

FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research (4th Edition)

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Embarking on the ethnographic road can be a daunting journey. It is a qualitative methodology that brings the researcher into the thick of the social world in one of the most intriguing methods of inquiry: participant observation. This road can be fraught with obstacles and qualitative distraction—with everything spread out before the researcher’s eyes and seemingly of importance. Ethnography is an incredible research tool and an incredible practice to explore. Without some kind of roadmap to the process, a researcher in training can be left alone on the metaphorical desert highway—an easy view of the direct path toward the horizon, yet still lost on the larger scale. Rosaldo (1993) calls ethnography “cultural anthropology’s most significant contribution to knowledge” (p. 38). He further adds that it plays a major role “for an array of academics, artists, and media” (p. 39). In a research world where qualitative inquiry had to once carve out a path among the positivists, researchers are now free to work within ever advancing and supported theories, and ethnography has become one of the most powerful and popular tools of the qualitative educational researcher. Eisenhart (2001) says that social and theoretical trends push ethnographers to consider how social systems are “manifested and produced in networks of larger systems” and she also asserts that ethnographers are mobile, they can “continue the tradition of ‘living’ the immediate experiences of those they study” (p. 22).

How then does an intrigued ethnographer point his or herself in the direction of, say, an ethnography such as Ralph Cintron’s *Angels’ Town*? Cintron (1997) takes his reader through a detailed look at his “Angelstown,” a Latino community where power, gang life, family structure, and the fight to survive weave complex social interactions that speak volumes about the social world. Though a powerful read, Cintron makes no secret of the volumes of field notes, data, and time required to construct his ethnography. His impressive work details his own trek across the ethnographic desert highway, but is no easy textbook for a beginning ethnographer. How then does one attempt a task like Cintron? Or, more realistically, how does a graduate student embark on a much smaller highway on a study representative of a much larger endeavor? The novice researcher needs a better roadmap; a graduate student or aspiring researcher needs a collection of carefully assembled examples and insight into the power of this methodology to question and to investigate the social world as well as the personal rewards in the many facets of the process. *FieldWorking* offers both the roadmap and the collection of examples.

Moving toward the Ethnographic *Field*

Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's *FieldWorking* has been key in my journey down that desert highway and has helped me begin to grasp many of the facets of the ethnographic endeavor; likewise, I have shared it with my own students. Like Sunstein's other contributions to academe, this book is replete with examples, excerpts, and interactive steps for a researcher in training to begin to unlock the qualitative promise of the ethnography. Especially innovative in *FieldWorking* are the "boxes" throughout each chapter that offer exercises for the reader to begin to practice elements of the ethnography—thinking exercises, writing prompts, mini-investigations of common objects and ideas (e.g., a taste of phenomenology)—and then connect such exercises with the examples in the text. Excerpts range from those contributed by her students—many with a very familiar feel to a reader at much the same stage—to those from more recognizable authors (Joan Didion, for example) on much heavier topics. It does not take long at all for the reader to identify with the informed narrative style of *FieldWorking* and to begin to sense that a change in thinking lies ahead.

Among my favorite moments in *FieldWorking* is an excerpt Sunstein uses (and often returns to in successive chapters) from Rick Zolo's visit to the Iowa 80 Truckstop ("Friday Night at Iowa 80"). Not only is Zolo's ethnographic investigation into the world's largest truck stop a fascinating example illustrating Sunstein's early concepts of gaining access to a site and building an early sense for the space in which the researcher ventures, but it also immediately leaves the reader thinking that he or she can, in fact, attempt this daunting ethnographic process. It does not advertise it as easy by any means, but it certainly makes it seem entirely possible. Zolo's findings detail the Iowa 80 panorama - from its origins, to the layout, to operational logistics, to the culture of truck drivers. This example not only captures the overall perspective on ethnography that authors will explore moving forward, but also draws the prospective scholar into an entirely plausible academic arena.

Stepping into the *Field*

Chapter 1, "Stepping In and Stepping Out: Understanding Cultures" truly makes the novice ethnographer ready for the ethnographic world. The authors lay the foundation of vital cultural relevance of this methodological practice and even explore the line between journalism and ethnography in a way that invites the reader to question the placement of that line. In the first chapter, Sunstein further connects Zolo's and others' experiences with the first three of her "boxes," instructional interludes with exercises to practice the ongoing concepts in the upcoming chapters. The "Research Portfolio" section at the end of each chapter also helps the reader tie the multiple elements of the chapter together under the reader's own practice (and, interestingly, it should come as no surprise that some kind of portfolio assessment appears in *FieldWorking*). This selection from the text is a prime example of what *FieldWorking* has to offer an instructor of qualitative methodology; likewise, it supports self-directed study by the student or methodologist. Where some first chapters in other qualitative research texts might open heavy flood

gates or begin a book at zero-depth entry, this first chapter begins a rigorous but highly-supported journey in an extremely engaging manner

Chapter 2, “Writing Self, Writing Cultures: Understanding FieldWorking,” pulls the details out of the visits to a field site and very appropriately guides the burgeoning ethnographer through the process of extracting those vital early ethnographic details that start the process of weaving an understanding of the culture under study. An infrastructure-like quality exists in this chapter that reveals a fundamental belief the authors seem to have regarding ethnography: it is a method for collecting and analyzing data and synthesizing understanding. This cannot, however, happen haphazardly. The second chapter makes a brilliant case for the value of field notes: they are more than just “hanging out” at a research site and observing. The authors defend their value as the essential ingredient in this process, one that must lead to writing. Having a process for collecting the ingredients for future writing, and various strategies to dissect and digest the field notes is their essential infrastructure for ethnography to move forward.

Chapter 4, “Research Place: The Spatial Gaze,” helps the reader not only endure the phenomenological avalanche of ethnographic detail, but learn to tame it. This chapter on mapping space turns overwhelming detail into meaning-making material. If the strength of *FieldWorking* is lending itself to doing what it says, then this chapter might perhaps be the leading chapter. The authors say it best when they launch the chapter with: “The word *fieldworking* implies place” (p. 165). And with the sociological imagination in mind, “your spatial memory and your spatial assumptions here depend on your past experiences and your present situation” (p. 165). “Personal geography” becomes a growing roadmap to tame new ethnographic territory; it becomes a tool turning it to the researcher’s phenomenological advantage. From excerpts on Jamaica Kincaid’s journey to England, to Joelle Hann’s visit to Brazil (where the taxi drive becomes as much a lesson in culture as a map of space created on the drive), to Box 18 which includes Emily Wemmer’s actual mapping of Amish horse barns, the authors consistently deliver the examples that illustrate the power of the methodology and potential for its practice. This chapter builds toward the concept of a focal point; mapping helps the researcher locate oneself within the space. With the focal point comes a researcher’s sensitivity to the insiders’ own view of their own geography (as highlighted in Jennifer Hemmingsen’s look at the Native American culture in Pendleton, Oregon). Just as the second chapter builds that infrastructure for moving forward, this chapter provides both navigation and destination toward that crucial ethnographic focal point.

Chapter 5, “Researching People: The Collaborative Listener” and Chapter 6: “Researching Language: The Cultural Listener” return the focus of the text more holistically to the people and cultural practices at the core of ethnography’s vitality. Where some might find these chapters a bit delayed in arrival, it is important to remember that the authors did make their case for cultural identity early on, and likewise began to explore language and cultural angles in the third chapter. With the previous chapters that have built both route and destination to ethnographic fruition, these chapters bring cultural identity back to the forefront. The authors reinforce the value of face time (further still in the importance of proper transcription) when they explore not merely

conducting interviews, but examining the language, the life background, and the role of the interviewee throughout the interview process. Cindie Marshall's time at "Ralph's Sports Bar" is entirely rooted in the strength of transcribed interviews (p. 234). This contributor's example, as do these chapters as a whole, speak to ethnographic validity where they guide the reader of the text to the deeper culture and context that make an interviewee reliable and rich in ethnographic support. The authors continue to remind the ethnographer to build the growing vital links between words, actions, artifacts and culture. They direct this focus more specifically in Chapter 7 to artifacts themselves.

Chapter 8, "FieldWriting: From Down Draft to Up Draft" embraces the inevitable aspect of the ethnographic process where the researcher must attempt something conclusive with the data. The authors bring previous chapters together as they offer ways to synthesize, coalesce, and reflect upon data. This mountain of data becomes an asset, a reassuring resource leading to potential rhetorical directions as a writer, as well as selected elements used as a theme. The authors are very open, very personable with their narrative—conceding the struggles of procrastination and simply beginning the task of doing something with the data, offering Anne Lamott's excerpt on "Shitty First Drafts" (p. 354) and even acknowledging the fact that it is okay to completely question one's first draft of writing. They return to the metacognitive component of the second chapter, the writing researcher looking inward at his or her process (and, thus, the first draft) and setting the stage for "thickening" the draft with even more description. This thickening is their way of triangulating the data, "the heart of the fieldworking process," and separating the ethnographic endeavor from writing such as library research, basic reporting, or creative nonfiction (p. 361). Sadly, this current edition lost a rather insightful offering from Stephen King, which was present in the third edition. As one would expect, Sunstein offers personal, very memorable looks at her own work and that seamlessly weaves them into the chapter.

Looking Back Across the *Field*

I have been fortunate to embark on several ethnographic journeys as an academic since I first encountered *FieldWorking*. Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's text gave me a great deal of additional inspiration and confidence in my ability to conduct the task at hand—particularly when studying a local high school football stadium for a detailed look at the culture of the community's football fans. Zolo's trip to Iowa 80 contained no less a mix of apprehension and excitement than I felt myself. Mapping space helped me tame the incredible amount of data fed to my senses faster than I could put it into field notes. Finding a theme in my data and thickening the draft proved to be just as rewarding a part of the process as the conversations I shared with community members in the stands during a number of the season's home games. In between these stages I found numerous opportunities to reflect on tidbits of my data, expand upon their significance, connect my experiences with the numerous others collected in *FieldWorking*, and constantly reflect upon those experiences and their impact on my ethnographic process.

FieldWorking does indeed fulfill its potential of guiding the student of ethnography into the methodology while reading the text. The authors make a very complicated process

possible by openly exploring the rewards of every stage and genuinely addressing the accompanying pitfalls. This text is the type that veteran qualitative researchers and researchers in training need. This is the type of text they will appreciate, just as I once came to appreciate it and the echoes it has left throughout my career in education. *FieldWorking* is a text that makes the ethnographic journey a manageable step-by-step process, with numerous guideposts to escape that long desert road. *FieldWorking* makes this a process with every possible opportunity to reflect, which is what makes ethnographic study both methodologically rewarding and productive in the field of education. The greatest strength in *FieldWorking* is that it ultimately lends itself to doing what it says it will do: truly supporting its reader's ethnographic journey.

References

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