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ETHNOGRAPHY ESSENTIALS

DESIGNING, CONDUCTING, AND PRESENTING YOUR RESEARCH

JULIAN M.
MURCHISON

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ETHNOGRAPHY ESSENTIALS

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JULIAN M. MURCHISON

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PREFACE

This book aims to guide the relatively new ethnographer through the research process step by step. Advanced undergraduate students in anthropology, sociology, education, and related fields that employ ethnography will appreciate this text, and it could also prove useful to undergraduate students at the introductory level, more advanced students who want a practical guide to doing research, and even practitioners of ethnography in organizations and institutions outside of academics. The book starts from the premise that you will be engaged in your own ethnographic research over the course of a semester or a similar time period. Some projects may be slightly more concentrated in duration, and some projects may last a year or longer. The same basic principles apply in either case.

The book assumes relatively little prior exposure to ethnography, though previous experience with reading ethnographies or even doing ethnographic research is always a plus. With this working assumption, the book starts at step one in the research process and walks the reader through the entire project in a mostly chronological fashion. Readers who bring some experience with ethnography to the book may find that some sections provide a sort of review. Such a review can help those readers in evaluating their own thoughts about ethnography.

The book was written to maximize usefulness and accessibility. You will find important ideas and concepts (often highlighted as key terms) throughout the text. However, you should find very little jargon or highly specialized terminology. I have aimed to cover important and complex ideas and issues in as simple and straightforward a manner as possible. When the ideas and issues can be covered in relatively plain language, I have preferred that approach over the language used in texts on ethnographic methods intended for a more advanced and specialized audience.

The reader of this book should find the tools and the space to pursue various ethnographic projects. As a research strategy, ethnography encompasses a lot of different approaches and assumptions. There are even fundamental disagreements about what ethnography is or should be. I have aimed to address key questions and critiques that arise in discussions of ethnography without getting sidetracked by topics that will prevent you from completing your task in a relatively straightforward and effective way. Along these lines, I explain why the use of terms like informant and field can be the subject of a significant debate, but I choose to use these terms because you will frequently encounter them elsewhere and they make discussion of certain topics, methods, and strategies easier. I expect that you will come to use these terms with some awareness of their multiple layers of meaning and that you will be part of the next generation of ethnographers who will help the research strategy evolve and overcome some of its limitations.

In producing this guide for the ethnographic endeavor, I want to allow, and even encourage, students and other readers to explore multiple possibilities in conducting ethnography. Therefore, the text is intended to include multiple approaches under the umbrella of ethnography. For example, your individual approach may be decidedly scientific or intentionally subjective. Either way, you should find useful information for your work in the text. At times, in order to allow for this multiplicity of approaches, the text has to include multiple possible scenarios and multiple options for you. In these instances, you have to decide for yourself the approach that seems most suitable for you and your

research. I have provided suggestions and criteria for making those decisions and emphasized the ways in which decisions and strategies related to research strategies, methods of data collection, and analysis are interrelated.

The topic of ethics is not confined exclusively to the final chapter or an appendix. Ethical issues arise throughout the text. This regular treatment of ethics should help you understand the importance of ethical considerations and the manner in which all ethnographers grapple with and address these issues. The book aims to give you a sense of the underlying ethical questions that ethnography raises and the practical steps that ethnographers take to address ethical concerns.

THE BASIS FOR THIS BOOK

There are a number of good books out there that examine ethnography as a whole or one of its component parts. Relatively few of these books are geared toward an undergraduate audience, and many of them are theoretical rather than practical in focus. Those books that are both practical and accessible to the undergraduate tend to assume a rather narrow sort of project or present a series of separate ethnographic exercises. Therefore, this text assumes that you benefit from designing and carrying out a particular project that employs a combination of methods.

A copy of the syllabus for a course called Ethnographic Research and Writing started the conversation between the publisher and me that ultimately led to this book. I have taught that course on two different occasions. Students in the most recent class read drafts of many of the chapters contained in the final book. Like the book, that course is designed around a semester-long ethnographic research project. Students are expected to choose their own topics and devote considerable time to the project throughout the course of the semester. The class considers the nuts and bolts of ethnographic methods, the strength and limitations of ethnography, and the writing process. There is a strong commitment to the idea of ethnography as writing. Work by the student and the instructor is presented and critiqued in a workshop format that requires the students to write and revise throughout the process. This book reflects that commitment to ethnography as writing-intensive. While the ultimate focus is on producing a final written ethnography, this book focuses also on the processual writing that happens in the course of writing from start to finish. Ethnographers write to record information, and they write as a way of analyzing the data they collect. If they are aware of the centrality of writing to the process, they can use writing to their best advantage as researchers and analysts.

This book generally assumes that the final ethnography will be a written ethnography. Many of the principles and methods discussed here also apply to ethnographic film and to other media, but writing ethnography includes its own unique opportunities and challenges, and these are the focus of this book.

Much of the content in the book is based directly or indirectly on my teaching experiences in a number of classes that involve ethnography. From students in Introduction to Anthropology who write a short ethnography to honors students who are writing ethnographic theses of a hundred pages or more, some of the concerns and questions are strikingly similar. The text aims to address as many of these concerns and questions as possible and tries not to make unwarranted assumptions about knowledge or experience.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The book is basically organized chronologically, starting with choosing a research topic and developing research design, then proceeding to consider the practice of ethnography in terms of note taking and specific methods, and finishing with a focus on the writing process that produces a final ethnography. Almost all ethnographies follow this basic progression in one form or another. The chapter on analyzing along the way, though, shows that data collection and analysis should be linked rather than separated. Therefore, embedded in the organization and thoughts about chronology you will find an important idea about connections between different stages of research.

The chronological model for the text can be expanded or contracted and even revised as your situation requires. When or how often you pause to review your progress during the course of your research will depend in part on how long your project lasts. Chapter Eight may apply to the third week of ethnographic research or the third month or both. You may decide to read the chapter on interviewing or mapping before you read the chapter on participant-observation if you know that one of these methods is particularly important or pressing for your project. The chapters are presented in this order to suit what is most likely to occur first in the most cases, but many projects will follow a slightly different model. You should make the text your own as you seek the parts that are most helpful for your ethnographic research.

NOTE TO STUDENTS

Ethnographic research should be an exciting opportunity. It takes you out of the library and the laboratory and into the social worlds around you. This project is your chance to learn from others and to gain knowledge about something in the real world about which you have always wondered. This book is designed to guide you step-by-step through that process. This research will probably be different from the research you have done for other classes. Make the most of the opportunity, and make the research process your own. You are the researcher and the research instrument. If you are prepared to think openly and learn from your neighbors and your fellow human beings, you are prepared to start your ethnographic project.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My work on this book and my approach to ethnography are a result of many varied influences. I have benefited immeasurably from assistance and kindness from many people in the course of my career and my ethnographic endeavors. I will never be able to repay all of my debts, but I wish to thank many of the people that have helped me at different points.

I am thankful to Jossey-Bass for the opportunity to write this book and support in the relative painless process. I am glad that Andy Pasternack approached me with the idea to write this book, and I have enjoyed working with Seth Schwartz, Kelsey McGee, and others in seeing this book to completion.

My first experience doing ethnography of a sort came when I went to live in Argentina in 1989. The Jerez family took me in as one of their own and taught me about life and culture in northern Argentina. They had incredible patience as they taught me Spanish and helped me through a long learning process. I will be forever thankful for their openness and kindness. They probably don't realize it, but they helped kindle my love for studying culture firsthand before I even knew what the word ethnography meant. Thank you, Susana, Periquín, César, Suzy, Martín, Valeria, Javier, Ernesto, Carla, Leandra, and Gastón. I remember the learning experiences with fondness and cherish the time that I got to spend with all of you. My classmates, teachers, and friends in Argentina were equally generous in their giving spirit and their willingness to teach me. My thanks to them all.

Matt Samson was the first person to introduce me to the words and worlds of anthropology and ethnography. He took me to Mexico and Cuba and encouraged me to learn and to engage culture in all its complexity. I did not fully appreciate it at the time, but I do now. Ever since, he has been a wonderful friend, supporter, and colleague. Thank you, Matt, for the trips, the guidance, and the conversations.

Kenyon College was a wonderful place to study anthropology as an undergraduate. I had excellent teachers in Rita Kipp, Ed Schortmann, Pat Urban, Nick Kardulias, and Ken Smail. Dave Suggs was and is an invaluable mentor. From our first conversation on the porch, I knew that Dave was somebody with whom I shared a common intellectual pursuit. I continue to be amazed at the way he guided and supported me while also allowing me to develop my own ideas and convictions about the discipline. I continue to treasure the times when our paths cross.

During my time at the University of Michigan, I was surrounded by people who constantly engaged me in interesting conversations about anthropology and ethnography. I learned so much from my classmates and colleagues, including Veve Lele, Jeff Jurgens, Jen Tilton, Erica Lehrer, Meghan Callaghan, Lourdes Gutierrez, Liz de la Portilla, Rochelle Davis, Bill Parkinson, and Lars Fogelin. As a graduate student instructor for Holly Peters-Golden, I gained a deep appreciation for ways that undergraduate students can study and learn ethnography with a keen interest. In a class on ethnographic writing with Ruth Behar, I was introduced to the craft of writing ethnography and the importance of detail and skill in communicating what emerges through the ethnographic process. Janet Hart taught me to appreciate the importance of words, narratives, and conversations in ethnography. Kelly Askew and Nancy Rose Hunt both offered helpful feedback on my own

ethnographic work that helped me to become a more effective ethnographer and teacher. Conrad Kottak was my guide and mentor throughout my time in graduate school, and he helped me understand the importance of using ethnography to effectively communicate information and insight concerning the world around us. Rackham, the Department of Anthropology, and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan provided important support that allowed me to do my own ethnography.

The bulk of my own ethnographic work has taken place in Tanzania. There are so many people who have assisted me throughout these endeavors. Without their assistance, I would not be able to speak about ethnography from a firsthand perspective, and I would not be in a position to write this book. I am always amazed by Tanzanians' willingness to share so much of their thoughts, words, and lives with me. I have a deep appreciation and affection for Tanzania as a place and for Tanzanians. I thank all the government workers who helped me, from the national offices that provided me with research clearance and immigration permits to local government offices. So many others have helped me and opened their homes and lives to me at different points. Even though I cannot name you all here, please know that I deeply appreciate your kindness. You were wonderful teachers, hosts, and friends. The Ndumbaro and Nyoni families have provided homes and companionship on too many occasions to count. I will never be able to repay fully your generosity. I will be forever thankful and treasure the ways that you have allowed me to become a part of your families.

When I began looking for a faculty position, I was very lucky to find an opportunity at Millsaps College. I have been blessed with wonderful colleagues, engaged students, and a life partner. George Bey, Mike Galaty, and Ming Tsui have provided exemplary models as undergraduate teachers and the sort of collegiality that makes work fun. The college has provided me with support to pursue my ongoing ethnographic research and the sabbatical during which most of this book was written. My students at Millsaps have taught me many things. I have a better understanding of ethnography from their comments and questions inside and outside of the classroom. Some of my most rewarding teaching experiences come when I guide students through their own research projects. I would not have been able to write this book without the chance to work with students like Chelsi West, Debra Billingsley, Ellen Beilmann, Khyati Gupta, Maggie Morgan, Brian Wallace, Caroline Ficara, Hannah Page, Jon-Mark Olivier, Matt Casteel, Jane Fuller, Mary Mitchell Williams, and many others. You may not always realize it, but working with you pushes me to new thoughts and new questions. I hope that you can see some of our learning experiences contained in this book.

Ben McNair provided bibliographic assistance for this book as a student worker in the department. Erin Jordan has been a wonderful editorial assistant in the process. Her willingness to help with the minutiae of putting a manuscript together has helped keep me sane during the process, and she has also offered cogent critique and useful suggestions along the way. I am truly lucky to have the chance to work with so many wonderful students. The line between student and colleague can be very fuzzy, and that is a good thing.

My family is a constant source of support. My mother, Eloise, and my father, Ken, have always been supportive of my goals and my dreams. Thirty years ago, they almost certainly did not envision their son as an ethnographer working in East Africa, but their support has been unflagging. They are both scholars in their own right and they have been wonderful models for me as I have pursued my own path. My sister, Kathryn, is the real educator in the family. I always find her deep commitment to teaching high school social studies (and to her soccer teams) to be an inspiration. I hope I can

approach the sort of meaningful difference in the lives of my students that she makes in the lives of her students. Kathryn and my parents have always helped me find meaning and clarity, even when it did not seem obvious to me.

My biggest thank-you has to go to my wife, Sandra. When we married in 2004, I gained a best friend and someone who inspires me. Her kindness and generosity make me a better person. Her love for making art makes me want to fulfill my own dreams as an anthropologist and an ethnographer. A good portion of this book was written while I was sitting in the printmaking studio working alongside her. Sandra, I cherish your love and your companionship more than I can explain.

October 2009

Jackson, Mississippi

THE AUTHOR

Julian M. Murchison is associate professor of anthropology at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. He received a BA in anthropology from Kenyon College and MA and PhD degrees in anthropology from the University of Michigan. As a cultural anthropologist, he has extensive ethnographic experience working in Tanzania. After studying at the University of Dar es Salaam as an undergraduate in 1993-94, he has returned regularly to pursue ethnographic research in Tanzania. His work has focused on the intersections of health and religion in southern Tanzania. Many of his presentations and publications have focused on topics including religious identity, spirit possession, HIV/AIDS, and religious and medical pluralism. Recently his thinking and writing have also focused on the nature of fieldwork experiences and an urban law firm as an ethnographic setting. His teaching experiences at Millsaps have taught him the value of ethnography as a learning tool and convinced him of the ability of committed students to conduct significant ethnographic research.

To Sandra, my inspiration and the love of my life

PART 1

THE WHY AND WHAT OF ETHNOGRAPHY

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define ethnography
- Explain the basic history of ethnography
- Track trends in contemporary ethnography
- Explore the implications of ethnography as firsthand research
- Examine the ethnographer's role as research instrument
- Consider collaboration as the foundation for ethnographic research

ETHNOGRAPHY: THE ENGAGED, FIRSTHAND STUDY OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN ACTION

Ethnography is a **research strategy** that allows researchers to explore and examine the cultures and societies that are a fundamental part of the human experience. Unlike many other scientific research strategies, the ethnographer as researcher is not typically a detached or uninvolved **observer**. The ethnographer collects data and gains insight through *firsthand* involvement with **research subjects** and **informants**. With few exceptions, the ethnographer conducts research by interacting with other human beings that are part of the study; this interaction takes many forms, from conversations and interviews to shared ritual and emotional experiences.

From the standpoint of ethnography, the only plausible way to study social and cultural phenomena is to study them *in action*. The complexity of human lives and social interaction cannot be reduced to a sterile laboratory experiment with the strict control of variables characteristic of a scientific experiment. Instead, ethnography aims to study life outside of a controlled environment. As a result, the objects of study are sometimes hard to identify and always subject to change as the result of innovation, conflict, and many other factors. Ethnographers employ a number of different research techniques and methods in a complex research strategy that matches the complexity of their objects of study.

Today, researchers employ ethnography as a research strategy in a number of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and education, and as a practical research strategy in marketing, management, and public policy arenas. This breadth of use indicates that the utility of the approach has become apparent in many different circumstances where better understanding of social and cultural dynamics is desirable. Ethnographic research encompasses a number of different research

methods and techniques ; this text will introduce many of these techniques and methods and explain how to design and to carry out effective research that applies these techniques and methods appropriate situations.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Ethnography originally developed as a research strategy in academic circles, mainly within the discipline of anthropology. Therefore, anthropology provides many of the most famous early ethnographers and many “classic” ethnographies. Names like Bronislaw Malinowski, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict, along with ethnographic subjects like the Trobriand Islanders, the Nuer, the island of Samoa, and the nation of Japan are important markers of ethnography’s early history. These ethnographers and their works have given us a number of important texts and some films that are important resources for students of ethnography. Before you begin planning to carry out your own research, you should become familiar with the history of ethnography. This section will provide a very brief discussion of that history, but it is not a substitute for exploring ethnographies and their history more deeply. A good ethnography makes for a good read and reading the work of others broadens the ethnographer’s awareness of the possibilities for ethnography as a research strategy. Anthropology and ethnography arose at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in the context of a particular set of historical circumstances that influenced early ethnographic work. These circumstances included European imperialism, American expansionist tendencies, and dominant understandings of race, ethnicity, and gender that usually placed white males in positions of privilege and power and placed others in marginalized or colonized positions of oppression and subordination. Ethnography can offer important insight into situations of suffering and disempowerment, and anthropology has a long history of using ethnography to expose human systems that are taken for granted and to offer implicit or explicit critiques of dominant systems and understandings. Nevertheless, much of early anthropology and ethnography intentionally or unintentionally supported existing systems and structures of power.

Early ethnography consisted mostly of white male ethnographers going from academic and political centers in the United States and Europe to study in geographically distant locales among socially marginalized groups. (There are many exceptions to this general statement: Margaret Mead, Zora Neale Hurston, and many other early ethnographers were not white males.) In some cases, the research projects were directly connected to political endeavors like colonialism—for instance, Evans-Pritchard’s work among the Nuer (Evans Pritchard 1940). The byproduct of research in these circumstances was a research situation in which clear foreigners arrived to study the “Other.” This dynamic has raised questions about the potential for mutual understanding, the importance of language, the role of intermediaries, and, perhaps most important, the role of power—political, economic, and social—in the research context. Because of the desire to present authoritative accounts that appeared to be suitably objective and scientific and for a variety of other reasons, many of the questions and concerns were not adequately addressed at the time. As a result, at least some of the potential for bias and the potential for multiple perspectives was ignored or left unexamined during an important part of the early history of ethnography.

The ethnographies that appeared in this context tended to present holistic accounts of particular

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