**Ethnography**

**Definition:** *ethnography* from *Philip’s Encyclopedia*

Study of the culture of an ethnic group or society. Ethnographers gather anthropological data by direct observation of a group's economic and social life. *See also* anthropology; ethnology

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**Summary Article:** *ethnography*

From *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*

The word ‘ethnography’ has a double meaning in anthropology: ethnography as *product* (ethnographic writings – the articles and books written by anthropologists), and ethnography as *process* (participant observation or fieldwork). The product depends upon the process, but not in any simple A→B relationship. In constructing ethnographies, anthropologists do more than merely ‘write up’ the fieldnotes they record as part of the process of doing fieldwork. If ethnographies can be seen as the building blocks and testing grounds of anthropological theory, ethnographies and the ethnographic process from which they derive are also shaped and moulded by theory.

Ethnography (in both senses) may profitably be envisioned as one point of an anthropological triangle. The other two points are *comparison* and *contextualization*. Together the three points of this triangle define the operational system by which anthropologists acquire and use ethnographic data in writing ethnographies. Fieldnotes are filtered and interpreted against comparative theory and against contextual documentary materials. As they are read, ethnographies then stimulate comparative theoretical thinking, which in turn suggests new problems and interpretations to be resolved through further ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographies, and the comparative theoretical reflection they spur, also regularly lead to new demands and rising standards for documentary contextualization (more history, more ecological or demographic backgrounding, more attention to state policy, economic trends and the world system). This anthropological triangle of ethnography, comparison and contextualization is, in essence, the way in which sociocultural anthropology works as a discipline to explain and interpret human cultures and social life.

Ethnographies as they have evolved over the past century-and-a-half constitute a genre, a form of writing conditioned by the process of knowledge construction epitomized in this anthropological triangle. Ethnographies consequently differ from travel writing, gazetteers, interview-based surveys, or even the personal fieldwork accounts of anthropologists (which form a separate genre). Ethnography, both product and process, has a history and pattern of development of its own.

**Ethnography as product: a history of ethnography**

As a written account, an ethnography focuses on a particular population, place and time with the deliberate goal of describing it to others. So, often, did the writings of nineteenth-century explorers, missionaries, military agents, journalists, travellers, and reformers; and these contain much information useful to anthropologists. What distinguishes the first ethnography, Lewis Henry Morgan’s *The League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois* (1851), from these other writings are two qualities: its attempt to depict the structure and operation of Iroquois society from the Iroquois viewpoint (the ethnographic...
point of the anthropological triangle), and its grounding in the monogenist anthropological theorizing of its time (the comparative point of the triangle), ideas to which Morgan would make major additions and reformulations. Morgan's book detailed Iroquois matrilineal kinship, political and ceremonial life, material culture, and religion; the ethnographic basis for this information being Morgan's partnership with the Western-educated Iroquois Ely S. Parker, his translator and cultural interpreter. The book's attention to history, geography, the impact of White settlers and contemporary land-rights issues also established standards for pre- and post-fieldwork contextualization (the third point of the triangle) that anthropologists continue to heed.

Morgan's ethnography, still authoritative and readable, was not joined by comparable works until the 1880s. What ensued instead were increased efforts to provide standardized guides for gathering ethnographic data by local ‘men on the spot’ (few were women) in accord with the comparative goals of armchair theorists. Although Morgan did himself collect kinship data from American Indian groups on fieldtrips during the 1860s, much of the material he used in later writings arrived from missionary and other amateurs in India, Australia and elsewhere, who filled in and returned his kinship schedules. In England, E.B. Tylor played a key role in drafting Notes and Queries on Anthropology, first published in 1874 for use around the globe; he and other comparativists like James Frazer helped shape up the resulting local work for publication, often first as articles in the Journal of the Anthropological Institute, which dates to 1872. Through these efforts ethnographic standards slowly improved, and theoretical perspectives became more overt, but contextualization retreated, a victim of anti-historical and ethnocentric evolutionism or diffusionism.

The fieldwork of Frank Cushing among the Zuni Indians in the early 1880s made a great leap forward in ethnographic method. Cushing learned to speak Zuni, resided at the pueblo over a four-year period, and combined observation of ongoing events with the seated-informant questioning more typical of the anthropological guide-users. Cushing's sensitive Zuni Fetishes (1888 [1883]) revealed the inner world of these people's cosmology, mythology and symbolism, and its connection to practical activities; so did his major work Zuni Breadstuff (1920), but its initial publication during 1884–85 in an obscure journal insulated its impact at the time. Cushing's lack of influence on students and his death in 1899 combined to make his ethnographic advances a false start for anthropology (Sanjek 1990: 189–92).

Franz Boas's ethnographic research among the Inuit in 1883–4 moved less thoroughly in the participant observation direction than Cushing, and his subsequent fieldwork through the 1890s among the American Indians of the Northwest Coast amounted mainly to the transcription of texts recited by seated informants (Sanjek 1990: 193–203). It was this approach that he taught his cohorts of students during the first three decades of the twentieth century at Columbia University, and they took it with them as anthropology departments sprouted in the United States. Their goal was the ‘salvage ethnography’ of ‘memory cultures’ and not the direct participant observation of human life as it is lived. In view of the devastated circumstances of Native American reservations, the Boasians recognized no other choice before acculturation and community studies became acceptable alternatives in the 1930s. Until then, American ethnographies increased in number, and improved in contextualization as historical interests supplanted evolutionary theory. But they stultified in method as participant observation regressed, and in theory as well, with little invigoration from the ethnographic point of the anthropological triangle.

In British anthropology, the division of labour between the armchair theorist and the person on the spot, already dead in the USA, entered obsolescence in the 1890s when Tylor and Frazer's Oxford-
trained protégé Baldwin Spencer collaborated in participant observation with a seasoned local expert on Aboriginal life, Frank Gillen. Their *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1968 [1899]) provided a vivid and detailed view of cosmology, ritual and social organization that not only revealed unheralded cultural complexity amidst technological simplicity, but also sparked new theoretical currents in the work of Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud.

Even before Spencer and Gillen’s work was published, in 1898 a team of Cambridge scientists arrived on the spot themselves in the Torres Straits expedition to the islands just north of Australia. Though less theoretically or ethnographically provocative, their results moved fieldwork practice beyond even the Australian ethnographers with crystallization of the genealogical method of anthropological inquiry by team member W.H.R. Rivers. Rivers demonstrated that the systematic collection of genealogies could produce far more than kinship terminologies; community history, migration trajectories, marriage patterns, demography, inheritance and succession, and the relation of rules to actual occurrences could all be studied. With his application of this method in *The Todas* (1906), an ethnography of a South Indian group, Rivers also found that prior knowledge of kinship connections enriched an understanding of participation in ongoing ritual events (Sanjek 1990: 203–7).

These British ethnographic innovations were incorporated into a 1912 revision of *Notes and Queries*. Novice ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski carried this with him to New Guinea in 1914, but soon became discouraged with the limits of even this more sophisticated use of the seated informant. In his ground-breaking Trobriand Islands fieldwork of 1915–18, Malinowski bettered Cushing. Not only did he learn the language, but he more actively entered the scenes of daily life and made the speech in action he heard and recorded there the basis of his ethnography. Moreover, he maintained detailed fieldnotes that he analysed topically while still in the field, and constantly re-read to plan further research activities (Malinowski 1922: 1–25). He found that topics like economics or law or landuse or magic intruded on each other – the events recorded in his fieldnotes could be analysed ethnographically from several of these institutional perspectives. Thus was his functionalism born, ‘the mass of gears all turning and grinding on each other’ as his American contemporary Ralph Linton put it (Sanjek 1990: 207–15).

Malinowski’s students, a robust and gifted group, produced dozens of classic ethnographies during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Perhaps the most influential has been E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (1940). Rich in ethnographic details, it is nonetheless highly selective in their presentation, subordinating them to a powerful theory of how descent ideology organizes group life and cattle management against the vagaries of annual ecological transformation and population movement. In this work, influenced by the thinking of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, a strong relationship was evident between the comparative and ethnographic points of the anthropological triangle, and its impact was marked over the next quarter century. As critiques of *The Nuer* later mounted, it was the historical-contextual point of the triangle that was seen as most in need of bolstering.

In the USA, Malinowskian-style ethnography took hold and Boasian fieldwork methods were largely superseded. Margaret Mead, one of Boas’s later students, appears to have independently invented an ethnographic approach equivalent to Malinowski’s, against her mentor’s advice (Sanjek 1990: 215–26). From the 1940s, on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, a combination of strong ethnography but weak contextualization was widely visible in both anthropological theory and in ethnographies themselves. New demands for improved contextualization arose with the impact of ecology, regional analysis, history and anthropology, and world systems in the 1960s and thereafter. Today, there are hundreds of classic ethnographies, though perhaps none since *The Nuer* would be as readily so
designated by a majority of anthropologists, or has been as widely read.

**Ethnography as process: doing ethnography**

The selection of a particular population or site for ethnographic research is ordinarily related to some unanswered question or outstanding problem in the body of comparative anthropological theory. Personal predilections or connections of researchers also shape this selection, but the field-worker still must justify his or her choice in terms of some significant theory to which the project is addressed. Usually this justification is made explicit in a written proposal for funds to underwrite the fieldwork.

While ethnographic fieldwork is thus lodged from conception in comparative anthropological theory (in one of the many varieties or schools discussed in this encyclopedia), the comparative point of the anthropological triangle also moulds the ethnographic process in two further ways. First, anthropologists are imbued with a cross-cultural perspective by training and reading. At each step in the ethnographic process they constantly refer to the global range of societies with which they are familiar. When addressing any aspect of social life – marriage, leadership, ethnicity, etc. – mentally they run through examples of similarities and differences elsewhere. Unlike other social sciences that see Western experience as the centre and as the norm, anthropology fixes each case within the widest coordinates – all social formations, globally, through human history.

Second, the comparative perspective focuses ethnographic attention on trends and transitions, not just on similarities and differences at random (which are infinite). Rather than treating each ethnographic instance as unique (which in terms of extreme cultural relativism it is), ethnographers place the social phenomena they observe within comparative frames (hunting and gathering, horticultural, agricultural, pastoral, industrial, colonial, neocolonial regimes; cooperative, competitive, individualistic societies; gender subordination, complementarity or equality; etc.). Ethnographies in turn provoke debate, revision and innovation in theorizing. And behind this, and behind the ethnographic process itself, lies the problem of identifying what is most deserving of close attention within the flux of daily life – the patterns of behaviour and change that effect shifts in the social order at large.

While significant theories bring ethnographers to particular locations, actors and activities, once they arrive they begin to listen as well as watch. Often they must first learn to listen – learn the language, the local vocabulary and the current verbal conventions. Ethnographic fieldwork now turns away from theoretical discourse and to the viewpoints and concepts of the people (informants, subjects, actors, consultants) themselves. Ethnographers aim to document how the people see and talk about their everyday social activities and groupings, and the wider worlds they live in. It is their normal scenes of activity, topics of conversation and standards of evaluation that are the objects of ethnographic fieldwork.

This is not begun by announcing: ‘I’m your anthropologist; when can I interview you?’ Ethnographers must be honest about their role and sponsorship, but their paramount aim is to listen, and to move as quickly as possible into natural settings of social life, the places people would be, doing what they would be doing, if the ethnographer were not there. Interviews become useful at later stages of fieldwork; participation observation begins by listening to what British anthropologist Audrey Richards called ‘speech in action’. As ethnographers watch and listen in a wide-ranging manner (though within parameters set by the significant theories that bring them there), they learn to understand culturally meaningful conventions, and to formulate culturally appropriate questions.
As this initial stage of the ethnographic process develops, the fieldworker must constantly make decisions about where to be, whom to listen to, what events to follow, and what safely to ignore and leave out. These decisions are guided both by the significant theories prefiguring fieldwork, and by the theories of significance that arise in the field. These latter theories (hunches, hypotheses, ideas about connections and relationships) emerge as participant observation and listening to speech in action proceeds. They suggest what people and activities to focus upon, what places and events to attend, and what objects and their circulation to follow.

As this occurs, the fieldwork ‘funnel’ narrows, to use Michael Agar’s (1980) apt metaphor. The early period is wide, open, and nearly all-encompassing. As theories of significance emerge, pan out, or are discarded, the funnel of informants, events, and activities narrows. Goals sharpen; research design crystallizes as cultural knowledge grows; wide-ranging fieldnotes are reread, and suggest more precise directions to follow; specific bodies of records (of household composition, land tenure, ritual performances, life histories, folklore, etc.) are collected systematically.

One side of ethnography is unmediated by communication with the actors. As observers, ethnographers watch, count, and record things in their fieldnotes – numbers of people in events, their positions, their comings and goings; objects, inventories, exchanges, movements, orderings, sequences, associations, assemblages and arrangements of all sorts. The other side of ethnographic work consists of speech events, scenes of communication in which the ethnographer is a passive or active participant. And like Agar’s funnel, the speech events of fieldwork (here classed in six categories) also move from wide to narrow, from open to more focused.

1. Ethnography begins with situated listening. Here the actors control topicality (talking to each other about what they usually do), and the anthropologist is admitted to their turf (the locations they usually occupy). Early on, as trust is established, fieldworkers place themselves in a wide sampling of such places; as the research funnel narrows, an ethnographer becomes more selective about where to listen.

2. Still on the informants’ turf, and still in the accustomed activities of daily life, the anthropologist soon starts to enter natural conversations, and begins to shift topicality to his or her own interests. This process starts gently, by moving appropriately into rounds of chatting, gossiping, and ordinary comment. As cultural competence increases (and as theories of significance start to emerge), the fieldworker also attempts to direct conversations by introducing questions and suggesting topics for responses from informants.

3. Though not a major part of ethnographic practice, in some instances, and while still on the informants’ turf, the fieldworker may ask direct and pointed questions, and attempt to secure precise pieces of data. Interventions of this sort are dangerous – the inappropriateness of such seizures of topicality in everyday settings may be jarring to the actors. Typically speech events of this sort occur in the final days of fieldwork, when local acceptance is at its peak, research goals are most pressing, and the fieldwork funnel approaches its narrow end.

4. Usually after some initial period of fieldwork (a few months perhaps), interviews may begin. This class of speech events is disruptive; the informant is removed from her or his turf, either to the ethnographer’s household or office, or by transforming an everyday location into a scene of ethnographer–informant dialogue (an activity that would otherwise not be occurring there). Typically the earliest of these deliberate breaks in time–place flow reserve topicality for the

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actor. In such open-ended (or discovery) interviews, the informant moves the conversation according to his or her own interests.

5. In later and more productive interviews, the ethnographer begins to assert control. Topics are introduced, allowing the informant to expand freely upon their own point of view and knowledge. In more structured ethnographic interviews, topicality is more firmly shaped and directed by the fieldworker; informant responses move away from orations and free commentaries, and to more specific responses to questions.

6. In the most focused form of interview, the ethnographer controls both turf and topicality as fully as possible. Questionnaires and interview schedules may be used, and the objective is to obtain particular types and pieces of data. These typically include household interviews, psychological tests, or reports of disputes, but may also encompass repeated interview sessions to secure lengthy life histories, with the anthropologist guiding the subject according to pre-set standards of scope and comprehensiveness.

The production of notes and records (Sanjek 1990: 92–121) begins to move the ethnographic process towards its ultimate written products. Focused interview sessions with seated informants often permit direct transcription of verbal statements. But in open-ended and ethnographic interviews, brief written notes – what Simon Ottenberg (in Sanjek 1990) terms scratch notes – are taken during the session, and these form the basis for the construction later of fuller written fieldnotes. Anthropologists often go through this two-step process even when interviews are tape recorded, both as a backup to and index of the taped session, and because of the analytic gains many ethnographers note in transforming their scratch notes into fuller descriptive fieldnotes.

In participant observation in natural settings, similar brief jottings may be inscribed, but major attention is directed to the event in progress. Often it is not even possible to record scratch notes, and both they and fuller fieldnote description occur later. Margaret Mead wrote about the nagging pressure to type-up fieldnotes from scratch notes, and about the danger of scratch notes growing 'cold' when this is delayed, even by one day. But she also wrote of the satisfaction of being caught up with this work, and of the importance for later ethnographic writing of the insights gained in moving from scratch notes to descriptive fieldnotes. Ottenberg sees this step as the interaction of scratch notes and headnotes, the stored memories and interpretations that arise from direct participant observation as filtered by the ethnographer's overall theoretical stance. Headnotes form an essential complement to fieldnotes (and to more formal fieldwork data sets, or records). Headnotes are employed to make sense of one's fieldnotes when they are reread later for ethnographic writing projects. The importance of headnotes is particularly evident when anthropologists attempt to use another ethnographer's fieldnotes, and quickly realize how difficult it is to understand them without any headnotes of their own.

Fieldnotes and records present ethnographers with great masses of information – hundreds, even thousands of pages – that may be arranged minimally in chronological order or by topic. Malinowski urged that fieldworkers constantly read and begin to organize their notes while still in the field, but more focused work on them ordinarily occurs when fieldwork is over. As ethnographers turn to ethnographic writing, they must readdress the theoretical discourse they turn away from in fieldwork. Fieldnotes and headnotes must now be related directly to the comparative and contextual points of the anthropological triangle.

On paper, two types of documents (each with many iterations and subdivisions) link fieldnotes and

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ethnographic writings. Book or article outlines key the writing process to comparative theoretical ideas and contextual data sources against which fieldnote evidence will be weighed and interpreted. Indexes of fieldnotes and records are refined to locate relevant data for the topics of concern in the writing outlines. The ethnographer then works back and forth along the fieldnote–index–outline ethnography continuum. At the same time, considerations are made as to format, style, readership, manner of presentation, and direct use of fieldnotes and informant statements. These issues are considered both through emulation of admired models of ethnographic writing, and through attention to a critical literature on ethnographic writing that arose in the 1980s (Marcus and Cushman 1982; Sperber 1985; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988). This postmodernist concern with ‘the crisis of representation’ adds to earlier forms of ethnographic criticism that focus primarily on faults of contextualization and which have produced ever higher standards in historical, political-economic, ecological, demographic, statistical and legal backgrounding.

Beyond these textual and contextual critiques of ethnography, and those that address an ethnography’s acknowledgement of, and relevance to, comparative theoretical work, there are also internal canons of validity by which ethnographic writing may be evaluated (Sanjek 1990: 393–404). The first of these is theoretical candour, the openness with which the ethnographer addresses the significant theories and the local theories of significance that structured the fieldwork process. A second canon calls for explicit depiction of the ethnographer’s fieldwork path – the number of informants from whom information was obtained, in what ways, and their relationship both to the wider population the ethnography concerns and to each other. A third canon concerns information about the fieldnote evidence itself: not simply ‘how much’ and its basis in participant observation or interviews but more significantly the precise relationship of notes and records to the written ethnography. Some ethnographies utilize fieldnotes directly, even masses of them; others, for rhetorical or narrative purposes, do not, and need not. What matters in the end is that readers of an ethnography have a clear picture of what the ethnographer did and why, whom they talked to and learned from, and what they brought back to document it.

See also: Boas; fieldwork, genealogical method, Malinowski, methodology, Morgan, multi-sited ethnography, postmodernism

Further reading


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