

Ethnographic Fieldwork

REC**UP**

Research Consortium on
Educational Outcomes &
Poverty

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Fieldwork:

Participating in order to write

- What do people actually *do* when they are doing 'fieldwork'?
- Planning access to field-sites
- Negotiating with gate-keepers
- Implications of different kinds of roles in the field

Different kinds of writing relevant for fieldwork

1. A daily diary

- ❖ Personal
- ❖ Field-related

2. Headnotes: brief reminders

3. Fieldnotes: accounts that are as full as possible

- ❖ Stream of consciousness
- ❖ Reflections on the content—questions it raises
- ❖ Analytic ideas

Dimensions of descriptive observation (*Spradley's list*)

- **Space (context, surroundings)**
- **Actors (who was present?)**
- **Activities (what were they doing?)**
- **Objects (what were they using?)**
- **Events (what happened?)**
- **Times (when did it start and end?)**
- **Goals (what were actors trying to achieve?)**
- **Feelings (what did actors seem to feel?)**

Five types of materials to be included in the record (*Lofland and Lofland*)

- **Running descriptions (simple account)**
- **Forgotten material, not noted at the time (and reported actions, not heard or seen)**
- **Your own interpretive ideas**
- **Your own personal impressions, feelings**
- **Reminders to yourself to look for additional information in future**

What to write down

- The limitations of ‘write down what you see and hear’: *do you try to capture everything or focus on specific aspects?*
- What to do about tacit knowledge—things you take for granted but your readers might not understand
- How notes change through time

How to write it down:

You might experiment

- with voice (first person, third person);
- with stance (personal, formal);
- with tense (past, present);
- with 'stream of consciousness' versus separating different kinds of notes
- with different 'readers' in mind

When to write it down

- What to do if you *can* take notes at the time
- What to do if you *cannot* take notes at the time

Ethical Considerations

Some basic rules:

- Informed consent
- Anonymity and confidentiality of your notes
- Ethnographic fieldwork should never bring anybody any harm
- Feedback
- Additional considerations in relation to your project

References

Lofland, J. and Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. California: Wadsworth Publishing Company

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York: Holt.