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This Understanding Social Research series is designed to help students to understand how social research is carried out and to appreciate a variety of issues in social research methodology. It is designed to address the needs of students taking degree programmes in areas such as sociology, social policy, psychology, communication studies, cultural studies, human geography, political science, criminology and organization studies and who are required to take modules in social research methods. It is also designed to meet the needs of students who need to carry out a research project as part of their degree requirements. Postgraduate research students and novice researchers will find the books equally helpful.

The series is concerned to help readers to ‘understand’ social research methods and issues. This will mean developing an appreciation of the pleasures and frustrations of social research, an understanding of how to implement certain techniques, and an awareness of key areas of debate. The relative emphasis on these different features will vary from book to book, but in each one the aim will be to see the method or issue from the position of a practising researcher and not simply to present a manual of ‘how to’ steps. In the process, the series will contain coverage of the major methods of social research and will address a variety of issues and debates. Each book in the series is written by a practising researcher who has experience of the technique or debates that he or she is addressing. Authors are encouraged to draw on their own experiences and inside knowledge.
John Brewer’s book on ethnography exemplifies these features well. It is more than a textbook about ethnography in that it reveals valuable insights into his experiences with this approach in a variety of contexts. Brewer is especially well known for his research into the Royal Ulster Constabulary and he draws on this work on many occasions. Making use of such experience allows the reader to relate general principles of ethnographic fieldwork to actual practice. Not only does this approach give life to methodological principles, it also demonstrates how ethnography is more than simply a set of axioms to be followed. There are so many contingencies to be dealt with, perhaps especially in the fraught circumstances associated with the troubles in Northern Ireland, that ethnography is better thought of as an accomplishment than a case of following methodological rules. As such, the book is very much in tune with the reflexivity that has inspired much writing on ethnography in recent years. It reflects a concern with the role and significance of the ethnographer in the construction of ethnographic knowledge and with a recognition of the part played by a multitude of unforeseen events in arriving at an ethnographic knowledge.

One of the most significant developments in ethnography in recent years is the growing recognition of the importance of viewing it as a text as much as a method. This recognition entails an acknowledgement that an ethnography is written as much to persuade readers of the credibility of the account offered as to present ‘findings’. One feature of this trend has been the examination of ethnographic writing conventions. The impact of postmodernist thinking can be seen in this growing interest in ethnographic writing, though the degree to which postmodernism is solely responsible is debatable. Brewer does not shirk these issues and indeed confronts them head on. Consequently, the book provides a valuable mixture of discussions about practical issues, like the use of computer-aided qualitative data analysis packages, and the more heady debates about what ethnographers are doing when they write. Readers may be surprised also to encounter a discussion of ethnography in relation to globalization but the examination of these issues further serves to identify the distinctiveness of the ethnographic imagination and its contribution.

Brewer’s book, then, brings together the excitement of ethnography with the frustrations (including negative book reviews!) and methodological precepts with the unanticipated contingencies. He never loses sight of what it means to be an ethnographer. It is the combination of insight from experience as an ethnographer with an extensive knowledge of the literature on the craft that will prove valuable to a wide constituency of readers.

Alan Bryman
The centrality of method in the social sciences

As a relative newcomer to the family of disciplines, the social sciences had to work out their identity against that of two older and more popular cousins, the humanities and the natural sciences, which were well established as family members, possessing a longstanding acceptance and status. Lesser known cousins quite often struggle to establish themselves, and can feel marginal to the wider family. They can feel unloved, unwelcome and generally resentful towards popular cousins. But newborns can also sometimes use older relatives as role models and establish themselves in the family by copying the popularly acclaimed and well liked members. So it was with the social sciences in the family of disciplines. The social sciences modelled themselves on the humanities and the natural sciences, but took different things from each, and in the process the social sciences resolved their identity crisis by becoming preoccupied with subject matter and method.

With a subject matter close to the humanities, the social sciences distinguished themselves from this popular and well liked cousin by the different methods adopted for doing research. They borrowed these methods from the natural sciences, in order to be like this most popular of cousins, despite having a subject matter very unlike that of the natural sciences. Identity for the social sciences thus partly became reduced to method; hence the centrality of methods to the social sciences. Janesick (1998: 48) recently referred to
this obsession as ‘methodolatry’, in that method has become a form of idol- 
atry, in which the slavish devotion to method has excluded the substance or 
the interest of the story being told in the research.

What is ‘method’?

Ask students what a ‘method’ is and they will list questionnaires, interviews, 
personal documents, experiments, surveys and the like, although they will 
tend to neglect some of the more recent innovations in data collection aris-
ing from cultural studies (see Box 1). This is partly correct, but methods of 
data collection are only one type of method. There are methods of data 
analysis, such as statistical inference, sampling and new forms of computer-
based qualitative analysis, which are used to interpret and analyse the data; 
and methods of research enquiry, used to formulate the research, such as the 
methods for constructing hypotheses, concepts, theories and propositions.

Couched in this way, methods are merely technical rules, which lay down 
the procedures for how reliable and objective knowledge can be obtained. 
As procedural rules they tell people what to do and what not to do if they 
want the knowledge to be reliable and objective. Thus, they lay down the 
procedures for constructing a hypothesis (methods of research enquiry), for 
designing a questionnaire, conducting an interview or doing participant 
observation (methods of data collection), for working out some statistical 
formulae or for using computer packages to analyse quantitative or quali-
tative data (methods of data analysis). 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. The research community has endowed certain procedural rules with 
the authority to certify knowledge as reliable and objective. If these rules are 
not followed, the knowledge can be impugned as unreliable; and one sure 
way to undermine results is to criticize the methods used to obtain them. 
Hence methods, of whatever kind, are central to research practice because 
they lay down the procedural rules to follow for obtaining certifiably object-
tive and reliable knowledge.

What is ‘methodology’?

If ‘methods’ are technical rules that define proper procedures, ‘methodol-
ogy’ is the broad theoretical and philosophical framework into which these 
procedural rules fit. It is because these procedural rules reflect broader 
theoretical and philosophical ideas about the nature of knowledge, explana-
tion and science that the research community gives them authority to 
endow knowledge as reliable and objective. The study of the ‘fit’ between
Box 1

Imagine a role play, and you are standing in front of a class of students on their first research methods lecture. How would you start to talk about methods? Perhaps . . .

Who here eats polyunsaturated margarine? What brands do you eat? Why is it that they're called ‘Flora’, ‘Sun’, ‘Olivio’? Close your eyes and think of tubs of ‘Olivio’ margarine. What does the name conjure in your mind? Go on, close your eyes; by the time this course is over you’ll be glad of occasions to close your eyes in class. So, what does ‘Olivio’ conjure? I suggest you’re thinking of rows of sun drenched olive trees, a Mediterranean vista, blue skies, purple seas and a pretty shepherdess or shepherd. We are now able to see why this blob of yellow coloured fat in a plastic tub is called ‘Olivio’ or ‘Flora’ or ‘Sun’, because the names conjure up such images of pastoral scenes, the countryside, things natural, healthy and strong. They tap, in other words, into a powerful cultural image in our society that associates health, naturalness and happiness with the countryside. This is why we watch Ballykissangel, Emmerdale, Glenroe or the High Road or listen to the Archers – real community, real happiness and healthiness are not found in the city. Why not call this blob of yellow fat smog, grime, or dog turd infested pavement? It wouldn’t sell if you did. Our society is replete with this image – seen in children’s stories, soap operas, television advertisements and so on.

What’s this got to do with a module on research methods? Let us say I was interested in doing research on public attitudes towards the building of a nuclear waste dump in Ballymena. One thing I may want to do as part of this research is undertake a questionnaire-based survey of what people in the area think. I would conduct a large survey, subject the results to statistical analysis and provide some impressive figures and tables describing people’s attitudes. Another part of my research, however, may examine the great sense of affection people feel for the countryside, what it means to people and why they want so strongly to protect and preserve it. The cultural images which it conveys to them therefore form part of this research. Data from this part of the study could comprise things like long quotations of natural language, extracts from personal documents, records of old videos, photographs and other memorabilia, newspaper cuttings, fictional stories, television advertisements and so on. What people in Ballymena think of great blobs of fat, for example, can thus be serious social research because, among other things, this reveals their images and meanings of the countryside, which bears upon their feelings towards the building of nuclear dumps in the place.
research methods and the methodology that validates them is called ‘the philosophy of social research’ by John Hughes (1990). It should be distinguished from the philosophy of social science, which is a more ancient concern with general epistemological and philosophical issues as they bear on the social sciences. In the philosophy of social research, the focus is on the authorization and validation of these procedural rules (research techniques, practices and methods) by the broad methodological context in which they fit. The flow of causation is:

methodology → procedural rules = methods → knowledge

As long as these philosophical ideas are unchallenged, the validity of the procedural rules will not be impugned. In this circumstance, there is great consensus about the methods to use to obtain reliable and objective knowledge, and results people disagree with are criticized for the application of the procedural rules (that is, the methods applied) rather than the validity of the rules themselves. Thus, debate about method within the social sciences is umbilically linked to issues of philosophy, science and the nature of knowledge and explanation: method and methodology cannot be separated.

Debate about methods in the social sciences

A number of trends are discernible in the current discussion of method and methodology in research method textbooks in the social sciences. First, a concern with technical issues has shifted towards theoretical ones. The early attention given to clarification and perfection of the procedural rules we know as methods has given way to a concern with methodological issues about the nature of knowledge, evidence and how it is that we know what we know. Early methods texts were essentially ‘cook books’, which suggested that research was like following a recipe, which is no more than a set of procedural rules for the preparation of meals. So students were told the steps to follow in research as if they were making dinner. Now research methods books no longer just outline technical advice about what procedural rules to follow in what circumstance and how to apply them properly, but also concern themselves with theories of knowledge and the nature of social reality. Some authors may do this reluctantly, but it is still done. Thus, Seale (1999: ix) opened his book on qualitative methods by writing:

this book starts from the premise that methodological writing is of limited value to practising social researchers, who are pursuing a craft occupation in large part learned ‘on the job’. Methodology, if it has any use at all, benefits the quality of research by encouraging a degree of awareness about the methodological implications of certain decisions
... it can help guard against more obvious errors. It may also offer ideas. Reading methodology, then, is a sort of intellectual muscle-building exercise.

Accordingly, the first part of his text covered methodological debates and issues.

A second trend in the methods literature is the perception of research as a process as much as practice. This means two things. Research is no longer presented as a set of discrete and logical steps or stages—planning, access, data collection, analysis, writing up, dissemination of the results—but as a whole event occurring over time, in which stages merge and are not sequenced. Many modern textbooks thus stress the importance of locating procedures in the larger research process and of seeing the enterprise as a messy one rather than a series of neat hermetic stages. The other consequence of the attention on process is that narrative tales about the ‘research process’ involved in any study or series of studies are as common as textbooks outlining the good practice and procedure. There is a long tradition of books which have collected together authors to write about the research process involved in some well known work with which they are associated. At first this was done to illustrate the range of processes that bore upon famous works (Hammond 1964; Bell and Newby 1977; Bell and Roberts 1984), but it has since developed a stronger methodological impulse associated with the need for researchers to be ‘reflexive’ and identify, honestly, some of the social, biographical and practical contingencies that helped to produce the data. Some such accounts are used to exemplify a particular research method, such as ethnography (Hobbs and May 1993), to illustrate a particular research task, such as qualitative data analysis (Bryman and Burgess 1994), or the methodological problems posed by particular types of research, such as ‘sensitive research’ (Renzetti and Lee 1993).

A third trend in methods textbooks is a focus on research styles as much as on specific techniques. ‘Feminist research’ (see Harding 1987; Stanley 1990a), ‘dangerous fieldwork’ (Lee 1995) and ‘sensitive research’ (Lee 1994) are styles of research rather than techniques, and identification of the problems and procedures associated with such styles broadens our understanding of what research is. Two familiar and older styles of research were ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research, and another noticeable trend in methods textbooks is the emergence of qualitative research out of the shadow of its partner. Qualitative research has become popular, reflecting some dissatisfaction with quantitative research and improvements in the systematization of qualitative research. This expresses itself in the greater use of qualitative data by researchers, students and, significantly, policy makers. Methods textbooks come to reflect this latter development when they address what is called ‘applied qualitative research’ (Walker, 1985) and outline its relevance to policy issues and policy making.
Within the focus on qualitative research there are also some noticeable trends. The first is a concern with the techniques and problems surrounding the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data (see Dey 1993; Bryman and Burgess 1994). The second is the attempt to define the opportunities computers offer to qualitative data collection and analysis (see Fielding and Lee 1991, 1998). Finally, there is a preoccupation with systematization in an attempt to avoid the stereotypical allegation that qualitative research is ‘mere journalism’. This concern with systematization also shows itself in many ways. These include attempts to deconstruct the art and skill of writing up qualitative research (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Atkinson 1990, 1992; Wolcott 1990), a stress on reflexivity, by means of which researchers reflect on the contingencies during the research process which bore upon and helped to produce the data (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Woolgar 1988a; Williams 1990), clarification of the strengths and limits of qualitative data, a concern with the methodological and theoretical base on which qualitative research is founded, especially its ability to ‘represent’ reality accurately (especially see the critique of Hammersley 1989, 1990, 1992), and attempts to build generality and representativeness into qualitative research in order to overcome the limits of the single case study approach. Much of this debate is engaged in by qualitative researchers themselves rather than by critics hostile to qualitative research. This might be termed ‘the ethnographic critique of ethnography’ (Brewer 1994), and it led Altheide and Johnson (1998: 283) to argue that qualitative researchers have met the enemy, and it is within themselves, for they have become their own worst critics.

**Purpose and outline of this book**

This volume defines ethnography as follows:

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.

Defined in this way, it is one of the principal research methods in the social sciences, and foremost in the repertoire of qualitative researchers. Among all the methods available to qualitative researchers it has been subject to the most criticism by ethnographers themselves, it has seen the greatest debate about its theoretical and methodological suppositions, and it has been the object of many of the processes of systematization. Thus, it is an excellent example to illustrate the shifts in our understanding of methods that were described above.
This book locates the method of ethnography in the context of the methodological debate surrounding it. Ethnography is a method for collecting data, but this cannot be distinguished from the broader theoretical and philosophical frameworks that give authority to this way of collecting data. Because method and methodology are so intertwined some authors describe ethnography as a perspective rather than a means of data collection (Wolcott 1973), although its features as a method and a methodology need to be distinguished. While the ‘procedural rules’ of ethnography are described, the discussion goes beyond the technical level in order to locate ethnography within the different methodological positions that compete for the intellectual legitimation of ethnography. Technical advice on how to do and write ethnography is matched with consideration of theoretical issues raised by the practice of the method, such as reflexivity, representation and realism. The book confronts the ethnographic critique of ethnography and rescues it from those postmodern critics who deconstruct it to the point where it dissolves into air, leaving everyone uncertain as to the value of the data collected by it. A vigorous defence is made of ethnographic data. This involves guidelines for the systematic use of ethnography, an outline of the strengths of the data and of the ways to minimize their weaknesses, and illustration of the uses to which ethnography can be put practicably.

Chapter 1 addresses the question of what ethnography is, given some of the common-sense misrepresentations of it, dismissing the parodies of ethnography as ‘mere journalism’, and tabloid journalism at that, which suggest that it is unable to move beyond descriptive images of the exotic and the erotic. By way of clarifying what ethnography is, a distinction is drawn between ‘big’ and ‘little’ ethnography. In the former, ethnography is seen as synonymous with qualitative research, whereas, more properly, it should be understood as ‘field research’. Finally, the first chapter introduces the two major critiques of ethnography, the natural science and postmodernist critiques, addresses the case for and against ethnography and outlines the possibility (and desirability) of systematic ethnography. This defence goes on to structure the rest of the volume.

In Chapter 2, we outline the philosophy of social research, locating ethnography in the context of competing methodological premises underlying it, the imperatives for social research which follow on from these methodologies and its characteristic form of data. This chapter also addresses some of the characteristic features of the data collected in field research, and considers the debate around ‘thick description’, which is the central characteristic of ethnographic data. It also addresses issues surrounding the accuracy, reliability, validity and relevance of ethnographic representations of reality. Chapter 3 looks at how to make ethnography systematic, and offers technical advice on doing ethnography. This covers negotiating access, the issue of informed consent, triangulation and multiple methods, recording the data, developing trust and managing relations in the
Ethnography

field, gender and social biography in the field, ethics and the problem of sensitive research and dangerous fieldwork. It offers advice on sampling within ethnographic research and on how to overcome the problems of the single case study approach in order to introduce breadth and generality into ethnographic research. The chapter suggests that research design is as important in ethnographic research as in more quantitative styles of research. An account is also provided of the methods of data collection in field research: observation, in-depth interviews, documentary analysis and studies of natural language. The strengths and weaknesses of field research methods are outlined, and a stress is placed on triangulation and the use of multiple methods.

Chapter 4 explores issues in the analysis, interpretation and presentation of ethnographic data. Inductive analysis, insiders' accounts and what Alfred Schutz calls 'the postulate of adequacy' are suggested as ways of verifying and validating one's findings. Advice is given on how to develop a category system to analyse the data, on the role of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis and on writing up an ethnographic text. The issue of reflexivity is addressed and advice given on how an ethnographer can be reflexive. Various debates around ethnographic texts are addressed. Chapter 5 looks at the uses of ethnography, contrasting the styles of ethnographic research and their different uses. The chapter focuses on the role of ethnography in theory generation and on applied ethnographic research, where it has applications for the study of social policy and relevance to policy makers. The Conclusion summarizes the case for ethnography in the context of postmodernism (which denies the possibility of objective research) and globalization (which denies the relevance of the local and small-scale).

There are numerous textbooks on ethnography, and it features in many more general textbooks on research methods. The case for another textbook is twofold. It cannot be left out of a series on social research that attempts to provide an ‘understanding of social research’, since it is an integral part of the research enterprise and the series would be the worse for excluding ethnography. The distinctiveness of this textbook, however, comes from its being research led, and the incorporation of examples from ethnographic research into the text. In this way, it will be associated with the author’s strong defence of ethnography from its postmodernist critics, and his extensive experience of doing qualitative research in difficult, sensitive and even dangerous settings. Much of the illustrative material in the text is drawn from ethnographic research in Northern Ireland and deals with sensitive and dangerous topics. As C. Wright Mills once wrote, 'it is better to have one account by a working student of how he is going about his work than a dozen “codifications of procedure” by specialists who often as not have never done much work' (Mills 1959: 195). It should be noted, however, that the extent of codification into 'how-to textbooks' is
much less for ethnography than survey research, and some traditional ethnographers remain obstinately antagonistic to attempts to formalize their procedures for those engaged in teaching and learning the practice of field research. I am not one.

Suggested further reading

As a general introduction to issues of method and methodology read:


Introduction

This chapter answers the question of what ethnography is, and the corollary of what it is not. It confronts the common-sense misrepresentations of ethnography, defending it against the allegation that it is journalism in another guise. By way of clarifying what ethnography is, a contrast is drawn between two ways of defining ethnography, referred to here as ‘big’ and ‘little’ ethnography. The former equates it with qualitative research as a whole; the latter restricts its meaning to ‘field research’. A definition of ‘little’ ethnography – ‘ethnography-as-fieldwork’ – is suggested.

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.

Two forms of criticism of ethnography are then outlined, the natural science and the postmodern forms, the first of which abuses it or sees it merely as an adjunct to the serious stuff of quantitative research, while the latter tries to deconstruct it to the point where it almost dissolves. This chapter claims that it is desirable and still possible to undertake systematic ethnography, a claim that the following chapters support and defend. First, it is necessary to note...
briefly from where ethnography came historically, since a legacy of its past is the pejorative common-sense stereotype that it deals with the foreign, strange and exotic.

The history of ethnography

Ethnography is not one particular method of data collection but a style of research that is distinguished by its objectives, which are to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given ‘field’ or setting, and its approach, which involves close association with, and often participation in, this setting. It is premised on the view that the central aim of the social sciences is to understand people’s actions and their experiences of the world, and the ways in which their motivated actions arise from and reflect back on these experiences. Once this is the central aim, knowledge of the social world is acquired from intimate familiarity with it, and ethnography is central as a method because it involves this intimate familiarity with day-to-day practice and the meanings of social action. To access social meanings, observe behaviour and work closely with informants and perhaps participate in the field with them, several methods of data collection tend to be used in ethnography, such as in-depth interviewing, participant observation, personal documents and discourse analyses of natural language. As such, ethnography has a distinguished career in the social sciences. There have been ‘travellers tales’ for centuries, going back even to antiquity, which count as a form of ethnographic research in that they purported to represent some aspect of social reality (in this case, a country, group or culture) on the basis of close acquaintance with and observation of it, although often they reflected the cultural and political prejudices of their own society (see Box 1.1).

Ethnography begins properly only with the twentieth century and two entirely independent intellectual developments, one British, the other North American. The first was the emergence of the classical tradition of social anthropology in Britain, with people like Malinowski, Boas, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard. That most were British or worked in Britain (with the obvious exception of Boas) can be explained because of the close association between social anthropology and British colonialism. And while social anthropology might no longer be the handmaiden of colonialism, its origins were tied to the needs of the British Empire to understand the cultures and groups it was seeking to rule once the period of colonial conquest was completed and assimilation in the ‘British family of nations’ was possible. This explains why it emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century rather than in the heyday of colonial conquest in the nineteenth century. These anthropologists pioneered an approach that involved close acquaintance with pre-industrial groups and cultures by close immersion and observation.

The second development was the work of the Chicago School in sociology,
which used observational techniques to explore groups on the margins of urban industrial society in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. With the occasional exception, the focus was on the dispossessed, the marginal and the strange, a focus Erving Goffman later came to characterize as an attempt to address ‘the standpoint of the hip outsider rather than the dull insider’. They bequeathed sociology with important studies of numerous deviant subgroups, like prostitutes, drug dealers, street gangs, various unusual urban occupations, such as taxi dance hostesses, jack rollers, janitors and the hobo, and relatively unknown social worlds, like those of flop houses and burlesque halls, Polish immigrants, Jewish ghetto culture and the culture of the slum (as well as that of the wealthy Californian Gold Coast elite). In every case, investigators actively participated in the setting or the way of life under study, being mindful that, as Robert Park, the foremost of the Chicagoans, used to put it to his undergraduates, for ‘real research’ first-hand observation was necessary (see Box 1.2).

While social anthropology called this approach ‘ethnography’, sociologists tended to call it participant observation or field research, but it meant much...

**Box 1.1**


> For given only to leisure and devoted only to laziness, they think that the greatest pleasure is not to work . . . This people is, then, a barbarous people, literally barbarous. Judged according to modern ideas, they are uncultivated . . . All their habits are the habits of barbarians . . . This is a filthy people, wallowing in vice. Of all peoples, it is the least instructed in the rudiments of the Faith . . . Moreover, I have never seen among any other people, so many blind at birth, so many lame, so many maimed in body and so many suffering from some natural defect. And it is not surprising if nature sometimes produces such beings contrary to her ordinary laws when dealing with a people that is adulterous, incestuous, unlawfully conceived and born outside the law and shamefully abusing nature. It seems a just punishment from God.

Cambrensis (1147-1223) was a Welshman at the English Court of Henry II when he first went to Ireland in 1183. It was Henry who first conquered Ireland. Cambrensis finishes his Topography with a eulogy to Henry and the ‘manner in which the Irish world was added to the titles and triumphs’ of England. Cambrensis visited Ireland twice, and then only travelled around Cork and Waterford.
the same thing in the way research was conducted. There are some differences between these two intellectual pillars (see Berg 1998: 120), but many similarities. The task of each was, in Wolcott’s (1973) phrase, ‘cultural description’, and while social anthropology sought to explore pre-industrial groups and cultures, requiring ethnographers to adopt an initial research role as an outsider, the groups studied by the Chicagoans were only slightly less unfamiliar and strange to middle-class, Middle Western Americans, and their research role as an ‘insider’ was not guaranteed. Since then, of course, ethnography has moved into other social sciences, notably education, health studies and social work, and the differences between sociological and social anthropological uses of ethnography have widened, despite the fact that social anthropology now parallels sociology in a focus on urban and industrialized settings. But this heritage has left one particular legacy for ethnography that dogs it to this day: the common-sense notion that it offers mere description of things foreign, exotic and peculiar. Within sociology, this just adds to the distortions about the discipline within common-sense knowledge.

Ethnography, sociology and common sense

Sociology is unique among academic disciplines, including other social sciences, in having a subject matter of interest to most ordinary people. The social institutions that interest sociology, like the family, community, the education system, the class structure, the state, the organization of work, law and order, religion and many others, form the fabric of the lives of ordinary people. Sociology is interested in the social, the cultural, the institutional, the symbolic, and the normative aspects of these institutions. The research methods of sociology are based on the assumption that these social institutions are not fixed or given, but rather are the product of human action and interaction. Sociology seeks to understand how these institutions come into being, how they are maintained, and how they change over time. Through the use of a variety of research methods, sociologists study the social processes that shape society, and the individual experiences that are shaped by society. Sociology is a social science that seeks to understand the social world in which we live.
people, and lay members of society spend considerable time thinking and talking about these institutions. This is a tremendous advantage, for sociology begins with a subject matter that is intrinsically interesting to many people; ordinary people in the street want to know about the things sociology knows about.

The disadvantage is that sociology sometimes competes with ordinary common-sense views of the same things. People develop lay knowledge by which they understand the world, make judgements and decisions, and guide their conduct and behaviour. This lay knowledge is called ‘common sense’, and the very term describes its two enduring qualities: lay people believe it to be shared and intersubjective (it is ‘common’) and true (it makes ‘sense’). Because social institutions form the fabric of the lives of ordinary people, a lay knowledge is inevitably developed about them, and people are only too keen to share views on them. People are confident that they know why the family is declining, or why crime or unemployment has risen, or what is wrong with the church, morality, the police or whatever. In this respect, the natural sciences have it relatively easy. When astronomers, for example, are producing new theories to explain the orbits of the moons of Jupiter or the existence of super novas, they do not have to argue with taxi drivers or hairstylists, who feel confident to tell astronomers that super novas are super novas because their mothers went out to work and neglected them. Or at least, insofar as ordinary unqualified people try to argue with astronomers, not many people take them seriously. But every lay member of society has a common-sense pet theory about why some people rather than others commit crime, or what causes unemployment, divorce and so on, or what the link is between race and employment, or what lies behind the years of civil unrest in Northern Ireland. However, people's common-sense knowledge of the world is derived from the small part of the world they know about and inhabit, so that explanations are partial and generalized from personal experience. Moreover, lay people often fix upon explanations derived from common-sense knowledge which best suit their personal beliefs and views, and never work at their explanations, or continually try to improve them. This means that sociology’s explanations have to confront habitual common-sense beliefs about phenomena that are often wrong and resistant to change (see Box 1.3).

Sociology is not able, therefore, to demarcate a subject matter that is ‘professional’, in the sense that it does not have a subject matter about which ordinary people feel ignorant and uninformed, which they take little interest in or rarely discuss. This is not the case for the natural sciences and most other social sciences, which are accorded, superficially, a competence and professionalism because their subject matter is beyond the realm of understanding and interest of lay people. It follows from this that critics of sociology can easily parody it as common sense - and many do. For these critics, sociology can win neither way. If it comes up with explanations that seem to
confirm common-sense knowledge, critics retort that this was known all along without the need for sociologists to tell us, and findings which contradict or dispute common-sense knowledge are dismissed as counter-intuitive and simply not true. As Giddens (1996a: 4) wrote in his defence of sociology, it is the fate of sociology to be seen as less original and less central that it actually is, and much sociological research and many concepts and theories are so much a part of people’s everyday repertoire as to appear as ‘just common sense’ (see also Bauman 1990: 8–10, for the similarities and differences between sociology and common sense).

Ethnographers, however, find themselves in a double bind. Sociological explanations of all kinds confront considerable resistance, but the common-sense parody of qualitative research and the kind of data it collects gives additional problems. Many proponents of the natural science model of social research, as well as lay people and policy-makers, parody qualitative data as ‘mere journalism’, providing highly descriptive and non-analytical accounts of people droning on about this or that topic, with so-and-so saying this followed by so-and-so saying that. And not only are we ‘mere journalists’, we are tabloid journalists at that, providing interesting details of the exotically unusual, the peculiar, odd and strange, copy that titillates but does not inform. Thus, ethnographers are seen as simply hanging loose

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**Box 1.3**

Interview with a member of Ian Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church, for research published in J. D. Brewer, Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600–1998 (London: Macmillan, 1998), with G. Higgins.

I feel churches today are more interested in themselves than preaching the gospel, and I feel ecumenism [cooperation between and integration of the denominations] is the whole purpose of some of the churches. The ecumenical movement is set on a one-world church, and under the ecumenical movement there’d be no other leader than the Pope. The Roman Catholic Church is a political organisation. The Vatican is a political state. I’ve studied the thing. While I’ve nothing against Roman Catholics, the system [of Roman Catholicism] sets out the Pope as Christ on earth. That’s why the country’s in the state it’s in. You’ve ecumenism, all these ecumenical services where it doesn’t matter what you believe – anything goes. I mean law and order has broken down in the home, in the schools, it’s broken down everywhere because man has tried to go his own way and forgotten the teachings of God.
on street corners or in bars, going with the flow, waiting for tittle tattle, the exotic and the erotic, like a hack from the tabloids, doing our ethnography unrigorously and unsystematically. Qualitative data are interesting, they say, but mere anecdote, hearsay and essentially unproven. It is evidence that reflects the artful, deceitful skill of the investigative journalist or documentary maker, not the serious researcher; real research requires numerate, statistical data (see Box 1.4).

Journalism shares some similarities with qualitative research writing (Seale 1999: 15), but there are important differences based on the researcher's commitment to greater depth of thought, more sustained periods spent on investigation and a more rigorously self-critical approach. And while some extreme postmodern ethnographers deconstruct their work to claim it has no difference from fiction or journalism, post postmodern ethnography takes us beyond this scepticism. This parody, however, does not lie solely in prejudice against humanistic models of social research, for some ethnographers do very poor qualitative research. Qualitative research is very easy to do, but it is very hard to do well. There is no defence for poor qualitative research, yet the notion that qualitative

Box 1.4


The authors of the paper we have just heard have done us all a service in providing such an original and insightful contribution to the debate concerning urban crime in Northern Ireland. I do, however, retain some reservations about the ethnographic method. Although it makes for interesting reading, it does not present a representative picture in the way that a more statistically-based project would do. As a lawyer, I have some difficulty accepting the evidence – which is anecdotal and hearsay – as satisfying the burden of proof. It seems to me that there is a tendency on the part of ethnographers to accentuate the unusual at the expense of the mundane. I am reminded of the kind of documentary journalism which makes excellent television by providing good soundbites and startling images but which leaves the viewer not quite sure what is fact and what is fiction. The ethnographic method certainly provides an alternative perspective but it is a supplementary one.
research cannot be systematic is years out of date. As Seale (1999: 17) argues in the title of his recent book, quality in qualitative research is possible. Some time ago, I undertook an ethnographic study of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) (Brewer 1991a) and one of the few criticisms made – at least in writing – was that some people doubted the capacity of qualitative data to support the comments made, although dislike of the findings led to some personal abuse (see Box 1.5). I naturally defended ethnographic data and later published a set of guidelines, by means of which ethnographers can do systematic qualitative research and display this fact when writing up the results, which have since become widely known and used (Brewer 1994). These guidelines, discussed in later chapters, paralleled similar discussions by many authors, before and since, which have sought to show how rigorous and systematic qualitative sociology can be (for example, Hammersley 1989, 1990, 1992; Silverman 1989; Stanley 1990b). Readers of the methodological literature on qualitative research have thus been aware for many years that common-sense parodies are increasingly difficult to support by reasoned argument. The prejudice against qualitative data persists only because the parodies are common-sensical and thus resistant to change.

### ‘Big’ and ‘little’ ethnography

In common-sense knowledge, ethnography is understood as descriptively ‘telling it like it is from the inside’. More reasoned judgements can be offered. These are two sorts of definitions. One uses ‘ethnography’ as a synonym for qualitative research as a whole, and virtually describes any approach as ethnographic that avoids surveys as the means of data collection. This can

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**Box 1.5**


Sociologists have a unique gift to make any subject boring – the mind-boggling jargon, the cloaking of the obvious in pseudo-science. John Brewer’s book is not a book for the public to read. They’ll be lucky to stay awake after the first chapter. John Brewer’s are contentious conclusions. The RUC will be pleased with them, nationalists sceptical. Others might have been happier had the conclusions been tested by wider research. Policing is also about the sort of things empirical research cannot always discover.
be called ‘big’ ethnography or ‘ethnography-understood-as-the-qualitative-method’, and is represented well by Wolcott’s (1973) view that ethnography is really a perspective on research rather than a way of doing it. Others define ethnography to mean the same as ‘field research’ or ‘fieldwork’, and this can be called ‘little’ ethnography or ‘ethnography-understood-as-fieldwork’. In this definition, ethnography becomes one particular way of doing qualitative research. This ‘way of doing things’ is best summarized by Burgess (1982: 15):

Field research involves the study of real-life situations. Field researchers therefore observe people in the settings in which they live, and participate in their day to day activities. The methods that can be used in these studies are unstructured, flexible and open-ended.

However, even in this case, ethnography involves both method and methodology, in that it is more than just a way of collecting data. ‘Little’ ethnography is thus still not all that small. This is perhaps best illustrated by the definition of ethnography adopted in this volume (see p. 10). Defined in this way, ‘little’ ethnography still involves judgements about: the object of the research, which is to study people in naturally occurring settings; the researcher’s role in that setting, which is to understand and explain what people are doing in that setting by means of participating directly in it; and the data to be collected, which must be naturally occurring and captured in such a way that meaning is not imposed on them from outside. These issues of technique derive from a set of theoretical and philosophical premises – a methodology – so that ‘ethnography-understood-as-fieldwork’ still describes more than just a set of procedural rules for collecting data (that is, ethnography is more than a method of data collection). This is why it is unsound to equate ethnography with one particular technique of data collection, say participant observation, although this may be one of the principal methods of data collection in ethnography. ‘Little’ ethnography uses several methods that access social meanings, observe activities and involve close association with, or participation in, a setting or ‘field’.

The accounts of ethnography proffered by Hammersley and Atkinson, who along with Burgess comprise Britain’s foremost authors on the topic, capture its quality as both method and methodology (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Atkinson and Hammersley 1998; see also their separate work: Hammersley 1989, 1990, 1992; Atkinson 1990, 1992; Burgess 1982, 1984). In a succinct definition, Hammersley (1990: 1-2) describes what is here called ‘ethnography-understood-as-fieldwork’ or ‘little’ ethnography in embracing terms, making references to data collection techniques as well as broader methodological issues. According to Hammersley, ethnography is research with the following features:

• people’s behaviour is studied in everyday contexts rather than under unnatural or experimental circumstances created by the researcher;
• data are collected by various techniques but primarily by means of observation;
• data collection is flexible and unstructured to avoid pre-fixed arrangements that impose categories on what people say and do;
• the focus is normally on a single setting or group and is small-scale;
• the analysis of the data involves attribution of the meanings of the human actions described and explained (see also Atkinson and Hammersley 1998: 110–11).

Hereafter, it will be this form of ethnography that will be referred to throughout this volume as ‘ethnography’, rather than ‘ethnography-understood-as-the-qualitative-method’.

Critiques of ethnography

Leaving aside common-sense parodies, there are two major critiques of ethnography within the social sciences, emanating from almost opposite sources. The natural science critique comes from advocates of the natural science model of social research, and accuses ethnography of falling below the standards of science, which form the proper measure for the social sciences. The postmodern critique comes essentially from within the humanistic model of social research, as ethnographers themselves come to reflect critically on their practice under the impulse, inter alia, of postmodernist theories. In its extreme form this critique deconstructs ethnography to its constituent processes, and accuses ethnography of melting into air and dissolving into nothingness, or, to use an older analogy, of being like Hans Christian Andersen’s emperor in having no clothes (an analogy used in Brewer 1994). However, less extreme versions of postmodern critique exist, which retain some form of realism. Each critique is worth addressing.

The natural science critique

Mainstream social science has been governed by what Giddens (1996b: 65–8) calls the ‘orthodox consensus’, which is that the social sciences should be modelled on the natural sciences (a position known as ‘positivism’ but which Giddens, rather confusingly, calls ‘naturalism’, a term normally reserved for the very opposite position). Three beliefs follow from this (see also Giddens 1974: 3–4; Platt 1981: 73–4): the social sciences address problems similar to those of the natural sciences; they should search for social causation when explaining human activity and aspire to deductive explanations; they should deal with systems and wholes. As Giddens (1996b: 68) is himself aware, this is a consensus no more. Yet the last home of the orthodox consensus is methodology textbooks in the social sciences (Box 1.6). Here a conception of natural science is advanced that
philosophers of science would not recognize any longer (this notion of science is, according to Platt (1981), now more of a ‘social construction’). However, this is our model of ‘scientific method’ in the social sciences according to these textbooks, and ethnography falls short of its standards.

Four salient features of ethnography are worth re-emphasizing to show the offence they offer to natural science models of social research. Ethnography focuses on people’s ordinary activities in naturally occurring settings, uses unstructured and flexible methods of data collection, requires the researcher to be actively involved in the field or with the people under study and explores the meanings which this human activity has for the people themselves and the wider society. Couched in these terms it breaches several principles held dear by the natural sciences. Some principles have to do with the role of the researcher. The natural science model of research does not permit the researcher to become a variable in the experiment, yet ethnographers are not detached from the research but, depending on the degree of involvement in the setting, are themselves part of the study or by their obtrusive presence come to influence the field. If participant observation is used in data collection, ethnography can involve introspection, or what Adler and Adler (1998: 97-8) call auto-observation, whereby the researcher’s own experiences and attitude changes while sharing the field has become part of the data, something criticized since Francis Bacon as being unscientific. Other principles concern the methods of data collection. Methods that are unstructured, flexible and open-ended can appear to involve unsystematic data collection, in which the absence of structure prevents an assessment of the data because differences that emerge in the data can be attributed to variations in the way they were collected. The rationale behind the highly structured methods of the natural sciences is to minimize extraneous variations.

Box 1.6


Practising science is one of the many ways of exploring social worlds. Practising art and religion are other ways. Why learn research methods and why practice science? One reason is to be able to predict correctly how people and nations will behave, to foresee the future. Another reason is to understand how the social world works by discovering the causal connection. We understand how something works when we can both predict what will happen and explain why. A third reason is to control events and produce intended effects.
in order to isolate ‘real’ differences in the data. This is why procedural rules within natural science models of social research are designed to eliminate the effects of both the researcher and the tool used to collect the data.

Ethnography also breaches dearly held principles in science concerning the nature of data. The natural science model of social research seeks to describe and measure social phenomena, but both description and measurement are achieved by assigning numbers to the phenomena. In short, it deals with quantity and collects numerate data. Ethnography also describes and measures, but it does so by means of extracts of natural language (long quotations from interviews, extracts from field notes, snippets from personal documents) and deals with quality and meaning (see Bryman 1988; Dey 1993: 10–14). As Dey (1993: 12) indicates, meanings may seem shifty, unreliable, elusive and ethereal. Such data can appear as ‘too subjective’ and contrast unfavourably with numerate data, which appear to be more objective.

For all these reasons ethnography is criticized by proponents of natural science models of social research. If it is accorded a role in research at all, it is as a sensitizing tool to collect preliminary data at the pilot stage, before the topic is pursued properly by means of quantitative research. The response to the natural science critique has been threefold: defending the natural science model, rejecting it and, finally, transcending it. This gives us what we might call, respectively, ‘scientific’ or ‘positivist ethnography’, ‘humanistic ethnography’ and ‘postmodern reflexive ethnography’. This is a distinction returned to throughout this volume, but the salient differences can be outlined here.

In order to meet some of the standards of the natural sciences, some ethnographers have refined and improved their procedural rules, claiming their practice was scientific (Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 13–22) distinguish between positivist, post-positivist and modernist phases of the ‘scientific’ mode of ethnography). Early textbooks on ethnography reflected this phase, such as Becker (1970), Lofland (1971), Bogden and Taylor (1975) and Lofland and Lofland (1984). Rigour made these ethnographers like scientists in the accuracy with which they wanted to capture reality, and like scientists they believed in a fixed reality, which rigorous method could uncover, describe and explain. This is not entirely extinct. Thus, in a recent textbook, Fetterman (1998: 2) declares that ethnographers are both storytellers and scientists, in that if their practice is systematic, the more accurate is the account given and thus the better the science. There is still a commitment in this style of ethnography to in-depth studies of people in natural social settings or fields, and a search for meaning, but the practice of ethnography was systematized and made rigorous and formal. Not only could ethnography ape the natural science model, it was part of it, for these ethnographers recognized its adjunct role. It was accepted that ethnography could be used as a preliminary and pilot phase in quantitative studies. It was also suggested that ethnographers could give causal accounts, use structured methods of
data collection in addition to the usual repertoire and present some data in a numerate and statistical form.

Other ethnographers responded to the natural science model of social research by asserting aggressively the primacy of alternative models which did not seek to appropriate the methods and approach of the natural sciences, advocating instead what Hughes (1990) calls the humanistic model of social research, much as Goffman (1961) did in his ethnography of a hospital (see Box 1.7). While the natural science model of research saw human beings as acted upon by external social forces, so that behaviour was the outcome of social causation, the humanistic model reasserts the idea of people as active, creative, insurgent and knowledgeable. These capacities are summarized in the notion that people are ‘meaning endowing’; they have the capacity to endow meaning to their world. These meanings are always bounded by the structural and institutional location of the person, but people possess a ‘practical consciousness’ - that is, a body of knowledge that enables them to know social life from the inside - and they possess the discursive capacity to articulate this understanding. ‘Interpretative sociologies’, like Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, Schutz’s social phenomenology or Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, have shown the complicated knowledge necessary for ordinary people routinely to manage and accomplish social behaviour, and ‘humanistic ethnography’ is a style of ethnography that seeks to explore these ‘reality construction’ abilities. It is antithetical to science and valorizes the social meanings which ethnography attempts to disclose and reveal; indeed, ‘ethnography-understood-as-fieldwork’ is often portrayed by these adherents as the most reliable means to disclose these meanings. Stress is laid on the advantages of research into naturally occurring behaviour by means of direct first-hand contact over artificially created

Box 1.7


My immediate object in doing fieldwork was to try to learn about the social world of the hospital inmate, as this world is subjectively experienced by him ... It was then, and still is, my belief that any group of persons - prisoners, primitives, pilots or patients - develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject. Desiring to obtain ethnographic detail, I did not gather statistical evidence.
experiments, and on the necessity to reflect in research the meaning-endowing capacities of human beings, who are not inanimate but can understand, interpret and construct their social world. ‘Humanistic ethnography’ thus sees itself as producing a very privileged access to social reality and is often associated with the forceful assertion that social reality is constituted by people’s interpretative practices, claims common in ethnomethodology, phenomenology and what Denzin (1989) calls ‘interpretative interactionism’. In this view, ethnographic research must disclose people’s reality-constituting interpretative practices rather than concerning itself with the interests of natural science models of social research. Advocates of this position include classic statements of ethnography like Blumer (1969) and Filstead (1970), and more recent accounts by Hughes (1990) and Holstein and Gubrium (1998).

The third response is to try to transcend the old dichotomy between natural science and humanistic models of social research, and the associated antinomies between quantity and quality, numbers and meaning. This transcendence is achieved by drawing on themes within postmodernism. ‘Numbers’ and ‘meaning’ are interrelated at all levels (Dey 1993: 17–28), often requiring each other or being implicit in each other. Elementary forms of enumeration (such as counting) depend on the meanings of the unit reckoned together, and social meanings are often better understood when articulated in relation to the number of observations referred to or the number of the experiences they describe (on the use of various forms of counting in qualitative research see Bryman 1988: 131–51; Seale 1999: 119–39). But ‘postmodern reflexive ethnography’ goes further than stating that the two poles are compatible; it deconstructs the terms of the debate to say a plague on both houses. This involves a rejection of both natural science models of social research and the claims by some humanistic ethnographers that it has ‘special’ and ‘privileged’ access to insider accounts of people’s world-views, a view described by other ethnographers as ‘naive realism’ (Hammersley 1990, 1992). In this view, ethnography should be rigorous and systematic, but science is not held up as the model, and while ethnography is still seen as suited to satisfying the interpretative and humanistic injunction to study people in natural settings, its knowledge is not privileged and unproblematic. Drawing on social studies of science, these ethnographers point to the fact that the natural science model of social research fails to meet its own standards. As Dey (1993: 15) argues, all data, regardless of method, are ‘produced’ by researchers, who are not distant or detached, since they make various choices about research design, location and approach which help to ‘create’ the data they end up collecting. Thus, it is claimed, all research is subjective, in that it is personal and cultural, including science (Hammersley 1990: 9). These ethnographers question the ability of any method to represent ‘reality’ accurately on three grounds: there is no one fixed ‘reality’ in the postmodern understanding of nature to capture ‘accurately’; all methods are
cultural and personal constructs, collecting partial and selective knowledge; and since all knowledge is selective, research can offer only a socially constructed account of the world. These ethnographers appropriately turn the lens on themselves and criticize the claim that ethnography is a privileged method. This postmodern ethnographic critique of ethnography provides a serious challenge to ethnography.

**The postmodern critique of ethnography**

Postmodernism began as a body of theory associated with Lyotard and Baudrillard and some writings from post-structuralists like Foucault. However, the term was first used by Lyotard in 1979 to describe a social condition of advanced capitalist society rather than a set of theoretical ideas (for one of the best sociological treatments of postmodernism, see Harvey 1989). This social condition is characterized by the realization that two great Enlightenment ideas (called ‘meta-narratives’) have been myths and illusions. The idea of progress and liberation is a myth, as witnessed by twentieth-century examples of genocide, and so is the idea that knowledge can be objective and truthful. In this latter respect, scientific knowledge is relative (as argued much earlier by Feyerabend and Kuhn), so there are no guarantees as to the worth of the activities of scientists or the truthfulness of their statements. Science is simply a ‘language game’. The deconstruction of both ideas into myths implies the disintegration of all the symbols of modern capitalist society, and specifically in relation to truth claims, postmodernism denies the existence of all universal truth statements, which are replaced by variety, contingency and ambivalence, and plurality in culture, tradition, ideology and knowledge. Everything solid melts into air, every structure dissolves and every truth statement is contingent and relative; we are left merely with rhetoric, discourse and language games about knowledge and truth. ‘Truth’ can be deconstructed to talk about truth, or ‘truth claims’, which are themselves reducible to language and are merely games. The effects of this approach are felt everywhere by everything, including ethnography.

This ‘moment’ in the history of ethnography is referred to as the ‘double crisis’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 21–2). Under the impulse of postmodernism, some ethnographers challenge the claim that ethnography can produce universally valid knowledge by accurately capturing or representing the nature of the social world (in anthropology see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; in sociology see Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; van Maanen 1988; Atkinson 1990; Hammersley 1990, 1992; Denzin 1997; Atkinson and Hammersley 1998; Richardson 1998). All accounts are constructions and the whole issue of which account more accurately represents social reality is meaningless (see Denzin 1992; Richardson 1992). This is called the crisis of representation. Inasmuch as ethnographic descriptions are partial, selective, even autobiographical in that they are tied to the
particular ethnographer and the contingencies under which the data were collected, the traditional criteria for evaluating ethnography become problematic, as terms like ‘validity’, ‘reliability’ and ‘generalizability’ are deconstructed. This is called the crisis of legitimation.

As we shall see in Chapter 2, these crises have deep effects on ethnography. The crisis of representation, for example, has implications for how we should understand ethnographic accounts: they do not neutrally or impartially represent the social world (but, in this view, nor does anything else). There are implications for the claims ethnographers are able to make about their account, which is no longer a privileged description of the social world from the inside (what Geertz once called a ‘thick description’ in order to emphasize its richness and depth). And there are implications for the written text, which attempts to represent in writing the reality of the ‘field’, for ethnographers should no longer make foolish authority claims in order to validate the account as an accurate representation of reality but be ‘reflexive’, in which they reflect on the contingencies which bore upon and helped to ‘create’ the data as a partial account. Ethnographers should produce ‘tales of the field’ (van Maanen 1988) rather than attempt spurious realist accounts of some setting. However, as we shall see in the next chapter, some postmodern ethnographers have responded to this challenge and developed a kind of post postmodern ethnography, which takes on board these criticisms but responds in ways that reassert some of the certainties and realism of earlier types of ethnography.

**Conclusion**

The postmodern critique presents four chief problems for ethnography, attacking its representation of the field, the value it places on ‘thick description’, the reliability and validity of its data and the construction of the ethnographic text. These criticisms are addressed in later chapters of the volume as we defend ethnography and make a case for its continued use. It is sufficient here to end with a general few remarks on the postmodern critique of ethnography and the defence against it.

‘Realist’ ethnographies survive among ethnographers who have not gone down the postmodern path and hold steadfastly to the validity of humanistic and interpretative approaches to studying people in natural settings. Realist ethnographies also continue among those ethnographers who subscribe to ‘critical realism’ as a methodological base, which asserts the objectivity and reality of some material structures, evidence on which it is possible accurately to uncover ethnographically (as well as by other means). Good examples of critical realist ethnography are Willis’s (1977) work on class reproduction, which addresses ethnographically the objectivity of the class system and how it imposes itself on school children, and Porter’s (1995)
Ethnography of the nursing profession, which confronts the reality of power relations in hospitals and objective structures like sectarianism and racism on critical realist ethnographies (see Porter 1993; Davies 1999).

Other ethnographers have sought to rescue ethnography from the excesses of postmodernism by incorporating some of its criticisms in order to defend ethnography and meet the challenge of postmodernism (Silverman 1989; Stanley 1990b; Brewer 1994; Seale 1999). This is not the extreme form of postmodern ethnography espoused by someone like Denzin (see Denzin 1988, 1992, 1994, 1997), where the method becomes a form of fiction or journalism, whose work represented for one critic ‘a somewhat elaborate review recording his personal responses’ (Seale 1999: 4). The attempt to reconcile postmodern ideas with the practice of good ethnography is clear in Hammersley's own work (1990, 1992), where he criticizes the failings of ‘naive realism’ only in order to advocate a more robust form of ethnographic representation which he calls ‘subtle realism’, and his use of ‘relevance’ as an alternative way of assessing ethnographic data under the attack on their validity and reliability. These responses, which defend ethnography from its critics, constitute a kind of post postmodern ethnography and are discussed in the chapters that follow.

Suggested further reading

The following are good general textbooks on ethnography: