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In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes

Ethnographers ultimately produce a written account of what they have seen, heard, and experienced in the field. But different ethnographers, and the same ethnographer at different times, turn experience and observation into written texts in different ways. Some maximize their immersion in local activities and their experience of others' lives, deliberately suspending concern with the task of producing written records of these events. Here, the field researcher decides where to go, what to look at, what to ask and say so as to experience fully another way of life and its concerns. She attends to events with little or no orientation to "writing it down" or even to "observing" in a detached fashion. Indeed, an ethnographer living in, rather than simply regularly visiting, a field setting, particularly in non-Western cultures where language and daily routines are unfamiliar, may have no choice but to participate fully and to suspend immediate concerns with writing. A female ethnographer studying local women in Africa, for example, may find herself helping to prepare greens and care for children, leaving no time to produce many written notes. Yet in the process of that involvement, she may most clearly learn how women simultaneously work together, socialize, and care for children. Only in subsequent reflection, might she fully notice the subtle changes in herself as she learned to do and see these activities as the women do.

Field researchers using this ethnographic approach want to relate naturally to those encountered in the field; they focus their efforts on figuring out—holistically and intuitively—what these people are up to. Any anticipation of writing fieldnotes is postponed (and in extreme cases, minimized or avoided altogether) as diluting the experiential insights and intuitions that immersion in another social world can provide.[1] Only at some later point does the ethnographer turn to the task of recalling and examining her experiences in order to write them down.

But the ethnographer may also participate in ongoing events in ways that directly and immediately involve inscription. Here, the fieldworker is concerned with "getting into place" to observe interesting, significant events in order to produce a detailed written record of them. As a result, participation in naturally occurring events may come to be explicitly oriented toward writing fieldnotes. At an extreme, the fieldworker may self-consciously look for events that should be written down for research purposes; he may position himself in these unfolding events to be able to observe and write; and he may explicitly orient to events in terms of "what is important to remember so that I can write it down later."

Each mode of field involvement has strengths and drawbacks. The former allows an intense immersion in daily rhythms and ordinary concerns that increases openness to others' ways of life. The latter can produce a more detailed, closer-to-the-moment record of that life. In practice, most field researchers employ both approaches at different times, sometimes participating without thought about writing up what is happening and, at other times, focusing closely on events in order to write about them. Indeed, the fieldworker may experience a shift from one mode to another as events unfold in the field. Caught in some social moment, for example, the field researcher may come to see deep theoretical relevance in a mundane experience or practice. Conversely, a researcher in the midst of observing in a more detached, writing-oriented mode may suddenly be drawn directly into the center of activity.[2]

In both approaches, the ethnographer writes fieldnotes more or less contemporaneously with the experience and observation of events of interest in the spirit of the ethnographer who commented, "Anthropologists are those who write things down at the end of the day" (Jackson 1990b:15). In the experiential style, writing may be put off for hours or even days until the field researcher withdraws from the field and, relying solely on memory, sits down at pad or computer to reconstruct important events.[3] In the

participating-to-write approach, writing—or an orientation to writing—begins earlier when the researcher is still in the field, perhaps in the immediate presence of talk and action that will be inscribed. The ethnographer may not only make mental notes or "headnotes"[4] to include certain events in full fieldnotes, but he may also write down, in the form of jottings or scratch notes, abbreviated words and phrases to use later to construct full fieldnotes.

Furthermore, in both styles, field researchers are deeply concerned about the quality of the relationships they develop with the people they seek to know and understand. In valuing more natural, open experience of others' worlds and activities, field researchers seek to keep writing from intruding into and affecting these relationships. They do so not only to avoid distancing themselves from the ongoing experience of another world but also because writing, and research commitments more generally, may engender feelings of betraying those with whom one has lived and shared intimacies. Ethnographers who participate in order to write, in contrast, pursue and proclaim research interests more openly as an element in their relationships with those studied. But these field researchers often become very sensitive to the ways in which the stance and act of writing are very visible to, and can influence the quality of their relationships with, those studied. And they also may experience moments of anguish or uncertainty about whether to include intimate or humiliating incidents in their fieldnotes.

In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on a participating-in-order-to-write fieldwork approach that confronts writing issues directly and immediately in the field. This approach brings to the fore the interconnections between writing, participating, and observing as a means of understanding another way of life; it focuses on learning how to look in order to write, while it also recognizes that looking is itself shaped and constrained by a sense of what and how to write. We will begin by examining the processes of participating in order to write in detail, considering a number of practices that ethnographers have found useful in guiding and orienting observations made under these conditions. We then take up issues of actually writing in the presence of those studied by making jottings about what we see and hear, even as these interactions are occurring. Here, we first present illustrations of actual jottings made in different field settings and discuss a number of considerations that might guide the process of making jottings. We then consider choices confronting field researchers in deciding how, where, and when to make jottings in field settings.

PARTICIPATING IN ORDER TO WRITE

In attending to ongoing scenes, events, and interactions, field researchers take mental note of certain details and impressions. For the most part, these impressions remain "headnotes" until the researcher sits down at some later point to write full fieldnotes about these scenes and events. In the flux of their field settings, beginning students are often hesitant and uncertain about what details and impressions they should pay attention to as potential issues for writing. We have found a number of procedures to be helpful in advising students how initially to look in order to write.

First, ethnographers should take note of their *initial impressions.* These impressions may include those things available to the senses—the tastes, smells, and sounds of the physical environment, and the look and feel of the locale and the people in it. Such impressions may include details about the physical setting, including size, space, noise, colors, equipment, and movement, or about people in the setting, such as their number, gender, race, appearance, dress, movement, comportment, and feeling tone. Writing down these impressions provides a way to get started in a setting that may seem overwhelming. Entering another culture where both language and customs are incomprehensible may present particular challenges in this regard. Still, the ethnographer can begin to assimilate strange sights and sounds by attending to and then writing about them.[5]

Furthermore, this record preserves these initial and often insightful impressions, for observers tend to lose sensitivity for unique qualities of a setting as these become commonplace. Researchers who are familiar with the setting they study, perhaps already having a place in the setting as workers or residents, have lost direct access to their first impressions. However, such fieldworkers can indirectly seek to recall their own first impressions by watching any newcomers to the setting, paying special attention to how they learn, adapt, and react.

Second, field researchers can focus on their personal sense of *what is significant or unexpected* in order to document key events or incidents in a particular social world or setting. Particularly at first, fieldworkers may want to rely on their own experience and intuition to select noteworthy incidents out of the flow of ongoing activity. Here, for example, the fieldworker may look closely at something that surprises or runs counter to her expectations, again paying attention to incidents, feeling tones, impressions, and interactions, both verbal and nonverbal.

Similarly, field researchers may use their own personal experience of

events that please, shock, or even anger them to identify matters worth writing about. A fieldworker's strong reaction to a particular event may well signal that others in the setting react similarly. Or a fieldworker may experience deeply contradictory emotions, for example, simultaneously feeling deep sympathy and repulsion for what he observes in the field. These feelings may also reflect contradictory pressures experienced by those in the setting.

To use personal reactions effectively, however, requires care and reflection. One must first pay close attention to how others in the setting are reacting to these events; it is important to become aware of when and how one's own reactions and sensitivities differ from those of some or most members. But in addition, in taking note of others' experiences, many beginning ethnographers tend to judge the actions of people in the setting, for better or worse, by their own, rather than the others', standards and values. Prejudging incidents in outsiders' terms makes it difficult to cultivate empathetic understanding and to discover what import local people give to them (see chapter 5). The field researcher should be alive to the possibility that local people, especially those with very different cultures, may respond to events in sharply contrasting ways. For example, an ethnographer in a Chokwe village may react with alarm to an unconscious man drugged by an herbal drink in a trial-for-sorcery court, only to realize that others are laughing at the spectacle because they know he will soon regain consciousness.

Yet, fieldworkers should not go to the other extreme and attempt to manage strong personal reactions by denial or simply by omitting them from fieldnotes. Rather, we recommend that the ethnographer first register her feelings, then step back and use this experience to ask how others in the setting see and experience these matters. Are they similarly surprised, shocked, pleased, or angered by an event? If so, under what conditions do these reactions occur, and how did those affected cope with the incidents and persons involved? Whether an ethnographer is working in a foreign or in a familiar culture, she needs to avoid assuming that others respond as she does.

Third, in order to document key events and incidents, field researchers should move beyond their personal reactions to attend explicitly to *what those in the setting experience and react to as "significant" or "important."* The field researcher watches for the sorts of things that are meaningful to those studied. The actions, interactions, and events that catch the attention of people habitually in the setting may provide clues to these concerns. Specifically: What do they stop and watch? What do they talk and gossip about? What produces strong emotional responses for them? "Troubles" or "problems" often generate deep concern and feelings. What kinds occur in the

setting? How do people in the setting understand, interpret, and deal with these troubles or problems? Such "incidents" and "troubles" should move the field researcher to jot down "who did what" and "how others reacted."

Often, however, a researcher who is unfamiliar with a setting may not initially be able to understand or even to identify local meanings and their significance. Hence, the researcher may have to write down what members say and do without fully understanding their implications and import. Consider, for example, the following fieldnote written by a student ethnographer making her first visit to a small residential program for ex-prostitutes:

> We walk inside and down the hallway, stopping in front of the kitchen. One of the girls is in there, and Ellen [the program director] stops to introduce me. She says, Catherine this is our new volunteer. She says, "Oh, nice to meet you," and thanks me for volunteering. We shake hands, and I tell her it's nice to meet her as well. Ellen adds, "Well most people call her Cathy, but I like the way Catherine sounds so that's what I call her." Catherine is wearing baggy, navy blue athletic shorts and a loose black tank top. Her thick, curly hair is pulled into a bun resting on the side of her head. She is barefoot. She turns to Ellen, and the smile leaves her face as she says, "Julie cut her hair." Ellen responds that Julie's hair is already short, and asks, "Is it buzzed?" Catherine responds no, that it's cut in a "page boy style and looks really cute." Ellen's eyebrows scrunch together, and she asks, well, is she happy with it? Catherine smiles and says, "Yeah, she loves it." To which Ellen responds, "Well, if she's happy, I'm happy," and that she's going to finish taking me around the house. I tell Catherine, "See you later."

Here, the program director's response to Catherine's report treats Julie's haircut as simply a decision about personal style and appearance—"is she happy with it?" On its face, it does not seem to be an important or significant statement and could easily have been left out in the write-up of this encounter.[6]

But events immediately following this encounter made it clear that Julie's haircut had important implications for the institution and its program. Leaving Catherine, the program director continued to show the ethnographer around the home:

> [In an upstairs bedroom] Ellen tells me to take a seat while she "makes a quick phone call." She begins the conversation, "Hey, so I just got home, and Catherine told me that Julie cut her hair." She listens for awhile, and her voice becomes more serious as she says, "Yeah, I know. I'm just thinking she's headed toward the same bullshit as last time." [Later in her office] Ellen explains to me

that Julie used to be a resident of the house but left and went back into prostitution. When Julie wanted to come back "we took her back on one condition, that she doesn't focus on her physical appearances but works on what's inside instead." That is why she was so concerned about the haircut: "It seems like she's going back to the same things as before," because this is how it starts.

The program director's phone call, immediately reporting Julie's haircut to someone else connected with the program, displays the local importance of this event. Later, the program director explains to the observer that, given Julie's history in the program, her haircut is a likely indicator of a troubled psychological state and weakening commitment to the program.

As this incident illustrates, the field researcher discerns local meanings, not so much by directly asking actors about what matters to them, but more indirectly and inferentially by looking for the perspectives and concerns embedded and expressed in naturally occurring interaction. And in gleaning indigenous meanings implicit in interaction, the ethnographer is well placed to apprehend these meanings, not simply as static categories, but, rather, as matters involving action and process. This requires not just that the ethnographer describes interactions but that she consistently attends to "when, where, and according to whom" in shaping all fieldnote descriptions. Those in different institutional positions (e.g., staff and clients) may evaluate different clients as doing well or poorly in "working the program" and may do so by invoking different evaluative criteria. Indigenous meanings, then, rarely hold across the board but, rather, reflect particular positions and practical concerns that need to be captured in fieldnote descriptions.

Fourth, ethnographers can begin to capture new settings by focusing and writing notes as systematically as possible, focusing on *how routine actions in the setting are organized and take place*. Attending closely to "how" something occurs encourages and produces "*luminous descriptions*" (Katz 2001c) that specify the actual, lived conditions and contingencies of social life. Consistent with our interactionist perspective, asking *how* also focuses the ethnographer's attention on the social and interactional processes through which members construct, maintain, and alter their social worlds. This means that field researchers should resist the temptation to focus descriptions on *why* events or actions occur; initially focusing on "why" stymies and prematurely deflects full description of specific impressions, events, and interactions because determining "why" is a complex and uncertain process requiring explanation and, hence, comparison with other

instances or cases. Consider the difference in understanding that Katz develops between asking *why* one decides to get gas for one's car and *how* one does so:

> I can describe how I did that on a given occasion, but why I did it is never really as simple as top-of-the-head explanations suggest, for example, "because I was low on gas" or "because I needed gas." I needed gas before I entered the station; I did not rush to the station the first moment I noticed the gas gauge registering low; and usually I get there without having to push the car in because it ran completely dry. In any case, my "need" for gas would not explain the extent to which I fill the tank, nor why I pay with a credit card instead of cash, nor which of the pumps I choose, nor whether I accept the automatic cut-off as ending the operation or top up with a final squeeze. As the description of how the act is conducted improves, the less convincing becomes the initially obvious answer to "why?" (Katz 2001c:446)

Finally, ethnographers' orientations to writable events change with time in the field. When first venturing into a setting, field researchers should "cast their nets" broadly; they should observe with an eye to writing about a range of incidents and interactions. Yet, forays into a setting must not be viewed as discrete, isolated occasions that have little or no bearing on what will be noted the next time. Rather, observing and writing about certain kinds of events foreshadow what will be noticed and described next. Identifying one incident as noteworthy should lead to considering what other incidents are similar and, hence, worth noting. As fieldwork progresses and becomes more focused on a set of issues, fieldworkers often self-consciously document a series of incidents and interactions of the "same type" and look for regularities or patterns within them.

Even when looking for additional examples of a similar event, the field researcher is open to and, indeed, searches for, *different forms* of that event, and for *variations from, or exceptions to, an emerging pattern*. Beginning field researchers are often discouraged by such discoveries, fearing that exceptions to a pattern they have noted will cast doubt upon their understanding of the setting. This need not be the case, although noting differences and variations should prod the field researcher to change, elaborate, or deepen her earlier understanding of the setting. The field researcher, for example, might want to consider and explore possible factors or circumstances that would account for differences or variations: Are the different actions the result of the preferences and temperaments of those involved or of their dif-

ferent understandings of the situation because they have different positions in the local context? Or the ethnographer may begin to question how she decided similarity and difference in the first place, perhaps coming to see how an event that initially appeared to be different is actually similar on a deeper level. In these ways, exploring what at least initially seem to be differences and variations will lead to richer, more textured descriptions and encourage more subtle, grounded analyses in a final ethnography (see chapter 7).

In summary, ethnographic attention involves balancing two different orientations. Especially on first entering the field, the researcher identifies significant characteristics gleaned from her first impressions and personal reactions. With greater participation in that local social world, however, the ethnographer becomes more sensitive to the concerns and perspectives of those in the setting. She increasingly appreciates how people have already predescribed their world in their own terms for their own purposes and projects. A sensitive ethnographer draws upon her own reactions to identify issues of possible importance to people in the setting but privileges their "insider" descriptions and categories over her own "outsider" views.

WHAT ARE JOTTINGS?

While participating in the field and attending to ongoing scenes, events, and interactions, field researchers may, at moments, decide that certain events and impressions should be written down as they are occurring in order to preserve accuracy and detail. In these circumstances, the field researcher moves beyond mere "headnotes" to record jottings—a brief written record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases. Jottings translate to-be-remembered observations into writing on paper as quickly rendered scribbles about actions and dialogue. A word or two written at the moment or soon afterward will jog the memory later in the day when she attempts to recall the details of significant actions and to construct evocative descriptions of the scene. Or, more extensive jottings may record an ongoing dialogue or a set of responses to questions.

In order to convey how field researchers actually write and use jottings, we provide two illustrations. Each identifies specific scenes, observed actions, and dialogue rather than making evaluations or psychological interpretations. But each researcher approaches interaction in their settings in different ways, noting different sensory and interpretive details. (We will consider the full fieldnotes written from both these sets of jottings in chapter 3.)

"Too Many Sexual References"

A student ethnographer jotted the following notes while sitting in on an after-school staff meeting attended by a continuation school principal, four teachers, and the school counselor:

> Sexual Harassment
> Andy—too many sexual references
> PE frisbee game "This team has too many sausages"
> Reynaldo—(*Carlos—in jail for stealing bicycle, 18 yrs old*) *[circled]*
> Laura → Wants to propose sexual harassment forms
> Thinking about detention for these students but already too much work for keeping track of tardies/truancies/tendencies

Here, the observer begins by marking off one of the topics that came up during this meeting—"sexual harassment." His jottings then identify a student—Andy—who has been accused of making "too many sexual references." The next line records a specific incident: When placed on a team composed mostly of boys during an Ultimate Frisbee game on the physical education field, Andy had commented that "this team has too many sausages." There follows the name of another student—Reynaldo—but no indication of what he said or did. Adjacent to this name was a circled phrase, including another name "Carlos" and a comment "in jail for stealing bicycle, 18 yrs old." The rest of the jotting names a teacher—Laura—and sketches her proposal to create "sexual harassment forms" to be filled out in response to such "inappropriate" sexual talk by students. Detention is mentioned as one possible punishment for such offenders, but this idea is countered by the observation that staff already has too much paperwork in dealing with students in detention.

"You Can Call His Doctor"

In contrast to the focus on named individuals and a variety of events linked to them, the following jottings focus strictly on dialogue, recording bits of talk in a formal court proceeding. The case involved a woman seeking a temporary restraining order against her two landlords, one of whom is not present in the courtroom. The landlord who is present disputes the woman's testimony that the missing landlord is "well enough to walk" and, hence, could have come to court:

you can call his doctor at UCLA and
he can verify all this
I just don't call people on the
telephone—courts don't operate that way—
it has to be on paper or
(in person)'

Here, only spoken words are recorded; specific speakers are not indicated but can be identified by content—the landlord defendant in the first two lines and the judge in the last four lines. The words represent direct quotes, written down as accurately as possible when spoken; an exception occurs in the last line where the observer missed the judge's exact words ending this sentence (because of jotting down the preceding dialogue) and inserted a paraphrase "in person" (indicated by parentheses). As in the prior illustration, there is no indication of what the ethnographer had in mind in noting these pieces of the flow of social life; they "speak for themselves," making no reference as to why they were recorded or about their possible implications.

Each of the jottings in these illustrations is "a mnemonic word or phrase [written] to fix an observation or to recall what someone has just said" (Clifford 1990:51). As preludes to full written notes, jottings capture bits of talk and action from which the fieldworker can begin to sketch social scenes, recurring incidents, local expressions and terms, members' distinctions and accounts, dialogue among those present, and his own conversations.

Making jottings, however, is not only a writing activity; it is also a mindset. Learning to jot down details that remain sharp and that easily transform into vivid descriptions on the page results, in part, from envisioning scenes as written. Writing jottings that evoke memories requires learning what can be written about and how. We have found the following recommendations helpful for making jottings useful for producing vivid, evocatively descriptive fieldnotes.[8]

First, jot down details of what you sense are key components of observed scenes, events, or interactions. Field researchers record immediate fragments of action and talk to serve as focal points for later writing accounts of these events in as much detail as can be remembered. The field researcher studying the continuation school staff meeting, for example, relied on the jotted names of two youth, supplemented by one direct quote, to recall two accounts provided by the complaining teacher about students' "inappropriate" sexual comments. In this way, jottings serve to remind the ethnogra-

pher of what was happening at a particular time, providing a marker around which to collect other remembered incidents. But the fieldworker does not have to have a specific reason or insight in mind to make a jotting about what she has seen and heard. For example, one field researcher teaching in a Headstart Program described a series of incidents that occurred while supervising children playing in a sandbox. Included in her jottings, but not in her full fieldnotes, was the phrase, "Three new bags of sand were delivered to the sandbox." In discussing this scratch note later, she commented: "I don't think it is so important as I would want to include it in my notes because I think it is just—I wrote it down to remind me more what the day was like, what was happening."[9]

Second, jot down concrete sensory details about observed scenes and interactions. Sensory details will later help to reconstruct the feel of what happened. Pay particular attention to details you could easily forget. Since jottings must later jog the memory, each field researcher must learn which kinds of details that they best remember and make jottings about those features and qualities that they might easily forget. Thus, fieldworkers come to develop their own jotting styles reflecting their distinctive recall propensities, whether visual, kinetic, or auditory. Some focus on trying to capture evocative pieces of broader scenes, while some jot down almost exclusively dialogue; others record nonverbal expression of voice, gesture, and movement; still others note visual details of color and shape. Through trial and error, field researchers learn what most helps them to recall field experiences once they sit down to write up full notes.

Third, avoid characterizing scenes or what people do through generalizations or summaries. Many novice field researchers initially tend to jot down impressionistic, opinionated words that lend themselves better to writing evaluative summaries than to composing detailed, textured descriptions. For example, it is problematic for a field researcher to characterize the way someone works as "inefficient." Such cryptic, evaluative jottings are likely to evoke only a vague memory when the fieldworker later on attempts to write a full description of the social scene. Such jottings also convey nothing of how people in the setting experience and evaluate worker performance. Similarly, jottings that a probation officer "lectures about school" and that a youth is "very compliant—always agrees" during a probation interview are overly general; such summary statements are not helpful for writing close descriptions of how the probation officer and the youth actually talked and acted during a particular encounter.

Fourth, fieldworkers use jottings to capture detailed aspects of scenes,

talk, and interaction; short or more extended direct quotes are particularly useful for capturing such detail, as reflected in the previous two illustrations of jottings. In general, field researchers note concrete details of everyday life that *show*, rather than tell, about people's behavior (see chapter 3). By incorporating such details, jottings may provide records of actual words, phrases, or dialogue that the field researcher wants to preserve in as accurate a form as possible. It is not enough, for example, to characterize an emotional outburst simply as "angry words." Rather, the ethnographer should jot the actually spoken words, along with sensual details such as gestures and facial expressions, suggesting that the speaker's emotional experience involved "anger." Jotting these words should evoke recall, not only of the details about what happened, but also of the specific circumstances or context involved: who was present, what they said or did, what occurred immediately before and after, and so on. In this way, jottings may be used to reconstruct the actual order or sequence of talk, topics, or actions on some particular occasion.

Fifth, use jottings to record the details of emotional expressions and experiences; note feelings such as anger, sadness, joy, pleasure, disgust, or loneliness as expressed and attended to by those in the setting. Beginning ethnographers sometimes attempt to identify motives or internal states when recording observed actions. Having witnessed an angry exchange, for example, one is often tempted to focus on the source or "reason" for this emotional outburst, typically by imputing motive (e.g., some underlying feeling such as "insecurity") to one or both of the parties involved. But such psychologized explanations highlight only one of a number of possible internal states that may accompany or contribute to the observed actions. Anger could, for example, result from frustration, fatigue, the playing out of some local power struggle, or other hidden factors; the ethnographer who simply witnesses a scene has no way of knowing which factors are involved.[10] When witnessing social scenes, then, the ethnographer's task is to use his own sensibilities and reactions to learn how others understand and evaluate what happened, how they assess internal states, and how they determine psychological motivation. Useful jottings should correspondingly reflect and further this process of writing textured, detailed descriptions of interactions rather than attributing individual motivation.

Sixth, use jottings to signal your general impressions and feelings, even if you are unsure of their significance at the moment. In some cases, the ethnographer may have only a vague, intuitive sense about how or why something may be important. Such feelings might signal a key element that in the

future could enable the field researcher to see how incidents "fit together" in meaningful patterns. For example, at another point the ethnographer in the Headstart Program made a jotting about a student, "Nicole showing trust in me," which she decided not to write up in her full notes: "It was just an overall feeling I had throughout the day; . . . at that point when I wrote the jottings I couldn't remember an exact incident." But this jotting served as a mental note, subsequently stimulating her to appreciate (and record) the following incident as a revealing example of "children trusting teachers":

> At one point, Nicole got on the swings without her shoes on and asked me for a push. I told her that I would push her after she went and put her shoes on. Nicole paused and looked at me. I repeated my statement, telling her that I would save her swing for her while she was gone. Nicole then got off of the swing and put her shoes on. When she came back to the swing, I praised her listening skills and gave her a hug. I then gave her a push. I found this incident to be a significant accomplishment for Nicole, as usually she doesn't listen to the teachers.[11]

Through thinking about whether or not to write this jotting up as full notes, this student developed sensitivity to the issue of "trust." The jotting later acted as a stimulus to observe and write up a "concrete event" involving such "trust."

In summary, by participating in a setting with an eye to making jottings, an ethnographer experiences events as potential subjects for writing. Like any other writer, an ethnographer learns to recognize potential writing material and to see and hear it in terms of written descriptions. Learning to observe in order to make jottings thus is keyed to both the scene and to the page. Ethnographers learn to experience through the senses in anticipation of writing: to recall observed scenes and interactions like a reporter; to remember dialogue and movement like an actor; to see colors, shapes, textures, and spatial relations as a painter or photographer; and to sense moods, rhythms, and tone of voice like a poet. Details experienced through the senses turn into jottings with active rather than passive verbs, sensory rather than evaluative adjectives, and verbatim rather than summarized dialogue.

MAKING JOTTINGS: HOW, WHERE, AND WHEN

Making jottings is not simply a matter of writing words on a notepad or laptop. Since jottings are often written close to or even in the immediate pres-

ence of those whose words and deeds are at issue, producing jottings is a social and interactional process. Specifically, how and when an ethnographer makes jottings may have important implications for how others see and understand who she is and what she is about. There are no hard and fast rules about whether to make jottings and, if so, when and how to do so. But with time spent in a setting and by benefitting from trial and error, a field researcher may evolve a distinctive set of practices to fit writing jottings to the contours and constraints of that setting.

One initial choice involves the selection of writing materials. Traditionally, fieldworkers have relied on pen and paper. Many have used small notepads that fit easily into pocket or purse. Others prefer even less obtrusive materials, using folded sheets of paper to record jottings about different topics on specific sides. Writers also frequently develop idiosyncratic preferences for particular types of pens or pencils. But with the spread and common use of electronic and computer technologies in many contemporary settings, many field researchers now avoid pen and paper entirely and make jottings directly onto laptop computers, netbooks, smartphones, or audio recorders.

Field researchers actually write jottings in different ways. It is time-consuming and cumbersome to write out every word fully. Many fieldworkers use standard systems of abbreviations and symbols (for pen-and-paper ethnographers, a formal transcribing system such as shorthand or speed writing; for those using electronic devices, the evolving codes of texting). Others develop their own private systems for capturing words in shortened form in ways appropriate to their particular setting; in studying highly technical judicial mediation sessions, for example, Burns (2000:22) "developed a system of shorthand notation and abbreviations for commonly used terms" that allowed her to produce minutely detailed accounts of these events. Abbreviations and symbols not only facilitate getting words on a page more quickly; they also make jotted notes incomprehensible to those onlookers who ask to see them and, hence, provide a means for protecting the confidentiality of these writings.

Field researchers must also decide when, where, and how to write jottings. Clearly, looking down to pad or keyboard to write jottings distracts the field researcher (even if only momentarily), making close and continuous observation of what may be complex, rapid, and subtle actions by others very difficult. But beyond limited attention, jotting decisions can have tremendous import for relations with those in the field. The researcher works hard to establish close ties with participants so that she may be included in

activities that are central to their lives. In the midst of such activities, however, she may experience deep ambivalence: On the one hand, she may wish to preserve the immediacy of the moment by jotting down words as they are spoken and details of scenes as they are enacted, while, on the other hand, she may feel that taking out a notepad or smartphone will ruin the moment and plant seeds of distrust. Participants may now see her as someone whose primary interest lies in discovering their secrets and turning their most intimate and cherished experiences into objects of scientific inquiry.[12]

Nearly all ethnographers feel torn at times between their research commitments and their desire to engage authentically those people whose worlds they have entered. Attempting to resolve these thorny relational and moral issues, many researchers hold that conducting any aspect of the research without the full and explicit knowledge and consent of those studied violates ethical standards. In this view, those in the setting must be understood as collaborators who actively work with the researcher to tell the outside world about their lives and culture. Such mutual collaboration requires that the researcher ask permission to write about events and also respect people's desire not to reveal aspects of their lives.

Other field researchers feel less strictly bound to seek permission to conduct research or to tell participants about their intention to record events and experiences. Some justify this stance by insisting that the field researcher has no special obligations to disclose his intentions since all social life involves elements of dissembling with no one ever fully revealing all of their deeper purposes and private activities. Other researchers point out that jottings and fieldnotes written for oneself as one's own record will do no direct harm to others. This approach, of course, puts off grappling with the tough moral and personal issues until facing subsequent decisions about whether to publish or otherwise make these writings available to others. Finally, some advocate withholding knowledge of their research purposes from local people on the grounds that the information gained will serve the greater good. For example, if researchers want to describe and publicize the conditions under which undocumented factory workers or the elderly in nursing homes live, they must withhold their intentions from the powerful who control access to such settings.

Many beginning researchers, wanting to avoid open violations of trust and possibly awkward or tense encounters, are tempted to use covert procedures and to try to conceal the fact that they are conducting research; this practice often requires waiting until one leaves the field to jot notes. While these decisions involve both the researcher's conscience and pragmatic

considerations, we recommend, as a general policy, that the fieldworker inform people in the setting of the research, especially those with whom he has established some form of personal relationship. In addition to making these relations more direct and honest, openness avoids the risks and likely sense of betrayal that might follow from discovery of what the researcher has actually been up to. Concerns about the consequences—both discovery and ongoing inauthenticity—of even this small secret about research plans might mount and plague the fieldworker as time goes on and relations deepen.

Of course, strained relations and ethical dilemmas are not completely avoided by informing others of one's research purposes. While participants might have consented to the research, they might not know exactly what the research involves or what the researcher will do to carry it out.[13] They might realize that the fieldworker is writing fieldnotes at the end of the day, but they become used to his presence and "forget" that this writing is going on. Furthermore, marginal and transient members of the setting may not be aware of his research identity and purposes despite conscientious efforts to inform them.

By carrying out fieldwork in an overt manner, the researcher gains flexibility in when, where, and how to write jottings. In many field situations, it may be feasible to jot notes openly. In so doing, the fieldworker should act with sensitivity, trying to avoid detracting from or interfering with the ordinary relations and goings-on in the field. If possible, the fieldworker should start open jottings early on in contacts with those studied. If one establishes a "note-taker" role, jotting notes comes to be part of what people expect from the fieldworker. Here, it helps to offer initial explanations of the need to take notes; an ethnographer can stress the importance of accuracy, of getting down exactly what was said. People often understand that such activities are required of students and, therefore, tolerate and accommodate the needs of researchers who, they believe, want to faithfully represent what goes on. When learning a new language in another culture, the field researcher can explain that she is writing down local terms in order to remember them. By saying the word as she writes, people might offer new terms and become further interested in teaching her.

Although taking down jottings may at first seem odd or awkward, after a time, it often becomes a normal and expected part of what the fieldworker does. In the following excerpt from a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) office, the office manager and a worker jokingly enlist the fieldworker as audience for a self-parody of wanting to "help" clients:

> Later I'm in Jean's office and Ramon comes up and waxes melodramatic. Take this down, he says. Jean motions for me to write, so I pull out my notepad. "I only regret that I have but eight hours to devote to saving" . . . He begins to sing "Impossible Dream," in his thick, goofy Brooklyn accent. . . . "Feel free to join in," he says. . . .

Here, the ethnographer and his note-taking provide resources for a spontaneous humorous performance.[14]

Yet even when some people become familiar with open writing in their presence, others may become upset when the researcher turns to a notepad or laptop and begins to write down their words and actions. Ethnographers may try to avoid the likely challenges and facilitate open, extensive note-taking by positioning themselves on the margins of interaction. Even then, they may still encounter questions, as reflected in the following comment by a field researcher observing divorce mediation sessions:

> I tried to take notes that were as complete as possible during the session. My sitting behind the client had probably more to do with wanting to get a lot of written notes as unobtrusively as possible as with any more worthy methodological reason. While taking copious amounts of notes (approximately 50 pages per session) did not seem to bother the clients, a few mediators became quite defensive about it. One mediator wanted to know how I "decided what to write down and what not to write down." At staff meetings, this same mediator would sit next to me and try to glance over to see what I had written in my notebook.

Given the delicacy of this and similar situations, fieldworkers must constantly rely upon interactional skills and tact to judge whether or not taking jottings in the moment is appropriate.[15]

Furthermore, in becoming accustomed to open jotting, people may develop definite expectations about what events and topics should be recorded. People may question why the fieldworker is or is not taking note of particular events: On the one hand, they may feel slighted if she fails to make jottings on what they are doing or see as important; on the other hand, they may react with surprise or indignation when she makes jottings about apparently personal situations. Consider the following exchange, again described by the field researcher studying divorce mediation, which occurred as she openly took notes while interviewing a mediator about a session just completed:

> On one occasion when finishing up a debriefing, . . . [the mediator] began to apply some eye makeup while I was finishing writing down some observations. She flashed me a mock disgusted look and said, "Are you writing *this* down too!" indicating the activity with her eye pencil.

Open jotting, then, has to be carefully calibrated to the unfolding context of the ongoing interaction.[16] Open jottings not only may strain relations with those who notice the writing, but, as noted previously, jottings can also distract the ethnographer from paying close attention to talk and activities occurring in the setting. A field researcher will inevitably miss fleeting expressions, subtle movements, and even key content in interactions if his nose is in his notepad.

Taking open jottings is not always advisable for other reasons as well. In some settings, the fieldworker's participation in ongoing interaction might be so involving as to preclude taking breaks to write down jottings; in such instances, he may have to rely more upon memory, focusing on incidents and key phrases that will later trigger a fuller recollection of the event or scene. For example, in a setting where only a few people write and do so only on rare occasions, an ethnographer who writes instead of participating in an all-night village dance might be perceived as failing to maintain social relationships—a serious offense in a close-knit village.

As a result of these problems, even ethnographers who usually write open jottings may, at other times, make jottings privately and out of sight of those studied. Waiting until just after a scene, incident, or conversation has occurred, the ethnographer can then go to a private place to jot down a memorable phrase. Here, it is often useful for the fieldworker to adopt the ways members of the setting themselves use to carve out a moment of privacy or to "get away." Fieldworkers have reported retreating to private places such as a bathroom (Cahill 1985), deserted lunchroom, stairwell, or supply closet to record such covert jottings. Depending upon circumstances, the fieldworker can visit such places periodically, as often as every half hour or so, or immediately after a particularly important incident. Another option is to identify the natural "time-out" spaces that members of the setting also rely on and use as places to relax and unwind, to be by oneself, and so on. Thus, fieldworkers can often go to the institutional cafeteria or coffee shop, to outside sitting areas, or even to waiting rooms or hallways to make quick jottings about events that have just occurred. Other researchers avoid all overt writing in the field setting but immediately upon leaving the field,

pull out a notepad or laptop to jot down reminders of the key incidents, words, or reactions they wish to include in full fieldnotes. A similar procedure is to record jottings or even fuller notes on some kind of recording device while driving home from a distant field site. These procedures allow the fieldworker to signal items that she does not want to forget without being seen as intrusive.

Finally, an ethnographer may write jottings in ways intermediate between open and hidden styles, especially when note-taking becomes a part of her task or role. In settings where writing—whether pen on paper or on a computer or laptop—is a required or accepted activity, fieldworkers can take jottings without attracting special notice. Thus, classrooms, meetings where note-taking is expected, organizational encounters where forms must be filled out (as in domestic violence legal aid clinics), or in public settings such as coffee shops and cafeterias where laptops are common, jottings may be more or less openly written. Those in the field may or may not know explicitly that the fieldworker is writing jottings for research purposes. Though many activities do not so easily lend themselves to writing jottings, fieldworkers can find other naturally occurring means to incorporate jottings. For example, fieldworkers often learn about settings by becoming members. For the fieldworker who assumes the role of a novice, the notes that as a beginner he is permitted or even expected to write may become the jottings for his first fieldnotes.

Strategies for how, where, and when to jot notes change with time spent in the field and with the different relationships formed between fieldworker and people in the setting. Even after the ethnographer has established strong personal ties, situations might arise in fieldwork when visibly recording anything will be taken as inappropriate or out of place; in these situations, taking out a notepad or laptop would generate deep discomfort to both fieldworker and other people in the setting.[17] One student ethnographer studying a campus bookstore who had grown quite friendly with bookstore workers—with whom she had spoken openly about her study—nonetheless reported the following incident:

> One of the younger cashiers came up to me after having seen me during two of my last observation sessions. She approached me tentatively with a question about me being a "spy" from the other campus bookstore or possibly from the administration. Trying to ease the situation with a joke, I told her I was only being a spy for sociology's sake. But she didn't understand the joke, and it only made the situation worse.

Sometimes people may be uncomfortable with a jotting researcher because they have had little experience with writing as a part of everyday life. Especially in oral cultures, watching and writing about people may seem like a strange activity indeed. In other instances, people have unpleasant associations with writing and find jottings intrusive and potentially dangerous. On one occasion, an elder in a Zambian village became very hesitant to continue speaking after the ethnographer jotted down his name on a scrap of paper simply to remember it. She later learned that government officials in colonial times used to come by and record names for tax purposes and to enlist people into government work projects.

Finally, even with permission to write openly, the tactful fieldworker will want to remain sensitive to and avoid jotting down matters that participants regard as secret, embarrassing, too revealing, or that put them in any danger. In other instances, the people themselves might not object and, in fact, urge the researcher to take notes about sensitive matters. Even though she thinks they may be embarrassing or bring them harm if they were to be made public, the researcher might take jottings but then later decide not to use them in any final writing.

All in all, it is a defining moment in field relations when an ethnographer begins to write down what people are saying and doing in the presence of those very people. Therefore, fieldworkers take very different approaches to jottings, their strategies both shaping and being shaped by their setting and by their relationships. Hence, decisions about when and how to take jottings must be considered in the context of the broader set of relations with those in the setting. In some situations and relations, taking open jottings is clearly not advisable. In others, fieldworkers decide to take jottings but must devise their own unique means to avoid or minimize awkward interactions that may arise as a result. When deciding when and where to jot, it is rarely helpful or possible to specify in advance one "best way." Here, as in other aspects of fieldwork, a good rule of thumb is to remain open, flexible, and ready to alter an approach if it adversely affects the people under study.

REFLECTIONS: WRITING AND ETHNOGRAPHIC MARGINALITY

Starting as outsiders to a field setting, many fieldworkers find themselves pulled toward involvement as insiders in ways that make maintaining a research stance difficult. The student-ethnographer working in a bookstore, for example, noted this tension:

> There were times when I wanted to be free to listen to other individuals talk or to watch their activities, but friends and acquaintances were so "distracting" coming up and wanting to talk that I wasn't able to. Also, there was this concern on my part that, as I got to know some of the staff people better, their qualities as human beings would become so endearing that I was afraid that I would lose my sociological perspective—I didn't want to feel like in studying them, I was exploiting them.

Many field researchers similarly find themselves unable to consistently sustain a watching, distancing stance toward people they are drawn to and toward events that compellingly involve them.[18] Indeed, some may eventually decide to completely abandon their commitment to research (a possibility that has long given anxiety to anthropologists concerned about the dangers of "going native"). Others may abandon their research commitment in a more limited, situational fashion, determining not to write fieldnotes about specific incidents or persons on the grounds that such writing would involve betrayals or revelations that the researcher finds personally and/or ethically intolerable (see Warren 2000:189–90).

But more commonly, ethnographers try to maintain a somewhat detached, observational attitude, even toward people whom they like and respect, balancing and combining research commitments with personal attachments in a variety of ways.[19] One way to do so is to take occasional time-outs from research, not observing and/or writing fieldnotes about selected portions of one's field experience while continuing to do so about other portions. When living in a village on a long-term basis, for example, an ethnographer may feel drawn into daily, intimate relations as a neighbor or perhaps even as a part of a family. On these occasions, she may participate "naturally"—without a writing orientation or analytic reflection—in ongoing social life. But on other occasions, she participates in local scenes in ways that are directed toward making observations and collecting data. Here, her actions incorporate an underlying commitment to write down and ultimately transform into "data" the stuff and nuances of that life.

Several practical writing conflicts arise from these opposing pressures toward involvement and distance. The inclination to experience daily events either as a "natural" participant or as a researcher shows up in writing as shifts in point of view as well as in varying kinds of details considered significant for inscription. Even where and when to jot notes depends on the person's involvement, at a particular moment, as a participant or as an observer. Whether a researcher-as-neighbor in the village or as a researcher-

as-intern on a job, ethnographers experience tension between the present-oriented, day-to-day role and the future-oriented identity as writer; this tension will shape the practical choices they make in writing both jottings and more complete notes.

While a primary goal of ethnography is immersion in the life-worlds and everyday experiences of others, the ethnographer inevitably remains in significant ways an outsider to these worlds. Immersion is not merging; the ethnographer who seeks to "get close to" others usually does not become one of these others. As long as, and to the extent that, he retains commitment to the exogenous project of studying or understanding the lives of others, as opposed to the indigenous project of simply living a life in one way or another, he stays at least a partial stranger to their worlds, despite sharing many of the ordinary exigencies of life that these others experience and react to (see Bittner 1988; Emerson 1987).

Writing fieldnotes creates and underlies this socially close, but experientially separate, stance. The ethnographer's fieldnote writing practices—writing jottings on what others are doing in their presence, observing in order to write, writing extended fieldnotes outside the immediacy of the field setting—specifically create and sustain separation, marginality, and distance in the midst of personal and social proximity. Overtly writing jottings interactionally reminds others (and the ethnographer herself) that she has priorities and commitments that differ from their own. Observing in order to write generates moments when the fieldworker is visibly and self-consciously an outsider pursuing tasks and purposes that differ from those of members.[20] And going to tent, home, or office to write fieldnotes regularly reminds the ethnographer that she is not simply doing what members are doing but that she has additional and other commitments.

In sum, in most social settings, writing down what is taking place as it occurs is a strange, marginalizing activity that marks the writer as an observer rather than a full, ordinary participant. But independently of the reactions of others, participating in order to write leads one to assume the mind-set of an observer, a mind-set in which one constantly steps outside of scenes and events to assess their "write-able" qualities. It may be for this reason that some ethnographers try to put writing out of mind entirely by opting for the more fully experiential style of fieldwork. But this strategy simply puts off, rather than avoids, the marginalizing consequences of writing, for lived experience must eventually be turned into observations and represented in textual form.