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Writing  
Ethnographic  
Fieldnotes

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## Writing Up Fieldnotes II: Creating Scenes on the Page

To view writing fieldnotes simply as a matter of putting on paper what a field researcher has heard and seen suggests that it is a transparent process; in this view, field researchers “mirror” observed reality in their notes. They describe without elaborate rhetoric, intricate metaphors, or complex, suspenseful narration. Writing detailed description, this view suggests, requires only a sharp memory and conscientious effort.

A contrasting view insists that all writing, even seemingly straightforward descriptive writing, is a construction. Through his choice of words and method of organization, a writer presents a *version* of the world. As a selective and creative activity, writing always functions more as a filter than a mirror reflecting the “reality” of events. Ethnographers, however, have only recently come to appreciate this view, and to see how even “realist” ethnographies are constructions which rely upon a variety of stylistic conventions. Van Maanen (1988:47), for example, has identified “studied neutrality” as a core convention in realist ethnography; through this convention “the narrator . . . poses as an impersonal conduit, who unlike missionaries, administrators, journalists, or unabashed members of the culture themselves, passes on more-or-less objective data in a measured intellectual style that is uncontaminated by personal bias, political goals, or moral judgments.”

As with completed ethnographies, descriptive fieldnotes also draw on a variety of writing conventions. Ethnographers construct their fieldnote descriptions from selectively recalled and accented moments. Whether it be an incident, event, routine, interaction, or visual image, ethnographers

reconstruct each moment from selected details which they remember or had jotted down: words, gestures, body movements, sounds, background setting, etc. While writing, they further highlight certain actions and statements more than others in order to portray their sense of an experience. In other words, ethnographers create scenes on a page through highly selective and partial descriptions of observed and reevoked details. These scenes—that is, moments recreated on a page—represent ethnographers’ perceptions and memories of slices of life, enhanced or blurred by their descriptive writing skills.

In this chapter, we explore the relations between an ethnographer’s attention to people’s sayings and doings, immediate purposes for recalling these moments, and writing options for presenting and analyzing them. Of course, no writing technique enables an ethnographer to write up life exactly as it happened or even precisely as she remembers it. At best, the ethnographer “recreates” her memories as written scenes which authentically depict people’s lives through selected, integrated details. But in mastering certain descriptive techniques, she can write up her notes more easily in that first dash of getting everything down; and she can depict more effectively those scenes which she intuitively selects as especially significant. Whether she writes up key scenes first or goes back to them to fill in details, learning descriptive writing strategies will enable her to more vividly and fully create those scenes on the page.

We begin this chapter by examining writing strategies for *depicting* slices of observed and remembered life in fieldnotes; specifically, we consider strategies for *describing* basic settings, for *presenting dialogue* between people, and for *characterizing* the main individuals who appear in the account. Second, we present options for *organizing* fieldnote descriptions: *sketches* and then two forms of narrative, *episodes* and *fieldnote tales*. (Although we discuss depicting and organizing strategies separately, in actual fieldnote writing one does both at the same time.) Third, we examine several *strategies of analysis* which, in contrast to descriptive writing, allow for in-process reflection through *asides* and *commentary* about the fieldnotes being written. Such reflection about fieldnotes not only spurs the ethnographer to envision scenes more clearly the next time he sees similar events, but it also facilitates tracing out potential interconnections between events recounted in the fieldnotes.

Throughout the chapter, we focus our suggestions on increasing fieldworkers’ awareness of their options for writing. For example, first-time fieldworkers typically have little difficulty in writing snippets about

brief interactions; however, they are often uncertain about how to write about more complex, key scenes by sequencing interactions, creating characters, reporting dialogue, and contextualizing an action or incident with vivid, sensory details. Failing to write in-process commentary, they overlook obvious connections which they might pursue. But though we offer many concrete suggestions and examples, we do not attempt to prescribe a "correct" style or to cover all the writing options an ethnographer might use. Yet, we do suggest that one's writing style does often influence how one envisions what can be written. An ethnographer committed to an "objective" writing style presented in the passive voice and with neutral, colorless wording will often overlook human agency and will more likely skip over the more messy (and often most interesting) details of human experience. Learning to envision scenes as vivid, detailed writing on a page is as much a commitment to a lively descriptive style of writing as it is to an intellectual honesty in recording events fully and accurately.

#### WRITING DETAILED NOTES: DEPICTION OF SCENES

The ethnographer's central purpose is to describe a social world and its people. But often beginning researchers produce fieldnotes lacking sufficient and lively detail. Through inadvertent summarizing and evaluative wording, a fieldworker fails to adequately describe what she observed and experienced. The following strategies enable a writer to coherently depict an observed moment through vivid details: these strategies are description, presentation of dialogue, and characterization. As is evident in several of the included excerpts, fieldworkers often merge several strategies.

#### *Description*

"Description" is a term used in more than one way. Thus far, we have referred to writing fieldnotes as descriptive writing in contrast to analytic argumentation.<sup>1</sup> Here we refer more specifically to description as a means of picturing through concrete sensory details the basic scenes, settings, objects, people, and actions the fieldworker observed. In this sense, writ-

ing descriptive images is just one part of the ethnographer's storytelling about a day's events.

As a writing strategy, description calls for concrete details rather than abstract generalizations, for sensory imagery rather than evaluative labels, and for immediacy through details presented at close range. Goffman (1989:131) advises the fieldworker to write "lushly," making frequent use of adjectives and adverbs to convey details. For example, details present color, shape, and size to create visual images; other details of sound, timbre, loudness, and volume evoke auditory images; those details describing smell or fragrance recreate olfactory images; and details portraying gestures, movements, posture, and facial expression convey kinetic images. While visual images tend to predominate in many descriptions, ethnographers find that they often combine these various kinds of images in a complete description.

When describing a scene, the writer selects those details which most clearly and vividly create an image on the page; consequently, he succeeds best in describing when he selects details according to some purpose and from a definite point of view. For example, the writer acquires a clearer sense of what details to accent if he takes as his project describing not the office setting for his observations, but the office environment as a cluttered place to work, perhaps as seen from the secretary's perspective who struggles with her boss's disorder every day. However, frequently the fieldworker sits down to write about a setting he does not yet understand. In fact, the beginning ethnographer often faces the dilemma of not knowing what counts as most important; under these circumstances his purpose is simply to document the impression he has at that time. Wanting to recall the physical characteristics and the sensory impressions of his experiences, a fieldworker often describes the setting and social situations, characters' appearances, and even some daily routines.

Ethnographers often select details to describe the ambience of a setting or environment that is important for understanding subsequent action. For example, during initial fieldwork in a village in southeastern Zaire, an ethnographer might reflect on the spacial arrangement and social relations as she has observed them thus far. In her fieldnotes, she might describe how the houses all face toward an open, cleared area; that the village pavilion where men visit is situated in the center; that the women cook by wood fires in front of their houses, often carrying babies on their backs as they work and are assisted by younger girls; that some men and

boys sit under a tree in the yard near two other men weaving baskets. How she perceives these details and the way she frames them as contextualizing social interactions determines, in part, the details she selects to create this visual image of a small village in the late afternoon.

An ethnographer should also depict the appearance of characters who are part of described scenes in order to contextualize actions and talk. For example, in looking at how residents adapted to conditions in a psychiatric board-and-care home, Linda Shaw described someone who others living in the home thought was especially "crazy":

Robert and I were sitting by the commissary talking this afternoon when a new resident named Bruce passed by several times. He was a tall, extremely thin man with straggly, shoulder-length, graying hair and a long bushy beard. I had heard that he was only in his thirties, even though he looked prematurely aged in a way that reminded me of the sort of toll that harsh conditions exact from many street people. He wore a long, dirty, gray-brown overcoat with a rainbow sewn to the back near the shoulder over a pair of torn blue jeans and a white tee shirt with what looked like coffee stains down the front. Besides his disheveled appearance, Bruce seemed extremely agitated and restless as he paced from one end of the facility to the other. He walked with a loping gait, taking very long strides, head held bent to his chest and his face expressionless, as his arms swung limply through the air, making a wide arc, as though made of rubber. As Bruce passed by on one of these rounds, Robert remarked, "That guy's really crazy. Don't tell me he's going to be recycled into society."

Here the ethnographer provides a detailed description of a newcomer to the home to provide the context necessary to understand a resident's comment that this person was too crazy to ever live outside of the home.

While describing appearance might initially seem easy, in fact many observers have difficulty doing so in lively, engaging ways. Part of the problem derives from the fact that when we observe people whom we do not know personally, we initially see them in very stereotyped ways; we normally notice and describe strangers in terms of gender, age, race, along with other qualities of their physical appearance.<sup>2</sup> Thus, beginning fieldworkers invariably identify characters by gender. They frequently add one or two visible features: "a young woman," "a young guy in a floral shirt," "two Latina women with a small child," "a woman in her forties," "a white male with brown/blond medium length hair." Indeed, many fieldnotes present characters as *visual clichés* relying on worn out, frequently used details to describe others, often in ways that invoke common stereotypes: a middle-aged librarian is simplistically described as "a bald man wearing thick glasses," a youth in juvenile hall as having "slicked

back hair," a lawyer as "wearing a pin-striped suit" and "carrying a briefcase." Such clichés not only make for boring writing, but also more dangerously blind the writer to specific attributes of the person in front of him.

The description of a character's appearance is frequently "categorical" and stereotyped for another reason as well: fieldworkers rely upon these clichés not so much to convey another's appearance to envisioned readers, but to label (and thus provide clarity about) who is doing what within the fieldnote account. For example, a fieldworker used the phrase "the floral shirt guy" a number of times to specify which character he was talking about when he described the complicated comings and goings occurring in a Latino street scene. Thus the initial description does not provide many details about this character's appearance, but merely tags him so that we can identify and follow him in the subsequent account.

However, the ethnographer must train herself both to notice more than these common indicators of general social categories and to capture distinctive qualities that will enable future readers (whether herself in reading notes or others who read excerpts) to envision more of what she saw and experienced. A *vivid image* based on actual observation depicts specific details about people and settings so that the image can be clearly visualized. For example, one fieldworker described a man in a skid row mission as "a man in the back who didn't have any front teeth and so spoke with a lisp." Another described a boy in a third-grade classroom as "wiggling his butt and distorting his face for attention" on entering the classroom late. Such images use details to paint more specific, lively portraits and avoid as much as possible vague, stereotypic features.

Ethnographers can also write more vivid descriptions by describing how characters dress. The following excerpt depicts a woman's clothes through concrete and sensory imagery:

Today Molly, a white female, wore her African motif jacket. It had little squares on the front which contained red, yellow, green, and black colored prints of the African continent. Imposed on top was a gold lion of Judah (symbol of Ethiopian Royal Family). The sleeves were bright—red, yellow, and green striped. The jacket back had a picture of Bob Marley singing into a microphone. He is a black male with long black dreadlocks and a little beard. Written in red at the top was: "Rastafari."

This description advances the ethnographer's concern with ethnic identity and affiliation. The initial sentence, "Today Molly, a white female, wore her African motif jacket," sets up an unexpected contrast: Molly is

white, yet she wears an item of clothing that the researcher associates with African-American culture. "African motif" directs attention to particular attributes of the jacket (colors, insignia, and symbols) and ignores other observable qualities of the jacket, e.g., its material, texture, style, cleanliness, or origins. Consequently, this description frames the jacket as an object publicly announcing its wearer's affiliation with African-Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, rather than simply *telling* the reader what the ethnographer infers, this passage *shows* affiliation with African-Americans in immediate detail, through actions and imagery. Contrast this descriptive strategy with the following (hypothetical) abstract and evaluative depiction which generalizes rather than specifies details: "Today, Molly, a white girl, *assertively* wore her *bright African* jacket. She always *shows off* in these clothes and *struts* around *like a black*." Not only does this summary rely on a vague adjective (bright), but it also obscures the actions with evaluative adverbs and verbs (assertively, struts, and shows off) and categorizing labels (like a black).

Because an ethnographer wishes to depict a scene for a reader, he does not condense details, avoids evaluative adjectives and verbs, and never permits a label to stand for description. While all writing entails grouping and identifying details, the ethnographer resists the impulse to unselfconsciously label others according to received categories from his own background. Nonetheless, it is not enough to avoid evaluative wording. In descriptions, the writer's tone of voice unavoidably reflects his personal attitude toward the people described. A better-than-thou attitude or an objectifying of the other (as odd, a foreigner, from a lower class, from a less civilized culture) always "shows" in subtle ways: tone, like a slip-of-tongue, appears in word choice, implicit comparisons, and even in rhythms as in the staccato of a curt dismissal. A self-reflective ethnographer should make his judgments explicit in written asides. But, the best antidote to these evaluative impulses is to keep in mind that the ethnographer's task is to write description that leads to an empathetic understanding of the social worlds of others.

In addition to describing people, places, and things, an ethnographer might also depict a scene primarily through action. For example, she might portray a character's talk, gesture, posture, and movement. In contrast to describing a person's appearance, action sequences highlight a character's agency to affect her world; a character acts within a situation, in response to a condition or to interactions with others in ways that

shape future interactions. Through actions, characters move through space and time; thus writers aim to capture the dynamic quality of action and its forward movement—something happens!

The following exchange between teacher and student focuses on the student's actions and the teacher's responses in a class for the "deaf and hard-of-hearing":

Bobbie walks in, swaying from side to side, and looks around. The teacher asks him where he had been and Bobbie mumbles something. Then he starts walking over to the computer and says that he wants to work on it, but the teacher replies, "No, Bobbie I want you to sit down here and see if you can play with us." Bobbie sits down at one end of the board [to a game]. He notices a crack in the board and folds it upward while asking, "Why did you put a crack in the board?" The teacher frowns and tells him curtly, "It was made that way. Put it back." Bobbie continues to move all the pieces around. The teacher tells him, "Okay, Bobbie, why don't you go work on the computer." Bobbie gets up quickly and walks over to the computer where he sits down and starts working immediately.

Here, the writer presents the sequence of interactions with almost no descriptive detail about appearances. Yet he conveys the scene by describing actions sequentially, using active verbs which allow the reader to see the back-and-forth movement of the interaction. We get a clear sense of movement from the lively, vividly worded actions: walks in, swaying, looks around, asks, starts walking, sits down, tells him, does not cooperate, moves, gets up quickly, walks over, starts working.

By convention, writers present action as progressing through time. In the above scene, the interactions are so clearly linked that the writer uses only one transitional word—"then." In a longer scene, or in one with less obviously interconnected actions, a writer needs to orient the reader with transitional markers to indicate shifts in time, place, and person as the action unfolds. Writers sequence actions in an order (e.g., first, second, third), and mark action shifts with transitions (e.g., now, then, next, afterwards, the next morning). They also locate action with situational markers (e.g., here, there, beyond, behind). In the following excerpt, a researcher studying an outpatient psychiatric treatment facility connects actions through transitional phrases ("as he continues talking") and transitional words ("then," "as"):

I sat down on the bench in the middle of the hall. And as I sat waiting for something to gain my attention, I heard the director yell out, "Take off your clothes in the shower!" as he shuts the door to the shower room. . . . Remaining outside

the door of the shower room, the director speaks with Roberta, one of the staff members assigned to look over the clients. Then Karen approaches them with a small, dirty Smurf that she found outside. "Look at it, how pretty, kiss it," she says talking to the director, but he doesn't pay any attention to her. As he continues talking to Roberta, he glances over and notices that I am observing them. As our eyes lock, he opens up his arm toward Karen and requests a hug. Karen, in her usual bashful way, giggles as she responds to his hug.

In this action-oriented paragraph, the writer focuses on movement—sat, shuts, approaches, glances, opens—interspersed with talk: "the director yells] out, 'Take off your clothes in the shower!'" In observing and reporting actions, ethnographers interested in social interactions view action and talk as interconnected features of what people "do." They write about "talk" as a part of people's actions.

### Dialogue

Ethnographers also reproduce dialogue—conversations that occur in their presence or that members report having had with others—as accurately as possible. They reproduce dialogue through direct and indirect quotation, through reported speech, and by paraphrasing. We hold that only those phrases actually quoted verbatim should be placed between quotation marks; all others should be recorded as indirect quotations or paraphrases.

The following example illustrates how direct quotation, indirect quotation, and reported speech work together to convey back-and-forth conversation:

For a minute or so before I left, I talked with Polly, the black woman who guards the front school entrance. As we were talking, a black girl, wearing dark blue sweats, walked by. Polly pointed to her. "Did you see that girl?" she asked me. I told her I had, and Polly confided that the girl had hassled her. Polly said the girl tried to leave school without permission and had started arguing. She said the principal had been walking by and he had tried to deal with the disturbance. And the girl had answered, "This is my school. You can't control me!" and then she called the principal a "white MF." Polly told me, "It's usually a black MF, but she changed it." She said that girl has a "bad attitude" and shook her head.

Writing up this conversation as predominately indirect quotation preserves the back-and-forth flow of the spoken interaction. Interspersing

quoted fragments livens up the dialogue and lends a sense of immediacy. By clearly marking the direct quotation, indirect quotation, and reported speech, we can see how they work together:

Direct: "Did you see that girl?"

Indirect: I told her I had . . .

Indirect: . . . and Polly confided that the girl had hassled her. Polly said that the girl tried to leave school without permission and had started arguing. She said the principal had been walking by and he had tried to deal with the disturbance.

Reported speech, direct:

And the girl had answered, "This is my school. You can't control me!" and then she called the principal a "white MF."

Direct: "It's usually a black MF, but she changed it."

Indirect: She said that that girl has a

Direct: "bad attitude" . . .

Indirect quotation more closely approximates dialogue than paraphrasing does. Paraphrasing this conversation with Polly might have preserved the basic content. But in paraphrasing, a writer translates speech into her own words and too readily starts to summarize. For example, a paraphrase of the last portion of this excerpt might read: "The girl talked back to the principal and called him names. . . . She has some attitude problems." This paraphrasing obscures the flavor of chatting and offering confidences, and it fails to voice the student's remarks to the principal which thus would have been unheard.

Members' own descriptions and "stories" of their experiences are invaluable indexes to their views and perceptions of the world (see chapter 5) and should be documented verbatim when possible. Writing this exchange as a "story" told verbatim to the fieldworker preserves two different kinds of information. First, it shows that "something happened" between a student, a guard, and the principal. Second, the account provides the guard's experience of that something. As the guard's story, this fieldnote conveys more about the teller and her concerns than it does about the girl and her trouble.

Writing up dialogue is more complicated than simply remembering talk or literally replaying every word. People talk in spurts and fragments. They accentuate or even complete a phrase with a gesture, facial expression, or posture. They send complex messages through incongruent, seemingly contradictory and ironic verbal and nonverbal expression as in

sarcasm or polite put-downs. Thus ethnographers must record the meanings they infer from the bodily expression accompanying words—gesture, movement, facial expression, tone of voice. Furthermore, people do not take turns smoothly in conversations: they interrupt each other, overlap words, talk simultaneously, and respond with ongoing comments and murmurs. Such turn-taking can be placed on a linear page by bracketing the overlapping speech.

Although accurately capturing dialogue in jottings and full fieldnotes requires considerable effort, ethnographers have a number of reasons for peppering their notes with verbatim quoted talk. Such dialogue conveys character traits, advances action, and provides clues to the speaker's social status, identity, personal style, and interests. Dialogue allows the field researcher to capture members' terms and expressions as they are actually used in specific situations. In addition, dialogue may point to key features of a cultural world view. The following excerpt comes from a discussion in an African-American history course:

Deston, a black male with Jheri curls, asked Ms. Dubois, "What's a sell-out? I hear that if you talk to a white person—you sell-out. If you go out with a white girl—you sell-out." She replied that some people "take it to the extreme." She said that a sell-out could even be a teacher or someone who works at McDonalds. Then she defined a sell-out as "someone who is more concerned about making it . . . who has no racial loyalty, no allegiance to people."

The writer uses direct quotation to capture a back-and-forth exchange about racial identity, and also retains a key members' term.

Since such verbatim quoting persuasively convinces a reader that one "was there" and overheard as an insider, it can be tempting to approximate remembered talk. However, we urge jotting down verbatim quotes as often as possible while in the field and then punctuating with quotation marks only those phrases that are actually written down. Such consistency not only avoids accidental misrepresentation but also keeps a fieldworker more alert to presenting members' views.

These issues and choices in writing dialogue become complex when the local language differs from the researcher's. How well the researcher knows the language certainly determines the extent of verbatim quoting. For example, when a fieldworker does research in a second language, not only will she frequently miss what someone said because she did not understand a particular word, but she also will have difficulty capturing

the verbatim flow of a dialogue even when she does understand. By working with a local assistant and checking to make sure she understands correctly what people are saying, she can compensate for some of her difficulty. Similar problems arise when working in English in a setting with much technical lingo or other in-group expressions such as slang. Unable to follow all the talk, the researcher paraphrases as much as she can and occasionally includes the snippets of verbatim talk she heard and remembered clearly.

In response to these language difficulties, many ethnographers supplement their fieldnotes by tape recordings. They might also make recordings in order to preserve as detailed a record of naturally occurring talk as possible so that they can pursue particular theoretical issues. For example, field researchers interested in recurrent patterns of interaction between staff and clients may make special efforts to tape-record at least some such encounters.<sup>4</sup> Still, most ethnographers do not regard recordings as their primary or exclusive form of data; rather, they use them as one way among others for closely examining the meaning events and experiences have for those studied.

By way of illustration, consider how Rachel Fretz worked with recordings of storytelling performances among the Chokwe people in Bandedu, Zaire. She recorded and carefully transcribed all verbal expressions of both narrators and audience, since listeners actively participate in the storytelling session. The following is an excerpt from the beginning of one such performance; the narrator (N), a young man, performs to an audience (A) of women, men, and children one evening around the fire (Fretz forthcoming).

- N: Once upon a time, there were some young boys, myself and Fernando and Funga and Shanuna.
- A: Is it a story with a good song?
- N: They were four persons. They said, "Ah. Let's go hunting."  
Pia they went everywhere. Pia they went everywhere.
- A: Good.
- N: They went this way and that way, this way and that way. No game. "Let's return. Let's go." They saw a large hut. Inside there was a container with honey in it.  
"My friends, this honey, mba, who put it here?"  
He said, "Who?"  
Another said, "Who?"  
[Another said,] "Let's go. We can't eat this."



Then, *fwapu*, Funga came forward and said, "Ah! You're just troubled.

Even though you're so hungry, you won't eat this honey?"

"Child. The man who put the honey here is not present. You see that this house was built with human ribs, and you decide to eat this honey."

He [Funga] said, "Get out of here. I'll eat it. Go on ahead. Go now." He took some honey; he ate it.

"Shall we wait for him? We'll wait for him."

He came soon. "Let's go."

*Liata, liata, liata*, they walked along. "We're going a long way. We came from a great distance." They arrived and found, ah! *Kayanda* [my goodness], a large river.

"My friends, what is this?"

"My friends, such a large river. Where did it come from?"

He said, "Ah! Who can explain it?"

"We can't see its source or where it's going."

"Let's cross the river. I'll go first."

#### First Singing

N: Oh Papa. Eee, Papa, it's I who ate honey.

A: This large river God created, I must cross it.

N: Papa! Eee, Papa, I'm going into the water.

A: This large river God created, I must cross it.

N: Papa! Eee, Papa, I didn't eat it.

A: This large river God created, I must cross it.

N: Papa! Eee, Papa, I'm crossing to the other side.

A: This large river God created, I must cross it.

Transcribing a performance involves catching all the teller's words and audience responses (often requiring the help of a native speaker) despite such interfering sounds as a dog barking and children crying. Accurate transcription also requires close attention to the rhythm and pauses in speaking so that the punctuation and line breaks reflect the storytelling style (cf. Hymes 1991; Tedlock 1983).

But transcribing and translating the tape is only one part of the ethnographer's efforts to learn about and understand storytelling performances. She also wrote extensive fieldnotes describing the situation and participants.<sup>5</sup> For example, she noted that the storytelling session took place by the fire in the chief's pavilion at an informal family gathering including the chief, his seven wives, and their children and grandchildren. She observed that the women participated primarily by singing the story-songs and by answering with exclamations and remarks. The ethnographer also recorded her conversations with these participants and the general comments Chokwe people offered about telling such stories, called *yishima*. She found out that in this performance, listeners know that the house-

made-of-human-ribs probably belongs to a sorcerer, that eating his honey is dangerous because it will cast a spell over them, that the river which appeared from nowhere across their path had been created by the sorcerer, and that Funga who ate the honey most likely will drown as a consequence of not listening to his older brother. She learned that the recurring song, sung four times during the performance, created a tension between hope and panic about the consequences of eating the honey, and between trusting that it was a natural river created by God ("This large river God created") and fearing that it was a sorcerer's invention ("Eee, Papa, it's I who ate the honey.")

Thus, a transcription of recorded speech is not a straightforward and simple means of documenting an event. The ethnographer needs to observe and listen to more than the words; she needs to ask many follow-up questions and write down what she learns. As a result, much field research uses a variety of recording and encoding processes, combining fieldnotes with audio and video recording.<sup>6</sup>

#### Characterization

Ethnographers describe the persons they encounter through a strategy known as *characterization*. While a simple description of a person's dress and movements conveys some minimal sense of that individual, the writer more fully characterizes a human being through also showing how that person talks, acts, and relates to others. An ethnographer most effectively characterizes individuals in context as they go about their daily activities rather than by simply listing their characteristics. Telling about a person's traits never is as effective as showing how they live. This entails presenting characters as fully social beings through descriptions of dress, speech, gestures, and facial expression, which allow the reader to infer traits. Traits and characteristics thus appear in and through interaction with others rather than by being presented as isolated qualities of individuals. Thus, characterization draws on a writer's skills in describing, reporting action, and presenting dialogue.

In the following set of fieldnotes, Linda Shaw describes an encounter with a couple living in the kitchen area of an apartment in a psychiatric board-and-care facility. The woman in particular emphasizes the efforts they have made to create a "normal" living environment and the futility they feel in doing so:<sup>7</sup>

I went with Terri and Jay today as they offered to show me the "apartment" they had created out of the small converted kitchen area that was their room. Terri escorted me from one space to another, taking great pride in showing me how they had made a bedroom area at one end, a living room next to it, and a kitchen area next to that. They had approximated an entire apartment in this tiny space, and she showed me features of each "room" in detail. The bed, they said, had a real mattress, not like the foam pads on all the other beds. There was a rug on the living room floor and a TV at the foot of the bed. Then Terri opened the cupboards. She pointed out the spice rack and counted each glass out loud. She took particular pride in the coffee pot she uses to fix Jay's morning coffee and a warmer oven where they sometimes heat take-out pizza.

Terri tried very hard to demonstrate all they had done to make their apartment like one that any married couple might have; yet, the harder she tried, the more apparent it became how different their lives really were. Terri spoke of the futility she felt in spite of all these efforts: "All the noise, the screaming, the tension really bothers me. I'm married, and I can't even be a normal wife here. I want to get up in the morning, fix my husband breakfast—a cup of coffee, eggs, bacon, orange juice—before he goes to work, clean the house, take care of the kids and then fix him a nice dinner and drink or whatever he wants when he gets home. Here, I get up and can fix him a cup of instant coffee. You know, it's not as good to just pick up the apartment, but then there's nothing else to do."

Terri comes across as a fully human individual whose actions and talk reveal her character. She has done her best to create the normal way of life she wishes for but cannot sustain in this quasi-institutional setting. Through her actions and words, we see her struggle in vain to construct this private space as a refuge against the debilitating forces of institutional life.

Pressed to finish his notes, a writer might be tempted to use some convenient label ("a retarded person," "a homeless person," a black/white/Asian, etc.) rather than looking closely at that person's actual appearance and behavior. Such quick characterization, however, produces a stock character who, at best, comes across as less than fully human and, at worst, appears as a negative stereotype. For example, one student, in describing people in a shopping mall, characterized an older woman as a "senile bag lady" after noting that she muttered to herself while fumbling absent-mindedly in a shabby, oversized purse. Such labeling sketches only a pale type and closes the writer's attention to other relevant details and actions.

An ethnographer, however, does include members' remarks and actions which stereotype or mock others. The following excerpt describes

a student who mockingly acts out typical gestures and postures of a Latino "cholo" before some classmates:

As the white male and his friend walked away, he said "chale homes" [eh! homies] in a mock Spanish accent. Then he exaggerated his walking style: he struck his shoes out diagonally, placed his arms at a curved popeye angle, and leaned back. . . . Someone watching said, "Look at you fools."

In this group of bantering young men, the white teenage male enacts a ludicrous caricature of a Latino "cholo." Ethnographers take care to distinguish members' characterizations from their own by providing details which clearly contextualize the talk and behavior as delivered from a member's point of view.

An individual already well known through previous entries does not need to have a full introduction each time he enters a scene. Even for a main character, one describes only those actions and traits relevant to the current interaction. In other words, a fieldworker not only considers an individual's qualities but also earlier appearances and relative impact in this moment. Each entry is only a partial record, and as notes accumulate, fieldworkers will notice that they have assembled enough observations to present some persons as full-fledged individuals ("rounded" characters), others as less well-known figures ("flat" characters), and a few individuals as types such as a bus driver or a policeman ("stock" characters).

Furthermore, continuing contacts with people greatly expand the field researcher's resources for writing fuller, richer characterizations. No longer limited to the surface features visible to any observer, the researcher can note and write about qualities that are harder to detect, that become evident only with repeated contact and greater familiarity. One problem here is that ethnographers often describe even main characters only upon first encountering them, leaving that first characterization unchanged despite coming to know more about that person. Hence we would suggest taking time as research progresses to periodically reflect on and try to capture on paper the appearance and feel of major characters, now known as persons with unique features and special qualities.

An ethnographer usually characterizes in detail those persons who act centrally in a scene. Although the full picture of any person develops through time in a series of fieldnotes, each description presents vivid and significant details which show a primary character as completely as possible: through appearance, body posture, gesture, words, and actions. In

contrast, a peripheral figure might indeed be referred to simply with as few details as necessary for that person to be seen doing his small part in the scene.

A number of criteria shape the field researcher's decision about who is central and who is peripheral. First, the researcher's theoretical interests will focus her attention toward particular people. For example, the central characters in a study of teamwork among "support staff" in a courtroom were courtroom clerks and bailiffs rather than attorneys, witnesses, or the judge. Similarly, methodological strategies also focus the ethnographer's attention. For example, a strategy for depicting a social world by describing distinctive interactional patterns may shape the ethnographer's decision to focus on someone who presents a particularly vivid illustration of such a pattern.

In addition, the person's centrality and function for those in the social setting determine the degree of detail in characterization. If members in a scene orient to a particular person, then a description that makes that person central to the scene is called for. Conversely, even those who may be central figures in a setting might get slight attention from the field researcher if they are so treated by those in the scene. For example, in a scene focusing on students talking in the quad at lunchtime, the "principal walking across the courtyard and looking from side to side" might not be described in much more detail if no one seems to notice him.

Fieldnotes should also include the ethnographer as a character in the interactions. The presence of the ethnographer who truly stands at the side watching might only be noted to identify the position from which the event is seen. But an ethnographer who directly participates in the action becomes a relevant character in the fieldnote, especially when a member clearly interacts with her. Indeed, a researcher may act as a central character in the incident in unanticipated ways. He might shift from his stance as an outside observer and become fully engaged in the interactions. In the following excerpt, students playing an educational game in a class for the deaf and hard of hearing encourage each other to speak. The fieldworker, having had a stuttering problem all of his life, clearly empathizes with the students. Though essentially an outsider in the class, the fieldworker becomes a pivotal figure at one juncture:

Lynn keeps on telling Caesar to say what the answers are by speaking (rather than through sign language). The teacher says, "Very good Lynn. . . . That's right, Caesar, you should try to speak what the answers are as well so that we can all understand you." Caesar looks over at me a little red in the face and looks down

at his desk with a half smile. The teacher asks him (while pointing at me), "Are you afraid of speaking because he is here?" Lynn and Jackie and Caesar all seem to answer at once in sign that he is afraid of having me hear him speak. I tell Caesar, "You don't have to be afraid of what I think. I have a hard time speaking too."

Caesar seems interested by my statements and points a finger at me questioningly. The teacher says, "Yes, it's okay, you speak fine. You don't have to be afraid of what anybody thinks about you. Just say one sentence and he'll tell you if he can understand you."

Caesar reluctantly says something and then looks at me, his head still slightly down and his face still red. A faint smile lines his lips as he waits for my answer. I had not understood a single word and was feeling desperate. What if they asked me to repeat what he had said? I reply, "Yes, that was fine. I understood you." The teacher quickly turns to Caesar and gives him the appropriate signs for my answer and goes directly into saying that he shouldn't be so intimidated by what other people think. Caesar looks at me and smiles. The game continues, and Caesar starts answering in both sign and speech. And I began to understand some of the things they were saying.

Clearly, this ethnographer's past experiences and presence played a central role in this scene, and his empathetic responses color the description in essential ways. Had he tried to write up these notes without including himself—his own interactions and feelings—the scene would have been deeply distorted.

When describing their own participation in scenes, field researchers generally write in the first person. If this observer had described the scene in the third person, referring to himself by name, much of the impact would have been lost:

Caesar reluctantly says something and looks at Paul, his head still slightly down and his face still red. A faint smile lines his lips as he waits for his answer. . . . He replies, "Yes, that's fine. I understood you." The teacher quickly turns to Caesar and gives him the appropriate signs for Paul's answer and goes directly into saying that he shouldn't be so intimidated by what other people think. Caesar looks at Paul and smiles. The game continues, and Caesar starts answering in both sign and speech.

In the original segment, the writer carefully stuck to Caesar's observable behavior ("looks over at me with a red face" and "looks down at his desk with a half smile") and did not attribute nervousness. But in the third person account, we miss an essential part of Caesar's struggle to speak. This struggle was conveyed through the ethnographer's empathetic and self-revealing comment, "I had not understood a single word. . . ." and by

his closing observation, "And I began to understand some of the things they were saying." Through the writer's careful attention to details of behavior and talk as well as through his own revealed personal feelings, readers may sense the fear and later the relief in speaking and in being understood.

#### WRITING EXTENDED ENTRIES: ORGANIZATION

Not only can ethnographers improve their descriptive writing by learning strategies for depicting moments of lived experience, but they also can write more clearly by organizing their writing into coherent units. Clear organizational strategies enable them to conceptualize units and more easily write up an extended and complicated memory as a coherent set of fieldnotes.

Initially, field researchers may find it difficult to sustain a concentrated attention when writing. They may recall disconnected incidents and rush through their writing, thereby producing scattered details and unreadable fragments that will make it difficult to "see" or "hear" a coherent slice of life and therefore hard to subsequently use their fieldnotes. Or, they press on for pages, meandering through endless minutiae which also make their later rereading and analysis of fieldnotes difficult. However, remembering any observed scene as a series of moments and then sustaining that memory as a perceived whole will help one write up a "complete" scene. In addition, by drawing on conventional strategies for organizing their notes, field researchers can more easily sustain a focused attention while writing all the details remembered.

Field researchers frequently attempt to write detailed descriptions which fully document events from beginning to end. They want to be sure, later on, that they have not accidentally skipped writing up an important feature of an observed event or incident. Consequently, fieldworkers write up their fieldnotes in ways which indicate that they have recorded the "entire" scene. They do so not only by providing full details but also by writing in units which create and mark beginnings and endings. Details grouped in a paragraph form one such unit.

By convention, a *paragraph* coheres because the writer's attention focuses on one idea or insight. That means he perceives some actions as a gestalt and concentrates on them. While writing, he shifts attention from one recalled moment to another: for example, from one person or activity

to another within a classroom. These slight shifts are often indicated by a paragraph break. Thus, in most fieldnotes, a paragraph presents a coherent moment and thereby structures the description.<sup>8</sup>

Ethnographers also organize their writing into units extending beyond a paragraph. They organize memories into larger wholes by sustaining their attention throughout an entire situation or event, so that the separate moments cohere to create a "complete" description of a scene. That larger whole becomes an extended entry, which may include a series of paragraphs. Though the largest unit of writing is that day's entire set of fieldnotes, the ethnographer often finds that she organizes her recollections and jottings to write up several discrete units within that day's entry.

These extended entries within a day's fieldnotes often concern an incident or event which the writer has noted to herself as especially important. Many fieldworkers sit down to write these events first. Especially when working on a computer, one can order the sequence of the day's activities and then scroll down to begin with that key event. In a sense, the ethnographer juggles two competing purposes: to get down all activities as quickly as possible and to write as fully and vividly as possible those scenes she intuitively feels most vital to her research project. When first in the field, the ethnographer might be more concerned with getting everything down: such writing is often more fragmented and spontaneous. Later on as her research progresses, she may be more invested in writing extended entries about incidents and events she selects as particularly revealing of members' experiences. Such fieldnotes require sustained concentration through longer passages and benefit from the extra effort to write vivid, detailed, and coherent sequences of action.

In writing such extended entries, ethnographers work with a number of different organizing units. In the following section, we consider three such options: sketches which describe a slice of life as an observed scene; and two forms of narrative entry, episodes and more extended fieldnote tales, which recount interactions, incidents, and events as dynamic actions in an unfolding scene.

#### Sketches

In a sketch, the fieldworker, struck by a vivid sensory impression, describes a scene primarily through detailed imagery. Much as in a photograph, sequencing of actions does not dominate. Rather the writer, as a

more distanced observer looking out on a scene, describes what he or she senses. Presenting a more or less static snapshot contrasts with writing narrative, where the writer has the sense of moving through time, recounting one action after another.

While the term "sketch" employs a visual metaphor, this form of organizing writing need not rely only on visual details but can also incorporate auditory or kinetic details as well. For example, not appearance but the sense of smell might be the primary criteria for recalling and conveying the merits of a particular food. In describing people, settings, objects, and so forth, the writer must evoke all those senses which recall that moment as she perceived it. Often the sense of vision dominates, however, simply because the fieldworker observes at a distance or aims to give a brief overview of the setting. It also dominates, in part, because the English language for vision is much more detailed and developed than it is for the other senses.<sup>9</sup> Hence the ethnographic writer may have to expend special effort to evoke and write about nonvisual sensory images.

A sketch typically is a brief segment, which unifies descriptive details about a setting, an individual, or a single incident. Because it is primarily static, it lacks any sense of consequential action (of plot) and any full characterization of people. Consider the following sketch of a Latino street market, which focuses on a single character at a stall with toys:

An older Latina woman is bent over looking at the toys on the ground. Behind her she holds two plastic bags of something, which she uses to balance as she leans over. She picks up several toys in succession from the ground, lifting them up several inches to turn them over and around in her hand, and then putting them down. After a minute, she straightens up and walks slowly away.

Organizing details into a sketch in this way permits the writer to give a quick sense of the setting by presenting a close-up picture of one particular character's engagement with it.

Often, sketches contextualize subsequent interactions, placing them into a larger framework of events or incidents, and allow the reader to visualize more readily the setting or participants involved. On some occasions, however, these entries may stand as independent units of writing. In the following sketch, for example, another writer describes the scene in a high school during an uneventful, uncrowded lunch hour in a way that documents how students group themselves:

Even though it was cold and windy, there were still about one hundred black students clustered in the central quad. On the far left, one short black male wear-

ing a black starter jacket was bouncing a ball. Next to him, seven black females and two black males were sitting on a bench. Further to the right stood a concentrated group of about thirty or forty black students. I counted about twenty who were wearing different kinds of starter jackets. Further up the quad stood another group of fifteen blacks, mostly females. At the foot of quad, on the far right, was another group of maybe twenty black students, about equally male and female. Some were standing, while others were sitting on a short concrete wall against the auditorium. To the right of this group, I noticed one male, listening to a yellow walkman, dancing by himself. His arms were flung out, pulling as though he were skiing, while his feet ran in place.

This ethnographer was especially concerned with ethnic relations and wanted to track how, when, and where students socialized and with whom. Even when he could not hear or see exactly what the students were doing, he depicted these groupings in an almost snapshot fashion; although the paragraph includes visual and kinetic details, it creates the scene as a still-life rather than as an event in which actions could be sequenced.

In general, sketches are useful for providing an overall sense of places and people that sometimes stands as a background for other fieldnote descriptions. Descriptive sketches of people standing around or of a person's expression and posture as she looks at someone, for example, can reveal qualities of social relations even when apparently nothing much is happening.

### *Episodes*

Unlike a sketch, which depicts a "still-life" in one place, an episode recounts action and moves in time. When recounting a brief incident which does not extend over a long period of time or involve many characters, one can organize and write it effectively as a single episode. In an episode, a writer tells an incident as one continuous action or interaction and thus constructs a more or less unified entry. Consequently, when ethnographers perceive actions as interrelated, they often write up that memory as a one- or two-paragraph episode.<sup>10</sup>

The following excerpt consists of a one-paragraph episode in which the writer describes an interaction between two students during the beginning of class time:

A black female came in. She was wearing a white puffy jacket, had glasses and straight feathered black hair. She sat down to my right. Robert and another male

(both black) came in and sat down. They were eating Kentucky Fried Chicken which they took out of little red and white boxes. Robert's friend kept swiping at the black female, trying to slap her. She kept telling him in an annoyed voice to leave her alone. After a minute of this exchange, the black teacher said to the guy, "Leave her alone, brother." He answered Ms. Dubois with a grin on his face, "Don't worry. She's my sisrah." The girl said, "Chhh," looking briefly at him. He had gone back to eating his chicken.

Here, the students' and teacher's actions are presented as a sequence, each seeming to trigger the next; the girl responds to the boy's swiping and the teacher responds to him, etc. Thus, these actions are linked and appear as one continuous interaction, producing a unified episode.

Not every episode needs to build to a climax as the one above does. Many fieldnote episodes minutely recount one character's routine, everyday actions. In fact, in many entries, ethnographers find themselves writing primarily about mundane activities. In the following excerpt, for example, the ethnographer recounts the way several students in an ESL class worked together to complete a group activity:

One group consisted of six people: two Korean girls, one Korean boy, two Mexican boys, and one Russian girl. Like all of the other groups, they arranged their chairs in a small circle for the assigned activity. Ishmael, a Mexican boy, held the question card in his hand and read it to the rest of the group: "List five things that you can do on a date for less than \$10.00 in Los Angeles." (His English was heavily marked by his Mexican accent, but they could understand him.) Placing his elbows on the desk and looking directly at the group, he said, "Well?" He watched them for a minute or two; then he suggested that one could go for drinks at Hard Rock Cafe. The others agreed by nodding their heads. Ishmael again waited for suggestions from the group. The other Mexican boy said "going to the beach" and the Russian girl said "roller skating." The Koreans nodded their heads, but offered no other suggestions. (I think that Ishmael waited for others to respond, even though he seemed to know the answers.)

In describing this classroom scene, the ethnographer filled six pages with a series of such more or less isolated episodes occurring during that hour. Thus, she was able to present the small groups as working simultaneously on various activities. The episodes belong together only because they are situated in the same class during the same hour. When describing concurrent actions during one hour, for example, fieldworkers often write them up as a series of discrete episodes, loosely linked by time and place.

Many fieldnote episodes stand on their own, barely associated with others. Ethnographers write many such episodic entries because they rarely can track a sequence of actions and learn of all its outcomes within

one day. They may write an episode about an interaction simply because it bears upon a topic they are interested in. They often write without knowing whether that fieldnote will later be important in the full analysis. Yet writing these episodes over time will enable the ethnographer to find patterns of behavior and connections between people's actions through many different fieldnotes.

### *Fieldnote Tales*

Within a day's entry, ethnographers sometimes recount a series of episodes as interconnected because they are describing the same characters or similar activities. The writer might also perceive the episodes as linked because "something happens": actions progress, develop over time, and seem to lead to immediate outcomes. In telling these episodes, ethnographers draw on the conventions of narration and write the unfolding actions as "fieldnote tales." These tales often become the most extended units of writing embedded within a day's entry.

Writing fieldnote tales, however, differs from crafting a dramatic narrative. Well-crafted stories not only describe actions chronologically so that a reader can follow them, but they also build suspense into the unfolding action. These stories make "something happen." Characters act in ways that have consequences and that lead to an instructive, often dramatic outcome.<sup>11</sup> Ethnographers, however, are wary of imposing a unified narrative structure on events. Most everyday life incidents and events do not happen like dramatic stories in which one action neatly causes the next and results in clear-cut consequences; instead, much of life unfolds rather aimlessly. Describing life in a narrative form is highly interpretive writing; in doing so, the ethnographer might overdetermine the connections between actions and their movement toward an outcome. Making all experiences fit the formal demands of a story falsifies them.

Ethnographers, then, generally write fieldnote tales as a series of related episodes rather than as a unified narrative. We suggest that they resist crafting events into complex, dramatic sequences or into better sounding, more convincing stories: they should not revise or rearrange actions to make them lead (inevitably) to a particular ending or a climactic outcome; nor should they build suspense into everyday events that lack this quality. Rather, an ethnographer should try to recount action as it unfolded, to tell the event as she saw it happen. As a consequence, fieldnote tales tend

to be episodic, a string of action chunks put down on the page one after another.

Though not highly-crafted or polished stories, fieldnotes tales nevertheless range from loosely to more cohesively integrated units within a day's entry. Inevitably, most fieldnote tales are loosely structured: the writer reports only what she saw and as much as she remembers. For instance, the ethnographer might write a series of episodes which highlight several characters or which concentrate on similar activities. She constructs them as an episodic fieldnote tale because she infers the actions to be loosely interconnected. Nevertheless, resisting the urge to write a cohesive story, she writes one episode after another, including all actions she observed and remembers, whether or not she sees how they fit in while writing about them. Often the import of an "extraneous" detail or episode becomes clear only when rereading the tale. When getting the scene on the page, the researcher makes what connections she can at the moment, guided by an intuitive sense for what belongs in this tale, for "what goes with what."

Sometimes, of course, an ethnographer may intend to write fieldnote tales as more tightly structured narratives—for very good ethnographic reasons. Committed to members' perception of events, the ethnographer should write cohesive tales about events which members enact or present as a unified series of actions. For example, the field researcher may observe activities that have more or less clear-cut beginnings, progression in which one action causes the next, and consequential endings. Many criminal court hearings in American society are structured to progress thus, and the ethnographer can felicitously write a cohesive tale about them. Similarly, the researcher may hear people telling coherent stories and should write these tales as the tellers narrate them. For example, people tell stories to each other about their day's experiences; they narrate past incidents in response to the researchers queries; and, they recount myths and legends learned from their elders. In writing about such events and stories, the ethnographer appropriately writes fieldnotes that have a unified narrative structure, in which one action leads to the next and builds to an outcome.<sup>12</sup>

In the following pages, we present two extended fieldnote tales. Though both tales present a series of episodes as the researchers saw and remembered them, the first tale presents the activities of two characters, a policeman and policewoman, and only loosely interconnects them. This episodic tale coheres only because the writer has a thematic interest in

the activities of the two officers; that is, the episodes hang together by a thematic thread. The second tale, in contrast, achieves a tighter narrative structure by linking a series of episodes about a dean disciplining a student and, thereby, tells a single, unfolding incident. The writer clearly depicts a school incident in which one action leads to another; the fieldnote tale moves through a sequence of actions toward some sort of resolution.

In this first tale, a student ethnographer writes about events he observed while riding, one night, on patrol with two police officers, Sam and Alisha. He recounts a series of consecutive but otherwise fairly discrete episodes; although these episodes all involve police activities, they are only loosely related to one another and contain several possible "somethings that happened."

(a) As we were driving, Alisha was telling Sam about women officers in another department. "I can't believe what some of the women and the women trainees have done and I hate it cause it's always the women that do the stupidest things. And that's what gives a bad name to the women officers. So—" "You know what the problem is, don't ya?" Sam says. "Women think on the wrong side of the brain."

"What?"

"They think out of the wrong side of their brain."

"Or is it because we don't have a penis to think from?" Alisha burst out laughing.

"NOOO!"

"Is that what you think, Sam?"

"No. I'll probably tell my wife that. She'll get a kick out of it." We pulled down an alley and passed a Hispanic guy about twenty. "That guy was stealing those tires that were down here."

"The kid's bike ones?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe."

"Um, sure. They were back there and they're not there no more."

"I don't know."

"They were there last night, pieces to a bicycle."

"Oh. Should we go get 'em?"

"No they've been there forever."

(b) We pulled out of the alley and were waiting to make a right hand turn. "I'm gonna stop that." I looked up and there was a white jeep without its lights on. We zoomed ahead and got behind the car. The car got in the turning lane as did we. After the light changed and we were proceeding through the intersection, Sam flipped on the lights. The jeep pulled into a gas station. . . . Sam walked up to the car and Alisha walked up and flashed her flashlight in the windows. She walked back and stood next to me. The people in the gas station all watched us. The girl (Caucasian) got out of her car, walked to the

back and looked at her taillights. Sam spoke to her and then walked back to the car. We got in and Sam said that her headlights were on but not her taillights. He let her off with a warning.

(c) We decided to go to 7-11 to get coffee. We walked in and the lady clerk knew Sam and Alisha. She gave them these big cups and Sam went and filled them with coffee. I walked over and didn't see any of the cups like they had so I just grabbed the largest coffee cup they had and filled mine up. Alisha was looking down the aisle with all the medicines. I told her she should get Turns for her stomach. Sam came over and made some comment. Alisha replied that she had a tough stomach and she didn't need anything. Sam got a Mounds candy bar. We each paid and then went back to the car and started driving around again. As we were driving, Sam rolled down his window and pretended to throw his candy wrapper out the window. "You didn't?" Alisha asked. With a big smile on his face, Sam said, "no," and showed her the wrapper. Alisha went on to explain that she had a real thing for not littering, especially when they were working. "I think we need to be examples. What does it look like if somebody sees a candy wrapper fly out the window of a cop car?"

(d) As we were driving through a residential area we heard, "Crack! Crack!" I immediately thought, fireworks? In retrospect that seems like such a dumb thought, but having never heard gunshots except at a range, I guess I'm not used to assuming something is gunshots. Sam said something about a car I hadn't seen and it having only one taillight. He floored the car, the engine raced and we flew down the street. Alisha threw her coffee out the window and both she and Sam pulled their guns out. "Get ready to duck if I tell you" she told me. She then called in that we would be out in the area on possible gunshots. "That fucker split." We flew down the street. At one point we came up on a car coming towards us and we met the car as it was driving through a narrow spot with cars parked on each side of the road. Sam locked up the brakes, the tires squealed and somehow we made it through. Sam floored it once again and once again we were flying down the street. We hit a bump and I flew out of my seat. I heard the things in the trunk bang on the top of the trunk. "I want to find that car Alisha!"

"Did you see the people in it?"

"No. They were just hauling ass and it's got a fuckin' taillight that's out and I don't even know what kind of car it is." We drove around for a while and then gave up the search. "Damn. I want a felony tonight. We have to find a felony tonight, Alisha. I want to point my gun at someone. Where are all the felons? That was a pretty close call there."

"Yeah. But I trust your driving Sam. I had to throw my coffee out though. Maybe we should go see if it's still there." [Sam teases Alisha for having to throw her coffee out the window.]

"How was I supposed to get my gun out and hold my coffee?"

"I did it and I was driving."

"That's because Sam, you're such a stud!"

"I kept mine." I said jokingly and they laughed.

"So you're talking to me about not littering and you go and throw your coffee cup out the window."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, I did realize my mistake afterwards, and I requested that you go back so I could retrieve my coffee."

"No you said, 'Go back and get my COFFEE!' is what you said." We all laugh.

"But the coffee had to be in a cup in order for me to get it."

"Would you do some police work and run this plate?" (It was a little surprising how fast the atmosphere had transformed. From total intensity to care-free joking in minutes.)

(e) Sam began to follow an old beat up American car. He sped up and told Alisha to call it in for wants and warrants. As he pulled in closer, I saw that the registration said 1991 [it's now January 1993]. "Come on. Come back Code 36 Charles." Sam said, hoping the plate would come back with felony wants on it. The plate came back all clear, expired reg. The car made a left off of the main street and as we turned to follow, Sam flipped on the lights. The driver was a black male. Alisha shined her flashlight in the back seat and Sam walked up to the driver's window. The driver handed Sam his license and registration. Sam spoke with the man for a minute and then walked back to the car. As he got in he said, "That's a responsible father. I'm not going to write up a responsible father. He had his kids' immunization records in his glove box. That's not our crack dealer."

"Just cause someone's a father doesn't mean he doesn't deal."

"That's not what I meant. Fathers can be drug dealers, but responsible fathers aren't drug dealers."

In this fieldnote tale, as two patrol officers drive around, they react to events observed outside the car and to topics raised in talk within the car. The episodes reveal their now-teasing, now-supportive work relationship. The tale also conveys the tenor of routine police patrol work—ongoing ordinary talk, endless driving, occasional breaks—punctuated by moments of excitement during a chase which, in turn, dissipate as the officers slip back into normal work activities. Clearly the quick shifts interest the writer, who comments in an aside how suddenly the officers turn from tense excitement to informal joking.

These actions clearly provide the material for a story or perhaps more accurately several possible stories. One story might be of a night's work for two patrol officers; another might be about the ethnographer riding along with two officers, his efforts to figure out what they do and why, and his hopes to gain some acceptance from them. But it is not at all clear that these were stories the ethnographer intended to tell at the moment



of writing. Rather his concerns were to write up "what happened" as he remembered it. He does so by constructing a series of episodes.

Not all these episodes are closely connected. Obviously the writer links some actions in one episode to actions in subsequent episodes: for example, the coffees purchased at the 7-11 store in episode *c* play a key role in the subsequent chase episode (*d*). But no explicit connections are apparent between other episodes. Even though the police stop two cars, there are no indications that the second car-stop was in any way connected to the first, although a reader might well be able to suggest connections (e.g., the black father in the second stop had to be let off with a warning since the white woman in the first stop also had been simply warned).

In writing this tale, the ethnographer advances the action through time by grouping actions into discrete episodes; in fact he has no need to use an explicit transition term (e.g., then, immediately, next) to mark the shift into a new episode. He also avoids using causal transitions such as "because" or "consequently" or "despite" to forward the action and more clearly establish links building to an outcome. Such interpretive transitions overly determine the reasons for actions; this fieldworker, for example, did not know why each person acted the way he or she did. To avoid such interpretation, he simply juxtaposed related actions to show how the interaction developed. In general, transitions should only orient a reader in time, place, and sequence, rather than imply causal connections between actions leading irrevocably to an outcome, especially when writing a loosely structured, episodic fieldnote tale.

Ethnographers, however, also write tighter, more cohesive narratives. In such fieldnote tales, all episodes are clearly connected and the account builds to an ending or outcome. Consider the following tale in which the fieldworker tracks a single incident handled by the high-school dean, Mr. Jones. The ethnographer composed this fieldnote as a sequence of episodes, which for purposes of discussion, we have labeled *a* through *i*:

- (a) Back in his office, Mr. Jones starts going through some of the paper work on his desk. One whole pile is set aside for those students caught smoking. According to Mr. Jones, smoking is a major violation at the school. "The first time you're caught, you get written up and you get a record. The second time—it's state policy now—you get suspended." I expressed my astonishment. Mr. Jones also noted with a sigh that "all the kids caught smoking are absent today."

indicator of delinquency. I was unfamiliar with the term so I asked him what it means. He explained that "tagging" is doing graffiti. . . . "Most of the time if we catch you, you go to jail. That's if it's on the scale that we can charge you for it, of course. For the second time, they either get transferred to another school or they have to do fifteen hours service for the school. Usually, what we have them do is scrape down all the walls" (that they painted with graffiti). I asked if many students get transferred to other schools. He replied that they do and that "we can send them anywhere in the district. The only limit is transportation. We send a lot of the kids out for gang involvement. Most of them go over to Southside. But then again, we receive a lot of the same type of students from uptown, too." I asked him, "So a lot of the problems are just being shifted back and forth between schools?" He replied, "Well, the idea is that once a student is in a new environment, he might be more inclined to change. So if we can't seem to do anything for him here, we ship him off somewhere else where he might be away from some of his bad influences."

- (c) But, flipping through his files, he finds one that he was looking for and stops. "Here's one right here. Yep, second time caught smoking. That means suspended." He turns to me and says with a confidential air, "You know, it can really ruin a student's future to get suspended, because it can lead to not being admitted elsewhere. We try to let them know it's serious." The student's name is Sokoloff (or something very similar and distinctly Russian-sounding). He looks at the schedules to see where Sokoloff is during second period and we head up there.

- (d) Walking into the room where Sokoloff was supposed to be, I see all the kids looking around at each other seriously. Mr. Jones asks the teacher, a middle-aged white man, if he knows if Sokoloff is here. The teacher had to ask the class if there was anyone there by that name. Many of the students look over to a short, white male with long hair and a heavy metal T-shirt. He stood up and acknowledged his name. Mr. Jones looks at him sternly and says, "Get your bags, you'll be needing 'em." We walk out of the room. (I was actually only in the doorway, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible.)

- (e) The kid has a Russian accent. He seems panicked once we are in the hallway. He is walking side by side with Mr. Jones and looking up at him. In a pleading voice, he asks him, "What did I do?" Mr. Jones responds, "You got caught smoking for the second time. That means we have to suspend you." The kid lets out an exasperated sigh of disbelief and whines, "But that was last semester. I don't even smoke [now]. Please do me a favor." Mr. Jones goes into explaining the state policy and tells him there's nothing he can do but suspend him. The kid starts talking about a Ms. Loges who ". . . told me it [rule] was going to change this semester. You can ask Julio [a classmate]." Mr. Jones seems to be getting frustrated and says, "I have enough trouble. Look! I'm activating school policy." With this, we walked into the attendance office.

- (f) (A little uncertain about how I should position myself to be unobtrusive, I sit

down at the desk opposite Mr. Jones's and start acting like I'm looking at some of the papers on his desk. The kid is starting to take notice of me now and keeps looking at my notebook.) He keeps on pleading with Mr. Jones to do him a favor. Mr. Jones inquires, "Don't you read what smoking does to you?" He gets on the phone and tells him, "I'm calling your mother. Does she speak English?" The kid replies affirmatively. As he talks to a receptionist where the mother works, he retains his authoritarian tone in introducing himself: "This is Mr. Jones, Dean of Discipline at the High School. Is Mrs. S. there?" The mother is not at work yet.

(g) The kid pleads a little more calmly, "Do me a favor." Mr. Jones replies authoritatively, but with less vigor, "I'm not going to do you a favor. Not since I don't know what Ms. Loges said." The kid continues to plead, while Mr. Jones stays silent for awhile. The kid tells him, "My friend, Igor, got suspended on the third time." Finally, Mr. Jones says, "Well, it is a new policy this year, so I suppose Ms. Loges could have gotten some of her facts turned around."

(h) As he says this, a short, middle-aged Asian woman walks into the room and seems amused by what is going on. (She sees me sitting at the desk and immediately I get the impression that it is hers. I stand up quickly, looking back down at it and then back up at her.) She seems to know exactly what is going on with the student. She turns to him and starts saying, "You've been smoking, hah? Well, don't you know how bad that is for you?" She asks him, "Do your parents smoke?" He says, "Yes, and my cousins. My whole family." (He seems noticeably relieved and more than willing to talk about the acknowledged evils of smoking.) He says, "I have been trying to stop, and I have been doing pretty good. But it's hard, you know?" The Asian woman says, "Ah, you just have to put your mind to it. I used to smoke." Mr. Jones adds, "Me too. I used to smoke." He nods his head knowingly. In a softer voice, he says to her, "I told him I wouldn't suspend him this time because he got some wrong information. But next time, that's it."

(i) Then, the Dean dismisses him with a slight wave of his hand. The kid leaves the office.

In writing this tale, the ethnographer interconnected the separate episodes—the talk and doings—to show actions as unfolding and developing in a chronological order. The tale moves from an opening which initiates the action (dean examines pile of smoking infractions), through a middle which advances actions as they develop (finding a delinquent student, threatening him with punishment), climaxes in a turning point involving a change in action (offering student another chance), to an end which indicates an outcome or brings the actions to a resting point (student leaving).

But even though this tale, unlike the previous one, moves to a specific ending, the writer does not foreshadow this outcome by building it into

his writing. In the last episodes (*h* and *i*), we learn only that the male dean and the female administrator work together, and that she discusses the smoking habit in greater detail with the student. She might have influenced the dean to change his mind, simply through her presence; for, he changes after she enters. But, we never get a clear sense of why the dean relents or appears to relent: he may, after all, have been intending all along to simply scare the youth rather than to actually suspend him. The ending merely writes a closing to the fieldnote tale and is almost anticlimactic: the student simply exits the scene. But a more definitive ending which made a point (about discipline or the dean's and student's actions) would have distorted the incident, attributing import that those involved did not, or hypothesizing consequences that might or might not occur. Remaining true to his observations, the writer squelched any inclination to craft a more emphatic ending.

Composing these tales often highlights a fundamental tension felt by many ethnographers as they write fieldnotes. The researcher wants to write the actions as she perceived them in the moment of observation and to include as many details as possible. However, writing is a way of seeing, of increasing understanding, and ultimately of *creating scenes*. Indeed, writing on a page is a process of ordering; the writer, perforce, selects this and not that, puts details in this order and not that one, and creates a pattern out of otherwise fragmented or haphazard details.

Narrating is a particularly structured way of seeing and ordering life and, consequently, may heighten the strain between trying to write "everything" and creating an intelligible slice of life on the page. The more unified and climactic the narrative he envisions writing, the more compelled the ethnographer feels to interconnect actions and to exclude any details which the building story line renders peripheral or irrelevant. For example, in the story about the dean disciplining the student, only episode *b* about graffiti does not bear directly on the story line about the smoking infraction. Had the ethnographer written down other details more extraneous to this story line, the tale would have been more episodic and less driven by an internal consistency. The tale might have included, for example, extraneous dialogue with a secretary who remarked after she got off the phone, "Your wife called to say you forgot your lunch," or incidental actions such as a student waiting at the office door holding a balloon in her hand. However, he did not include such irrelevant details; his tale has few gaps.

In telling a fieldnote tale, the ethnographer must juggle these contra-

ditory impulses: to include even peripheral actions and to create an ordered progression telling the "something that happened." If she truly writes "everything," she likely will create mumbo-jumbo on the page; but if she overdetermines the connections in her story, she might close her mind to other possible interpretations. Faced with this dilemma, we suggest that the ethnographer aim to write the more loosely structured fieldnote tales. Such a tale tends to be episodic: it describes seemingly extraneous actions which happen during the incident recounted; it might have gaps between episodes with no apparent connections leading from one set of actions to the next; it often begins in the midst of action and closes without necessarily arriving at any consequences or resolution.

Such a fieldnote tale reflects the ethnographer's perceived experience at the moment of writing. It tells the story as he understands it that day. But every fieldnote tale is embedded not only within the day's entry but also within the context of ongoing fieldwork and note-taking. The researcher returns to the field the next day to further explore his hunches about the previous day's events. He sees a character in various situations over time and deepens his understanding of that person's relationships and patterns of action. Thus, as writing continues and fieldnotes accumulate, the ethnographer may begin to see earlier tales differently than when he wrote them. He may reexamine the implicit connections, the gaps he did not understand, and the endings he inferred, and consequently, he asks himself questions which stimulate a closer look when he returns to the field.<sup>13</sup>

The cohesion of fieldnote tales, then, is temporary and conditional: ethnographers' understandings of recounted events may change as fieldwork continues. In the light of further observation of related activities and reappearing characters, the ethnographer may reassess connections and disjunctions between episodes in a fieldnote tale. After observing the dean many times, for example, the writer of this tale might come to see the dean's talk about graffiti as an essential unit in what, after all, seems to be a rather cohesive story: the dean talks about graffiti as a serious infraction in order to highlight the minor nature of smoking violations. He would then come to understand the tale as following this common pattern: An authority threatens punishment for infraction; the student exhibits properly deferential behavior, offers an excuse, and promises to do better; the authority relents and lets the student off with a warning. In this version of the story, the student will not be suspended as long as he is cooperative.

In reviewing his tale, the ethnographer not only should reflect on the implicit connections he made but also reconsider the gaps between (and within) episodes. The apparent gap in the dean's story—between the suspension threat and the remission—might have various interpretations. The ethnographer, for example, could infer any one of the following: (a) that the dean lets smoking students off-the-hook if they are deferential; (b) that the dean generally defers to the opinions of the female, Asian administrator; (c) that the Asian administrator intervenes often for foreign students. To locate grounds for choosing between these possibilities, the ethnographer would further observe the dean as he disciplined students.

Finally, continuing fieldwork and note-writing may lead to revised understandings about the ending of a tale; for, there is an element of arbitrariness in both the beginnings and endings of stories. The writer begins the tale at the point she began observing an event, key characters, or an interesting situation. She ends her story either when that incident concludes (the dean dismisses the student) or when she shifts her attention to other characters, activities, or situations. Initially, the writer's experience and attention creates the parameters of the fieldnote tale. But as she rereads a tale and thinks about it, she might realize that this tale is inextricably linked to others about the same characters. The specific endings are mere resting points. For example, although this one police patrol tale ends, Sam and Alisha continued their patrolling for several more hours that evening and during other subsequent observations; the story continues through many more pages.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, fieldnote tales have temporary endings because the story about people's lives continues the next day and throughout the fieldnotes.

In sum, ethnographers write fieldnote tales which reflect daily experience, rather than craft artful, suspense-driven narratives. They draw on narrating conventions which order actions so that a reader can visualize them and which, nevertheless, remain true to their immediate sense of the incident. But the understanding a researcher has of any one event often fluctuates and develops as he continues to write and reread his notes. By considering alternate interpretations of a tale in the light of his ongoing research, the ethnographer opens up the tale to more incisive questions. Therefore, ethnographers commit themselves only tentatively to the version they write today, for the "something that happened" might well change. Thus, each fieldnote tale links to and comments on other episodes and tales within a set of fieldnotes. In that sense, each tale—as one version among many—remains open-ended.

IN-PROCESS ANALYTIC WRITING: ASIDES,  
COMMENTARIES, AND MEMOS

As the field researcher participates in the field, she inevitably begins to reflect on and interpret what she has experienced and observed. As previously noted, writing fieldnotes heightens and focuses these interpretive and analytic processes; writing up the day's observations generates new appreciation and deeper understanding of witnessed scenes and events. In writing, a field researcher assimilates and thereby starts to understand an experience. She makes sense of the moment by intuitively selecting, highlighting, and ordering details and by beginning to appreciate linkages with or contrasts to previously observed and written-about experiences. Furthermore, she may begin to reflect on how she has presented and ordered events and actions in her notes, rereading selected episodes and tales with an eye to their structuring effects.

To capture these ruminations, reflections, and insights and make them available for further thought and analysis, field researchers pursue several kinds of analytical writing that stand in stark contrast to the descriptive writing we have emphasized to this point. As the result of such writings, the researcher can bring a more probing glance to further observations and descriptive writing and consequently become more selective and in-depth in her descriptions.

These interpretive and analytic forms of writing include asides, commentaries, and in-process memos. These analytic writing strategies move progressively further from the descriptive writing that produces the bulk of the researcher's fieldnotes. Asides and commentaries are analytic writings touched off while composing fieldnotes; the researcher might get an idea as she recalls and puts on paper the details of a specific observation or incident. In-process memos, however, are products of a more concentrated effort to identify and develop analytic themes while still actively in the field and writing fieldnotes. Such memos are not usually stimulated by writing up a specific event. Taking a more consistent analytic stance, the fieldworker produces in-process memos by reading recently completed pieces or sets of fieldnotes to identify and develop particular interpretations, questions, or themes.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, these distinctions are not absolute; the lines between asides, commentaries, and in-process memos are often blurred. We offer them as heuristic devices that may sensitize the fieldworker both to momentary and to more sustained concentration on analytic writing while actively producing fieldnotes.

*Asides* are brief, reflective bits of analytic writing that succinctly clarify, explain, interpret, or raise questions about some specific happening or process described in a fieldnote. The ethnographer dashes off asides in the midst of descriptive writing, taking a moment to react personally or theoretically to something she has just recounted on paper, and then immediately turns back to the work of description. These remarks may be inserted in the midst of descriptive paragraphs and set off by parentheses, as in the following examples. In the first, the writer pauses in an aside to explain his reaction:

As we're driving along I ask George how long he has been teaching and he tells me, "Well, it's going on my eighth year." I respond with a "Wow! (I didn't think he was as old as that.) He smiles as he looks at me and goes on to explain where he used to teach.

In the next excerpt, the ethnographer notes his uneasy feelings in an aside about someone watching him:

I turn around, away from the office, and face the woman with the blondish hair who is still smiling. (I can't shake the feeling that she's gazing at me.) "I'll see you Friday," I say to her as I walk by her and out the front door.

Fieldworkers often write somewhat more elaborate asides, several phrases in length, again triggered by some immediate piece of writing and closely tied to the events or scenes depicted in that writing. In the fieldnote below, the fieldworker describes a moment during her first day at a crisis drop-in center and then reacts to that experience in a more extended aside:

Walking up the stairs to the agency office, I noticed that almost every step creaked or moaned. At the top stands an old pine coat hanger, piled high with coats. Behind it is a bulletin board containing numerous flyers with information about organizations and services of various kinds. (Thinking about the scene as I climbed those stairs, I think that if I were an upset, distraught client, I would most probably find it difficult to find helpful information in that disorganized mass.)

In providing her own "lived sense" of the agency, the student incorporates in her description the meaning of physical space, while allowing for the possibility that others might perceive it differently. Asides may also be used to explain something that would otherwise not be apparent, or to offer some sort of personal reflection or interpretive remark on a matter

just considered. Ethnographers frequently use asides, for example, to convey their explicit "feel" for or emotional reactions to events; putting these remarks in asides keeps them from intruding into the descriptive account.

A *commentary* is a more elaborate reflection on some specific event or issue; it is contained in a separate paragraph and set off with parentheses. Commentaries involve a shift of attention from events in the field to outside audiences imagined as having an interest in something the fieldworker has observed and written up. Again, in contrast to descriptive fieldnotes, commentaries may explore problems of access or emotional reactions to events in the field, suggest ongoing probes into likely connections with other events, or offer tentative interpretations. Putting commentary in separate paragraphs helps avoid writing up details as evidence for preconceived categories or interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

Commentaries can be used to create a record of the ethnographer's own doings, experiences, and reactions during fieldwork, both in observing-participating and in writing up. A researcher/intern placed in a social service agency wrote the following commentary after describing an incident that she felt marked a turning point in her relationship with staff:

Entering the kitchen, where staff often go to socialize alone, I began to prepare my lunch. Soon, several staff had come in, and they began to talk among one another. I stood around awkwardly, not quite knowing what to do with myself. I exchanged small talk for awhile until D, the director, asked in her typically dramatic tone loud enough for everyone to hear: "Guess where A (a staff member who was also present) is going for her birthday?" There was silence in the room. Turning in her direction, I realized that she was speaking to me. "Where?" I asked, somewhat surprised that she was talking to me. "To Hershey Park!" she exclaimed. "No way!" I said, and feeling embarrassed, I started laughing. "Yeah," D exclaimed, "She's gonna dip her whole body in chocolate so R (lover) can eat her!" The room filled up with laughter, and I, too, could not restrain my giggles.

(With that, the group broke up, and as I walked back to my desk, I began to feel that for the first time, I had been an active participant in one of their kitchen get-togethers. This experience made me believe that I was being viewed as more than just an outsider. I have been trying to figure out what it takes to belong here, and one aspect undoubtedly is to partake in an occasional kitchen get-together and not to appear above such practices.)

In this commentary the researcher not only reports her increased feeling of acceptance in the scene but also reflects on the likely importance of

these informal, sometimes ribald "get-togethers" for creating a general sense of belonging in the organization.

Finally, commentaries can raise issues of what terms and events mean to members, make initial connections between some current observation and prior fieldnotes, and suggest points or places for further observation, as in the following excerpt:

M called over to Richard. He said, "C'm here lil' Honey." Richard came over to sit closer to M. He asked Richard about something Richard said earlier (I couldn't completely hear it) . . . something to do with weight lifting. Richard replied, "Oh, I could talk about it for hours. . . ." M asked Richard if there was a place where he could lift weights on campus. Richard said there was a weightroom, but only "hoops" could use it today. M then asked Richard what 'hoops' was. Richard answered that "hoops" was basketball.

(Is the word *honey*, possibly derived from *homeboy*, somebody who is *down* or *cool* with another person? It seems to me that M, who apparently didn't know Richard, wanted to talk to him. In order to do that, he tried to let Richard know M thought he was a *cool* person? *Honey* appears to be applied regardless of ethnicity. . . . Their interaction appeared to be organized around interest in a common activity, weight lifting. Judging by the size of M's muscles, this was something he excelled in.)

This ethnographer has been noticing the ways blacks use the terms *cool* and *down* to refer to inclusion of non-blacks in their otherwise black groupings. In this commentary, he reflects on other terms which also seem to be inclusive.

*In-process memos* are products of more sustained analytic writing and require a more extended time-out from actively composing fieldnotes. Often they are written after completing the day's fieldnotes. Although perhaps touched off by thoughts generated by writing up a day's fieldnote entries, such memos address incidents across several sets of fieldnotes. In writing in-process memos, the fieldworker clearly envisions outside audiences and frames his thoughts and experiences in ways likely to interest them.

In-process memos can profitably address practical, methodological questions that include: Where should I observe next? What questions should I ask to follow up on this event? These questions help direct the ethnographer's attention, focusing and guiding future observations and analysis. Asking such questions helped a researcher in a battered women's shelter identify gaps in her understanding of how staff viewed and accomplished their work:

The goals staff have talked about so far of "conveying unconditional positive regard" for clients and "increasing their self-esteem" seem rather vague. How does the staff know when they have achieved unconditional positive regard? Is it based on their interaction with the client or by their refraining from being judgmental or critical of them during staff meetings? I will attempt to discover how they define and attempt to achieve the goal of "increasing a woman's self-esteem." It has been made clear that this goal is not only seen to be achieved when women leave their abusive relationships. If leaving their abusive partners were the primary indicator of achieving raised self-esteem, the organization would be largely unsuccessful, since most of these women go back to their abusive relationships. Yet, while I have learned what raising self-esteem is not, I have yet to learn what it is.

In this more extended series of comments and questions, the fieldworker identifies two matters that shelter staff members emphasize as goals in their relations with clients: "conveying unconditional positive regard" and increasing client "self-esteem." She then considers ways she might look to understand how these general policies/values are actually implemented and their success or failure practically assessed in interactions within the shelter.

In-process memos may elaborate new interpretations developed from subsequent incidents or understandings, as in the following:

Several weeks ago, I wrote about a client whom staff found to be quite aggravating and "annoying" because she had been continually calling the crisis line at all hours of the morning. At the time I had been under the impression that staff perceived such calls as unnecessary unless they pertained to immediate threats of physical injury. Through a conversation that took place today [included in earlier notes], I realize that this was an accurate but oversimplified notion. Although the staff finds late night crisis calls quite aggravating, they also acknowledge the necessity of maintaining such an option to deal primarily with violence of an immediate and physical nature. But even if the caller's situation does not fit into that category, she wouldn't necessarily be identified as a "nuisance" unless she had called repeatedly and had enough familiarity with the organization to know better. Each caller seems to be viewed as an individual case and is treated accordingly. It is only when their issues become too time consuming or chronic that are they identified as nuisance callers.

Here the student developed a more complex analysis by correcting and extending an earlier analytic claim. Writing helped her clarify her ideas and draw out subtle differences as she systematically examined new information in light of what she had previously understood.

As a general practice in writing commentaries and in-process memos, the field researcher should remain open-minded, avoiding conclusive an-

alytic statements in favor of possibilities and alternatives. These writings are most helpful when offering probing reflections, tentative musings, and open questions. For example, phrases such as "possibly," "apparently," "appeared to be" reflect these qualities in the field researcher's commentaries on the term "homey."

The field researcher may experience uncertainty and strain in deciding when to concentrate on writing thoroughly descriptive fieldnotes and when to record and develop analytic insights. Writing analytic commentary and in-process memos can easily displace time and effort needed for writing core descriptive fieldnotes. Yet we have often found that new ideas, like the descriptive details that make vivid fieldnotes, are fleeting; if not written down immediately, they tend to "get lost" or remain undeveloped. So the field researcher may constantly have to balance the impulse to write down ideas and insights when they occur against the compulsion to "get it all down" as quickly and completely as possible without interruption.

In sum, ongoing reflection and analysis, even as the fieldworker continues to observe in the field and to actively write fieldnotes, is crucial for ethnographic research. Writing analytic asides, commentary, and in-process memos helps the field researcher carry forward analysis contemporaneously with the collection of field data. Such reflective writing often incites the researcher to pay closer attention to what she sees and, thus, to write more detailed and vivid descriptions. In-process analytic writing in turn increases the possibility of making the kinds of observations needed to develop and support a specific analysis. The more explicitly analytic themes are identified, the better able the fieldworker is to "check out" different alternatives, making and recording observations that can confirm, modify, or reject different interpretations. Theoretical asides and commentary, as well as more elaborate theoretical memos, enhance these prospects.

#### REFLECTIONS: FIELDNOTES AS PRODUCTS OF WRITING CHOICES

In writing fieldnotes, ethnographers have as their primary goal description rather than analysis. A researcher writes notes with a specific purpose in mind: to record a slice of life on a page. But these contrasting terms—description and analysis—refer more to recognized kinds of writing than to separate cognitive activities. In that sense, writing fieldnotes is a process

of “analysis-in-description.” Indeed, all descriptions are selective, purposed, angled, voiced, because they are authored. To “write up life” in this way, an ethnographer uses language conventions to create an envisioned scene. Sketches and episodes present a still-life or tell a story; they paint portraits of settings, people, and actions rather than offer causal explanations or build an argument.

All writing, by definition, is an abstracting and ordering process: clear writing always has internal coherence, the product of the writer’s attention to the subject as well as to the potential reader. Ethnographers construct their fieldnotes in a process more accurately captured by the expression “writing up” than “writing down” or “getting down” people’s doings and sayings. Writers do more than inscribe the world. Just as the ethnographer-as-observer participates with members in constructing a social reality, so too the ethnographer-as-writer creates that world through language.

In this chapter, we have seen that even though restricted to actual observed details, an ethnographer always “creates” the described scene. Writing fieldnotes *processes* experience not only through a researcher’s attention in the field but also through a writer’s memory and compositional choices at the desk. An ethnographer perceives interactions and selects significant details; in writing she groups these details into a coherent whole according to conventional writing strategies.<sup>17</sup>

Awareness of writing conventions, however, is not meant to lead a writer to be more craftily inventive through the use of persuasive rhetorical skills. Rather it invites the ethnographer to make more conscious choices when creating fieldnote records that portray social worlds as experienced and perceived by others. Consider the effects of writing: not only does a writer’s theoretical stance influence compositional choices, but the reverse also happens. Even by inadvertently imitating an “objective” social science style, for example, with its measured wording, omniscient viewpoint, and use of the passive voice, descriptions reflect an affinity—though ever so subtle—for that orientation. Certainly, a writing style tends to shape any writer’s vision. How researchers see in the field, in part, results from what they find noteworthy and “writable” as a fieldnote. Consequently, students concerned about research integrity must develop a conscientious respect for how their writing choices influence both fieldwork and note-taking.

Whether carefully or haphazardly written, every fieldnote mirrors an author’s choices: to include these details rather than those, to view actions

either through this character’s or that one’s eyes, to sequence actions in this way or that way (or randomly), or to write with particular readers in mind. These authorial choices, if only subliminal, result in on-the-page descriptions with certain kinds of detail, a particular point of view, a tone and attitude toward the persons depicted, and a distinctive voice. These day-to-day renderings of scenes pile up, and writing choices assume a cumulative effect: the notes portray that world through this particular writer’s lens. In making writing choices, therefore, *how* ethnographers write fieldnotes becomes as consequential for readers and those depicted as what they write. Whether as privately filed resources or as public excerpts in final documents, fieldnotes persuade.