid their normal, human inclinations to inject their own personal views into informants' accounts during the process of gathering data regarding what life is like to those being studied. A verstehende sociological approach requires the investigator to develop and maintain a close relationship with representatives of the empirical world in question and to rely heavily on them for information regarding what is going on there and what it all means to them.<sup>4</sup> In these ways, the informants provide direct and substantial assistance in grounding the researcher's conceptual and substantive expectations and discoveries in the empirical world (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Verstehende sociology not only teaches social researchers how to avoid indulging any subjective tendencies they may have but also assures them that their data are objective; that is, what they report is what they and their informants know to be grounded in informants' actual experiences. A major defect in much sociological research is that it does not come to terms with this aspect of social reality. As Blumer (1969) put it,

[Such] research gives no assurance that premises, problems, data, relations, concepts, and interpretations are empirically valid. Very simply put, the only way to get this assurance is to go directly to the empirical social world—to see through meticulous examination of it whether one's premises or root images of it, one's questions and problems posed for it, the data one chooses out of it, the concepts through which one sees and analyzes it, and the interpretations one applies to it are actually borne out. (p. 32)

Ethnography, then, is capable of providing this "meticulous examination" and thus an enhanced understanding of the social world; but, like any other

kind of scientific research, it cannot do so without data derived from samples of known generalizability.

## **SAMPLING STRATEGIES AND ETHNOGRAPHY**

The kind of sampling that sociologists and other social scientists who do fieldwork are most familiar with is based on the assumption that nothing is known about the social organization of the population to be studied. From this, it is concluded that probability sampling must be used to keep the field-worker from making too many mistakes in finding and selecting representative respondents. Human communities are regarded as not significantly different from other natural orders of phenomena. If any theoretical concessions are made concerning the sociocultural organization of human communities, they are based on the assumption that those members of the community who are knowledgeable about its organization are distributed, like secrets of nature, in some mysteriously randomized way. Thus, the sample must be a statistical, random one to ensure the inclusion of these representatives in the sample data. Investigators are then confident that they can count and compare responses, examine relationships, measure research variables, and generalize to the larger population with all the methodological rationale of probability theory behind them.

Of the two major forms of sampling used in sociology, probability sampling is so well known to so many of the discipline's researchers that further discussion of it need not take place here. Accordingly, attention here will focus on the other major form, sociological sampling—the one that is predominantly employed in ethnographic research.

Sociological sampling is based on assumptions and research aims that are strikingly different from those used in statistical sampling. Sociological sampling's overarching assumption is that the people whose society is to be studied are the very best source of information on how to put together an empirically grounded, representative sample of that society. Sociological sampling assumes that the human community, as opposed to the remainder of the environment, has sociocultural characteristics that are the products of its members' interaction; that the features of social organization that are significant in community life are known to its members and discoverable by the investigator; and that, if those definitions of the community vary in important ways between different groupings and interests within it, articulate informants can and will identify them. Just as these assumptions concern the distribution of relevant characteristics and behaviors that are sociologically ascertainable, so the research goals concern social and cultural rather than other parameters of life in the community and in the surrounding environment.

Sociological sampling facilitates addressing these concerns. It is designed for research that aims to discover how people in the study area classify or label each other, how they find meaning in activities they care about in life, and how they engage in processes in which they individually and collectively define (antecedents and consequences of) their situations. The process of sampling sociologically permits informants to participate in the actual sampling through telling the researcher how to locate and interview persons whose social roles, relationships, situations, desires, needs, and the like are representative instances of the particular human behavior that the researcher is interested in investigating. To achieve this kind of empirical grounding of the sampling process, sociological sampling must be used.<sup>5</sup>

For example, informant participation permits the ethnographer to determine quickly and inexpensively what the several social groups of a study area's residents are like from the standpoint of each group's members and from that of neighbors, friends, relatives, and community officials who know them, and so on. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), this approach is called *theoretical sampling* when its purpose is to generate new knowledge of theoretical importance through describing and explaining the basic processes at work in the members' daily situations.

Theoretical sampling is done in order to discover categories and their properties and to suggest the interrelationships into a theory. . . . The adequate theoretical sample is judged on the basis of how widely and diversely the analyst chose his groups for saturating categories according to the type of theory he wished to develop. . . . The inadequate theoretical sample is easily spotted, since the theory associated with it is usually thin and not well integrated, and has too many obvious unexplained exceptions. . . . Learning [when to stop sampling] takes time, analysis and flexibility since making the theoretically sensitive judgment about saturation is never precise. The researcher's judgment becomes confidently clear only toward the close of his joint collection and analysis, when considerable saturation of categories in many groups to the limits of his data has occurred, so that his theory is approaching stable integration and dense development of properties. (pp. 62-64)

A counterpart of theoretical sampling that is relatively more oriented to generating informants' natural or folk accounts of their observations, experiences, and reflections is called substantive sampling. As in theoretical sampling, substantive sampling is *verstehende* sociological in principle and thrust. Both of these procedures attempt to sample with a view to depicting the social situation being studied in accordance with the combinations of descriptions and explanations given by informants in those situations. The main difference between the two is that the objective of the former is to generate theory, whereas that of the latter is to generate empirically sound accounts of how the people perceive, experience, and make sense out of that which is under study. It should be noted that this conceptual distinction verges on being ideal, typical and that, in actuality, the two varieties of

sociological sampling occur together. The ethnographer places emphasis on one or the other in light of having relatively theoretical or substantive research objectives.<sup>6</sup>

Investigators using theoretical or substantive procedures in community and other organizational research begin by selecting as initial informants a few persons in positions that, according to the findings of previous field research, are likely to give them good overviews of the community (e.g., pastors, newspaper reporters, courthouse employees, school administrators, etc.). These persons are then asked to identify those who are generally thought to be representative of the various social categories and points of view of interest to the research.<sup>7</sup> While following informants' suggestions of persons to contact, the investigator is obliged to search continually for evidence that the informants' remarks are based on misinformation, faulty perceptions, and other erroneous factors. The reason for pursuing unexpected results is not to prove the informants wrong but to quickly and efficiently get to the limits of their knowledge of the types, lifestyles, needs, hopes, fears, commitments, and so forth of people who live in their vicinity or elsewhere in the study area. Furthermore, when researchers are able to predict consistently and accurately how informants are going to respond to certain specific questions, they move on to other types of questions and to other types of informants that they discover should be included in the study.

In sampling sociologically to reach either theoretical or substantive objectives, ethnographers do not rely on their judgment alone or even principally. Rather, they rely on the social knowledge of people in the study area to help them saturate the empirical categories pertaining to sampling. In their discussion of *theoretical saturation*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) give sound advice for deciding when it is time to stop sampling the kinds or categories of behavior under study.

As we have said, the sociologist trying to discover theory cannot state at the outset of his research how many groups he will sample during the entire study; he can only count up the groups at the end. Since data for various categories are usually collected from a single group—although data from a given group may be collected for only one category—the sociologist usually is engaged in collecting data from older groups, or returning to them, while simultaneously seeking new groups. Thus he continually is dealing with a multiplicity of groups and a multiplicity of situations within each; while absorbed with generating theory he would find it hard to count all these groups. . . . Even during research focused on theory, however, the sociologist must continually judge how many groups he should sample for each theoretical point. The criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category's *theoretical saturation*. *Saturation* means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated. He goes out of his way to look for groups that stretch diversity of data as far as possible, just to make certain that saturation is based on the widest possible range of data on the category. . . .

The criteria for determining saturation, then, are a combination of the empirical limits of the data, the integration and density of the theory, and the analyst's theoretical sensitivity. (pp. 61-62)

When both the ethnographer and his or her informants have exhausted their ability to identify other kinds of informants and other sorts of questions of relevance to the research objectives,<sup>8</sup> it is time to terminate this phase of the study and begin putting findings together in terms of observations and theories.<sup>9</sup> This process of generating findings involves continually grounding and validating one's data.

## ONGOING GROUNDING AND VALIDATION OF DATA

In accordance with the *verstehende* sociological approach to studying human society, the ethnographer generates information and empirically grounds and validates it in and through the process by which he or she interacts with informants. An occasional individual may be (and almost always in fact is) astoundingly knowledgeable and articulate, able and willing to say loudly and clearly what many others like him or her have said not as well or not at all. On the other hand, not all informants are able and/or willing to provide insightful, coherent, and lucid descriptions of what has been (or will be) happening to them as they get caught up in the sociocultural currents and crosscurrents that give form and substance to their world. To learn what those who are less articulate know about what is happening to and around them, the researcher returns to some to try out on them what he or she thinks he or she has come to know as a result of interviewing one or more of their especially articulate fellows. The usual response is "Yeah, that's what I meant, but I didn't know how to explain it to you" or "No, that's not exactly what I meant. What I meant was. . ."; and here usually follows a much clearer account than the informant was able to give when first contacted. The researcher then continues checking with informants until he or she establishes that there is or is not consensus regarding whatever he or she is inquiring about, or until the discovery that perhaps he or she misclassified some informants and needs to refine his or her classification of them or of their attitudes, values, and actions to account for seemingly deviant cases, and so on. Also, the researcher continually tries out his or her depictions on them to get them to agree or disagree with his or her understanding of their accounts and to correct him or her where they perceive him or her to be mistaken. Using such validation and self-correction procedures, the researcher attempts continually to perceive and understand the empirical realities of the informants as they do and to depict their social world as faithfully as possible, even using locals' own terms and natural expressions to help ground the report, no less than the fieldwork, in the experiences of those who are being portrayed.

The field-worker uses the face-to-face relationships with informants as the fundamental way of demonstrating to them that he or she is there to learn about their lives without passing judgment on them, that he or she is an absolutely trustworthy recipient of candidly and thoughtfully expressed accounts of experiences and reflections on their meanings and implications, and that he or she will do his or her utmost to say and write nothing about them that will knowingly cause them any social or personal harm. In these ways, the field-worker continually negotiates with informants what is mutually acceptable as proper, right, and safe to talk about at given stages in their relationship and thus of his or her understanding of what they are prepared to say. In time, they come to realize as keenly as the field-worker does how important it is that he or she understand their long-standing values as well as their relatively emergent definitions of situations. Both are sometimes subtle, hard to verbalize, and thus difficult for the ethnographer to understand as the informants do, but the fieldwork relationship exists precisely to facilitate identifying and solving such problems.

As the researcher learns to understand a great deal about the informants and their way of life, some important changes naturally take place in how he or she plays the fieldwork role. For example, the researcher can no longer easily get away with asking "dumb" questions when asking informants to teach him or her about the various aspects of their lifestyle he or she has come to study. By this time, they know that the researcher has become quite knowledgeable about them and expect him or her to use this knowledge more to discuss than merely to inquire. So the researcher obliges, in the course of which he or she learns much about how members of the community carry on discussions of topics of interest to the research and thus about the topics themselves.

Moreover, as the researcher gradually gains knowledge of the processes at work when informants perceive and define emergent and ongoing situations, he or she grows increasingly capable of projecting images of the future that people in the study area are creating. The researcher learns how the informants and others like them create images of the future through defining their situations and imagining how these situations would develop and affect them over time. Acting so as to protect their interests in light of what they predict, they tend to create aspects of the future through hedging and other protective actions that become self-fulfilling prophecies.<sup>10</sup> Through fostering an understanding of people's values and of the definitional processes they devise to safeguard and realize their values, ethnographic data on the present can be very useful for charting the course of social change and thus predicting the future. This is true to the extent that people do in fact have some direct control over their lives and do exercise some indirect control in the sense of trying to adjust to and otherwise cope with the impacts of the combined forces of the surrounding "natural" and human environment.

The ethnographer's continuing assumption is that people in the social scene being studied are the ultimate authorities concerning what is happening there and what it all means to them and others around them (Gamble, 1978). If, for example, the people of a community say that social stratification has been subtle and played down in any overt sense because they value and share a strong equalitarian commitment, then this is their reality, and it must be respected if one is to understand them as they understand themselves. This point is made in Thomas's (1931) famous observation that if the individual defines the situation as real, it is real in its consequences. The individual's reality and its consequences for the individual and his or her friends and neighbors are accordingly of paramount interest to the researcher. How all this comes about, the implications for the individual and his or her fellows in terms of attitudinal development, behavioral expression, and the like are matters the researcher continually seeks to understand as the actors themselves do in the variously dynamic and changing circumstances of their lives.

As facts, viewpoints, interpretations, and other accounts are gathered, the researcher continually forms impressions and develops explanations when trying out his or her understanding of these versions of reality on these individuals and others who represent the social categories, groups, and points of view concerned. During this process of analytical induction, perceptions, insights, and hypotheses emerge and are tested continuously. Indeed, this running interaction between formulating and testing (and reformulating and retesting) hypotheses while in the act of generating data is an efficacious and productive blending of deductive with essentially inductive analysis that has no parallel in any other kind of social research. Understandably, then, the field-worker engaged in this process continually modifies concepts and conclusions to make them more accurate and adequate in light of his or her increasing ability to comprehend the dynamics of the issues being investigated. In this way too, negative cases are continually pursued to account for apparent deviations or other unexpected and surprising departures from norms, patterns, and other consistencies in the findings (Znaniecki, 1934). In short, the investigator continually turns to informants and, where qualified and available, fellow researchers to verify findings and thus to minimize the chances of misunderstanding, overlooking, biasing, or otherwise turning information into anything but the reliable and valid data needed to reach research objectives.

In addition to continually validating data by checking out findings as noted, ethnographers rely on a multiplicity of research techniques to systematically cross-check emergent descriptions and analyses. They may use open-ended interviews; conduct a wide range of personal observations; set up and regularly consult a local research advisory committee;<sup>11</sup> hold small- and large-group discussions; analyze secondary sources of information, such as population census materials; use qualitative findings to generate question-

naire topics and items and to interpret and validate questionnaire tabulations;<sup>12</sup> and compare information gathered from various categories of informants with what is found out from various other groups of people. In addition, drafts of progress reports and final reports are usually reviewed with a cross section of the investigators' research subjects as part of the checking procedure. In these ways, ethnographers strive for multiple assurances that their data are valid, or in Glaser and Strauss's (1967) term, that *saturation* has been achieved.

Blumer (1969) adds to the rationale for the foregoing by pointing out major deficiencies in social science research.

Current methodology gives no encouragement or sanction to such direct examination of the empirical social world. Thus, a diligent effort, apart from the research study one undertakes, to see if the empirical area under study corresponds in fact to one's underlying images of it, is a rarity. Similarly, a careful independent examination of the empirical area to see if the problem one is posing represents meaningfully what is going on in that empirical area is scarcely done. Similarly, an independent careful examination of the empirical area to see if what one constructs as data are genuinely meaningful data in that empirical area is almost unheard of. Similarly, a careful identification of what one's concepts are supposed to refer to, and then an independent examination of the empirical area to see if its content sustains, rejects, or qualifies the concept, are far from being customary working practices. And so on. I do not believe that I misrepresent current social and psychological research by saying that the predominant procedure is to take for granted one's premises about the nature of the empirical world and not to examine those premises; to take one's problems as valid because they sound good or because they stem from some theoretical scheme; to cling to some model because it is elegant and logically tight; to regard as empirically valid the data one chooses because such data fit one's conception of the problem; to be satisfied with the empirical relevance of one's concepts because they have a nice connotative ring or because they are current intellectual coins of the realm. (pp. 32-33)

## **AVOIDANCE OF OBSERVER BIAS: AN ASPECT OF OBJECTIVITY**

If a case can be made for science as a relatively objective approach to gathering and processing information and analyzing it into knowledge, it rests ultimately on the procedures that science uses to reach agreement regarding the properties and behavior of whatever phenomena it chooses to study. Thus, in contrived-world (i.e., laboratory or experimental) scientific research, an investigator's findings are published so that his or her colleagues are given an account of, say, how and why he or she did the laboratory study—an account that is sufficiently detailed to enable them to replicate his or her work, determine the extent to which the findings are a function of the operations the investigator performed and the conditions under which he or she performed them the laboratory, and to determine the extent to which the

findings are a function of the investigator, his or her beliefs, predilections, and so on. If they get essentially the same findings when they replicate the investigator's work (in the course of which they presumably are able to do as well as he or she has done in minimizing investigator bias), they tend to conclude that the findings are objective portrayals of the phenomena the investigator has studied. Likewise, in real-world (i.e., natural-setting, empirical) scientific research, in which the study of phenomena in their natural settings ordinarily requires dealing with much more complex interactions and relationships under conditions that may be far messier than in the laboratory, standard procedures are used to maximize observational efficacy, minimize investigator bias, and allow for replication and/or verification to check out the degree to which these procedures have enabled the investigator to produce valid, reliable data that, when incorporated into his or her published report, will be regarded by peers as objective findings. In essence, then, objectivity—in doing scientific research or anything else in life—is a function of sharing views and/or plans of action on the phenomena in question; it obtains when there is agreement between participants and observers concerning these phenomena. Subjectivity is that state or condition that results from unwillingness and/or inability to do this sharing and/or to negotiate rules and procedures for doing this sharing and thus reaching agreement on what is or is not so and why.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, it is understandable that in addition to employing ongoing validation procedures to safeguard against unintentionally biasing the data, ethnographic researchers often arrange to *reality check* their findings. Whereas the former activities involve regularly reviewing with informants the emerging data and the researchers' understanding of what the findings mean to the people being studied, reality checking requires that informants representing the diverse groups and opinions in question check what the ethnographers have put together from the data gathered. They then affirm that what has been said does (or, possibly, does not) in fact accurately represent the situation as they see it. For example, it is not uncommon for an ethnographic research team to spend hours going over every one of their progress reports with each of about a dozen informants, most of whom they have already interviewed and all of whom they regard as good representatives of the major social groupings and points of view being studied. Ordinarily, not one of these individuals will find anything about the report more than minimally objectionable, as all of the objections and other responses that they or others like them have made will have already been taken into account by the objectifying process by which the findings were generated. The researchers are careful in their final report to indicate when the views of informants are being presented and when the researchers themselves are commenting about the data. After reading a draft of this report, key informants attest to its objectivity by affirming that they found the substance of the report to be accurate and its style reasonable and fair.

## DOCUMENTATION: ANOTHER ASPECT OF OBJECTIVITY

Any presentation of ethnographic findings is not complete without proper documentation, a process that is concerned with how the investigator knows something is so and demonstrating it to the reader's satisfaction. In scholarly and scientific works, each discipline has conventions for documenting statements in such a way that the reader can check them out to determine their authenticity and credibility or perhaps to obtain more complete information from an original source.

In reports on survey research on human behavior, documentation is built into the tabular presentations of data. Here, the investigator shows how many respondents of given categories replied in specified ways to particular questions. It is understood by all concerned that in this kind of research, much effort is devoted to prestructuring the information-gathering activity, usually in the form of a questionnaire that is either self-administered or administered by an interviewer. It is further understood that every effort is made to neutralize or at least standardize the influence of the person administering the questionnaire to control for interviewer effect and consequently to be reasonably certain that the responses will be as much as possible merely a function of the stimuli provided by the written questions. Following the rules for documentation of data generated by statistical sampling, both the investigator and the qualified reader of the report understand that when numbers in the tables are a certain size or larger, they indicate, for example, that a significant part of the population surveyed definitely said this or did that.

This kind of attention to the number of respondents and to the distribution of their responses is very understandable when examining the documentation in reports on survey or other statistical research. However, it has a quite different place in ethnographic research or in any other social research that calls for the investigator to maximize, rather than minimize, interviewer effect with a view to developing relationships with informants that have the effect of facilitating the generation of desired data. In this kind of research, the process of obtaining data is the key factor in documenting, not the number of interviews conducted or responses obtained. This process involves finding ways of demonstrating to informants that the interviewer is a qualified, congenial, and trustworthy recipient of information, feelings, and concerns of importance to them. Ethnographers do more than just question informants: They sometimes challenge responses, declare their inability to see how a given reply is so different from or stereotypical of other individuals in the represented social category, discuss the informants' situation with them, and in other ways try to develop a relationship that has the effect of helping the persons being interviewed to respond fully and effectively.<sup>14</sup> In social psychological terms, the ethnographic field-worker seeks personally and directly to

help informants to maximize self-expression at minimal self-risk while being interviewed.

All this is meant to point out that ethnographers document their data, not by reporting how many people responded in certain ways to standardized questions asked rather mechanically and unobtrusively but by describing how they developed relationships with informants so as to help them share their knowledge of whatever was under study.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, it is standard practice in the final reports of ethnographic studies to include a discussion that presents such details as how the researchers entered the field, made contact with potential informants, developed (and, in some instances, failed to develop) relationships with interviewees, used (or, at times, failed to use) the relationship to generate data, checked the information, and (in studies of literate societies) even got their informants to criticize the report drafts so that the final depiction of their social world would, in their view, be no less meaningful and fair than factually correct.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article has presented the essential features of ethnography, a field-work method that offers unique investigative, substantive, and theoretical contributions to social research. Based on *verstehende* sociology, the method directs social researchers to study human society from the points of view of its members; as such, ethnographers must become personally and deeply acquainted with their informants' experiences and views. Rather than relying on a preconceived framework for gathering and analyzing data, ethnographers use their interactions with informants to discover and create analytical frameworks for understanding and portraying that which is under study. The procedures used in this direct and intimate acquaintance with the empirical world provide assurance that the data collected are grounded in the informants' actual experiences. Resultant findings are the products of ethnography's self-correcting investigative process.

As in statistical research, various requirements must be met to achieve reliability and validity. These include adequate and appropriate sampling procedures, systematic techniques for gathering and analyzing data, validation of data, avoidance of observer bias, and documentation of findings—all of which are approached in ways that differ from conventional (statistical) procedures. From hypothesis formulation to final report, competently done ethnography is a singularly dynamic and fruitful way of studying the human scene.

It follows from the foregoing discussion that an important difference between ethnographic and statistical research is that there is no temporal or procedural separation between description and analysis in the former, whereas such separations are standard features of the latter. Thus, when

ethnographic fieldwork is finished, the principal findings are already in hand. It also follows that it would make no sense to attempt to posit a distinction between the findings resulting from the two principal ways of sampling sociologically in ethnographic research, one with a view to emphasizing the generation of substantive data, the other with a view to emphasizing the generation of theoretical data. Both kinds of findings contain informants' explanations of their social world, and both contain the investigator's synthesis of these explanations. The key distinction is that the substantive data emphasize the relatively context-bound explanations of informants, whereas the theoretical data emphasize the relatively context-free (e.g., formal sociological, universal) explanations of the researcher's discipline.

## NOTES

1. It should be noted, too, that this article is my version of the "classic" University of Chicago approach to ethnography. Some aspects of this version were first published in 1958.

2. For a recent, penetrating review of the literature on ethnography and many related topics, see Atkinson and Hammersly (1994).

3. See, for example, Tocqueville (1850/1966), Martineau (1838), LePlay (1855), and an edited translation of LePlay in Zimmerman and Frampton (1937).

4. See Gold (1958) for a discussion of basic fieldwork roles for developing and maintaining various kinds and degrees of closeness in relationships with informants.

5. It should be noted that statistical sampling can be very useful if employed after the investigator has classified and categorized the data and wishes to find out how many cases there are in each category of behavior, what the precise distribution of attitudes of a given sort is among the population under study, or the like.

6. Although the focus of the present article is on literate societies, the methodological principles and procedures it outlines are universal and thus are applicable to preliterate societies as well.

7. Sometimes it is necessary, purposely and deliberately, to seek out certain social categories that have only one or a few representatives in the study area (e.g., county health nurse, land developers, county sheriff, and so on) because of the obvious need to make sure that their observations are not missed.

8. A seeming exception to the rule that people in a given social category are usually the best source of information for identifying others in the category should be noted. It sometimes happens that ethnographers are able to synthesize what they have learned from informants in a particular social category to identify those in it who wish to conceal this aspect of themselves. For example, an ethnographer may in this way become more skilled at spotting closet functional illiterates than any formerly closeted person already interviewed. This would be an example of carrying sociological sampling to its logical extreme as an aid to identifying desirable potential informants.

9. Comparative and longitudinal case studies are particularly useful in enabling the ethnographer continuously to sort out generalizable from nongeneralizable findings (Blumer, 1969).

10. Bear in mind that a self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction that has a way of actually happening because the person making the prediction wittingly or unwittingly acts in ways that help to make it (e.g., a definition of a situation) come true.

11. The committee is composed of a cross section of informants and others. Its functions include giving all concerned feedback on the study, reality checking findings, reviewing and commenting on drafts of study reports, and otherwise helping the researcher to keep the study on track. These functions constitute powerful reassurances for all concerned that the findings are valid and are being portrayed accurately and fairly.

12. Numerical analyses can be very useful when derived from questionnaire items based on an initial ethnographic study of the area in question because the qualitative data permit the items to be tailored to specific matters of importance to respondents. Such statistical findings are much easier to explain because they have been grounded in what the research subjects regard as the real world.

13. These definitions are not unique to social research. Physicist Abdus Salam, in his Nobel Prize lecture, uses a quote from an Einstein lecture to express "his [Einstein's], my colleagues', and my own views": "Pure logical thinking cannot yield us any knowledge of the empirical world; all knowledge of reality starts from experience and ends in it" (Salam, 1980, p. 726). And astrophysicist Robert Geroch, in a 1976 interview, talks about theories in that field:

A common misconception among students is that physics is sharp, clear, cut and dried. . . . Most of physics is making judgments. . . . Theories come and go. A theory isn't right or wrong. A theory has a sort of sociological position which changes as new information comes in. (Poliski, 1976, p. 32)

14. There is no temporal or procedural separation between gathering and analyzing data ethnographically. The process of seeking to discover and saturate categories (or behavior, meaning, etc.) is one of ongoingly testing understandings of information and thereby transforming information and meanings into findings.

15. Two good examples of such description are Malinowski (1950) and Whyte (1954).

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