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Ethnographic methods [second edition]

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Ethnographic Methods

The practice of ethnography

Karen O'Reilly

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Preface to the second edition

I agreed to write a second edition of this book thinking it would not involve much more than a bit of updating. However, the field has developed to such an extent that the revisions and modifications I have made and the developments I have discussed have resulted in a much more extensive revision than I had imagined at the outset. It has been exciting work. Relatively little was published in the field of qualitative methods, still less ethnographic methods, when I prepared the first edition. Especially in anthropology, there was an implicit understanding that writing about methods was somewhat banal, inferior to other things academics should be doing, and certainly tedious. In the past few years, this situation has changed to such an extent that at times I felt completely overwhelmed with material. Textbooks, specialist literature, disciplinary tomes, analytical and descriptive articles, debates, new approaches, and 'innovative' methods abound as authors find ever new ways to make the same (or similar) argument in such a way as to warrant yet another publication. I therefore sympathise with students, and those new to ethnography, who have to find some way of filtering this mass of material for their own purposes.

Nevertheless, I believe this book can offer something unique because my work is theoretically informed yet accessible. It is interdisciplinary, based on many years of using and adapting ethnographic methods in diverse settings, and on teaching the approach to students with very diverse disciplinary backgrounds, from all over the world. I am both a sociologist and a social anthropologist, whose work also overlaps with human geography and politics. I have applied ethnography in a fairly conventional way to undertake a 15 month community study of British people living in Spain, and a year long in-depth analysis of change and continuity in an English town; and I have used ethnographic methods more flexibly in shorter periods in schools, business organisations, at public events and in private settings, through the use of ethnographic, life story,

and email interviews, the analysis of weblogs, and more. Finally, as a sociologist, my approach to ethnography is heavily informed by social theory, especially theories of practice (see Chapter One) and theories of knowledge (see Chapter Two).

The second edition has made a few changes to which I would like to draw readers' attention. Overall the book is much longer with many more recent examples and illustrations; arguments, debates and references have been updated; and I have introduced Key Ideas (in boxes) and provided exercises at the end of each chapter. In Chapter One I make the case that ethnography should be perceived as *practice*. I thus spend time elaborating ideas that are implicit in some definitions of ethnography that perceive human beings as part object and part subject. These are based on, often implicit, assumptions about the extent to which humans are free agents or are determined by structures. There has been a tendency in more recent ethnography to focus on individuals' and groups' opinions and feelings, or on their cultures, while forgetting to look at the wider structures that frame and inform their choices. Here, I propose that ethnography should be informed by a theoretical perspective that understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; that also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and that determines the methods to draw on and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography. I thus outline some of the social theories of practice that can be drawn on by ethnographers to inform their own practice. Chapter One now introduces William Foote Whyte's Street Corner Society, as an example of a Chicago School style of ethnography. The discussion of contemporary uses of ethnographic methods now introduces the notion of reflexive practice, and specifically covers developments in health and medicine, human geography, and education. Several of the key principles of ethnographic practice are introduced here.

Chapter Two introduces the notion of 'guiding theoretical problems' that inform iterative-inductive research and provides examples of these. There are plenty of references for readers to pursue for examples of inductive research questions and design, and for the role of the literature review in ethnographic research. I have included an extended discussion of sampling strategies. The section on philosophies of social science has been updated and expanded and linked more overtly to ethnographic methods; it is summarised with the use of Key Ideas, and includes a clear statement of my own position: that many of the debates about philosophy are resolved through ethnographic practice and that the role of philosophy is as under labourer not master builder.

Chapter Three is changed little but examples and debates are brought up to date and more case studies are used to bring it all to life. The chapter has made some special consideration of ethical issues for virtual, sensual, critical, and autoethnographies. I have also included some discussion of the ethics of ethical committees and reflected on issues of embodiment, field relations, power, and engagement. I end the chapter with a clear statement of my own ethical position that ethical dilemmas must be resolved on a case by case basis as ethnography takes place. Ethical research is therefore an essential and ongoing component of ethnographic practice.

The advantage of Chapter Four is that it discusses what one actually does in the field, which so many textbooks fail to consider in much depth. It now has more up to date examples and case studies and is updated in line with recent debates about reflexivity, insider ethnographies, field relations, and the embodied practice of ethnography. I have also extended the chapter with some discussion of rapport, intimacy and conflict, team work, and much more on note-taking. I cover field-walking, the role of participation in contemporary ethnography, and the limits of ethnography. The discussion about the participant observation continuum has been reworked into a discussion about the useful and essential dialectic of participation and observation.

Chapter Five has been updated and there is more apparent emphasis on asking questions within participant observation, and on defining an ethnographic interview. I have changed the first section of the chapter to focus more broadly on the distinctive nature of interviews and

conversations within ethnography, and a discussion about passive and active interviewing and the importance of listening. I have included some description of autoethnographic accounts. The sections on group interviews has been reworded to discuss 'group interviews' rather than discussion groups, and some new examples and references have been added.

Chapter Six links practical issues in interviewing more explicitly than previously to the nature of the ethnographic interview (as discussed in Chapter Five). The chapter has more up to date examples and lots of references students can follow up for more in-depth discussion of key points (such as the implications of transcription, and understanding what might be going on when an interview is refused). There is an example of an interview guide and references to archived ethnographic studies and to previously collected interview data. Discussion of the interpretation of narratives has also been extended a little.

Chapter Seven (previously titled: Visual data and other things), now addresses 'New Directions in Ethnography'. There is still quite a good coverage of visual ethnography but the chapter has been considerably updated to include autophotography, and virtual, mobile, multi-sited, and global ethnography. Most of these are also covered in my *Key Concepts in Ethnography* (O'Reilly 2009) but the coverage here is broader with lots of references, examples and case studies. These are exciting advances that are covered in disparate texts, monographs and journal articles, so discussing them here in a single text on ethnographic methods is invaluable as well as novel.

Chapter Eight now has more, up-to-date, examples of published work to illustrate flexibility and reflexivity in analysis. I have included some discussion of the role of thinking for analysis, and how analysis should focus on action and structure and their interaction in the practice of daily life and ethnography (with reference back to Chapter One). I have extended and updated the discussion of grounded theory and outlined some of the key concepts and the history of the approach in more depth. The section on computer software has been updated, recognising the ways in which use of these programs can be interactive and creative, and have adapted to new developments in ethnographic methods. There are improved examples for using concepts in analysis, the relationship

between ethnography and theory has been updated a little and a relevant up-to-date example added. There is also some discussion of the role of key events in analysis.

Finally, Chapter Nine now overtly makes the case for a subtle realist approach to representation informed by the philosophical approaches discussed in Chapter Two. This is particularly revealed through the use of Key Ideas. I have added references that illustrate contemporary writing that finds ways to acknowledge the tentative, provisional nature of the interpretation of events without abandoning all attempts to write a somewhat realist account. The chapter concludes with reflection on the validity of ethnographic accounts and an extended discussion of the relevance of ethnography beyond the specific case. There is an extended discussion of generalisation and ethnography, and some further reading for those interested in applied ethnography.

To illustrate the arguments made in the book I have used a combination of the stories of the experiences of students and people I have worked closely with, my own work, and some published works. I often use first names to indicate a personal relationship and intimate knowledge of the ethnographic experience. Published reflections of fieldwork experiences have become far more numerous since I wrote the first edition and it is now much easier than previously for students of ethnography to read about the trials and tribulations, stops and starts, excitements and lessons of others. I have relied quite heavily here on just a few key texts and journals so that readers can follow up examples for themselves. I especially recommend: the journals *Ethnography* and *Contemporary Journal of Ethnography; Ethnographic Research. A Reader* edited by Stephanie Taylor (2002); William Foote Whyte's (1993) famous *Street Corner Society*; and *Journeys Through Ethnography*, edited by Annette Lareau and Jeffrey Shultz (1996). These are enough to get any newcomer to ethnographic methods started on the right foot.

Acknowledgements

This book has been written especially for students and is written with thanks to the undergraduate and postgraduate students who have inspired me over the years with their enthusiasm to learn about ethnographic methods. A special mention is due to Jo Cram, Elizabeth Dinnie, Lydia Lewis, Nicola Marzouka, and Gavin Smith. I would not have coped without the emotional and intellectual support of several colleagues over the years at Essex, Aberdeen and Loughborough. They are too numerous to list, but hopefully they know who they are. I especially wish to mention the LiQUiD Lab team (Loughborough's Qualitative Digital Research Lab) for their inspiration. I also thank the reviewers who helped me shape this second edition and the editors and other staff at Routledge for their continued support. Of course, any errors or blunders are entirely my own. I apologise to family and friends for being lost in this for a while, and thank you for accepting that. My partner, Trevor, has once again suffered my insecurities and doubts with nothing but good humour and unfailing belief in my abilities.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Ethnography as practice

Key Idea: Ethnography should be informed by a theory of practice that: understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; that also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and that determines the methods to draw on and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

I am still, as I write the second edition of this book, very enthusiastic about ethnographic research. Over the decades ethnography has proven to involve the application of any number of the full range of methods available to a researcher in a way that is close to the way we all make sense of the world around us in our daily lives - by watching, experiencing, absorbing, living, breathing, and inquiring about a culture, lifestyle, event, or even object – while it can also be, if undertaken carefully, scientifically rigorous, systematic, and at least to some extent objective. Ethnography has proven to be the best way to learn, in detail, about a diverse range of complex social phenomena from personal experiences of self-harm (Adler and Adler 2007) to the globally-structured network of organs trafficking (Scheper-Hughes 2004). Nevertheless, ethnography is difficult to define because it is used in diverse ways in a wide range of disciplines drawing on different traditions. This chapter will first examine how ethnography has been defined by a range of other authors before explaining my own definition of ethnography as a methodology informed by a theory of social life as practice. I will trace some of the historical development of ethnography, especially within anthropology and sociology, before looking at more contemporary approaches in other disciplines.

Defining ethnography

Exemplifying the breadth of ethnography within the social sciences, Stephanie Taylor (2002) brings together a collection of ethnographic studies, including Valerie Hey's (1997) engaging and critical work on schoolgirls' friendships and Lesley Griffith's (1998) interpretive study of how humour is used as a strategy by health care workers to mediate instructions from powerful professionals. The studies range methodologically from what Taylor calls a conventional ethnography, 'for which the ethnographer makes the enormous personal investment of moving into a community for an extended period' to a team project drawing on several discrete methods of formal data collection. However, for Taylor, ethnography essentially involves empirical work, especially observation, with the aim of producing a full, nuanced, non-reductive text, in 'the ethnographic tradition', however that is defined or interpreted by each author.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) acknowledge that the term ethnography is variable and contested, overlapping with qualitative research more broadly, with 'fieldwork', case study, and even life histories (see Heyl 2001). In their search for a definition they focus on what ethnographers do, recognising that in terms of data collection:

> ethnography usually involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts - in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.
>
> (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3)

Beyond this, they also acknowledge that the research is usually small in scale, undertaken in everyday contexts, using various data sources and methods, and they draw attention to the inductive and interpretive nature of ethnographic inquiry.

David Fetterman, an applied anthropologist, focuses more on the real-world applications of knowledge produced using ethnography, and calls it 'more than a 1-day hike through the woods. It is an ambitious journey through the complex world of social interaction' (2010:xi). Ethnography, for him, involves telling 'credible, rigorous and authentic' stories from the perspective of local people, and interpreting these stories in the context of people's daily lives and cultures (2010:1). This involves both phenomenological and hermeneutic interpretations (as I discuss further in Chapter Two).

In the *British Medical Journal*, Jan Savage (2000) argues the case for using ethnography as a qualitative methodology for the in depth study of health issues in context. She recognises that there is no standard definition of ethnography, but argues that the defining feature is often participant observation entailing prolonged fieldwork, and that:

> Most ethnographers today would agree that the term ethnography can be applied to any small scale research that is carried out in everyday settings; uses several methods; evolves in design through the study; and focuses on the meaning of individuals' actions and explanations rather than their quantification.
>
> Jan Savage (2000:1400)

We therefore begin to see a few essential components of ethnography emerging, and these are not so much to do with methods of data collection as a methodology, or an approach to research. These are summarised very well in the eclectic approach of Paul Willis and Mats Trondman (2000: 5), the first editors of the journal *Ethnography*, who in their introduction to the (then new) journal, describe ethnography as 'a methodology that draws on a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and on richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing, *at least partly in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience'. Crucial elements are: the understanding and representation of experience; presenting and explaining the culture in which this experience is located, but also acknowledging that 'experience is entrained in

the flow of history' (p6). Human beings are therefore part subjects and part objects. For Willis and Trondman, ethnography should also be theoretically informed, with a critical focus, and should have relevance for cultural politics.

It is the contention of the present book that ethnography is a practice that evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive, and credible stories. Ethnography should be informed by a theory of practice that: understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; that also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and that determines the methods to draw on and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

The chapters

It is not essential to read this book in order. It should be treated as a handbook that can be taken into the field with you and consulted at various stages of your journey through ethnography. I firmly believe that the best way to learn about ethnography is to do it, but that this book should raise awareness and a critical reflexivity in you, helping you make informed and considered decisions at various junctions. I am proposing that ethnography is best viewed using the concept of practice. This first chapter therefore goes on to discuss what I mean by the *practice* of ethnography, and sketches out the theoretical framework for a theory of practice. I then describe the origins of the methods of ethnographic fieldwork within social anthropology and sociology, in which disciplines ethnography arguably has its roots. We especially examine the work of Bronislaw Malinowski who is considered by many to be the founder of contemporary ethnographic fieldwork methods. Then we are

introduced in depth to the work of William Foote Whyte, who has contributed so much to debates in ethnographic methods through his famous methodological appendix. This chapter concludes with the range of contemporary uses of ethnographic methods in social science, especially in health and medicine, geography, and education.

Chapter Two explores more practical issues about how one might approach a piece of ethnographic research. It includes iterative-inductive nature of much ethnography, defining a guiding theoretical problem, reviewing the literature, starting out and selecting cases. The chapter then takes an in-depth look at the role of the philosophy of social science and theories of knowledge for ethnography. This examines positivism, interpretivism, realism, critical approaches, relativism, postmodernism, and post-positivism/ subtle realism and their implications for ethnographic methods in practice.

Chapter Three explores the myriad ethical considerations raised while conducting ethnographic research, including: the difficult distinction between overt and covert ethnography; gaining consent; disclosure and confidentiality; issues of power and control; and how to balance rights, responsibilities and commitments. This chapter features a transcript of a group discussion about ethics between existing researchers. It also considers ethical issues for some of the newer approaches in ethnography, such as autoethnography, performance and virtual methods.

The main method of ethnography is known as participant observation, and it is very distinctive as a method. The advantage of Chapter Four is that it discusses what one actually does in the field – which so many textbooks fail to consider. Key elements of participant observation explored here are gaining access, taking time, learning the language, participation and observation, and taking notes. We also address field relations, reflexivity, the notion of ethnography as embodied practice, the building of trust and rapport, and the use of gatekeepers. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the dialectic relationship between participating and observing.

Ethnographers conduct interviews as well as participating and observing. Interviews can take the shape of opportunistic chats, questions that arise on the spur of the moment, one to one in-

depth interviews, and group interviews, and all sorts of ways of asking questions and learning about people that fall in between. It is therefore quite difficult to prescribe how an ethnographer should do an interview. Nevertheless, there are some quite distinctive features of an ethnographic approach to interviewing, so Chapter Five deals with that first, before going on to explore the different types of interview available to an ethnographer, including oral history interviews, autoethnographic accounts, and group interviews. Ethnographic interviews are shown to be collaborative rather than interrogative, guided rather than structured, flexible, and usually informal.

Although I prefer not to be too prescriptive about interview styles and techniques, Chapter Six offers some practical guidelines for interviewing, addressing questions such as: how do I get someone to agree to an interview? What is an interview guide? What do I do if they wander off the point? Should I transcribe? How do I test for validity? It includes an example of an interview topic guide, and lots of illustrations of interviewing practice.

Chapter Seven explores some of the ways ethnography is responding to changes in the world around us as well as to theoretical, conceptual and thematic developments in the disciplines that guide our work. The chapter therefore introduces advancements in visual, mobile, multi-sited, global, and virtual ethnography.

Ethnographic research is iterative-inductive. This is a practice of doing research, informed by a sophisticated inductivism, in which data collection, analysis, and writing are not discrete phases but inextricably linked. Nevertheless, we do reach a point where we move more towards analysis and representation and leave data collection to one side (if only for the moment). Chapter Eight deals with this final phase. It explores the spiral model for ethnographic analysis; using computer software; sorting, classifying and describing; the role of concepts and theories; and how to analyse the interaction of structure and agency. It concludes with an in-depth description of the methodology and techniques of grounded theory.

Since the reflexive turn of the 1980s the production of ethnographic texts has come under careful scrutiny. Ethnographers must now think critically and reflexively about writing and about the

contexts of research and writing. Chapter Nine thus explores modernist (traditional), postmodern and post postmodern (or subtle realist) writing styles and their attempts to construct, or to think critically about the construction of, authoritative texts. Through the use of the arguments outlined in the key ideas, it makes the case for a subtle realist approach to representation informed by the philosophical approaches discussed in Chapter Two. The chapter concludes with reflection on the validity of ethnographic accounts and on the relevance of ethnography beyond the specific case.

Each chapter ends with suggestions for further readings and recommends exercises for readers to undertake on their own or in small groups (perhaps in classroom settings). If students work through the classroom exercises for each chapter, they will be equipped to independently undertake a theoretically-informed ethnographic study, to analyse and write it up with a critical reflexivity towards representational forms, and be in a position to defend the validity and reliability of their work.

The Practice of Ethnography

I would like to spend a little time here elaborating on some of the ideas implicit in the definition of ethnography proposed by Willis and Trondman, above. Their call to perceive human beings as part object and part subject is based on some assumptions about the extent to which humans are free agents or are determined by structures. There has been a tendency in more recent ethnography to focus on people's opinions and feelings or on their cultures, while forgetting to look at the wider structures that frame their choices, or at least with very little theorising about how agency and structures interact. In this second edition of this book, I propose that ethnography is best viewed using the concept of practice. By this I mean it should be informed by a theoretical perspective:

- that understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life;
- that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time;

- that also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and
- that determines the methods to draw on and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

There are some useful threads in social theories of practice we can draw on to inform ethnographic practice. I will very briefly examine the work of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Rob Stones, Etienne Wenger, Jean Lave, and a few other authors[1]. Structuration theory was a social theory of practice proposed by Anthony Giddens via various publications (especially 1976, 1979, and 1984). It argues we should not see objects (structures) and subjects (agents, individuals) as distinct entities but as interrelated in the everyday playing out (or practice) of everyday life. Giddens insists that social life is not the outcome of either individual actions (or agency, he uses the same term), determined by how individuals feel, what they intend, or plan to achieve; but neither is it determined by social structures (institutions, rules, or resources). Indeed, social structures limit what people can and cannot do, what they even try to or wish to do, but agents do have some free will; and the very social structures that enable and constrain in some situations are made and remade by individuals in the process of their acting (or their agency). For Giddens, we therefore cannot even think of agency and structure as (ontologically) distinct; they are a duality - always interdependent and interrelated: 'structures are constituted through action and […] action is constituted structurally' (Giddens 1976: 161). But Giddens did not give us much in the way of methodological tools for applying this theory, so people have applied it rather loosely. He tends to be voluntaristic (and so do those who use his theory). He does not very clearly specify what he means by structures and perhaps leaves them too tangled up with agency. However, he does make the important point that social life is an historical process; it therefore cannot be studied by taking a snapshot. This is an important point for ethnographers.

[1] Note that some authors, such as Cohen (1989), prefer to use the term 'praxis' rather than practice, since the latter has other connotations associated with the mundane repetition of actions.

Key ideas: Objectivism in social science is the idea that social structures, laws, institutions, systems of relationships etc, have a reality that is 'independent of individual consciousness and wills' (Bourdieu 1990: 26). **Subjectivism** concentrates more on the way the social world is perceived by individuals and sometimes perceives society as nothing more than the outcome of individual actions.

Pierre Bourdieu's social theory (again elaborated via many publications, but especially 1977, 1984, 1985, 1990, and Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), similarly opposes a crude distinction between objectivism and subjectivism, 'while preserving the gains from each of them' (1990: 25) . For him, people's tastes and preferences, choices, desires and actions cannot be separated from structural constraints. Subjectivism, Bourdieu (1990) contends, views agents as free-floating subjects who can choose to do what they will, as if their actions are not at all circumscribed by what has gone before. Objectivism, on the other hand, reduces all actions and subjects to the mere outcomes of structures, and thus history to a process without a subject. He proposes the concept of *practice* (eg 1990) as a way of thinking through those same processes that Giddens refers to as structuration. His notion of the practice of social life rests on a few key concepts, especially habitus, capital, the field, and the game. These are all elaborated in depth in Bourdieu's various publications; I do not have the space to elaborate them here. Very crudely, *habitus* is the dispositions, habits, ways of doing things, ways of thinking, and ways of seeing the world that individuals acquire, singly and in groups, as they travel through life. They are therefore structures that have become embodied and are enacted. People are always in practical relations to the world: 'the habitus is constituted in practice and is always oriented to practical functions' (Bourdieu 1990: 52). Practices, Bourdieu argues, are reasonable adjustments to the future; not rational calculations, and not necessarily the product of an identifiable plan, but the outcome of the interaction of habitus with external conditions, in the given field and dependent on available forms of capital. However, Bourdieu tends to be deterministic and so do those who use his work, and there is a tendency to rely on the concepts without referring to the overall theory of practice.

It is possible to conceptualise practice drawing from the work of both of these authors as well as that of some others. Rob Stones (2005), for example, has developed a stronger version of structuration theory that builds on the work of Giddens, responding to criticisms and drawing on strengths from other work. Elsewhere (O'Reilly forthcoming), I have proposed an approach that combines Stones' work with further insights from the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, where they describe communities of practice and situated learning, and the elaboration of the concept of agency as proposed by Mustafa Emirbayer's and Ann Mische. The important bridge between macro and micro perspectives, missing in so much empirical research, is provided by analysis of the interaction, through *practice*, of individuals (with desires, goals, expectations, and habits) and the wider structures as enacted by people in positions, roles or statuses, in relation to each other.

I found Etienne Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice a useful way to think about the various contexts within which agency and structures are enacted, and within which ethnographic research might be undertaken. Communities of practice are the coming together of groups of individuals; people engage in practice, in the negotiation of meaning, in communities. 'The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do' (1998: 47). Practice is the acting out of social life (not to be confused with the adjective 'practical' or the verb 'to practice'). Practice, Wenger says, includes what we might recognise (traditionally) as structures – codes, rules, regulations, procedures – but also 'all the implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognizable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions, and shared world views. Most of these may never be articulated, yet they are unmistakeable signs of membership in communities of practice...' (ibid: 47). In other words practice is about knowing (and working out) how to go on in given circumstances suspended within networks of other people and groups each with their own habits, rules, norms, and constraints. Not only do individuals each have their own desires and habits, but also ways of

knowing how to go on that are continually learned and relearned within communities where others are all doing the same (including ethnographers).

A community of practice is not just a group or network, it involves sustaining 'dense relations of mutual engagement organized around what they are there to do' (ibid: 74), be those families, friends, a workplace, a school, or even an online community. Here, in all these situations of everyday life, individuals need to negotiate their way forward, each bringing to the situation their own internalised structures (or habitus) and adapting their own goals and expectations in line with experiences, norms and practices of others. Communities of practice are not homogeneous, Wenger notes; participants have different roles, backgrounds, identities, histories, goals, statuses, power. Crucially, communities of practice are interrelations that arise out of engagement in practice rather than entities an ethnographer might try to objectively describe as a community.

The theory of situated learning, proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), is also useful in helping make sense of how individuals actually engage in social life, negotiating external structures, embodied structures in the form of habitus, and the expectations and habits of those within our communities. Based somewhat loosely on the general theories of practice outlined briefly above, in which wider structures are both preconditions and variable outcomes of action (the wider, sociologically-informed theoretical framework is spelled out more fully in their footnotes), these authors suggest that learning is not a specific action but something we all do all the time while co-participating in everyday situations. Here, we are not so interested in what we learn as how we adapt what we think we know, how we feel, or what we do in order to co-participate within communities of practice. Another way to think about this might be as the strategies people learn and internalise as ways to get by in the practice of everyday life within communities, as they adapt their expectations, desires, goals and dreams to the practical context and the norms, rules and resources of those around them (see de Certeau 1984 and Scott 1985 for some more on these strategies).

For Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963, and thanks to Ewa Morawska for bringing these to my attention), human agency is

> a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

Agency thus consists of three elements: the iterational, the projective and the practical. Their discussion around the iterational does not add anything beyond what is already provided by Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Their discussion of the practical element of agency contributes to theory of situated learning, above. It involves making sense of problems based on what is known (characterising), adjusting habits consciously in changing contexts (deliberation), more or less conscious decision-making, and execution. The projective element on the other hand recognises that the concept of habitus can be overly deterministic and that humans do have the ability to create and to pursue goals. Social life, Emirbayer and Mische suggest, includes challenges and uncertainties to which actors respond. Of course, actors' desires and dreams are culturally embedded, but they are not predetermined. Actors plan and project, as the Chicago School pragmatists and interactionists (Dewey, Schutz, Mead, Wiley) taught us; drawing on what they know, they imagine alternatives to current situations, visualise proposed solutions (and how they might be achieved), test out their ideas (perhaps moving temporarily or going somewhere on holiday, or just finding out from others who have done the same), and modify them constantly as they 'move within and among...different unfolding contexts' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:964).

I am proposing these various theoretical perspectives on practice as a means to start thinking theoretically about how social life unravels in practice. Methodologically, this involves conceptualising and learning about the wider structures that frame the practice of a given community or group. This can use both grand theorising as well as learning practically about the smaller, local, relevant context. But, such abstract level arguments should always be linked overtly to

the analysis of the practice of daily life. Practice theory views individuals as knowledgeable, which calls for empirical research to pay attention to their own perspectives, thoughts and opinions. Practice also often involves doing things without being aware of it, in the context of constraints and opportunities of which people may not be conscious. It is essential, therefore, to find ways of studying the practice of daily life and understanding it without relying solely on the views of agents. Ethnography that pays attention to both wider structures and the thoughts and feelings of agents, within the context of action, is thus an ideal approach to research practice.

Key idea: Ethnography that pays attention to wider structures and to the thoughts and feelings of agents, within the context of daily life and individual action, is an ideal approach to research the *practice* of social life.

Rob Stones (2005) says that his strong version of structuration theory has a normative commitment to studying the complexity of people's daily lives (to hermeneutics and phenomenology), a desire to understand cultural differences, to challenge stereotypes and typifications, and not to reduce such complexity. Life history and narrative research that examine individuals' personal stories also offer promising and fruitful approaches for the study of practice. But structures are both internal and external, so agents' perceptions can never be divorced from structural contexts. Furthermore, a researcher might understand aspects of the context not perceived by the agent. Some methodology that enables a perspective beyond just that of the agent seems crucial.

Finally, an empirical study informed by a theory of practice will always be temporal. Giddens says we must 'situate action in time and space as a continuous flow of action' (1979: 3). We should avoid snapshots of society, on the one hand, and equating time with social change on the other; social reproduction and continuity also take place over time (and space). The gaze of the researcher cannot be restricted to the 'present moment' or to 'individual action'. We have to study broader institutional systemic and structural frames, wider forces, but the focus is on how these are manifested in practice (within the practical action horizon of particular agents, ibid: 83, check). This, of course, depends on the collection of adequate empirical evidence.

Ethnography: a critical definition for practice

Ethnography is then more a theory about how research should be conducted than a recipe for techniques that can be employed. It draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and conversations. It gains its understanding of the social world through involvement in the daily practice of human agents, and it involves immersion in the context, the building of trust and rapport with agents, both phenomenological and hermeneutic interpretations, and recognition of the complexity of the social world. It does not attempt to reduce this complexity to a few statistical or typological representations. It is reflexive about the role of the researcher and the messiness of the research process. And, if it is faithful to practice theory, then it will ensure that it employs a macro approach to gain knowledge of the wider context of action, as well as maintaining a close eye on the various ways that structures are taking effect within and through agents in the practice of daily life.

Key Idea: a critical definition of ethnography. Ethnography is a practice that: evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive, and credible stories.

If we are true to a theory of practice for ethnography then we also need to acknowledge that as individuals taking part in the daily lives of the individuals we are interested in, we are also subject to our own wider structures of opportunities and constraints, we have embodied our own set of expectations from diverse sources, and we will bring those ideas and assumptions to the setting with us. We will also have an impact on the practice of daily life as well as how we understand that practice, and we will be implicated in the outcomes of that practice in terms of actions, attitudes,

and in the (re)production and transformation of social structures. I discuss all these issues further in subsequent chapters, when I discuss reflexivity, and, in Chapter Two, when I look at some of the philosophical perspectives informing ethnography. Therefore, as I have said earlier, ethnography should be informed by a theory of practice that: understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; that also examines, reflexively, one's own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and that determines the methods to draw on and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

This is not a recipe book. I do not pretend to teach readers how to do ethnographic research through a step-by-step guide to techniques and procedures. This book aims to sensitise you to the issues involved when making decisions about specific methods. Because ethnography is a practice, it is not possible to predetermine what should be done and how in a given set of circumstances. Every decision is a matter of weighing up a multitude of factors so that I cannot tell you what to do but what choices there are and how others have resolved various problems, describing the array of methods available in order to encourage you in what Plummer (2001a:118) calls 'a self-consciousness about method' and what Brewer (2000) refers to as analytical reflexivity. However, you can only give free reign to the ethnographic imagination (Willis 2000) if you are aware of techniques and procedures as well as the shared methodology of ethnography. I recommend reading published ethnographies as a route to understanding what it is and how it is done, what kinds of uses it is put to, what sorts of findings it generates, and the broad range of styles used and methods employed. Throughout the rest of this book I will refer at times to published work that you can search out for yourself but will also use examples of students' work to demonstrate methodological dilemmas and resolutions (even now, published work rarely explicates the myriad

decisions, turn-arounds, heartaches, and enlightened moments that constitute the ethnographer's daily fare).

Ethnography and Anthropology

This section explores the work of Bronislaw Malinowski quite closely as a means of introducing almost all the issues relevant to this book. Malinowski is often considered to be the founder of modern social anthropological methods of fieldwork and participant observation (Macdonald 2001). A Polish man, born in 1884 of aristocratic parents, who studied maths, physics and philosophy at the Jagiellonian University, in Cracow, he was inspired to take up anthropology after reading Fraser's *The Golden Bough*, and in 1910 went to study in England at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He gained the financial support to undertake field research in New Guinea, but war broke out while he was in Australia. However, though legally an 'enemy' in Australia, he was able to freely move about the pacific islands for the duration of the war as long as he reported his movements to the Australian government. His most famous research was carried out in the Trobriand islands in Melanesia, off the north-east coast of Australia, where he picked up the Kiriwinian language and was able to dispense with an interpreter within four months (Gerould 1992). Malinowski was not the first person to use fieldwork methods but was the first to systematically record and later to teach his students the canons of the method. His work helped establish the fieldwork principles anthropologists adhere to today (Eriksen 1995, Urry 1984). For social anthropology the theories and theoretical orientation may change but the methods of approach stay more or less the same. Indeed this is the case to such an extent that many anthropologists seem to believe that the methods of doing ethnography cannot and need not be taught (Johnson 1990). Clearly, I do not agree!

Prior to the early 1900s most ethnographic information had been collected by what Malinowski referred to as 'amateurs' - missionaries, colonial administrators and travellers - and survey work of sorts had been carried out, measuring skulls and charting physical traits for example. 19th century researchers delighted in collecting artefacts and descriptions of the exotic and

supposedly backward peoples they came into contact with and were obsessed with charting and classifying their collections (see Banton 1977), while the anthropologists who analysed the data brought back by such researchers mostly engaged in 'armchair theorising'. By the early 1900s academics had begun to discuss the idea of going out and talking to people and learning about these 'natives' first hand. So Malinowski did not invent fieldwork all alone, but, if you look at the first chapter of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1922) you will see that what he did was spell out, fairly polemically, his methods. So what was Malinowski's special methodology?

Malinowski's Methodology

Malinowski's monographs include an account of the system of ceremonial exchange known as the kula (in which bracelets and necklaces made from shells seemed invested with power and status far beyond their intrinsic worth); a study of Trobriand courtship, marriage and domestic life; a study of gardening and magic, crime, spirits and social control (Malinowski 1922, 1926, 1935, 1960). Above all Malinowski writes polemically about the methods he employed in his research. Malinowski insists that scientific field work has three aims:

- To describe the customs and traditions, the institutions, the structure, the skeleton of the tribe (or what people say they do)
- To give this flesh and blood by describing how daily life is actually carried out, the *imponderabilia* of actual life (how they do it)
- To record typical ways of thinking and feeling associated with the institutions and culture.

At first, a new culture or society seems to an outsider unruly, disordered or chaotic, but when we look closely and carefully we begin to see that everything is carefully structured and organised, controlled by rules and laws, customs and traditions that help to make sense, at least for those taking part, of the activities that at first seemed so strange. In order to understand this we have to

spend time watching events and asking people about them, and what they do in certain circumstances. Much of this sort of information, Malinowski suggested, could be obtained through survey work. Survey work can tell us much about the framework of the society we are interested in, it gives us the skeleton, but this lacks flesh and blood. Hence the second aim.

Of course, we must remember, Malinowski and his colleagues at the time were trying to understand 'natives', tribal peoples with cultures and lifestyles (and even appearances) very different than their own. It was very easy to see these as exotic and strange and for the researcher to focus on these aspects. But Malinowski wanted to make sure people understood that was not what proper scientific research is all about. One should not focus on these things only, but needs to explore closely and carefully the daily habits and customs that might seem boring and routine. These, as much as those things that seem strange to us, can enlighten the observer about the group's way of life. Similarly today, an entire group we thought were familiar can seem strange and exotic when we apply the ethnographic gaze and when we closely explore all the little habits and customs that people take part in. Take a Western Christmas, for example, and the strange compulsion people have to get into all sorts of debt buying gifts no one needs, or the compulsion Shetland Islanders have to engage in a dangerous ball game (The Ba', see Chapter Two, and www.bagame.com) that can end in broken legs and arms and can cause rifts between groups of people who normally coexist contentedly.

Finally, we need to understand the 'native's' views of what they do, 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, *his* vision of *his* world' (1922: 25). (note, the sexist language Malinowski uses is his not mine). This does not involve getting inside the heads of *individuals* but beginning to understand the *group's* views, feelings and sentiments. For example, a 'man who lives in a polyandrous community cannot experience the same feelings of jealousy as a strict monogynist' (1922:23). In addition to these main aims, there are a few key elements to Malinowski's ethnography. These are that data are collected in context, over a period of time, using participant observation as well as other data collection techniques. I will look at each of these in turn.

Ethnographic data is collected in context

For Malinowski, the ethnographer should not sit in 'his' armchair theorising but should get out there and spend time learning about different peoples from within their own natural surroundings. Nor should we remove people from their natural setting in order to analyse them, observe them, measure and weigh and assess them as objects for research, as was popular at the time. It is unscientific to do this. We cannot trust the reports of others. We, as trained scientists, must use our senses to collect empirical data (sense data) and we must do this within the naturalness (laboratory-like setting) of the surroundings. 'Proper conditions for ethnographic work…consist mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which can really only be achieved by camping right in their villages' (Malinowski 1922:7)

It is only by being in context, being there to talk with and listen to the people you are researching as they experience things and as they go about their daily lives, that you can get them to tell you about how they feel and think. In this way, Malinowski says, you get so much more from people than you would if they were a 'a paid, and often bored, informant'. It is worth noting here that much survey data, interviews, life histories, and other sociological data is data collected out of context and should always be analysed as such. What people say they do is not always the same as what they do. What they do varies with circumstance and setting. The other reason for collecting the research in context is so that you can observe the imponderabilia, and can find out how people think and feel as things happen rather than after or before the event. Daily quarrels, jokes, family discussions, all are significant. All give you an insight into the way of life. However, this is not some woolly method involving hanging around and making sweeping generalisations pulled from who knows where. For Malinowski this was a scientific method, which should be approached with due rigour. The context needs to be described, the methods used as well as the setting, the moods and so on. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski prescribes that an ethnographer should describe his methods just as a scientist would explain the conditions of an experiment.

> No one would dream of making an experimental contribution to physical or chemical science, without giving a detailed account of all the arrangements of the experiments; an exact description of the apparatus used; of the manner in which the observations were conducted; of their number; of the length of time devoted to them, and of the degree of approximation with which each measurement was made. In less exact sciences, as in biology or geology, this cannot be done as rigorously, but every student will do his best to bring home to the reader all the conditions in which the experiment or the observations were made. In Ethnography, where a candid account of such data is perhaps even more necessary, it has unfortunately in the past not always been supplied with sufficient generosity, and many writers do not ply the searchlight of methodic sincerity, as they move among their facts but produce them before us out of complete obscurity.
>
> (Malinowski 1922:3)

Malinowski deals with this difficult demand by offering a 'brief outline of an Ethnographer's tribulations' which he hopes will shed more light on the question than an abstract discussion would do. In other words, he describes his methodology, his attitude to his methods, and his reasons for doing what he does and how. He also gives an outline, in a table, of what expeditions took place where, and for how long, and lists some of the events that took place during that time. Unfortunately many contemporary ethnographers seem not to have learned this lesson, and nowadays, every ethnographer has to decide for him or herself how much information is necessary for the reader to be able to evaluate the results of the research (see Chapter Nine).

Time

As Ball and Smith (2001: 307) have noted; 'what distinguished Malinowski's ethnography was the time he devoted to it, and its quality: between one and two years in the field, alongside the obligation to acquire competence in the vernacular'. For Malinowski an ethnographer needs to

spend a considerable amount of time actually in the company of the people he or she is studying for the following reasons:

- To become part of the daily routine so as to limit the effects on the research subjects of your presence as an outsider;
- time to learn and understand as an insider;
- time to add to your questions and to guide your research in alternative directions.

Whenever you begin a new ethnographic study and enter the field for the first time not only will you feel strange and obtrusive but so will you affect those you are spending time with. Trying to learn about people by spending time living or working alongside them has one obvious problem: they know you are there and this might affect how they behave. How can you know if they are doing the same things in the same way as if you were not there? Well, one way around this is for you to be there long enough for the people to get used to you and to stop feeling strange about you being there. You have to become part of the natural surroundings, to blend in. he says

> It must be remembered that as the natives saw me constantly every day, they ceased to be interested or alarmed, or made self-conscious by my presence, and I ceased to be a disturbing element in the tribal life which I was to study.
>
> (Malinowski 1922:8)

This is one reason why an ethnographer needs time. However, time also allows the researcher to settle in themselves and to begin to feel part of things and to understand them from the point of view of those being researched. When you begin, everything looks strange and inexplicable. As time goes on and you begin to understand the society better, as Malinowski says, you acquire the 'feeling' for good and bad manners, for how to behave in this new culture and thus learn it better than if you had merely asked questions about it. The third reason for needing to spend time doing ethnography is that you might not know what you want to explore at the outset. Malinowski's approach was informed by inductive reasoning (see Chapter Two), where theory flows from data, but also informs research questions. He explains this better than I can:

> If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings into the field, the more he is in the habit of moulding his theories according to facts**,** and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped with the work. Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies.
>
> (Malinowski 1922:9)

This kind of development of theory in context takes time. It is not the kind of research where one goes out with a fixed idea of what one wants to study, collects the data and returns to analyse it. The data collection and analysis go hand in hand (this will be discussed more in Chapter Eight). For Malinowski, it is even likely you would have to return to the field a few times to do more observations once you started to try to write up your research.

Participation

A crucial element of ethnographic research for Malinowski is participation in the lives of the people being studied. As with the importance of spending time with the group (as opposed to simply making brief visits), participation is important for the ethnographer to become part of the natural surroundings or the setting, so that the people being researched cease to be affected by his or her presence. If you take part in things then everything you want to study becomes within easy reach, rather than you having to renegotiate access over and over again. But more than this, participation helps you experience things as the insiders do and thus understand them better;

> …in this type of work, it is good for the ethnographer sometimes to put aside his camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on…Out of such plunges into the lives of the natives – and I made them frequently not only for study's sake but because

> everyone needs human company – I have carried away a distinct feeling that their behaviour, their manner of being, in all sorts of tribal transaction, became more transparent and easily understandable than it had been before.
>
> (Malinowski 1922:21-2)

As an aside, since the publication of his diary in 1967 Malinowski has been criticised for not really taking part in things at all, and there have been debates within ethnography about how much you can actually experience things as an insider and remain objective. Indeed, the publication of Malinowski's diary placed a mark of interrogation beside any overly confident and consistent ethnographic voice (Clifford 1986). Contemporary ethnography is often described as, or attempts to be, reflexive, that is to say it is conducted in full awareness of the myriad limitations associated with humans studying other human lives (these issues are discussed more fully in subsequent chapters).

Key Idea: Reflexivity. Contemporary ethnography is often described as, or attempts to be, *reflexive*; that is to say it is conducted in full awareness of the myriad limitations (and advantages) associated with humans studying other human lives.

Observation

Of course, an ethnographer does not merely participate. Real scientific research, Malinowski insists, is active, purposeful and demanding, with observation providing the more detached and scientific part of the research. It involves an amount of objectivity, of standing back from the culture, group or individual and seeing and noting what is going on. It is better done by a trained scientist than a casual observer, he says. Anna Grimshaw (2001: 44) suggests Malinowski approached his work with a romantic gaze, portraying ethnographers as visionary 'seers'. The ethnographer, he argued, should observe what is going on in the field, logging the minute detail of every aspect of tribal life; but one should not focus purely on the exotic but should observe what he poetically refers to as *the imponderabilia of actual life*: daily routines, the preparing of food, the details of the care of the

body, conversations and social life. This also involves making mental and then actual notes of these observations.

Collecting data

For Malinowski, participant observation did not mean merely hanging around or even just being there. It was more active than that. An ethnographer needs to have real scientific aims, and to collect data on as many facets of life as possible. This involved using statistical documentation and building statistical summaries and analyses from concrete evidence. It meant systematically documenting details from daily life. It meant documenting speech, habits, customs, as well as magic formulae, and myths; making lists, drawing maps, constructing genealogies and taking photographs. Above all one needs to take field notes, recording not only those occurrences and details that are prescribed by tradition, but also the actual actions that are observed as they occur, by the participants as well as the spectators. This insistence on the collection of facts and evidence reflects Malinowski's positivistic approach, but I will discuss this more later.

In summary, Malinowski was insistent that the goals of ethnography were:

1. to use concrete statistical documentation to record the organisation of the tribe and the anatomy of its culture.
2. To use minute, detailed observations to log the actual details of daily life, and
3. To collect ethnographic statements, narratives, utterances as documents of native mentality.

To achieve this one had to spend time with the people one was studying, joining in with their daily lives, observing special events as well as daily rituals, asking questions, collecting information, and also, of course, learning the language.

Malinowski: Functionalist and Positivist?

Ball and Smith (2001) have argued that Malinowski has become so firmly established as the ancestor of fieldwork methods that those who influenced him have been overlooked. It is at least essential to consider the intellectual context in which Malinowski worked in order to understand his approach. Malinowski worked under two current influences: the need for the study of social life to be seen to be scientific, and current ideas, influenced by Emile Durkheim, about the constitution of social life as external to us, influencing our actions and shaping culture, while culture simultaneously constitutes society, integrating individuals in the harmonious functioning of the 'whole' society. Malinowski was one of the founders of the *functionalist* school of anthropology. He considered it important to look at all aspects of the life of a society, from religion and magic, to sex and family organisation. His was a holistic approach. Malinowski uses the analogy of the body, saying that one needs to get at the flesh and blood as well as the skeleton of a society. This approach sees the society as a whole unit, with all its constituent parts interrelated into a functioning whole and analyses events and institutions in terms of the functions they serve for the society and the individuals. This is what he says about the response to his work *The Sexual Life of Savages*, of which he says sulkily: 'only sensational bits were picked out and wondered or laughed at':

> I intended to give a concrete example showing that a subject like sex cannot be treated except in its institutional setting, and through its manifestations in other aspects of culture. Love, sexual approaches, eroticism, combined with love-magic and the mythology of love are but a part of customary courtship in the Trobriands. Courtship, again, is a phase, a preparatory phase, of marriage, and marriage but one side of family life. The family itself ramifies into the clan, into the relations between matrilineal and patriarchal kindred; and all these subjects, so intimately bond up with one another, constitute really one big system of kinship, a system which controls the social relations of the tribesmen with each other, dominates their economics, pervades their magic and mythology, and enters into their religion and even into their artistic productions. So that, starting with the problem of sex, I

was led to give a full account of the kinship system, and of its function within the Trobriand culture.

(Malinowski 1932:xx)

Functionalism has now been discredited generally as being a-historic, static and linked to colonial attitudes and history; Malinowski's holistic approach leading to a tendency to treat societies as if they were isolated islands (Macdonald 2001). Though seductive in its explanatory power, it does not easily allow for processes of change, or for interaction with external structures or external influences. Malinowski's methods however have been adopted and adapted to be applied to studies with perspectives such as feminism and Marxism, and to research of specialist institutions, cultures, themes or groups within a society rather than to whole societies which can no longer be seen as isolated discrete units.

Key idea: Holism. Ethnographic research has traditionally taken a holistic approach. This perspective (linked to functionalism) views societies as discrete and coherent entities. However, holism also recognises the interconnectedness of societies, as parts and wholes.

Malinowski's approach could arguably be described as positivist. 'Striving after the objective, scientific view of things' (Malinowski 1922:6) he collected facts and data from the real lives of the people under study in as detached a way as possible. His participation, contradictory to his fieldwork prescriptions, was actually minimal and seemed to mean little more than pitching his tent in the village. He insisted on separating thoughts and opinions from facts and observations and urged that 'the main endeavour must be to let facts speak for themselves' (page 20). Early social anthropologists, such as Malinowski, Rivers, and Haddon, wanted to establish the Natural Science of Society and thought that for the science of society to have any credibility, to match the achievements of the natural sciences, it would have to mimic its methods. The subject matter had to be conceived as real, factual, out there. Empirical data should be collected using senses, especially

direct observation, and preferably by trained scientists (Kuper 1977). The data Malinowski collected was therefore collected as documentary evidence, with the objectivity of the collecting tool (the camera for example, or even the ethnographer) taken for granted. But all this does not constrain contemporary ethnography to being positivistic (see Chapter Two); one contemporary approach to 'evidence', for example, is to explore it in terms of the multiplicity of representations being constructed (Wright 1994, and see Chapter 9).

Ethnography and sociology: the Chicago school

Within sociology participant observation and ethnographic field research are often considered to have their roots within the Chicago School of sociology (Wellin and Fine 2001, and see Deegan, 2001, for an overview of what she calls the Chicago School of Ethnography). At a time when the city of Chicago was growing in population numbers at a vast rate, with huge influxes of immigrants and the rapid growth of urban areas, social researchers began to see their city as a sort of natural laboratory in which they could do studies. The Chicago School, Deegan (2001: 11) suggests, 'towered over the intellectual and professional landscape of sociology from 1892 until 1942' becoming famous for urban sociology and also for innovative empirical research methods, for getting out in the streets and into the city doing field research and participant observation with real people. Robert Park, an ex-newspaper reporter, who held the first Chair in Sociology, famously told his students

> Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesk. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.
>
> (Park, cited in Bulmer 1984 :97)

The research the Chicago School produced often included some statistical data but mostly these researchers studied face to face interaction, in everyday settings, and produced descriptive narratives of social worlds. A swathe of ethnographies (though they were not identified as such by name) were produced between 1917 and 1942, often conducted by students of Robert Park and

Ernest Burgess and clearly influenced by the ideas of symbolic interactionism and 'social ecology' (Bulmer 1984). The Chicago school heritage includes a number of classical studies, including case studies on geographical areas (such as Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and The Slum*, 1929), on organisations and institutions (such as Cressey's *The Taxi-Dance Hall*, 1932), and even on individuals and small groups (such as Anderson's *The Hobo*, 1923, and Shaw's *The Jack Roller*, 1930). The Chicago School also gave birth to the life history and the use of documents such as diaries and letters (Plummer 2001b).

Street Corner Society

I would like to introduce readers to perhaps the best-known Chicago ethnography, *Street Corner Society*, by William Foote Whyte[2]. This book was first published in 1943, is now in its fourth edition (1993), and still features on the reading list for many courses in ethnographic methods. Part of the explanation for this is that, like Malinowski, Whyte expends considerable effort describing in wonderful detail, and with amusing and intelligent reflections, his methodological approach and the precise methods he adopted and adapted.

The study is based in a poor Italian American neighbourhood of Boston, that Whyte calls Cornerville. The area was almost entirely inhabited by the families of Italian migrants and was seen by outsiders as somewhere depressing and hopeless yet, on the other hand, somewhat mysterious and exciting (1993:xv). Newspaper reports, gossip, and even statistics collected for various welfare or political reasons, tended to portray Cornerville as dangerous, neglected, and dilapidated, a place that harboured dissent, criminal activity, and high rates of juvenile delinquency. But Whyte believed these were distorted views based on second-hand information and misconceptions, and promulgated by people from more fashionable parts of the city. In a similar way to Malinowski, he contended that the only way to understand such a place is to gain intimate knowledge of the human

[2] It is important to note that, though Whyte was Chicago trained he had completed the first draft of *Street Corner Society* before going there, and he argues that his analysis was in no way affected by the Chicago perspective (1993: 361). He was influenced more by anthropological methods.

lives by living and participating in local life; and rather than focus on the 'spectacular event' or the sensational these need to be understood in the context of the social structure within which they occurred and make sense. Using ethnographic methods, Whyte was able to demonstrate the orderliness and the meanings for the participants behind the social structure of the slum area.

William Foote Whyte begins by describing the history of Italian migration, thus locating his research in wider and long-term structural change. He then describes to readers, in rich detail, the evolution of gang membership and the way it provides a route to status and belonging, describing the routines and patterns of daily life for young men, the relationships, loyalties and obligations established over decades, and the limiting nature of gang life (that reduces the breadth of experience for those routinely drawn into it day after day). He describes the relationship of these groupings to those 'higher up', and the ways in which illegal activity and relations with the police and politicians are organised, and the personal relations that tie them all together. Whyte thus portrays an organised and hierarchical society, rich with the sense of obligation and position.

Whyte was fortunate enough to gain three years funding to research whatever he chose and decided to do a community study, along the lines of the *Middletown* (Lynd 1956), but in a slum district. However, he did not want to focus on social problems, as tended to happen in community studies of the time (the 1930s); rather, he was concerned to study the community as an organised social system. Reading the anthropological literature, 'beginning with Malinowski', he began to realise this was something he wanted to do, albeit in a city district rather than with primitive tribes (1993: 286). Although he had quite comfortable accommodation nearby and found it much easier to take trips into the neighbourhood he was studying, he found it difficult to really get to know people and to be involved in their daily lives. He decided that he needed, like Malinowski, to move right in to the area: 'Only if I lived in Cornerville would I ever be able to understand it and be accepted by it' (1993: 294). So, his methodological approach involved both participation and observation. He says, (implying a study of the practice of daily life long before we were employing that term):

> ‘a man’s attitudes cannot be observed but instead must be inferred from his behaviour. Since actions are directly subject to observation and may be recorded like other scientific data, it seems wise to try to understand man through studying his action. This approach not only provides information upon the nature of informal group relations but it also offers a framework for the understanding of the individual’s adjustment to his society’ (p268)

Initially, Whyte was interested in simply describing the social organisation of the society, but over time he began to notice changes in the groups he was spending time with and realised that an extended study was required. Time became an essential component of the study, as he sought to present ‘a moving picture instead of a still photograph’ (p323). Eventually, Whyte spent four years in the field.

As with the iterative inductive approach I describe in Chapter Two, Whyte says analysis does not proceed in a straight line; even when we ‘bring all our powers of logical analysis’ to the mass of data we are confronted with, coherence does not immediately appear. Indeed we are more likely to begin to understand the social worlds of others as we spend time with them, constantly thinking through the sociological problems we are trying to deal with, and then sometimes something happens that throws a new light on things and starts to help us shape our analysis. So, though logic does play a part, generally ‘ideas grow up in part out of our immersion in the data and out of the whole process of living’ (1993: 280). Though he now advocates the use of participatory action research and recognises the intermingling of his voice with those of his participants (seep364-5), Whyte was working within the current intellectual framework (and without a secure position from which to challenge prevailing orthodoxies) in which ‘pure science’ should proceed with the researcher being as little engaged or involved in the social world of the researched as possible (like Malinowski). But he nevertheless acknowledges, albeit implicitly, the subjective nature of social research interpretations that we discuss more in later chapters. Referring to Doc, his key informant during his time in Cornerville (who we meet again in Chapter Two), Whyte says: ‘Some of the

interpretations I have made are more his than mine, although it is now impossible to disentangle them' (1993: 301).

To conclude, we can see a few similarities between the works of Bronislaw Malinowski and William Foote Whyte, that link back to our earlier definition of ethnography. Ethnography involves researching something closely, over time, in its natural setting, drawing on participation and observation, as well as other data collection techniques. There is an emphasis in seeing things from the point of view of the insider (or the native), and an emphasis more on induction than deduction. Whether or not the native's view is sufficient an explanation or whether one looks beyond that to other, underlying explanations depends on one's philosophical position. The techniques look quite similar in either case. We could, then, describe William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* as an example of a reflexive ethnographic study of the practice of social life.

Contemporary ethnography in social science

Contemporary ethnographies subscribe to the same principles as Malinowski and Whyte illustrate: the close study, over time, using participation and observation, of a group of people, with the emphasis on obtaining the insider view. Contemporary ethnographies fall into modernist, postmodern and post positivist traditions; Marxist, feminist, realist and positivist ethnographies are conducted; action and participatory research stands beside commentaries, descriptions and single voices. The journals, *Ethnography* and *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, provide an insight into the range of ethnographies being conducted today, as do many journals that report on qualitative studies more generally. Ethnographic methods are now being applied across the social science disciplines, especially within education, health studies, social geography, sociology, organisational studies, and psychology. The 'field', which Brewer (2000) defines as a naturally occurring setting, is these days as likely to be a hospital, school playground or street corner as a peasant or rural community.

Here is an example of a student's study that clearly fits the critical definition outlined above. We will hear more about Michael's study as we go along.

Example: a contemporary ethnography. Michael's Study of Young People and Drug Use

Michael wanted to know how young people talked about and justified drug use amongst themselves. He had no set hypothesis to test, simply some ideas about drug use and young people, drawn from his own experience and from what he had read in the academic and other literature. He decided to explore drug use among two groups of young people. He decided to spend some time in each group, going to parties, chilling out in their homes, shopping, going out to bars and clubs, and generally being a member of each group. The research was conducted in its natural setting, with most of the information gathered via participation and observation, but Michael also used the collection of other data. He spent time in the groups and experienced life as a member of each group. He asked questions in his mind and out loud about the drug use and other talk around it. But he supplemented what he saw and what he could ask in context with other information. A few more in-depth interviews were conducted with the members of the group by asking them to meet at other times and places. Data on young people, drug use and policies were used as a framework; Michael's analysis therefore to some extent involved the consideration of wider structures. Michael's own experiences were drawn on reflexively in helping him frame questions, direct conversations, and interpret findings. Michael's work was iterative-inductive, in that the design and analysis developed as the research progressed.

There has been a revolution in the production of research methods texts, introducing students to all sorts of methods and approaches, perhaps led by Sage publishers, and ethnographic methods are no exception. They are now discussed in the context of a wide variety of fields and disciplines. I will briefly introduce some relevant texts and studies in health and medicine, human geography, and education. Note that ethnography is also widely used now in business studies, management, and law (see, for example, Ferdinand et al 2007).

Ethnography of Health and Medicine

Ethnographies within the field of health and medicine have increased rapidly in recent years[3]. There is a book devoted to *Ethnography in Nursing Research* (Roper and Shapira, 2000); Elizabeth Cluett and Rosalind Bluff's (2006) core text for midwifery students includes a chapter on ethnography by Patricia Donovan; and Catherine Pope and Nicholas Mays's (2006) *Qualitative Research in Health Care* has a chapter on observational methods, by the same authors. Here, ethnography is portrayed as an *approach* to research, with roots in anthropology and the Chicago School of sociology, in which the central method is observation. Pope and Mays suggest that the most common way in which qualitative methods are used in health research is as part of the preparation for quantitative or survey research, with qualitative research helping researchers identify phenomena before counting their instances, helping them design questionnaires that are meaningful to respondents, asking the right questions, or it can provide a fresh perspective on phenomena revealed through surveys, helping researchers interpret other findings (such as what people mean by certain illnesses or sets of symptoms, how they might understand certain proposed interventions). But qualitative health research can also be done independently, evaluating reforms, understanding relationships, and revealing social processes.

Of course, in the health field some key problems that we will explore in this book, such as how qualitative data can be generalised and the practical and ethical issues associated with observing research participants, are particularly acute. But the unique advantage of ethnographic research in contributing to the understanding of patients' and clinicians' worlds from their own perspectives is worth retaining as we attempt to reconcile these difficulties (Savage 2000). Readers might enjoy reading Sue Estroff's *Making it Crazy*, (1981) in which, through participant observation, she encounters and learns from psychiatric outpatient clients, who have been labelled mentally ill

[3] However, if we include ethnographies such as Goffman's *Asylum*'s (1961) as well as the many other studies of health and illness in non-medical settings such as Bloor (1985) and Prout (1986) we see the field has a much longer history than might be thought.

yet are not hospitalised. Or try Paula Saukko's (2008) autoethnographic account of her personal experience of anorexia nervosa, which is discussed in more depth in Chapter Five. Several of the ethnographic examples that I use in this book fall into the field of health and medicine because students from health-related disciplines have attended my courses on qualitative and ethnographic methods for many years.

Geography and Ethnography

Ethnographic methods are increasingly embraced within human geography, alongside a growing interest in qualitative geography more broadly. The *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, by Dydia DeLyser and colleagues (2010b) includes chapters on ethnography and participant observation, and on autoethnography (discussed more in Chapter Five). There are now books on ethnography and geography and there are increasing numbers of courses teaching ethnography (and other qualitative methods) to geography students. Ian Hay's (2010) edited volume, *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, (now in its third edition) is an Australian-oriented text for students of geography, with a chapter by Robin Kearns, a medical geographer, on participant observation (that some readers might find useful). There has also been something of a 'spatial turn' in many other disciplines, with more scholars paying attention to the spatialities of the social world as well as of the research itself (DeLyser et al 2010a: 1), and to the notion of landscape as social construction, perception, and imbued with multiple meanings, and these often employ ethnographic techniques (see the work of Tim Ingold, 2007, 2010a and b, for example). DeLyser et al (2010a) suggest that geographers are becoming more sophisticated, trained, and reflexive qualitative researchers. Kurt Raaflaub and Richard Talbert's (2010) *Geography and Ethnography*, is a wonderful collection of historical ethnographies examining the world-view of diverse ancient societies, including the early Egyptians, the Aztecs and the Inca. This is challenging work indeed and really stretches our idea of what constitutes ethnography. However, Mike Crang and Ian Cook (2007) are probably the key writers on geography and ethnography. Their book *Doing Ethnographies* advocates

a *practice* approach to doing ethnography (though they don't call it that). Rather than attempting to follow the linear 'read-*then*-do-*then*-write model' that seems to be routinely expected of PhD students, they suggest ethnographers proceed in a grounded, process-oriented manner, that recognises the 'deeply entangled set of relationships between field and academy' (2007: 207).

Education and ethnography

There are also now several books and chapters on ethnography and education, not forgetting that the early work of Martyn Hammersley, Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont, authors of some of the best-selling books and key texts in the field of ethnographic methods, has been for the most part in the sociology of education before they concentrated more on methodological issues). The *Handbook of Ethnography* includes a chapter on Ethnographic research in educational settings (Gordon et al 2001). In *Ethnography for Education*, Pole and Morrison (2003) argue that ethnography has become one of the most frequently used approaches in the field, and the sixth edition of *Research Methods in Education* (Cohen et al 2007) has a chapter on 'naturalistic and ethnographic research'. For Gordon, Holland and Lahelma (2001) educational ethnographies have tended to focus on social interaction, influenced by ethnomethodology, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (see Chapter Two of this book). Others, as a reaction to the depoliticised nature of these approaches, have taken cultural studies, critical, and feminist approaches, or have undertaken postmodern ethnographies in educational settings. Critical and feminist approaches are more likely than the others to theorise 'the interrelationship of structure and agency, in order to consider paths towards empowerment of the researched' (Gordon et al 2001: 193). It is these approaches in educational ethnographies, then, that are most likely to fit with an approach towards ethnography as practice. For examples, I strongly recommend Annette Lareau's (1996) personal account of some common problems in fieldwork in educational settings; and Paul Willis's (1983) *Learning to Labour* remains a classic.

Further reading

The key text for **Malinowski's methodology** is the first chapter in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922).

Mary Jo Deegan (2001) has produced a valuable review of what she calls **The Chicago School of Ethnography**, especially the ethnographies produced between 1917 and 1942. You might also enjoy Martin Bulmer's (1984) *The Chicago School of Sociology*.

For **contemporary ethnographies** explore the journals *Ethnography*, and the *Contemporary Journal of Ethnography*, and trawl through journals in your own discipline that publish qualitative research. Note that ethnographies can crop up in unexpected places, for example in *Society and Animals* (Cassidy 2002).

There are now some wonderful honest, open and **reflexive accounts of ethnographic fieldwork experiences**. I particularly recommend *Journeys Through Ethnography*, edited by Lareau and Shultz (1996), *The Sage Handbook of Fieldwork*, edited by Dick Hobbs and Richard Wright (2006), and *In the Field*, edited by Carolyn Smith and William Kornblum (1996). Readers will also enjoy Rosalie Wax's (1971) *Doing Fieldwork*, and, of course, William Foote Whyte's (1993) appendix to *Street Corner Society*.

Exercises

Read two or three ethnographies (examples of ethnographic methods in practice) in your own discipline and try to establish a definition of ethnography that fits with your own (or your discipline's or subject field's) view of how the world works.

Read two studies that use ethnographic methods and two that use other methods. What are the advantages of ethnographic methods over other methods? Can you identify a specific methodology behind the methods chosen in these studies?

Read one classic (or quite old but well known) and one contemporary (or more recently published) ethnography and compare them in terms of their language, the methods they use, the methodology behind the choice of methods, and the theories that (implicitly or explicitly) inform them.

For short courses in ethnographic methods I recommend applying most of the methods in this book in the conduct of a mini ethnographic study, informed by the definition you have determined in the exercise above. Working in small groups, begin to identify a field, setting, or small group (naturally-occurring) in which you could undertake some participant observation, interviews, and other methods of approach covered in this book. Start by trying to find some phenomenon that interests or puzzles you.