Defining ethnography

Knowing what it is and knowing what it isn’t

In choosing to open and read this book about ethnography and education it is probably fairly safe to assume that you, the reader, know something about ethnography and education. We, the authors, might assume that you are required to conduct a piece of research which focuses on some aspect of education and that you have decided to consider ethnography as the most appropriate or the most attractive way of doing the research. Alternatively, it could be that you are considering a range of approaches to research including ethnography, or that you are simply curious about ethnography and education and want to find out more. Whatever the reason, we think it is likely that you know something, perhaps in a very general or vague way, not only about what ethnography is, but also about what it is not. It may be that in seeking to identify appropriate research methodology or methods it is important to know what something isn’t as well as what it is.

You probably know something about ethnography for two reasons. First of all because, as Hammersley (1990) said in his book Reading Ethnographic Research, there are now many texts about ethnography which introduce students to how to do it, and there have been many more since Hammersley wrote this in 1990. Second and related to Hammersley’s point, ethnography has become, if not the dominant, then certainly one of the most frequently adopted approaches to educational research in recent years. At the same time, you probably know something about what ethnography isn’t, as in many of the books to which Hammersley refers ethnography is presented as an alternative approach to something like survey-based research. Consequently you may have some idea of what can and cannot be achieved by using ethnography.

The issue of what ethnography is and what ethnography isn’t is worth pursuing in these early pages of the book as it relates not only to ethnography as a process, that is, how ethnography is done and the research methods that
it may utilize, but also to the kind of knowledge that ethnography might yield, that is, the product of ethnographic research. Having said this, however, identifying what is and what is not ethnography is not straightforward. As Hammersley (1990) says many definitions of ethnography to emerge in recent years have used the term as a synonym for other broadly qualitative approaches to social research such as case study, life history, participant observation and even for qualitative research itself. In addition, more recently, John Brewer (2000) has drawn attention to a dichotomy between method and methodology in the context of ethnography in which he discusses the difference between the characterization of ethnography as a collection of particular research methods and as a theoretical and philosophical orientation towards research. Moreover, to complicate discussion about what is and what isn’t ethnography even further, we might also add the fact that the term is frequently used both as a noun and a verb. Researchers talk about doing ethnography as an activity and they also talk about ethnographies as a product of their research, and the field of education has been a particularly fertile ground for ethnography and ethnographies over the last 20 years.

The general point to be made from what might be considered to be these somewhat confusing opening remarks, is that although the term ethnography may to some degree be familiar, its definition is not without ambiguity or complexity. The frequency with which the term is now used in educational and other fields of research may have led to, or at least contributed to, some of the ambiguity which surrounds ethnography, both as a noun and as a verb and may also have resulted in the range of research practice that is now characterized as ethnography. In order to take things further and in an attempt to resolve some of these ambiguities it will be useful to examine some of the characteristics of ethnography, to consider what might be achieved in using or doing ethnography and to offer a definition of ethnography which we will use throughout this book.

Characteristics

Useful insight into the characteristics of ethnography can be gained quite simply by reading many of the published ethnographies that exist. Whether you choose to read ethnographies which focus on educational or other issues it is likely that they will share certain characteristics in terms of the methods that have been used to conduct the research upon which they are based, the scope of the study in relation to its size and the range of issues it seeks to address, and the nature of the findings or the knowledge that the ethnography yields. Having speculated that there will be some common characteristics evident in all ethnographies we do not wish to imply that all ethnographies are the same or that adopting these characteristics as a
kind of formula will result in a successful ethnography. Clearly, in reading different ethnographies we soon become aware that each is as individual as the subject matter on which it focuses and that the individuality is in itself a common characteristic of ethnography. However, for the purposes of this discussion we suggest that the principal common characteristics of ethnography are:

1. A focus on a discrete location, event(s) or setting.
2. A concern with the full range of social behaviour within the location, event or setting.
3. The use of a range of different research methods which may combine qualitative and quantitative approaches but where the emphasis is upon understanding social behaviour from inside the discrete location, event or setting.
4. An emphasis on data and analysis which moves from detailed description to the identification of concepts and theories which are grounded in the data collected within the location, event or setting.
5. An emphasis on rigorous or thorough research, where the complexities of the discrete event, location or setting are of greater importance than overarching trends or generalizations.

Having identified these five characteristics, there remains considerable latitude in respect of what constitutes ethnography. While the characteristics are not intended to act as a straitjacket, we do feel that they offer important signals not only as to what constitutes ethnography but also as to what distinguishes it from other forms of research. However, it may be argued that the characteristics are not exclusive to ethnography as they may be applied to other forms of research. This may be the case. Consequently, to add more detail to this attempt to identify and define ethnography it will be useful to consider what researchers expect to achieve by engaging in ethnography and producing ethnographies.

What ethnography achieves

To some extent the identification of common characteristics has already indicated what can be achieved by ethnography. Moreover, as we have already said, given that every ethnography is unique, the precise nature of what may be achieved will vary, in so far as it will reflect the particular circumstances of the discrete location, event or setting within which it is conducted. Nevertheless, in general terms we would hope that ethnography would achieve the following:

- The collection of detailed data, which would facilitate careful analysis of the kind outlined in Chapter 4.
A comprehensive and contextualized description of the social action within the location, event or setting. Such descriptions are often described as rich, or thick (Geertz 1973).

The portrayal of an insider’s perspective, in which the meaning of the social action for the actors themselves is paramount and takes precedence over, but does not ignore, that of the researcher.

The construction of an account of the discrete location, event or setting which is grounded in the collected data and which incorporates a conceptual framework that facilitates understanding of social action at both an empirical and theoretical level.

In addition there may be many other things that ethnography achieves concerning, for example, its impact in terms of policy, practice and change or in relation to individual actor’s lives or roles within the specific setting. Again, many of these outcomes will be specific to the particular ethnography and therefore difficult to identify in this rather abstract way. Our intention here has been to identify the general features relating to the nature of the outcome of ethnography and what it may achieve in respect of knowledge and understanding of the social world.

Method and methodology

In identifying common characteristics and outcomes we may be seen to relate broadly to what Brewer (2000) refers to as ethnography as method and ethnography as methodology. While we have already said that ethnography’s relevance to both of these may contribute to the ambiguity and lack of clarity on what it is in any absolute sense, we would argue that the difference between method and methodology is important not just for ethnography but for research more generally. Moreover, we would also argue that a more complete understanding of ethnography can be achieved only if it is considered in relation to both method and methodology. Brewer outlines the generally accepted view that method refers to the tools that a researcher might use to gather data, for example, questionnaires, interviews, participant observation and so on, and to the techniques by which the collected data are analysed, for example, close reading of text, content analysis, statistical inference and computer aided qualitative data analysis. In both cases, method refers to the rules and procedures that are followed to conduct empirical research consequently as Brewer (2000: 2) states: ‘People are not free to design their questionnaire, do their observation or work out correlation coefficients any old way they want; or, at least not if they want their research to be seen as reliable’. In this way, methods can be seen to relate to the tool bag from which the researcher selects the most appropriate instrument with which to gather data and subsequently to analyse those
data. Methods also act, therefore, to limit and constrain the data collection process, in the same way that the tools of a plumber or carpenter restrict the work that he or she can do (Pole and Lampard 2002). The common characteristics of ethnography which we identified above may be seen, in general terms, to relate to this notion of method, as these are what shape, limit and define not only what ethnography can do but also how it can be done.

With regard to methodology, Brewer identifies this as ‘the broad theoretical and philosophical framework into which these procedural rules fit’ (2000: 2). By this he refers to issues of epistemology and the nature of the knowledge that ethnography yields. As we have already said, this equates to our notion of what ethnography can achieve, or perhaps more usefully what we might regard as the outcomes of ethnography. In fairly common sense terms this relates to the accounts of social life studied within the discrete location or setting upon which the ethnography has focused. Again, in equally general and common sense terms we can see from ethnography’s concern with everyday events and its emphasis on meaning and action that the accounts that it yields are usually insiders’ accounts. That is, they are concerned not with presenting a distanced, scientific and objective account of the social world, but with an account that recognizes the subjective reality of the experiences of those people who constitute and construct the social world. In using the term subjective in this context we do not wish to infer that ethnography can be reduced to mere opinion, dogma or journalism. Our intention is to place ethnography within a theoretical tradition which places a primacy on the importance of situated meaning and contextualized experience as the basis for explaining and understanding social behaviour. Equally, this does not eschew the importance of structure in ethnographic accounts of social action. The concern with contextualized meaning ensures that the structures which shape, limit and in some cases define social action are central to the explanation and understanding of that action.

Similar accounts of the general theoretical and philosophical orientation of ethnography can be found in most of the texts on ethnography to emerge over the past 20 years. While each gives its own slightly different interpretation of the basic epistemological tenets that can be seen to underpin ethnography, the common theme to emerge is that ethnography is located within the approach of naturalism. For example, O’Connell-Davidson and Layder (1994) state that contemporary ethnography’s concern to study people in their natural environments rather than in situations which have been artificially created, as with laboratory or experimentally based research, means that it ‘belongs to a tradition of “naturalism” which centralizes the importance of understanding the meanings and cultural practices of people from within the everyday settings in which they take place’ (1994: 165).

They go on to locate this approach within the tradition of Verstehen and interpretative analysis. A decade before this, Hammersley and Atkinson
(1983), in what has been one of the most influential and widely read texts in this field, made largely the same point. They drew on Matza’s (1969) words to characterize naturalism as ‘the philosophical view that remains true to the nature of the phenomenon under study’ (1969: 5). This emphasis on naturalism has embedded within it the assumption that human beings, social behaviour and social phenomena are fundamentally different from inanimate physical phenomena in that they are socially shaped and constructed by social actors, human beings rather than the forces of nature. Brewer (2000) locates naturalism with nineteenth century German philosophy of the Geisteswissenschaften tradition, within which human beings are seen to be the creators of their own social worlds rather than mere respondents to external stimuli. However, it is here that confusion can sometimes arise.

Although we locate ethnography within the general approach of naturalism it is not concerned with naturalistic research method. Rather it eschews this as anathema to the epistemological and ontological foundations of ethnography. In an attempt to clarify what is a commonly confused situation, therefore, we can state that naturalism is concerned with the setting and location within which social action is created and experienced. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) state, it draws on sociological and philosophical approaches of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, linguistic philosophy and ethnomethodology. In sharp contrast naturalistic approaches to research assume that social phenomena, rather like inanimate objects, may be researched by scientific, positivistic methods where concern is more with enumeration, generalization and notions of external, objective realities of the phenomena, rather than its significance and meaning to those involved in its creation.

From this discussion of theoretical and philosophical orientation it is not difficult to identify clear links between methods and methodology in the sense that Brewer (2000) defined them. Where methods are the tools used for data collection and methodology refers to the general theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the research, then the link exists in the capacity of the method to yield data which will facilitate analysis within a methodology. In this case, that of naturalism. The intention to collect data from ‘real life’ situations which are as far as possible undistorted by the researcher, in a way which conveys the subjective reality of the interior world of the participants, leads to the identification of particular methods. In short those which do not seek to create artificial situations or require those at the focus of the research to change their behaviour in any significant way. Traditionally, these methods included different forms of observation and participant observation, conversation and listening techniques together with, in some instances written sources of data including a wide range of documents. More recently, technological advances have widened the scope of methods at the disposal of the ethnographer to include photography,
video and other visual media. More recently still and continuing to emerge are a range of tools described as virtual methods (Hine 2000) where the internet and other forms of information technology are utilized.

While we will consider specific methods in detail later in the book, the intention here is not only to establish in broad terms the kinds of research tools which may be seen to contribute to a definition of ethnography, but also to demonstrate that important link between method and methodology. Having located ethnography in relation to a particular methodological orientation and subsequently identified particular methods as commensurate with that methodology, the temptation is to suggest a somewhat neat and tidy relationship between the two and in doing so, to have placed limits on the kinds of method open to the ethnographer. In general terms we may be seen to have allied ethnography very firmly to qualitative methods. We would defend this alliance as one which is epistemologically justifiable, as in order for ethnography to have specific meaning we believe it requires some kind of limits or boundaries which distinguish it from other approaches to research, and the methods identified make an important contribution to establishing such boundaries. However, identifying some methods as appropriate by implication means that others are inappropriate. It is here that things become more complex, as to categorically and universally rule some methods out is difficult and may be against the scope of the methodological orientation of ethnography.

While ‘pure’ forms of ethnography may rely primarily on methods of participant observation and other methods in which there is direct contact between researchers and researched within the specified setting, more inclusive forms have also embraced some quantitative methods based on questionnaire and survey research. If one takes this more inclusive approach, then the inclusion exists not merely with the methods deployed but also with the methodology. In simple terms, while qualitative methods of research may be seen to equate to methodologies based on an epistemological tradition of interpretivism, more quantitative methods may be seen in broad terms to be allied to positivist traditions where concern rests primarily with the external realities of any given social situation, rather than its meaning to and experience by social actors. If a more inclusive approach to ethnography becomes a method and methodology of ‘anything goes’ and at the same time there is seen to exist this over-simple and indisputable division between on the one hand, positivism and its methods and on the other interpretivism and its methods, then we fear that any claims that ethnography may have to a distinctive approach to social research would be seriously challenged. We are not advocating such an approach.
Inclusive ethnography

In our inclusive characterization of ethnography we wish to argue a case for pluralism of method but not for methodological pluralism. In doing this we wish to challenge some of the over-simple dichotomies that are sometimes seen to characterize the relationship between particular methods and methodologies. For example, quantitative methods are almost invariably allied to positivism while qualitative approaches are seen, often without question, to belong to a methodology based on epistemological tenets of verstehen and interpretivism. As bold generalizations these assertions may be broadly acceptable. However, some recent writing in this area has questioned this one dimensional link between methods and methodology. For example an interpretation of Hammersley’s (1995) article, ‘Who’s afraid of positivism’, may suggest that ethnography and qualitative method may itself be allied to a positivist quest of capturing data and seeking to advance the truth about social phenomena based on that captured data. In this way, the objectives and methodology of qualitative and quantitative research methods have much in common. Similarly, Ward-Schofield (1993) has advocated methods to increase the generalizability of qualitative research, while Jayaratne (1993) advocates the greater use of quantitative methods within a feminist paradigm, traditionally associated with qualitative methods, to ‘promote feminist theory and goals and to document individual and institutional sexism’ (1993: 110). In a similar vein, Bryman (1988) among others has advocated the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and has rejected charges that such approaches result in an epistemological confusion, to the extent that findings based on combined approaches become a meaningless mixture of method and methodology. The significance of these pieces, which may be seen as criticisms of traditional dichotomized views of research method and methodology, is that they encourage us to think creatively in ways which challenge established boundaries of method and methodology.

In suggesting a more inclusive approach to ethnographic method it is important to keep in mind the characteristics of and the reasons why it would be chosen in preference to others. Here it is instructive to recall the characteristics of ethnography and what it is intended to achieve. In short, this refers to the privileging of a detailed insider’s view over that of the outsider and a concern for the significance and meaning of social action for the actors upon whom the research is focused. While this remains the philosophical principle of ethnography and is, therefore, in essence its *raison d’être*, then the kind of inclusive ethnography which we have suggested above is possible. Consequently, we arrive at a position where ethnography, as a process, may make use of a range of different methods as long as they are utilized within the context of the specific methodological and epistemological tenets of ethnography, as product. We would argue, therefore, that it
is possible to use quantitative methods alongside qualitative methods in the context of ethnography as long as the quantitative methods adhere to the epistemological principles of naturalism, in seeking to gather data with as little disturbance to the natural, everyday rhythms of the location as possible. In addition, at the stage of analysis, we would argue that the principal role of quantitative data would be in providing a picture of the wider context within which the specific location and the social action therein take place.

**Is there an ethnographic method?**

Our assertion that ethnography may make legitimate use of qualitative and quantitative methods as part of what we have described as an inclusive approach to research leads us to pose the question, is there an ethnographic method? Similar questions have been posed about case study (Hammersley 1992b; Bassey 1999; Burgess 2000), where the concern has been to identify what it is that makes case study distinctive, either as an approach to research or as a specific research method. Given the not infrequent use of the term case study as a synonym for ethnography, many of the issues raised in these debates will be relevant to our question about a specific ethnographic method. Researchers’ claims to be ‘doing ethnography’ or ‘using ethnographic methods’ which are frequently made in conference presentations and research seminars, would seem to imply that there is an ethnographic method that can be readily identified and deployed. Their accounts of their research usually reveal the use of a range of qualitative approaches to data collection. From this we may conclude that qualitative method in general is ethnography and that ethnography is qualitative method. However, we have already seen that our inclusive ethnography also ‘permits’ the use of quantitative methods. This would seem to complicate matters, as, clearly, ethnographic method is not now solely qualitative method.

Perhaps the confusion can be resolved, at least to some degree, with reference to Brewer’s (2000) discussion of ‘big ethnography’ and ‘little ethnography’, where the former refers to qualitative method as a whole and the latter restricts it to field research. Our reading of Brewer’s (2000) distinction is that ‘big’ ethnography refers to the whole enterprise of ethnography which includes methodology as well as method, and in this sense the notion of ‘bigness’ is useful. However, like the accounts of ethnographic research to which we refer in the previous paragraph, it does imply that all qualitative research is ethnography. We would agree with Brewer’s general argument, but would temper it slightly by saying that all qualitative methods have the capacity to be ethnographic methods only if they are deployed within the framework of ethnographic methodology. In addition, the definition of ‘little’ ethnography as fieldwork we also find to be useful, as it places
the researcher and the methods firmly within the discrete location, event or setting in which the ethnography is to be conducted. However, we would take issue with Brewer by drawing a difference between fieldwork and field research. For us, fieldwork would be characterized by methods and methodology in the form of that discussed by Wolcott (1995) in his important book, *The Art of Fieldwork*, where he says:

To me, the essence of fieldwork is revealed in the intent behind it, rather than the label itself . . . fieldwork is a form of enquiry in which one is immersed personally in the ongoing activities of some individual or group for the purposes of research. Fieldwork is characterized by personal involvement to achieve some level of understanding that will be shared with others.

(1995: 66)

While we should not fall into the trap of regarding fieldwork as a synonym for ethnography, the importance of fieldwork to ethnography (Brewer 2000) should not be overlooked. Clearly, the key issues for Wolcott are personal involvement and intent, both of which accord to our earlier attempts to characterize ethnography and which also resonate with Brewer’s (2000) concept of ‘big’ ethnography.

Alongside this notion of fieldwork as a form of personal involvement in the discrete location, stands field research as a less specific approach based on the discrete location, but not exclusively inside it. Consequently, quantitative methods may be seen as contributing to field research but not to fieldwork. On their own, therefore, quantitative methods may contribute to Brewer’s (2000) definition of ‘little’ ethnography, but their lack of engagement with the interior world of the actors within the specific location does not qualify them as ‘big’ ethnography.

To return to our question of whether there is an ethnographic method, these deliberations lead us to adopt a position similar to that of Wolcott (1995) who identifies ‘intent’ as the crucial factor in his definition of fieldwork. Consequently, we would argue that single methods in the sense of research tools do not constitute ethnographic methods per se. Rather, it is their location within the wider methodology of ethnography or what Brewer (2000) defines as ‘big’ ethnography that makes a method ethnographic. As a result, it is feasible to regard both qualitative and some quantitative methods of data collection as having the potential to contribute to ethnographic research. Again, we stress it is methodology which underpins the deployment of the methods, which in turn determines whether or not a method is defined as ethnographic. Consequently, a particular method may be defined as ethnographic in some circumstances and not in others.

In answer to our own question, therefore, we would say that methods cannot be described as ethnographic independently of the methodology which provides the context for them. In addition we would clearly include
quantitative methods as having the potential for ethnographic status. Furthermore, as a logical extension of this point, we would, therefore, argue that the range of methods which may be deployed in an ethnographic study is considerable. However, to reiterate one of our earlier points, ethnography is not an approach based on a philosophy of ‘anything goes’. The importance of methodology over method ensures the maintenance of boundaries which we regard as essential for the definition of ethnography as a distinct approach to research. In short, there can be no meaningful method without methodology.

The roots of ethnography

By this stage in this opening chapter we hope to have conveyed some idea of what ethnography is in relation to its philosophical and theoretical underpinnings and how it is conducted in terms of the kinds of methods upon which it draws. On the basis of this discussion we have suggested an inclusive notion of ethnography which may involve qualitative and quantitative research methods used in tandem or qualitative methods deployed on their own. The crucial thing is the methodological context within which the methods are used, as it is this that adds the ethnography to the method. Our characterization of ethnography is at the same time both specific, in terms of its methodological and epistemological underpinnings, and flexible in terms of the methods upon which it may draw. While for some researchers this may be regarded as a somewhat contradictory position to take, our response would be to encourage them to look at what ethnography attempts to do and at where it attempts to do it. In ethnography’s attempt to understand social action within discrete locations or social collectivities, it needs to be in a position to respond to social action as it unfolds, to make sense of its significance and meaning for the actors who create action and to examine the structures within which it unfolds. In this sense, the extent to which the ethnographer can plan ahead, in anything but fairly general terms is limited. In seeking to be part of the social action in a way that does not influence what happens in any overt sense, the ethnographer is essentially reactive rather than proactive. In order to react in a way which does not affect what is the focus of the ethnography, the researcher needs to be able to blend in, to be accepted by the social actors and to be as flexible as the particular situation demands.

This approach to research, which is now common to and accepted within the study of educational institutions and processes and across the social sciences more generally, has its roots in late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropology. While it can be seen in the work of several of these early social researchers such as Boas, Evans-Pritchard, Haddon, Radcliffe-Brown, Rivers, Seligsman, it is the pioneering work of Malinowski which is
credited as having particular influence on the development of ethnography and in shaping it into the approach which is commonly used by researchers 80 years after his death.

For all of these anthropologists research was something that was conducted in exotic places, far away from their homes. Prior to their expeditions little was known about the people of the north-west coast of North America or of the islands of the Torres Strait. Accounts of life in these lands and others which constituted the British Empire came from missionaries and travelers and as Burgess (1982, 1984) states, were concerned largely with the exotic, the unusual and the untoward, rather than with everyday life. For the anthropologists of the new twentieth century the challenge lay in experiencing, documenting and understanding not just the unusual and the exotic but also the mundane and everyday activities that constituted everyday life for the people of these far away places. To do this, Malinowski (1922) set out a series of preconditions for effective ethnography, in his book Argonauts of the Western Pacific. Reflecting what he was keen to convey as his approach to modern anthropology, this publication became a standard text on how to do ethnography and Malinowski remains perhaps the most influential figure in social anthropology, even in spite of doubts about the extent to which his published accounts of his ethnographic method accorded with his own practices. In particular, the publication of his diary (Malinowski 1967) by his widow includes personal accounts of the day to day rigours of ethnography and shows a considerable distance between the great anthropologist and those he was researching, suggesting that the account of ethnography in Argonauts of the Western Pacific should, at best, be seen as an ‘ideal type’, rather than an accurate reflection of Malinowski’s field experiences. Nevertheless, ideal types are useful and Malinowski remains a key figure in the development of modern ethnography.

In addition to anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modern ethnography draws on the tradition of social research established in the 1920s and 1930s by the Chicago School of sociology. Rather than sail away to exotic foreign lands, the Chicago sociologists studied their own city. Their approach was, however, in many ways similar to that taken by Malinowski and the other social anthropologists. The Chicagoans, led by several pioneering and influential social researchers including Albion Small, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, sought to gather information about the many different aspects of life in Chicago. Adopting what has since been termed a social mosaic approach (Faris 1970; Bulmer 1984), their research was based largely on participation in the rich and varied social life of Chicago. In most cases their background and university positions made the Chicago researchers outsiders in relation to those they sought to study. However, they were outsiders who were attempting to become insiders, seeking first-hand experience and knowledge of the lives of
the natives of Chicago in the same way that Malinowski approached the study of the people of New Guinea. Their intention was to participate in the lives of those who were the focus of their studies, within the natural settings where their lives were conducted. For most, this meant adopting social behaviour to blend in with the researched and the research setting in order to observe and experience what those being researched experienced, at first hand. The approach gave rise to the phrase ‘participant observation’, one which, as we have already seen, is now frequently used as a synonym for ethnography.

The focus of the Chicago studies was largely on deviant groups in what was a turbulent time in the history of Chicago. These included the homeless (Anderson 1923), gangs (Thrasher 1927), prostitutes (Cressey 1932), a Jack Roller or what more recently we have come to know as a mugger (Shaw 1930), life in the ghetto (Wirth 1928) and of crime and vice (Reckless 1933). In addition, there were studies which attempted to look at more prosperous areas of the city located along what was known as the Gold Coast (Zorbaugh 1926), on the shore of Lake Michigan.

The significance of the Chicago School to modern ethnography rests, therefore, in its methodology and in the focus of its research. Its collected work shows very clearly that the value of ethnography is not restricted to the far away, the exotic or the untoward, rather it lends itself to a study of the structures and interactions which shape many locations, communities and social groups. Moreover, while the approach of the Chicago sociologists was largely qualitative, relying on what Park (McKinney 1966) described as getting ‘the seat of your pants dirty in real research’, they also made good use of statistical method. As Bulmer’s (1984) excellent history of the Chicago School reminds us, a range of methods was deployed in order to produce the mosaic of the city. This included using statistical method to trace the extent of crime and violence in the city (Reckless 1933) and the development of quantitative mapping, leading to techniques of social zoning and to concentric zone theory (Burgess and Bogue 1964), which remain key tools in the field of urban sociology and social geography.

The influence of the Chicago School and of Malinowski’s anthropology can be seen in the emergence of ethnography as a dominant approach in social scientific research in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the areas of health, industry and work, deviance, social movements and of course education, studies which focused on the researcher(s) as participant(s) within organizations or social groups grew both in number and in respectability as not only the methods which they deployed, but also the methodology upon which the methods drew, became accepted as an epistemologically respectable alternative to more positivistic approaches which had hitherto tended to dominate the study of social life, institutions and processes. This continued growth in ethnographic studies in what were now familiar settings led Burgess (1984) to talk about ethnography coming
home ‘from coral garden to city street’. The locations may have changed but the principles upon which the study of the locations was based remained essentially the same. By the middle of the twentieth century, ethnography had proved itself to be adaptable, capable of producing detailed accounts of many different aspects of social life in ways which, while grounded in the particular circumstances of the discrete location, event or setting, were nevertheless illustrative of wider social processes. Moreover, analysis of the detailed descriptions produced by ethnographic research yielded conceptually grounded accounts (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of social phenomena which challenged the validity of positivistic research, concerned with cause and effect, widescale generalization and statistical significance, at the expense of depth and detail. Ethnography had not only come home, but it had its feet firmly under the table!

Challenges to ethnography

To this point we have given what might be interpreted as a very positive account of ethnography and what it might achieve. Given that we are writing a book about ethnography and education and that we (the authors) have both engaged in ethnographic research in a variety of educational settings over the past 15 years, this may not seem unusual or unacceptable. However, although we may generally be regarded as supporters of and advocates for ethnographic research, we do not seek to offer an unconditional or uncritical portrayal of ethnography. Rather our approach is one, largely, of pragmatism, but pragmatism based on an acceptance of the epistemological position of naturalism and a recognition of the importance of social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1967) and of knowledge about the social world. Consequently our approach to educational and social research is one which emphasizes the importance of insider accounts, of observation and participation in social action to facilitate the collection of primary data at first hand. Having said this, we recognize that not all topics for research in education, or indeed other areas of social life, lend themselves to such an approach. There will be many instances where a more quantitative, widescale, positivistic, external approach to study will be acceptable above that of ethnography. For example, research undertaken on behalf of policy makers, where specific data relating to finances and spending plans allied to a particular educational initiative, may stipulate that quantitative data are collected. Consequently, we would argue that it is not just a question of ethnography not being suitable for some topics, but suitability may also be dependent on the reasons why the research is being undertaken in the first place.

Moreover, as we have also seen, our view of ethnography is one which we have characterized as comprehensive, incorporating quantitative methods
where appropriate. Again, this can be seen as evidence of a pragmatic approach to research where the aims, objectives and focus of the specific study are the things that determine the methods to be deployed. Clearly, ethnography cannot be the only approach to educational research and to hold religiously to its use without due attention to the focus or purpose of the research would lead to what Mills (1959) has called ‘the fetishism of method’ and what Bryman (1988) alludes to as epistemology over technology.

The principal criticisms of ethnography which lead some researchers to question not only whether it is appropriate for their work but also more fundamentally its validity as an approach to research relate to the nature of the knowledge which it yields. In particular, researchers from a more positivist tradition have accused ethnography of imprecision where language used in description has be seen to lack rigour, for example, the tendency to describe and characterize events rather than quantify them. In addition, ethnography has been accused of subjectivity, where its findings have been seen as particular interpretations of specific social action by the researchers concerned, amounting to little more than anecdote and mere opinions presented in a style that perhaps has more in common with journalism than science. Allied to such accusations have been others which draw attention to ethnography’s inability to generalize. Consequently, its concentration on the discrete location or social action is seen to have little to contribute to understandings of wider social issues, being both time and space bound.

Such criticisms challenge the methodological legitimacy of ethnography, rather than the methods that it might employ, as methods can clearly be deployed in a range of different contexts, underpinned by different epistemologies. The challenges are at one level difficult to counter, as it seems to us that they are not without foundation. However, the fact that they tend to emanate from researchers often more closely associated with quantitative methods and the positivist tradition in social research, means that they need to be viewed not as technical criticisms or challenges to what ethnography is able to achieve, but as epistemological challenges about the nature of the knowledge which ethnography yields. In short, we would agree with these and other similar challenges. Moreover, we do not see the need to counter them by arguing that the findings from ethnographic research are precise or objective or generalizable. To do so would be to fall into a technical trap of judging ethnography by characteristics to which it does not aspire. Ethnography does not set out to do or be any of these things and in its more general defense we would argue that as long as ethnographers do not claim that their research can meet what are essentially positivistic characteristics, then such challenges are largely irrelevant. Furthermore, the converse of those and similar criticisms can often be leveled at non-ethnographic methods in that they are over precise, not allowing for the uncertainty
of social life, lacking detail and depth in the accounts of social action that they advance and failing to acknowledge the role of researcher–researched interaction in the production of social knowledge.

Summary

In this opening chapter we have set out to present a clear picture of what ethnography is and what it can achieve in educational and other fields of social research. We have argued that more than simply the deployment of particular qualitative methods, ethnography relates to a distinctive methodology based on naturalism and the Weberian notion, verstehen. Like many other approaches to social research, ethnography does not lend itself to short pithy definitions. However, in an attempt at least to be relatively brief and accessible, we can define ethnography as:

An approach to social research based on the first-hand experience of social action within a discrete location, in which the objective is to collect data which will convey the subjective reality of the lived experience of those who inhabit that location.

Our discussion of ethnography thus far, leading to this definition, has been fairly theoretical. We have taken this approach out of a belief that it is important to understand the theory of the approach before drawing on examples in any abstract sense. However, now that we have a definition to work with and hopefully an understanding of the principles which underpin that definition, the remainder of this book will make extensive use of examples drawn from our own and other researchers’ experience of ethnography in a range of educational settings. In particular, this is the approach we will take to Chapters 2 and 3, which focus on the methods involved in doing ethnography.

Note

1 We do recognize there may be occasions when ethnographers wish to take a more proactive approach, perhaps initiating a specific course of action in order to observe its impact on and the reactions of those at the focus of the research. However, while this may be a legitimate approach to take in particular circumstances, we would urge that such interventions are taken only after careful consideration of their likely consequences for the research setting and its participants, which, of course, may not be fully appreciated before such action is taken.