

*INFO 272. Qualitative Research Methods*

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# Ethnography!

Fall 2014

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# Field Notes

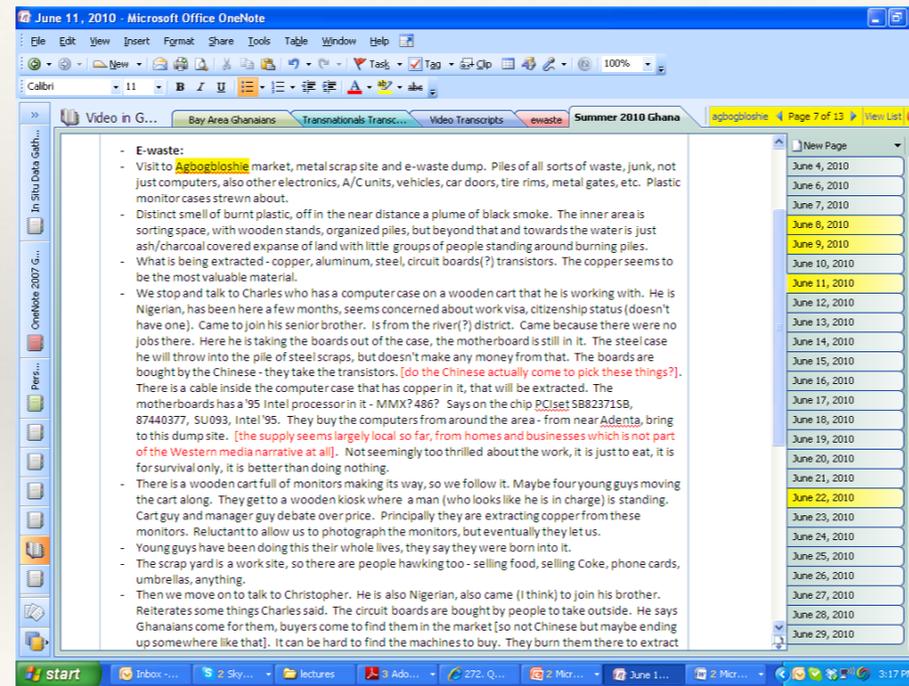
- ❖ Jottings
- ❖ Full Field Notes
- ❖ 'Thick Description'

historically a source of confusion for students in this class. Jottings are incomplete notes you typically write down in the moment (while observing, to capture what might be lost to memory).

'Full field notes' are a complete narrative account filling in all the blanks missing from your jottings. Usually these are written the same day (ideally) and you will reference your jottings to compose your field notes, to help jog your memory.

'Thick description' is the resulting ethnographic writing, the outcome of analysis. Your field notes are not a 'thick description' but the basis that may later be drawn from to form a 'thick description.'

# Jottings vs. Full Field Notes



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# Introduction

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- ❖ Participant-Observation ≠ Ethnography
- ❖ Classic Ethnographic Practice
- ❖ Challenges to the Classic Model
- ❖ Subjectivity & The Researcher as Research Instrument

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# Ethnography

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- ❖ not a 'method' or 'procedure' rather a methodological approach: combination of subject matter, epistemology, and practice
- ❖ etymology: ethno [nation] + graphy [writing]

## Ethnography - characterized by...

- ❖ **subject:** the *holistic* study of people, culture, societies, social relations, social processes, behaviour *in situ*
- ❖ **method:** some component of participant-observation
- ❖ **analysis and writing style:** inductive analysis, use of 'thick description' and narrative, *emic* accounts

## Ethnography - characterized by...

- ❖ **thick description**
  - ❖ Keeping intact (holism)
  - ❖ 'You are there' feeling
  - ❖ Not just observing action, understanding *symbolic* action, behavior and its *meaning*

Interpretation and meaning (wink vs. blink)

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## A brief history...

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# Ethnography ala Malinowski (1922-1960s)

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## Researcher's Role:

- ❖ scientific detachment
- ❖ be neither preacher nor politician (Weber, 'Science as a Vocation')

## Ethnography ala Malinowski (1922-1960s)

### Spatial Aspects of Field Work:

- ❖ fieldwork: the study of distant cultures through total immersion in particular sites, participant-observation
- ❖ assumed to take place in one distinct site ('the field')
- ❖ Assumption that the site = focus of 'whole culture'

see Gupta and Ferguson on the 'assumption that the site = focus of the whole culture'

Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J. (1997). Beyond Culture: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. In A. Gupta & J. Ferguson (Eds.), (pp. 33-51). Durham and London: Duke University Press.

# Ethnography Since the 1960s

# challenges to the model

## 1) Subject Matter

- Chicago school (urban ethnography)
- ethnographies of 'the West' and "studying up" (Marcus, 1986)
- scientists and engineers (Latour, Traveek, Orr)

- What Clifford describes as the breakdown in "ethnographic authority"
- the convergence of anthropology and sociology

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# challenges to the model

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## 2) Spatial Aspects of the 'Field Site'

- questioning cultural isolation and cultural 'purity,' 'authenticity' and whether it ever existed
- ambiguous spatial terrain (cyberspace, media studies, transnationalism).
- Marcus (1995) proposes multi-sited ethnography
- *more about this next Tuesday*

# challenges to the model

## 3) Researchers Role – Issue of Subjectivity

- cultural research implicated in colonial practices – the politics of ‘objectivity’
- The ‘subjects’ of research begin to talk back (**i.e. negritude movement**)
- insights gained from **examining subjectivity** (Rosaldo reading)

- Objectivity and ‘scientific approach’ as a rhetorical strategy for maintaining power/authority or serving the powerful. See Said, Orientalism or Rosaldo
- Haraway calls this the ‘god trick’ and proposes ‘situated knowledge’  
there was something to be gained by one’s presence in the fieldsite – that the researcher and the presence in the field could generate knowledge – not one that claimed a universal objectivity – but a “situated knowledge”

# Subjectivity

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# subjectivity

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“the attempt to understand another life world  
using the self ... as the instrument of knowing”

- Sherry Ortner

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## subjectivity, example 1

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- Jean Briggs, Never in Anger on emotion (and control of) among the Utku
- *unintentional* disruption — foreign self unsocialized into the culture

## subjectivity, example 2

- ❖ *intentional* disruption of the everyday, the expected, what is common sense (ethnomethodology, Garfinkel) — “**breaching experiments**”:
- ❖ Frozen in Grand Central Station, a flash mob - <http://youtu.be/jwMj3PJDxuo>

Garfinkel: “Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble. The operations that one would have to perform in order to multiply the senseless features of perceived environments; to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation, and confusion; to produce the socially structured affects of anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation; and to produce disorganized interaction should tell us something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained.”

## subjectivity, example 3

- ❖ Forms of knowledge not easily attained through interviews:
  - ❖ Embodied, Tacit (difficult to articulate)
  - ❖ Rosner, 'the material practices of collaboration' (CSCW paper)



Figure 1: (left to right) Sean prints gold letters on a spine; Ellen, an assistant, & Peter examine mottled pages; the binders at work.

from Rosner's CSCW paper, methods section: "To study a binding workshop, I organized my ethnographic inquiry through an apprenticeship. This auto-ethnographic approach follows from prior CSCW research that employs the author as research subject by constructing a reflexive autobiographical account of the author's experience. This work includes examinations of a naval tactical command and control system [1] and embodiment while horseback riding [16]. My methodology draws most closely on anthropological approaches to the study of craft skill, such as Ingold's [18] sawing of wood, Prentice's [30] employment in a garment factory, and work by Lave [22], Coy [9] and others that suggests apprenticeship gives way to valuable insights into technical and social behavior. As compared to a course, apprenticeship imparts tacit skills (physical, economic, social) "through long-term observation and experience," [9:xii]. Anthropologists have long employed embodied subjectivity as an instrument of ethnographic inquiry, "theorizing not only what work means to people, but also what it does to them" [30:55]. Through continued engagement with materials and tools, my work became a gateway for my social inclusion in the workshop and in my understanding the particularities of the binders' practice."

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# Sites

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- ❖ 1) Library, sites of public Internet access, McDonalds?
- ❖ 2) public transport — BART (ticketing, kiosk), on the platform, on the train, buses, bus stops
- ❖ 3) restaurants, bars, eateries