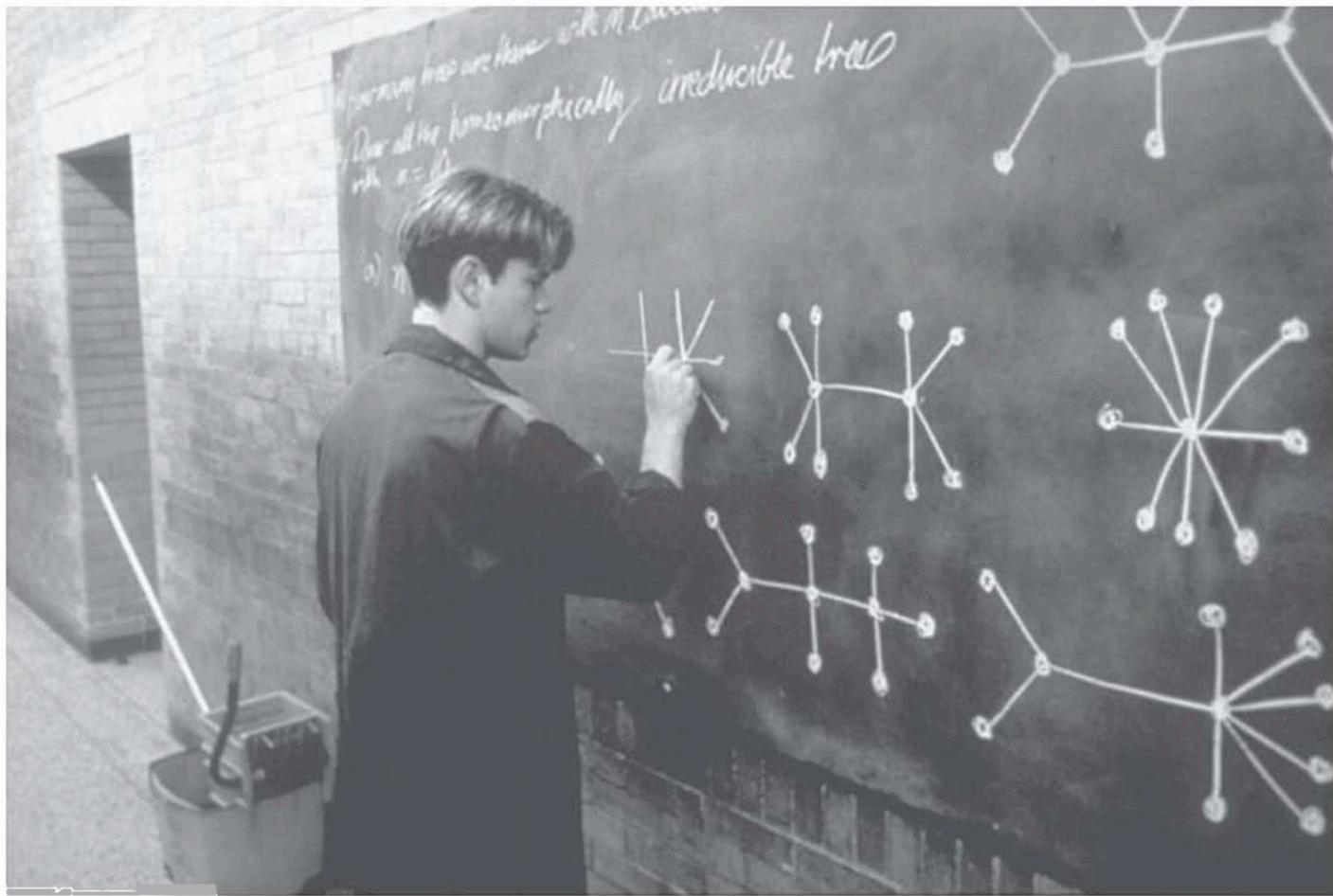


# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## Ethnographic Research



Everett Collection

*Good Will Hunting, 1997*

"Ethnographic research . . . is the study of the cultural patterns and perspectives of participants in their natural settings." (p. 378)

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading Chapter 14, you should be able to do the following:

- 14.1** Briefly state the definition and purpose of ethnographic research.
- 14.2** Describe the ethnographic research process.
- 14.3** Describe the key characteristics of ethnographic research.
- 14.4** Identify and describe the different types of ethnographic research.
- 14.5** Describe the use of ethnographic research techniques.

The chapter learning outcomes form the basis for the following task, which will require you to write the research procedures section of a qualitative research report.

## TASK 8B

For a qualitative study, you have already created research plan components (Tasks 3 and 4B) and described a sample (Task 5B). If your study involves ethnographic research, now develop the research procedures section of the research report. Include in the plan the overall approach and rationale for the study, site and sample selection, the researcher's role, data collection methods, data management strategies, data analysis strategies, trustworthiness features, and ethical considerations (see Performance Criteria at the end of Chapter 16, p. 438).

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## SUMMARY: ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Definition	<i>Ethnographic research</i> (also called <i>ethnography</i> ) is the study of the cultural patterns and perspectives of participants in their natural settings. The goal of ethnographic research is to describe, analyze, and interpret the culture of a group, over time, in terms of the group's shared beliefs, behaviors, and language.
Design(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical ethnography</li> <li>• Realist ethnography</li> <li>• Ethnographic case study</li> </ul>
Types of appropriate research questions	Questions focused on describing and interpreting cultural patterns and perspectives in a natural setting.
Key characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is carried out in a natural setting, not a laboratory.</li> <li>• It involves intimate, face-to-face interaction with participants.</li> <li>• It presents an accurate reflection of participants' perspectives and behaviors.</li> <li>• It uses inductive, interactive, and repetitious collection of unstructured data and analytic strategies to build local cultural theories.</li> <li>• Data are collected primarily through fieldwork experiences.</li> <li>• It typically uses multiple methods for data collection, including conducting interviews and observations and reviewing documents, artifacts, and visual materials.</li> <li>• It frames all human behavior and belief within a sociopolitical and historical context.</li> <li>• It uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results.</li> <li>• It places an emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them.</li> <li>• It investigates a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail.</li> <li>• It uses data analysis procedures that involve the explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions. Interpretations occur within the context or group setting and are presented through the description of themes.</li> </ul>

(continued)

- It requires researchers to be reflective about their impact on the research site and the cultural group.
- It offers interpretations of people's actions and behaviors that must be uncovered through an investigation of what people do and their reasons for doing it.
- It offers a representation of a person's life and behavior that is neither the researcher's nor the person's. Instead, it is built on points of understanding and misunderstanding that occur between researcher and participant.
- It cannot provide an exhaustive, absolute description of anything. Rather, ethnographic descriptions are necessarily partial, bound by what can be handled within a certain time, under specific circumstances, and from a particular perspective.

#### Steps in the process

1. Identify the purpose of the research study and frame it as a larger theoretical, policy, or practical problem.
2. Determine the research site and the sample for the study.
3. Secure permissions and negotiate entry to the research site.
4. Collect data, including the use of participant observation, field notes, interviews, and the examination of artifacts such as school policy documents and attendance records.
5. Analyze data.
6. Write an ethnographic account that is usually a narrative capturing the social, cultural, and economic themes that emerge from the study.

#### Potential challenges

- Developing and maintaining an intimate face-to-face interaction with participants
- Sustaining lengthy fieldwork for a “full cycle” of the phenomenon under investigation
- Using the concept of culture as an interpretive lens

#### Example

What are the factors that affect adolescent drug use in high schools?

## ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH: DEFINITION AND PURPOSE

**Ethnographic research** (also called *ethnography*) is the study of the cultural patterns and perspectives of participants in their natural settings. Ethnographers engage in long-term study of particular phenomena to situate understandings about those phenomena into a meaningful context. With origins in cultural anthropology, ethnographic research

involves multiple data collection techniques and demands prolonged time in the research setting. Most commonly, ethnographers engage in intensive participant observation: By participating in varying degrees in the research setting, the researcher attempts to discern patterns and regularities of human behavior in social activity. Ethnographic research thus requires the researcher to appreciate the tension caused by bringing together contrasting and perhaps incompatible perspectives, all in

the spirit of describing and understanding what is actually going on in a specific context.

The goal of ethnographic research is to describe, analyze, and interpret the culture of a group, over time, in terms of the group's shared beliefs, behaviors, and language. **Culture** is the set of attitudes, values, concepts, beliefs, and practices shared by members of a group. As you begin to think about your own ethnographic research studies, keep the concept of culture in your mind as an organizing principle for your work. It is tempting to talk in generalities about the “culture of the school” or the “culture of adolescent drug users.” In qualitative research, however, statements about culture are bold assertions that can be made about a group only after the group has been studied over an extended period of time. Use of the word *cultural* can help you clarify, in more concrete terms, what you are attempting to describe in the ethnographic research setting. Wolcott<sup>1</sup> suggested thinking in terms of three broad conceptual areas that focus on tangible behaviors: cultural orientation (i.e., where the people under study are situated in terms of physical space and activities), cultural know-how (i.e., how a group goes about its daily activities), and cultural beliefs (i.e., why a group does what it does). This strategy helps ethnographic researchers to identify the phenomena that are at the heart of an ethnographic research enterprise and, in so doing, capture the culture of the group.

To picture what an ethnographic research study may look like, imagine that you have been asked by a teacher (Hilda) working at a secondary school (High High School) to help her and her colleagues look into adolescent drug use at the school. You ask yourself, “What kind of research approach is appropriate to investigate this problem?” Could you structure an experiment to look at the impact of a particular treatment on the outcome of reducing drug use? What treatment would you choose? What do you really know about the drug culture of this school community? Would students really be willing to be assigned to a control group and an experimental group? (Perhaps your head hurts just thinking about these issues!)

As we think about social problems such as adolescent drug use in high schools, it becomes

clear that we probably know very little about what is really going on in the drug culture that exists right under our noses. Indeed, although scientifically based approaches and school policies (such as zero tolerance policies) attempt to address the problem of adolescent drug use, we may be surprised to learn that a universal panacea for adolescent drug use in our schools probably does not exist. We may do well to think about an ethnographic study of adolescent drug use to understand the problem and how we may address it.

A unique type of understanding can be gained by implementing a research approach that focuses on everyday, taken-for-granted behaviors such as adolescent drug use. Our aim in ethnographic research is not to “prove” that a particular intervention (e.g., drug treatment) “solves” a particular “problem” (e.g., adolescent drug use) but rather to understand “what’s going on” in a particular setting (e.g., high school). It should be clear that the goal of an ethnographic study is quite different from the goals of survey, correlational, causal-comparative, and experimental studies and that the methodology we use dictates the kind of research we conduct.

#### MyLab Education Self-Check 14.1

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH PROCESS

An individual interested in conducting an ethnographic study must first decide if he or she has the time, access, experience, personal style, and commitment to undertake this style of research. In this section we describe some basic steps that can serve as guideposts in the process of conducting an ethnographic study. In discussing the steps, we will use the example of an ethnographic study on adolescent drug use in a secondary school (High High School).

From the start, we need to be clear about the purpose of the research. For the scenario chosen, suppose we identify the following purpose:

The purpose of this study is to understand the social, cultural, and economic influences affecting the use of drugs at High High School.

Not a bad start. Next, the researcher should demonstrate the relevance of the proposed study using

<sup>1</sup> *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, by H. F. Wolcott, 1999, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

a frame of reference that the reader will be able to relate to. Given a national preoccupation with illegal drug use, it is not difficult to frame the importance of this study in terms of a larger societal, cultural, and economic study on adolescent drug use, whether it occurs in or outside school. It follows, then, that you can express the overall approach and rationale for the study as follows:

The overall approach for this study of adolescent drug use in secondary schools will be ethnographic. The rationale for the study is based on society's need to understand how teachers cope with adolescent drug users in their classrooms and the social, cultural, and economic influences affecting the widespread use of drugs at High High School.

With the topic and design in hand, the researcher must decide on the site and the sample for the study. In this case, suppose you have been invited by a teacher, Hilda, to participate in a collaborative ethnographic research study that she hopes will ultimately contribute to her (and perhaps others') understanding of adolescent drug use in high schools. It is likely that your role as researcher in this study would need to be negotiated carefully in terms of entry to the school setting and the ethical dilemmas that would likely be faced. In this study in particular, issues of confidentiality and anonymity would be crucial, especially if illegal behavior were observed. You would also need to consider what you would do if you observed unhealthy behavior, such as cigarette smoking, which, although legal, is a violation of school policy. The very intimate nature of ethnographic research makes the possibility of facing an ethical dilemma omnipresent, but that doesn't mean we should shy away from doing it!

Having negotiated your entry to the research setting, your next step is to establish rapport with your collaborators in the research process—the key informants, also known as subjects or active participants. Researchers identify participants in many ways. For example, school counselors, teachers, administrators, and community law enforcement officers would probably be able to provide names of likely drug users or students who have a history of drug use. A good starting point would be to establish a trusting relationship with one or more of these students and then, after explaining the purpose of your study, ask for volunteers

who would be willing to be observed. For students under legal age, you would need to obtain approval from parents for the students to participate in the study. You would also want to assure students and parents that students' identities would be kept confidential.

After negotiating entry and identifying participants, you can begin data collection. Your primary data collection techniques in the study of High High would likely be participant observation, field notes, interviews, and the examination of artifacts such as school policy documents and attendance records.

As a participant observer, you should ease into the research setting and refrain from asking questions until you have done some initial observation of the setting and participants. However, you should arrive with some initial ethnographic research questions in mind. Beginning researchers are often challenged when they try to make the decision about what they will ask when they arrive at the research setting. Guided by the overriding goal of describing what's going on at the research site, you could enter the site with this initial research question in mind: "How do teachers describe the effects of students' drug use on the classroom/academic setting?" Such a question naturally suggests other questions that you may want to ask the teachers and administrators:

- How do you know that students in your class are using drugs?
- What are the school policies on drug use, drug possession, and intoxication in school?
- What social services are available to help students deal with drug-related problems?

The questions just listed would be good ones to start with. If you followed up by prompting the participant to "tell me a little bit more about that," or to describe who, what, where, when, or how, you will never be at a loss for questions to ask in your study.

Following data collection, you'll need to analyze and interpret the data and write an ethnographic account of your experience. For example, you could analyze your field notes for themes emerging from the data that help you increase understanding of what is going on at High High School. Your final ethnographic account will likely be a narrative that captures the social, cultural, and economic themes that emerge from the study. The

account should include a description of the limitations of the study and recommendations for what you would do differently next time. The account should also acknowledge the incomplete nature of the story given; qualitative researchers craft an “end” to a story while knowing full well that the story continues beyond their involvement.

It should be noted that one of the challenges for time-strapped educational researchers planning to do ethnographic research is the length of time in the field (i.e., usually a “full cycle,” comprising a calendar year) and the length of the written account. If you are a graduate student, conducting ethnographic research could lengthen the time you spend in your graduate program and add cost to your education. Researchers in all circumstances need to consider whether they have the time to spend in the field before making the decision to undertake an ethnographic research study.

#### MyLab Education Self-Check 14.2

MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.1:  
Evaluating Research Articles: Identifying the Steps of Ethnographic Research

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

There is a pretty good chance that you have already read an ethnographic account but may not have recognized it as such. Ethnographic research possesses the following characteristics:<sup>2</sup>

- It is carried out in a natural setting, not a laboratory.
- It involves intimate, face-to-face interaction with participants.

<sup>2</sup> Characteristics were adapted from those in “Ethnography and Participant Observation,” by P. Atkinson and M. Hammersley, 1994, in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 249–261), by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (5th ed.), by J. W. Creswell, 2015, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.; *Conceptualizing Qualitative Inquiry: Mindwork for Fieldwork in Education and the Social Sciences*, by T. H. Schram, 2003, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall; and *Ethnographer’s Toolkit: Vol. 1. Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*, by J. J. Schensul and M. D. LeCompte (Eds.), 1999, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

- It presents an accurate reflection of participants’ perspectives and behaviors.
- It uses inductive, interactive, and repetitious collection of unstructured data and analytic strategies to build local cultural theories.
- Data are collected primarily through fieldwork experiences.
- It typically uses multiple methods for data collection, including conducting interviews and observations and reviewing documents, artifacts, and visual materials.
- It frames all human behavior and belief within a sociopolitical and historical context.
- It uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results.
- It places an emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them.
- It investigates a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail.
- It uses data analysis procedures that involve the explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions. Interpretations occur within the context or group setting and are presented through the description of themes.
- It requires that researchers be reflective about their impact on the research site and the cultural group.
- It offers interpretations of people’s actions and behaviors that must be uncovered through an investigation of what people do and their reasons for doing it.
- It offers a representation of a person’s life and behavior that is neither the researcher’s nor the person’s. Instead, it is built on points of understanding and misunderstanding that occur between researcher and participant.
- It cannot provide an exhaustive, absolute description of anything. Rather, ethnographic descriptions are necessarily partial, bound by what can be handled within a certain time, under specific circumstances, and from a particular perspective.

These characteristics will help you recognize ethnographic research studies. They will also help you determine if this approach to educational research feels like a good fit for your individual personality and the problems you want to investigate.

FIGURE 14.1 • Types of ethnographies

- Realist ethnography—an objective, scientifically written ethnography
- Confessional ethnography—a report of the ethnographer’s fieldwork experiences
- Life history—a study of one individual situated within the cultural context of his or her life
- Autoethnography—a reflective self-examination by an individual set within his or her cultural context
- Microethnography—a study focused on a specific aspect of a cultural group and setting
- Ethnographic case study—a case analysis of a person, event, activity, or process set within a cultural perspective
- Critical ethnography—a study of the shared patterns of a marginalized group with the aim of advocacy
- Feminist ethnography—a study of women and the cultural practices that serve to disempower and oppress them
- Postmodern ethnography—an ethnography written to challenge the problems in our society that have emerged from a modern emphasis on progress and marginalizing individuals
- Ethnographic novels—a fictional work focused on cultural aspects of a group

Source: Creswell, John W., *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, 5th Edition, p. 468. © 2015. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.

### MyLab Education Self-Check 14.3

MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.2:  
Identifying the Characteristics of Ethnographic Research

## TYPES OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Ethnographic research comes in many forms. Figure 14.1 is a comprehensive list of the types of ethnographies you are likely to encounter in your studies or likely to produce as a result of your fieldwork.

Although examples of all these types of ethnography can be found in educational research, the three most common are the critical ethnography, the realist ethnography, and the ethnographic case study. One feature that distinguishes these types of research from one another is the product (i.e., the written account) itself, the **ethnography**. However, the researcher’s intent in conducting the research is an equally important distinguishing feature. A **critical ethnography** is a highly politicized form of ethnography written by a researcher to advocate against inequalities and domination of particular groups that exist in society (including schools). The researcher’s intent is to advocate “for the emancipation of groups marginalized in our

society.”<sup>3</sup> These ethnographies typically address issues of power, authority, emancipation, oppression, and inequity—to name a few. Realist ethnographies are most commonly used by cultural and educational anthropologists who study the culture of schools. A **realist ethnography** is written with an objective style and uses common categories for cultural description, analysis, and interpretation; such categories include “family life, work life, social networks, and status systems.”<sup>4</sup> Case studies, as a type of ethnographic research design, are less likely to focus on cultural themes. Instead, an **ethnographic case study** focuses on describing the activities of a specific group and the shared patterns of behavior the group develops over time. It is important that beginning ethnographic researchers recognize the different ways in which they can focus their research to distinguish it as a particular type of ethnography. The literature provides numerous examples of ethnographic research that can serve as models of particular designs and that illustrate the final written accounts.

### MyLab Education Self-Check 14.4

MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.3:  
Designing an Ethnographic Study

<sup>3</sup> *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, 5th ed., p. 471, by J. W. Creswell, 2015, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

Like other qualitative researchers, an ethnographic researcher collects descriptive narrative and visual data. As mentioned previously, the researcher is engaging in an activity to answer the question, “What is going on here (at this research site)?” It is not a mysterious quest but is quite simply an effort to collect data that increase our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Wolcott reminds us that “the most noteworthy thing about ethnographic research techniques is their lack of noteworthiness.”<sup>5</sup> Although the techniques may not be noteworthy, they are systematic and rigorous, and over an extended period of time they allow the researcher to describe, analyze, and interpret the social setting under investigation. In the following sections, we focus on participant observation and field notes as the primary data collection techniques used in ethnographic research.

### Participant Observation

A researcher who is a genuine participant in the activity under study is called a participant observer. Participant observation is undertaken with at least two purposes in mind:<sup>6</sup> (1) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of a situation and (2) to engage in activities that are appropriate to a given situation and that provide useful information. The participant observer is fully immersed in the research setting in an effort to get close to those studied and thus understand what their experiences and activities mean to them. This immersion provides a window through which the researcher can see how participants in the study lead their lives and carry out their daily activities. It also provides an opportunity for the researcher to determine what is meaningful to participants, and why.

Depending on the nature of the problem, ethnographic researchers have many opportunities to participate actively and observe as they work. However, the tendency with observing is to try to

see it all! A good rule of thumb is to try to do less, but do it better. As you embark on some degree of participant observation, do not be overwhelmed. It is not possible to take in everything that you experience. Be content with furthering your understanding of what is going on through manageable observations. Avoid trying to do too much, and you will be happier with the outcomes.

Participant observation can be done to varying degrees, depending on the situation being observed and on the opportunities presented. A participant observer can be an *active participant observer*; a *privileged, active observer*; or a *passive observer*.<sup>7</sup>

### Active Participant Observer

Ethnographic researchers, by virtue of the problems they choose to investigate, are likely to have opportunities to be active participant observers. For example, when doing educational research, researchers often negotiate roles as teacher’s aides, student teachers, or even substitute teachers to gain access to schools and classrooms (i.e., the research settings). When actively engaged in teaching, teachers naturally observe the outcomes of their teaching. Each time they teach, they monitor the effects of their teaching and adjust their instruction accordingly. Teacher-researchers who plan to observe their own teaching practices, however, may become so fully immersed in teaching that they don’t record their observations in a systematic way during the school day. Such recording is a necessary part of being an active participant observer.

### Privileged, Active Observer

Ethnographic researchers may also have opportunities to observe in a more privileged, active role. For example, a researcher may observe children in classrooms during a time when he or she is not participating in the instructional setting as the teacher. During these times, the researcher can work as a teacher’s aide and, at the same time, withdraw,

<sup>5</sup> “Ethnographic Research in Education” by H. F. Wolcott, 1988, in *Complementary Methods for Research in Education* (p. 191), by R. M. Jaegar (Ed.), Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

<sup>6</sup> *Participant Observation*, by J. Spradley, 1980, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

<sup>7</sup> *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*, by P. J. Pelto and G. H. Pelto, 1978, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press; *Participant Observation*, Spradley, 1980, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; “Differing Styles of On-Site Research, or ‘If It Isn’t Ethnography, What Is It?’” by H. F. Wolcott, 1982, *Review Journal of Philosophy and Social Science*, 7, pp. 154–169; and “Ethnographic Research in Education,” by H. F. Wolcott, 1997, in *Complementary Methods for Research in Education* (2nd ed.) (pp. 325–398), Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

stand back, and watch what is happening during a teaching episode. As a privileged, active observer, the ethnographer can move in and out of the roles of teacher's aide and observer.

### Passive Observer

When a researcher takes on the role of passive observer, he or she assumes no responsibilities in the classroom setting but rather focuses on data collection. A researcher may spend time in the setting as a passive observer only or may enter the setting as a privileged, active observer and then, on occasion, choose to act as a passive observer by making explicit to the students and teaching colleagues that the “visitor” is present only to “see what’s going on around here.”

According to Wolcott,<sup>8</sup> success as a participant observer depends on the personal characteristics of the researcher, as evidenced by what the researcher is thinking and how the researcher behaves in the field. While in the research setting, you need to conduct yourself in a manner that will allow you to build rapport with research participants; otherwise, you will learn little from the field-based experience. Everyday courtesy and common sense go a long way in helping you establish your fit in the field. When was the last time you were approached by someone (maybe a telemarketer or pollster) and asked for a “few minutes of your time” (which, of course, turned into many minutes of your time!)? Was the person pleasant, patient, and genuinely interested in what you had to say? Or was the person pushy, inconsiderate, and relatively uninterested in what you had to say? Were you tempted to hang up or walk away? When you work as a researcher, you need to be accepted into the research setting as a person who can be trusted.

### Guidelines for Participant Observation

Some guidelines in certain areas of social behavior encourage researchers to think about how they carry themselves in the participant observation experience. We discuss these guidelines in the following subsections.

**Gaining Entry and Maintaining Rapport.** During the early stages of the ethnographic research process, you will negotiate your entry into the research setting. In educational research, you will most likely make arrangements with key players in the setting, such as teachers, principals, and superintendents. You will need to describe clearly to these educators what you are planning to do, what kinds of time constraints will be placed on them, how the research will add value to the educational process, and other important details. Furthermore, you will need to maintain a good working rapport with the people in the setting. Be considerate of others and thoughtful about how you are perceived. If in doubt, ask for feedback from a highly trusted person at the research setting.

**Reciprocity.** Reciprocity in the ethnographic study of education can take many forms. As the researcher, you may be asked by teachers to assist with classroom tasks. Because of your connection to a university, you may be asked to provide some kind of curriculum resource or access to teaching materials. You may even be asked to pay for informants’ time for interviews if such activities require time beyond informants’ contracted hours (i.e., the regular workday). It is best to address these matters during your initial request for access to the setting. Unless you have a large, funded research study, it is unlikely that you will be in a position to pay teachers for their time. Reciprocity for educational ethnographic researchers more commonly takes the form of a willingness to share personal information and professional courtesy. Participants who are going to spend considerable time with you want to know something about who you are as a person. They may also look to you as an educational expert—after all, you are probably working at the university on an advanced degree, so you must know something about teaching and learning! As you negotiate your degree of participation in the setting, be sure to set your boundaries about what you are willing and able (i.e., qualified) to do.

**A Tolerance for Ambiguity.** Fieldwork does not always (or perhaps ever) proceed at the speed or intensity we may want it to. We may enter the field with a naïve view that something exciting will be occurring at every moment and it will be related directly to what we are investigating. The reality is, many times you will find yourself frustrated with

<sup>8</sup> *The Art of Fieldwork* (p. 90), by H. F. Wolcott, 1995, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

the life of an ethnographic researcher. Rather than offering perfect examples of interesting, relevant behavior, most episodes you observe are likely to be ambiguous in meaning. You must learn patience, if you are not already blessed with this trait.

**Personal Determination Coupled with Faith in Oneself.** Wolcott<sup>9</sup> offered ethnographic researchers this valuable advice: “Self-doubt must be held in check so that you can go about your business of conducting research, even when you may not be sure what that entails.” At some time during your fieldwork, you may experience what is commonly termed culture shock—that is, you will encounter an unexpected set of events that challenge everything you assumed about your research setting and the participants. This situation may be both exciting and frightening. If you find yourself in this kind of situation, concentrate on simply writing down what you are seeing, hearing, experiencing, and feeling. You will inevitably make sense of it over time. Have faith in what you are doing, and hang in there!

**Letting Go of Control.** Just as we need to tolerate ambiguity, ethnographic researchers need to be able to let go of control. Fieldwork can be challenging and stressful, especially when our future academic lives (e.g., theses, dissertations, contracts, grades) rest on the outcome of our work. In all likelihood, we have entered the field with an approved research plan and feel in control of the situation. However, ethnographic researchers must be prepared to relinquish control of the research time line and agenda to take advantage of the emergent nature of the ethnographic research process. For example, you should be prepared to abandon your plans to talk to a participant at a certain time and place. Unanticipated events will occur, and you need to be willing to go with the flow. Wonderful things can happen when you let go of control!

## Field Notes

Field notes are gathered, recorded, and compiled on-site during the course of a study. For an ethnographic researcher, field notes provide a record of the researcher’s understandings of the lives, people, and events that are the focus of the research. In all likelihood, you will embark on a research

journey that thrusts you into an educational setting, and you will spend considerable time and energy trying to understand what is going on. A critical component of this research journey will be the data you collect as a trained observer. You will need to capture your experiences in a way that will enable you eventually to craft a narrative about those experiences. Your primary tool is your field notes. Emerson and colleagues provide several insights into the use and nature of field notes in ethnographic research:

- (1) What is observed and ultimately treated as “data” or “findings” is inseparable from the observational process.
- (2) In writing field notes, the field researcher should give special attention to the indigenous meanings and concerns of the people studied.
- (3) Contemporaneously written field notes are an essential grounding and resource for writing broader, more coherent accounts of others’ lives and concerns.
- (4) Such field notes should detail the social and interactional processes that make up people’s everyday lives and activities.<sup>10</sup>

In the past, the craft of recording field notes was learned in a constructivist graduate school environment. In other words, students learned how to write field notes through folklore and on-the-job training; little in the literature helped them prepare for entering the research setting with trusty notebook and pencil in hand. The literature now has some helpful guidelines that suggest ways to record field notes and the process to use to move from writing scribbles on a table napkin to writing cohesive narratives that can ultimately find their way into the ethnographic research account.

We begin with an example of how *not* to record field notes. During his studies at the University of Oregon, one of the authors (Geoff Mills) took a class entitled Ethnographic Research in Education and was required to conduct a beginning ethnography of something that was “culturally different” for him. As an Australian studying in the United States, Geoff had a number of opportunities to study a culturally different phenomenon while having fun with the project. He chose to study a sorority. As part of this study, he participated in

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes* (2nd Ed., p. 11), by R. M. Emerson, R. I. Fretz, and L. L. Shaw, 2011, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

one of the regular ceremonies that was part of the sorority members' lives: a formal dinner held each Monday night at which members were required to wear dresses and male guests were expected to wear a jacket and tie. During the course of the dinner, Geoff frequently excused himself to visit the restroom, stopping along the way to take out his notebook so he could record quotes and reconstruct events as they were happening—trying to capture in great detail all that he was observing. Of course, the irony in this strategy was that he was missing a great deal of the dinner by removing himself from the setting. The ridiculousness of the situation became evident when a dinner host asked him if he was feeling well or if the meal was to his satisfaction. After all, why did he keep leaving the dinner table? The message for ethnographic researchers who use field notes as part of their data collection efforts is clear: You cannot record everything that is happening during an observation, nor should you try to.

### Guidelines for Recording Field Notes

Some general guidelines should help you combat the naïvety exhibited by Geoff in the preceding example. You should write your field notes as soon as possible after the observational episode. You will find that you rely heavily on the mental notes, or *headnotes*, that you have made during the day, and you should record your thoughts while they are fresh in your mind.

Depending on the setting you are researching and the degree of participation you are engaged in, the detail you record in your field notes will vary considerably. You may find by the end of the day that you have a pocket full of scrap paper with jottings from the day to augment your more detailed notes. Sometimes these jottings will capture keywords and phrases without a whole lot more to explain them. It is a good habit to let research participants know that you will be scribbling things down in your notepad; soon, they will become accustomed to your writing, and it will not cause a distraction. Your jottings will serve as mnemonic devices to help you reconstruct the events of the day. In short, when combined with your headnotes, these jottings can be a crucial aid in reconstructing and writing your observations.

Your jottings and expanded field notes are for your own use, so you needn't worry about editorial

concerns or journalistic conventions. They are not intended to be polished text. Your goal in recording field notes should be to describe, not analyze or interpret. It is helpful to think of field notes as a way to capture a slice of life while acknowledging that all descriptions are selective because they have been written by a researcher trying to capture it all. Once you accept that the purpose is to describe and that through your descriptions will come understandings, you can easily focus on the task of creating field notes without concerns for style and audience.

Sometimes beginning researchers are troubled by how to begin summarizing their field notes for the day. A simple approach is to trace what you did during the day and to organize the notes in chronological order. That is, start at the beginning and finish at the end of the day. You should avoid the temptation to re-create the dialogue. Use quotation marks only when the words were taken down at the time of the observation; anything else should be paraphrased. Although a recording device is appropriate for structured ethnographic interviews, in your day-to-day observations you should stick with the convention of recording the quote on the spot or paraphrasing after the event.

Whether taken in the actual setting or recorded as soon as possible after leaving the setting, field notes describe as accurately as possible and as comprehensively as possible all relevant aspects of the situation observed. They include what was observed and the observer's reactions. What was observed represents the who, what, where, and when portion of the field notes. To appreciate the enormity of the task, imagine yourself trying to describe, in writing, in excruciating detail, even one of your current research class meetings. What was the physical setting like? What did it look like? Who was present? What did they look like? How did they act? What about your instructor? How did he or she look and act? What was said? What interactions took place? The task appears even more awesome when you consider that descriptions must be very specific. Patton<sup>11</sup> provided several good examples that clearly illustrate the difference between "vague and overgeneralized notes" and "detailed and concrete notes." One of them is presented below:

<sup>11</sup> *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd ed., pp. 240–241), by M. Q. Patton, 1990, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

*Vague and overgeneralized notes:* The next student who came in to take the test was very poorly dressed.

*Detailed and concrete notes:* The next student who came into the room was wearing clothes quite different from the three students who'd been in previously. The three previous students looked like they'd been groomed before they came to the test. Their hair was combed, their clothes were clean and pressed, the colors of their clothes matched, and their clothes were in good condition. This new student had on pants that were soiled with a hole or tear in one knee and a threadbare seat. The flannel shirt was wrinkled with one tail tucked into the pants and the other tail hanging out. Hair was disheveled and the boy's hands looked like he'd been playing in the engine of a car.

What constitutes being "very poorly dressed" may vary from observer to observer, but the detailed description speaks for itself, and most people who read it will have a similar mental picture of what the boy looked like.

In addition to describing what was seen and heard, the observer also records personal reactions in reflective field notes. These notes include interpretations and other subjective thoughts and feelings, but they are clearly differentiated from the more objective, descriptive field notes; typically they are identified with a special code (e.g., PC for personal comment or OC for observer's comments). In these notes, the observer is free to express any thoughts regarding how things are going, where things are going, and what may be concluded. Reflective field notes may include statements such as the following:

PC I have the feeling that tension among faculty members has been growing for some time.

PC I think Mr. Haddit has been egging on other faculty members.

PC I'm finding it hard to be objective because Mr. Hardnozed is rather abrasive.

PC I think the transition would have been smoother if key faculty members had been informed and involved in the process.

Such insights add a significant dimension to the observations and thus contribute to producing a rich description, which is the objective of ethnographic research.

## Observing and Recording Everything You Possibly Can

At the start of an observation, researchers begin with a broad sweep of the setting and gradually narrow focus to get a clearer sense of what is most pressing. Engaging in an effort to record everything will quickly attune you to the topics and behaviors that most interest you. You can also decide on your strategies for recording observations. You may decide to record verbatim conversations, make maps and illustrations, take photographs, make video or audio recordings, or even furiously write notes. Recording observations is a very idiosyncratic activity, so try to maintain a running record of what is happening in a format that will be most helpful for you. For example, in his ethnographic research study of a school district attempting multiple change efforts,<sup>12</sup> Geoff Mills attended the teacher in-service day for the district. Following are some of his field notes from this observation:

8:30 a.m. An announcement is made over the public address system requesting that teachers move into the auditorium and take a seat in preparation for the in-service. As the teachers file into the auditorium, the superintendent plays a song that speaks to his desire to see teachers be role models for their students.

8:41 a.m. The Assistant Superintendent welcomes the teachers to the in-service with the conviction that it is also the "best district with the best teachers." The brief welcome is then followed by the Pledge of Allegiance and the introduction of the new Assistant Superintendent.

8:45 a.m. The Assistant Superintendent introduces the Superintendent as "the Superintendent who cares about kids, cares about teachers, and cares about this district."

The next hour of the in-service was focused on the introduction of new teachers to the district (there were 60 new appointments) and

<sup>12</sup> *Managing and Coping with Multiple Educational Change: A Case Study and Analysis*, by G. E. Mills, 1988, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, Eugene.

the presentation of information about at-risk children becoming a new focus for the district.

10:00 a.m. The Superintendent returns to the lyrics of the song he was playing and suggests that the message from the song may be suitable as the district's charge. He compels the teachers to be the heroes for their students and wishes them a successful school year before closing the in-service.

As you can see from this abbreviated example, there is nothing mystical about field notes. They serve as a record of what a researcher attended to during the course of an observation and help guide subsequent observations and interviews. These notes were taken at the beginning of Geoff's year-long fieldwork in the McKenzie School District, and this initial observation helped him to frame questions that guided his efforts to understand how central office personnel, principals, and teachers manage and cope with multiple innovations.

### Looking for Nothing in Particular; Looking for Bumps and Paradoxes

While working in the field, you should try to see routines in new ways. If you can, try to look with new eyes and approach the scene as if you were an outsider. Wolcott<sup>13</sup> offered helpful advice for teachers conducting observations in classrooms that are so familiar that everything seems ordinary and routine:

Aware of being familiar with classroom routines, an experienced observer might initiate a new set of observations with the strategy that in yet another classroom one simply assumes "business as usual". . . The observer sets a sort of radar, scanning constantly for whatever it is that those in the setting are doing to keep the system operating smoothly.

You should consider the environment you are observing as if it were metaphorically flat or, in other words, with nothing in particular standing out to you. This strategy gives you an opportunity to look for the bumps in the setting. In ethnographic research studies focused in classrooms, these bumps may be unexpected student

<sup>13</sup> *Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation* (p. 162), by H. F. Wolcott, 1994, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

responses to a new curriculum or teaching strategy or an unexpected response to a new classroom management plan, seating arrangement, monitoring strategy, or innovation. For example, a teacher concerned with gender inequity in the classroom may notice that one or two boys seem to be controlling the classroom. Upon noticing this bump, he keeps a tally of the number of times students command his attention by answering or asking questions, and it becomes painfully evident that one or two boys are regularly the focus of attention during a lesson.

Ethnographic researchers should also look for contradictions or paradoxes in their classrooms. Like a bump, a paradox often stands out in an obvious way to the researcher who has taken the time to stand back and look at what is happening in the classroom. Teacher-researchers using ethnographic techniques often comment on the unintended consequences of a particular teaching strategy or a curriculum change that has become evident only when they have had an opportunity to observe the results of their actions. These consequences often present themselves in the form of a paradox—a contradiction in terms. For example, one teacher-researcher had recently incorporated manipulatives (e.g., tiles, blocks, etc.) into her math instruction in a primary classroom. After observing her students, she commented, "I thought that the use of manipulatives in teaching mathematics would also lead to increased cooperation in group work. Instead, what I saw were my kids fighting over who got to use what and not wanting to share."

Figure 14.2, which represents an adaptation of Patton's guidelines, provides a useful summary of fieldwork and field notes in ethnographic research. If you undertake this intimate and open-ended form of research, you may be faced with a set of personal (and perhaps interpersonal) challenges, but you may also find yourself engaged in a meaning-making activity that belies description and that redefines your life as an educational researcher.

An example of ethnographic research appears at the end of this chapter.

#### MyLab Education Self-Check 14.5

MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.4:  
Conducting Ethnographic Research



**FIGURE 14.2 • Summary guidelines for fieldwork and field notes**

1. Be descriptive in taking field notes.
2. Gather a variety of information from different perspectives.
3. Cross-validate and triangulate by gathering different kinds of data (e.g., observations, documents, interviews) and by using multiple methods.
4. Use quotations; represent people in their own terms. Capture their experiences in their own words.
5. Select “key informants” wisely and use them carefully. Draw on the wisdom of their informed perspectives, but keep in mind that their perspectives are limited.
6. Be aware of and sensitive to different stages of fieldwork.
  - a) Build trust and rapport at the beginning. Remember that the observer is also being observed.
  - b) Stay alert and disciplined during the more routine, middle phase of fieldwork.
  - c) Focus on pulling together a useful synthesis as fieldwork draws to a close.
7. Be disciplined and conscientious in taking field notes at all stages of fieldwork.
8. Be as involved as possible in experiencing the situation as fully as possible while maintaining an analytical perspective grounded in the purpose of the fieldwork.
9. Clearly separate description from interpretation and judgment.
10. Include in your field notes and report your own experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Source: From M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, pp. 272–273, copyright © 1990 by Sage Publications, Inc. Adapted by permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

## SUMMARY

### ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH: DEFINITION AND PURPOSE

1. Ethnographic research is the study of the cultural patterns and perspectives of participants in their natural settings.
2. Ethnography produces a picture of a way of life of some identifiable group of people using a process (primarily participant observation) that enables the researcher to discern patterns of behavior in human social activity.
3. Ethnographers describe and interpret culture—the set of attitudes, values, concepts, beliefs, and practices shared by the members of a group.

### THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH PROCESS

4. In ethnographic research, the researcher first identifies the purpose of the research study and frames it as a larger theoretical policy or practical problem. The researcher then decides on the site and the sample for the study, secures permissions and negotiates entry, and begins data collection.
5. The primary data collection techniques in ethnographic research are participant observation, field notes, interviews, and the examination of artifacts such as school policy documents and attendance records.
6. Following analysis of the data, the researcher writes an ethnographic account, which is usually a narrative that captures the social, cultural, and economic themes that emerge from the study.

### KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

7. Ethnographic research is carried out in a natural setting, not a laboratory.
8. It involves intimate, face-to-face interaction with participants.
9. It presents an accurate reflection of participants' perspectives and behaviors.
10. It uses inductive, interactive, and repetitious collection of unstructured data and analytic strategies to build local cultural theories.

11. Data are collected primarily through fieldwork experiences.
12. It typically uses multiple methods for data collection, including conducting interviews and observations and reviewing documents, artifacts, and visual materials.
13. It frames all human behavior and belief within a sociopolitical and historical context.
14. It uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results.
15. It places an emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them.
16. It investigates a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail.
17. It uses data analysis procedures that involve the explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions.
18. It requires that researchers be reflective about their impact on the research site and the cultural group.
19. It offers interpretations of people's actions and behaviors that must be uncovered through an investigation of what people do and their reasons for doing it.
20. It offers a representation of a person's life and behavior that is built on points of understanding and misunderstanding that occur between researcher and participant.
21. Ethnographic descriptions are necessarily partial, bound by what can be handled within a certain time, under specific circumstances, and from a particular perspective.

### TYPES OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

22. A critical ethnography is a highly politicized form of ethnography written by a researcher in order to advocate against inequalities and domination of particular groups that exist in society.
23. A realist ethnography is written with an objective style and using common categories (e.g., "family life") for cultural description, analysis, and interpretation.
24. An ethnographic case study focuses on describing the activities of a specific group and the shared patterns of behavior the group develops over time.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

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- 25.** A researcher who is a genuine participant in the activity under study is called a participant observer. The participant observer is fully immersed in the research setting as a way to get close to those studied and thus understand what their experiences and activities mean to them.
- 26.** A participant observer can be an active participant observer; a privileged, active observer; or a passive observer.
- 27.** Field notes are the written records of participant observers.
- 28.** Field notes are characterized by headnotes and jottings. The observer records literal, objective descriptions and personal reactions, generally referred to as reflective field notes.
- 29.** Ethnographic researchers try to look with new eyes and approach the scene as if they were outsiders. Ethnographic researchers also look for contradictions or paradoxes that stand out.

### Preparing Preservice Teachers in a Diverse World

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**ABSTRACT** This study was designed to develop more effective ways to address culture and cultural differences in the preparation of preservice teachers. Its purpose was to provide a more adequate preparation for working in high-need schools by assisting educators in the development of “habits of mind” that incorporate an understanding and valuing of students’ cultures and a recognition of the need to consider those cultures in teaching practices. This paper reports data from the second year of a five-year study that examined the experience of six preservice teachers. The data indicate that using ethnography as an observational tool helps preservice teachers become more aware of cultural differences.

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- (01) The teaching force in the United States is becoming increasingly White during a time when the student population is becoming increasingly diverse. The percentage of preservice teachers of diverse races ranges from 7% to 68% per state while the national percentage of White teachers remains over 90% (Hodgkinson, 2002). Because of the disparities between the backgrounds of teachers and those of students, multicultural education in schools is essential because the “classroom is a meeting ground of cultures where the worlds of the students meet the worldview of schools and teachers” (Cumrot, 2002, p. 14). The meeting of cultures in schools, however, can result in a cultural clash when the culture of students is different from that of the teacher. Since the way that teachers address cultural differences can influence student learning, it is imperative that preservice teachers learn to become culturally responsive to students from diverse backgrounds (Garcia & Willis, 2001).
- (02) Teachers need to become culturally responsive whether the teachers themselves are White or from other cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2000). Over the course of their careers, teachers can expect to teach students who come from dozens of different cultural groups, so it is unrealistic to expect teachers to have a deep understanding of all of the cultures that are represented in their classrooms (Nieto, 2002). Instead, teachers need to learn new ways of thinking about cultural differences, and this learning should begin in teacher preparation programs. According to Darling-Hammond and Garcia-Lopez (2002), “it is impossible to prepare tomorrow’s teachers to succeed with all of the students they will meet without exploring how students’ learning experiences are influenced by their home languages, cultures, and contexts; the realities of race and class privilege in the United States; the ongoing manifestations of institutional racism within the educational system; and the many factors that shape students’ opportunities to learn within individual classrooms” (p. 9).
- (03) Past efforts at preparing future teachers to become culturally responsive through traditional multicultural courses have shown mixed results. Some researchers have indicated that preservice teachers in multicultural courses had improved racial attitudes (Delany-Barmann & Minner, 1997; Ross &

Smith, 1992), while others reported few or even negative changes (Bollin & Finkel, 1995; Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Haberman & Post, 1990; McDiarmid & Price, 1993; Zeichner et al., 1998). On the whole, multicultural courses have tended to reinforce the idea of “difference blindness,” which suggests that a neutral image of students promotes equality (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Recent research, however, has indicated that teachers who believe that they are “color blind” and treat all students equally, actually privilege mainstream students in subtle but important ways (Lewis, 2001; Reeves, 2004).

Because preservice coursework in multicultural education has not made enough of an impact on future teachers, teacher educators have recently been working to redefine multicultural education (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Vavrus, 2002). In an outline of a new curriculum for multicultural education, Villegas and Lucas (2002) argue that preservice teachers need to become socio-culturally conscious. In order for that to occur, some researchers believe that White preservice teachers need to come to an understanding of their own White culture and that they should examine their identity in relation to other cultures (Johnson, 2002; Howard, 1999; Tatum, 1994). This change in directions has shown promise. Studies conducted by Schmidt (1998) and Xu (2001) indicated that asking teachers and preservice teachers to examine their own cultural beliefs and compare them with the beliefs of someone outside their cultural group helps them become more aware of cultural differences. (04)

Studies for preparing future teachers to become culturally responsive have not previously taken into account the observational tools ethnographers use to learn about new cultures. Ethnography is sometimes discounted in educational circles because it is traditionally a long-term, labor-intensive activity. However, some ethnographers believe that ethnographic practices can be used in short-term projects (Handwerker, 2001) since ethnography is “a way of seeing” the community and the cultures of students’ classrooms (Wolcott, 1999). For example, Moll and Gonzalez (1994) used ethnography to help practicing teachers learn about the funds of knowledge of families of their students. Other studies indicate that student teachers and practicing teachers can become ethnographers in order to learn about their students (Dixon, Frank, & Green, 1999; Frank, 1999; Frank & Uy, 2004). These studies influenced our work as we developed a project that would help our preservice teachers become culturally responsive teachers. (05)

### ***Beyond Awareness Project***

The Beyond Awareness Project was a five-year program designed to move preservice teachers from being aware of cultural differences to the development of “habits of mind” that incorporate an understanding and valuing of students’ cultures and recognition of the need to consider those cultures in teaching practices. As we developed the program, we decided to implement an ethnography project for preservice teachers thinking that ethnography would help preservice teachers become aware of the cultural complexities of the school communities where they would student teach. The goals of the ethnography were to promote the constructivist dispositions necessary to work with diverse populations and to move beyond awareness of other cultures to a real sensitivity toward differences. During the ethnography project, we repeatedly discussed the numerous non-visible types of diversity such as gender issues, religious diversity, and socioeconomic (SES) influences to bring about an awareness of the complexities of the populations that would constitute the future classrooms of preservice teachers. (06)

The purpose of the study was to describe the impact of an ethnography project (the Beyond Awareness Project) on preservice teachers’ awareness of the cultural complexities of the schools and communities in which they student-teach.

### ***Method***

Before and during the ethnography the preservice teachers were instructed how to conduct ethnographic research. This process was based on Spradley’s (07)

book (1980) *Participant Observation*. During the fall semester, an anthropologist, Rob, a literacy educator, Susan, and an on-site teacher, JoNancy, instructed the preservice teachers in the steps of ethnography. The steps in the ethnographic process included learning about ethnography, conducting participation observation, making descriptive observations, analyzing the data, and writing a report.

- (08) Every two weeks the preservice teachers held information sharing discussions with Rob, Susan, and JoNancy. During these sessions, the steps of ethnography were discussed and modeled. During the yearlong project, Susan also completed an ethnography and used her work to illustrate the ethnographic process. Before beginning their projects, however, the preservice teachers practiced their observation skills in a school setting. They completed walks around the neighborhood and the school, took a school bus ride, made observations in their schools, and wrote reflections. The goal of pre-ethnography activities was to increase the preservice teachers' confidence in ethnographic tools.
- (09) After the preservice teachers grew comfortable with their role as observer and were adept at taking field notes, they formed groups to choose a community site for the ethnography. Community sites were chosen with the help of an advisory group composed of community members, teachers, and administrators. The preservice teachers were encouraged to make at least 10 visits to their site, first observing and taking field notes and then becoming participant observers.
- (10) During the data-gathering period, the preservice teachers continued to receive instruction on ethnographic research. The project was designed with the assumption that to learn to conduct ethnographic research, it is necessary for individuals to develop into a researcher while simultaneously grasping how the process evolves. The preservice teachers took field notes and wrote reflections throughout the year and discussed them every week in class. Upon completion of the fieldwork, the preservice teachers wrote a final paper and prepared presentations for their classmates and for a state reading conference.

### **Participants**

- (11) The participants of this study were enrolled in an elementary education program at a large Midwestern university. The group included 28 preservice teachers, 26 females and 2 males. Of the participants, 25 were of European American background and one was Hispanic. All of the participants attended a Professional Development School (PDS) that was located in a suburb of a metropolitan center. The PDS was a partnership between the university and a school district that has a large number of students from diverse backgrounds. During the PDS year, the preservice teachers took courses from university faculty on site, and they also spent two or three days each week in schools.

### **Data Sources**

- (12) Over the course of this five-year project, an ethnographically informed approach to data collection was used (Lecompte & Priessle, 1993). The first year of the project was a pilot year. We collected and analyzed data and learned how to tailor the project to better serve the preservice teachers (see Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler, & Stallworth, in press). Data from the second year of the study were collected on multiple levels. Data sources included 1) neighborhood observations, 2) reflections of a school bus ride, 3) observations of school sites, 4) observational field notes and reflections of community sites, 5) interviews of six preservice teachers during the project, 6) student papers describing ways to address cultural issues in classrooms, and 7) final ethnographic papers. The data from the second year of the project will be described in this paper.

Ethnographically informed data collection strategies included observations (and field notes) of neighborhoods, school sites, and community sites; reflections of a school bus ride; interviews with six preservice teachers; analysis of student papers addressing cultural issues in classrooms; and final ethnographic papers.

## Data Analysis

All twenty-eight of the preservice teachers were participants in the study. However, after a preliminary analysis of the neighborhood observation and school bus ride, a sub-group of six students were chosen to be interviewed. This group was chosen as representative of the larger group of preservice teachers and was viewed as a variation of the concept of “key informants” (Lecompte & Preissle, 1993). While they did not have “specialized knowledge” that is often attributed to individuals who are members of the community where research was conducted, as members of the community of preservice teachers, they did provide researchers access to more in depth information about issues of diversity (Lecompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 166). The interviews spanned the year and included three formal interviews and five informal interviews.

The data from these participants were separated from the larger data set. Interviews were transcribed and copies of all of the data were given to the research team. At bi-monthly meetings, the researchers discussed their overall perceptions of the data. Discussions led to the formulation of four non-overlapping themes indicative of patterns that surfaced throughout the review of the data. In each of the four areas, sample comments were selected to illustrate the pattern of responses. The themes were then reformulated into questions that framed the next stages of data analysis. The questions were:

1. How do participants view themselves as cultural beings?
2. How do participants view issues of diversity?
3. In what ways do participants “step into the community,” or actually become a participant observer?
4. How do the participants use the experiences they had in the ethnography project to represent themselves as an emerging teacher?

The researchers used these questions to delve back into the data and to analyze it more thoroughly. The multiple data sources were used as triangulation for validity and reliability purposes (Yin, 1994). Based on this analysis, codes were developed by each of the four researchers independently, using a system of “open coding,” and then the research team met, compared, and refined these initial codes to arrive at consensus (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using these revised codes, the researchers re-examined the data to ensure theoretical rigor and to ground their analysis in conceptual precision.

## Results

One of the primary goals of this study was to look at ways that preservice teachers view themselves as cultural beings. Since examining one’s own culture is a prerequisite for understanding differences, we were interested in knowing whether our students were able to understand their own privileged position as future teachers in a diverse community. One way we approached the data was to look for ways students were able to confront their assumptions of culture and to look at the ways in which they could be open to new ways of thinking.

### Views of Self as a Cultural Being by Confronting Cultural Assumptions

One of the purposes for asking students to conduct ethnography was to help them sharpen their observation skills and learn about communities before jumping to conclusions. The data indicated that the students in our study had made a variety of assumptions while during their observations.

(13)

Sample selection included all 28 preservice teachers in the study with a sub-group of six “key informants” chosen to be interviewed as representative of the larger group of preservice teachers.

What do we know about these key informants that would lead us to the same conclusion that they are representative of the larger group of preservice teachers?

(14)

Data analysis was conducted by the research team at bimonthly meetings, where they identified four nonoverlapping themes indicative of patterns that surfaced throughout the review of the data. In each of the four areas, sample comments were selected to illustrate the pattern of responses.

(15)

(16)

(17)

One of the activities that illustrated the assumptions students automatically made was during their walk around the neighborhood. As students observed houses, stores, and people, they tended to make unwarranted assumptions. For example, Inez (all names are pseudonyms) observed a school neighborhood that was near a bus station and power lines, so she concluded that the neighborhood was low income. She also assumed that the neighborhood was violent after seeing “neighborhood watch” signs. Inez wrote, “I thought that you don’t need a neighborhood watch unless your area had some violence or vandalism.” Another assumption Inez made about the neighborhood was that it had “many elderly people living in it along with a new crowd that moved there within the last couple of years.” The basis for her assumption was that many houses were older and were neatly kept while other houses looked “run down.” Inez, therefore, used brief snatches of observation to make assumptions and draw conclusions about the community and the people in that community.

- (18) Although the assumptions students made about a community may be benign, other assumptions they made could be potentially damaging to the students they would teach. For example, Taylor recorded, “most bilingual-Hispanic homes are single parent or combined households.” She also wrote, “many teachers have a narrow mind when it comes to diversity.” These comments seem to indicate that Taylor, like many other preservice teachers, tend to over generalize information. The school where Taylor was observing had a large Hispanic population in an area of low-cost houses and apartments where the parents of some of the students from her class were living. Taylor met some of the parents from her class who did not live in traditional families and she heard teachers denigrating these families. From this small sample of information, Taylor concluded that many Hispanics lived in the same situations and that teachers tended to be narrow-minded.
- (19) After reading these comments, we were concerned that the ethnographic process was leading students to use small bits of observations and making assumptions about people based on limited information. Therefore, we began examining students’ assumptions in class and holding discussions about ways in which previous beliefs color observations. We also emphasized that ethnography was not intended to have investigators draw conclusions quite as rapidly as our students seemed to do. As we worked with students, we saw rapid growth and understanding.
- (20) By the time students had spent two or three visits at their community sites, they began viewing themselves in a different light. Taylor, who spent her time observing an after-school program, stated, “This project is making me aware of my own culture and that of other students. Before this, I didn’t think of myself as having a culture.” Like many people, Taylor had previously considered herself “just an American.” Lynch and Hanson (2004) have found this lack of cultural understanding to be common among White teachers. They also suggest that not understanding one’s own cultural background is an obstacle to understanding the cultural backgrounds of their students. As the project progressed through the year, the preservice teachers continued to grow in their understanding of themselves as a cultural being.

### ***Issues of Diversity***

- (21) The preservice teachers learned to expand their ideas of diversity through this project. In classroom conversations, they focused on race as the only aspect of diversity. As students visited a variety of community sites, however, they found that diversity can be found in other areas. Bob, for example, stated, “Teachers need to be aware of gender, ethnic, and socio-economic differences.” This statement was a major breakthrough for him; he had described diversity in an earlier class as ethnic heritage.

An example of ways students learned to expand their internal definition of diversity was illustrated by the students who visited an Asian Mexican grocery store. In the store, they found many religious icons for sale. Jodi, who was observing at the store, wrote, "This informed us how important Catholicism is to the Hispanic culture." Another student visited a Hebrew Saturday school. During class discussions, the discussions of religion as a component of diverse cultures helped some of the preservice teachers expand their views of diversity to include issues of religion, gender, and socio-economic status. (22)

Near the end of the project, the preservice teachers wrote about diversity in their final papers. Jodi wrote, "Diversity is far reaching. . . It's not just race/ethnicity. My classroom will be full of children who are diverse and I want to be aware and sensitive of all kinds of diversity (race, gender, academics, economics, etc.) to be an effective teacher." In group discussions of the ideal classroom, Taylor said, "It calls to mind a classroom of different genders, race, religions, cultures, and all kinds of different people; all the things that make people unique." (23)

### ***Becoming a Participant Observer***

The preservice teachers voiced concerns throughout the project about being asked to conduct ethnographies. One of the concerns of the researchers was that the preservice teachers would see the project as one more teaching activity, where they, as student teachers, would find themselves in situations where they were considered an "authority." Instead, students were encouraged to make observations as researchers or ethnographers. We thought that by asking students to position themselves as ethnographers, they would be able to distance themselves from their role as teachers and actually learn about a cultural group. (24)

Most of the students found that it took some time to learn how to observe community sites without making judgments. However, they found that stepping into the role of participant observer helped them look at their students differently. For example, Bob said that observing students on the bus "brought back a lot of memories and reminded me of when I was in school." Bob continued, "I have a better idea of where the students live and what their neighborhoods are like." As Jodi began her ethnography of an Asian Mexican store, she said in her interview, "I began to feel very comfortable in the store, even helping other customers find items." Jodi moved from being an uncomfortable observer to a participant observer. (25)

Although it was difficult for the preservice teachers to "step into the community," time at the site helped them feel comfortable. Other studies support this notion. Kidd, Sanchez, and Thorp (2004) found that having preservice teachers learn about family stories helped them become more culturally aware, and Garmon (2004), in his study of a White preservice teacher, hypothesized that learning about a different culture can be the basis for potential change about views of diversity. In our study, we found that all six of the preservice teachers moved from being mildly afraid in their new surroundings to becoming enthusiastic champions of the people at their site. (26)

### ***Emergence as Teachers***

One of the strongest areas of the ethnography project was the preservice teachers' ability to apply the knowledge of their experiences and learning to future classroom instruction. In every area of the project, students attempted to make sense of the activity through the lens of a teacher. We encouraged this kind of thinking. In the first year of the ethnography project, we asked preservice teachers to think like "researchers." The preservice teachers, however, could see little value in looking at teaching as a researcher and balked (27)

at the entire notion (Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler, & Stallworth, in press). Learning that preservice teachers believed they needed to apply every activity in their methods courses to teaching, we emphasized applications to teaching during the second year of the project.

(28) We found that our preservice teachers were able to apply their experiences to teaching easily. For example, as Jodi spent time in the Asian Mexican grocery store talking with the owners and patrons, she concluded, "The traditions of the Filipino culture we learned will aid us in giving our students the best experience possible, by carrying on some of the traditions in school. This knowledge we have gained will help us to be more culturally sensitive teachers." In this case, Jodi realized that they had little knowledge of the Filipino culture before spending time interacting with people with Filipino heritage. She realized that learning about the culture of their students is one of the prerequisites of becoming a culturally responsive teacher (Gay, 2000).

(29) Our data were replete with such specific examples, and we also found that students were able to generate their own teaching principles about teaching and learning. For example, Inez wrote, "we must connect learning to personal experience for all students to comprehend what's happening." In their final papers, many students used language similar to Inez's by discussing the ways to connect curricula to students' lives, to help students apply their background knowledge, and to differentiate instruction. Some of the practical applications of these principles included learning words in students' native languages, researching authors from the students' culture, having books read in students' native language, posting students' native language alphabet in the classroom if it's not the Roman alphabet, and valuing students' funds of knowledge (e.g., Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Perhaps the most telling comment from the preservice teachers, though, was Jennifer's comment: "I don't want to see them as a group of children; I want to see them as individuals."

### **Discussion**

(30) Analysis of the data indicated three trends. First, while the preservice teachers valued the ethnographically informed work, there was a tension between looking for specifics and using the observations as a way to learn how to see. In other words, the preservice teachers seemed to want to be told specifically what to look for, while the researchers were interested in the preservice teachers opening themselves to the dynamics and interactions of the chosen observational site. While this could be viewed as part of the challenge of the "dual purposes of participant observation" (Spradley, 1980, p. 54), it also suggested how ethnographic work in diverse settings might help faculty in teacher education courses encourage preservice teachers to examine their own views about diversity education. Second, data indicated that all six preservice teachers concluded that as they prepared to pursue teaching jobs in schools, participating in this project had shifted their thinking about diversity. Individuals described how they had moved beyond being aware of the need for dealing with diversity to actually planning strategies for bringing students' communities into their classrooms. This shift from general concern to specific plans suggested that the project impacted these preservice teachers' views about instruction. We hypothesize that the process of learning about people from different backgrounds and becoming personally engaged in their culture was one reason for this change. Third, preservice teachers reported that the writing component of this project was a burden, given the challenges of their methods coursework. We are committed to continuing participant observation in this project; however, as our larger goal is reforming aspects of teacher education, we must be sensitive to how we build this approach into an already full curriculum for preservice teachers.

## Conclusions

(31) Many teacher educators recognize that recruiting and preparing teachers who can be effective to work with preservice teachers from diverse backgrounds is at a crisis level. Haberman (2003) argues that securing and retaining effective teachers is of utmost importance because conditions in education are becoming increasingly more challenging for students in urban centers. Effective urban teachers believe they are focused on their students' learning and development. "They do not stay in teaching because they want to function as educational change agents, community organizers or system reformers" (Haberman, p. 21) but instead they stay for their students. Effective teachers need to continually examine the relationships between students and the curriculum. "Being a critical multicultural educator is as much a philosophy and way of life as it is implementation of quality curriculum" (Page, 2004, p. 8). As teacher educators have learned ways to teach preservice teachers about cultural differences, new ideas for multicultural education have been developed. In keeping with this new movement in moving beyond multicultural education to influencing preservice teachers' habits of mind, we developed the Beyond Awareness Project.

The data from the second year of the study suggest that participant observation and ethnographically informed approaches embedded within teacher preparation courses could be key elements to developing more effective ways to address culture and cultural diversity in teacher education. By having preservice teachers use ethnographically informed methods to learn about the community, they began to interact with perspectives different from their own. From this interaction the six preservice teachers that we studied moved "beyond awareness" of cultural differences to thinking about ways to effectively teach all students in their classrooms—especially those who have been overlooked because of their cultural background. The preservice teachers in our study learned to be problem posers through real life experiences within ethnographic inquiry. They learned to examine more critically the situations they observed and question their beliefs and understandings of the community. (32)

The data from this study suggest that participant observation and ethnographically informed approaches embedded within teacher preparation courses could be key elements in developing more effective ways to address culture and cultural diversity in teacher education. However, this study has taken place in one PDS with preservice teachers who self-selected into the site so cannot be generalizable to other groups. Our findings, however, indicate that an ethnographic approach could have the potential to impact views of diversity and needs to be tested in a larger arena. (33)

Our goal for the future of this project is to take the knowledge gained from this project back to the main campus program with the hope of transforming the methods courses and experiences for a larger number of preservice teachers. We will continue our research in this broader context to progressively refine our approaches to educating preservice teachers about diversity. Such an approach may allow more insights into preservice teachers' "habits of mind" about diversity and that lead to even more effective ways to encourage inclusive and transformative teaching for a wider audience in deeper, more meaningful ways. (34)

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