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Field Notes: How to Take, Code, and Manage Them

"Those who want to use qualitative methods because they seem easier than statistics are in for a rude awakening" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984:53).

Anthropologists collect many kinds of qualitative data. These include audio tapes (of musical performances and of recitations of folktales and myths), videotapes (of ceremonies, dances, and everyday activities), photographs, newspaper clippings, transcriptions of formal interviews, notes from formal interviews, caches of personal letters, texts written by native people about their own lives and, of course, field notes.

In this chapter, I focus on field notes—how to *write* them, how to *code* them, and how to *manage* them. The lessons about coding and managing field notes apply just as well to transcripts of interviews and to other textual data.

The method I present here for making and coding field notes was developed and tested by the late Michael Kenny and me, between 1967 and

from Bernard, 1994, Research Methods in Anthropology

1971, when we ran those NSF-supported field schools in cultural anthropology I described in Chapter 7. Kenny and I relied initially on our own experience with field notes and we borrowed freely from the experience of many colleagues. The method we developed—involving jottings, a diary, a daily log, and three kinds of formal notes—was used by 40 field-school participants in the United States and in Mexico and by others since then. Some years later, after microcomputers came on the scene, my students and I began to think about using machines to help manage textual data (Bernard & Evans, 1983).

Two things can be said about the method I'm going to lay out here: (a) It works, and (b) it's not the only way to do things. You'll develop your own style of writing field notes and add your own little tricks as you go along. Still, the method described in this chapter will help you work systematically at taking field notes, and it will allow you to search through them quickly and easily to look for relationships in your data. I wish I had used this method when I was doing my own MA and Ph.D fieldwork—and I wish microcomputers had been available then, too.

The Four Types of Field Notes: Jottings, the Diary, the Log, and the Notes

Jottings

Field *jottings*—or what Roger Sanjek calls "scratch notes" (1990:96)—are what get you through the day. Human memory is a very poor recording device, especially for the kind of details that make the difference between good and so-so anthropological research. Keep a note pad with you at all times and make field jottings on the spot. This applies to both formal and informal interviews that you conduct with people, in bars and cafés, in homes, and on the street.

It also applies to things that just strike you as you are walking along. Jottings will provide you with the trigger you need to recall a lot of details that you don't have time to write down while you're observing events or listening to an informant. Even a few key words will jog your memory later. Remember: If you don't write it down, it's gone.

Of course, there are times when you just can't take notes. Morris Freilich did research with the Mohawks in Brooklyn, New York, and on the Caughnanaga reservation, 10 miles south of Montreal, in the 1950s. He did a lot of participant observation in a bar and, as Freilich tells it, every time he pulled out a notebook his audience became hostile. So, Freilich

kept a small notebook in his hip pocket and would periodically duck into the men's room at the bar to scribble a few jottings (Freilich, 1977:159).

William Sturtevant used stubby little pencils to take furtive notes (1959). When Hortense Powdermaker did her research on race relations in Mississippi in 1932, she took surreptitious notes on sermons at African-American churches. "My pocketbook was large," she said, "and the notebook in it was small" (1966:175).

Every anthropologist runs into situations where it's impossible to take notes. It is always appropriate to be sensitive to the feelings of your informants, and it is sometimes a good idea to just listen attentively to an informant and leave your notebook in your pocket. You'd be surprised, however, how few of these situations there are. Don't talk yourself into not jotting down a few notes by *assuming* that informants won't like it if you do.

The key is to take the role of researcher immediately when you arrive at your field site, whether that site is a peasant village or a corporate office. Let people know from the very first day you arrive that you are there to study their way of life. Don't try to become an inconspicuous participant rather than what you really are: an observer who wants to participate as much as possible. Participant observation means that you try to *experience* the life of your informants to the extent possible; it doesn't mean that you try to melt into the background and *become* a fully accepted member of a culture other than your own.

It's usually impossible to do anyway. After three decades of coming and going in Indian villages in Mexico, I still stick out like a sore thumb and have yet to become the slightest bit inconspicuous. Be honest with people, and keep your note pad out as much of the time as possible. Ask your informants for their permission to take notes while you are talking with them. If people don't want you to take notes, they'll tell you.

Or they may ask to see your notes. A student researcher in one of our field schools worked in a logging camp in Idaho. He would write up his notes at night from the jottings he took all day. Each morning at 6 a.m. he nailed the day's sheaf of notes (along with a pen on a string) to a tree for everyone to look at. Some of the men took the time to scribble helpful (or amusing) comments on the notes. If you use this technique, watch out for the TV-news effect. That's when people tell you things they want to tell everyone because they know you're going to broadcast whatever they say.

The Diary

Notes are based on observations that will form the basis of your publications. A diary, on the other hand, is personal. It's a place where you can

run and hide when things get tough. You absolutely need a diary in the field. It will help you deal with loneliness, fear, and other emotions that make fieldwork difficult.

A diary chronicles how you feel and how you perceive your relations with others around you. If you are really angry at someone in the field, you should write about it—in your diary. Jot down emotional highs and lows while they're happening, if you can, and write them up in your diary at the end of the day. Try to spend at least half an hour each day pouring out your soul to a diary. Later on, during data analysis, your diary will become an important professional document. It will give you information that will help you interpret your field notes, and will make you aware of your personal biases.

The important thing about a diary is just to have one, and to keep it separate from your other field notes. Franz Boas was engaged to Marie Krackowizer in May 1883, just 3 weeks before beginning his first field trip. It was a grueling 15 months on Baffin Island and at sea. Boas missed German society terribly, and though he couldn't mail the letters, he wrote about 500 pages to his fiancée. Here is an excerpt from this extraordinary diary:

> December 16, north of Pangnirtung. My dear sweetheart. . . . Do you know how I pass these long evenings? I have a copy of Kant with me, which I am studying, so that I shall not be so completely uneducated when I return. Life here really makes one dull and stupid. . . . I have to blush when I remember that during our meal tonight I thought how good a pudding with plum sauce would taste. But you have no idea what an effect privations and hunger, real hunger, have on a person. Maybe Mr. Kant is a good antidote! The contrast is almost unbelievable when I remember that a year ago I was in society and observed all the rules of good taste, and tonight I sit in this snow hut with Wilhelm and an Eskimo eating a piece of raw, frozen seal meat which had first to be hacked up with an axe, and greedily gulping my coffee. Is that not as great a contradiction as one can think of? (Cole, 1983:29)

> February 16. Anarnitung. . . . I long for sensible conversation and for someone who really understands me! Unfortunately, this time I did not bring a book to read, so I cannot help myself. I read all the advertisements and everything else on one page of the Kolnische Zeitung [a magazine]. In four days I shall have been away eight months. I have heard from none of you for four and a half months. (ibid.:42)

Bronislaw Malinowski spent much of World War I trapped in the Trobriand Islands. He, too, missed his fiancée and European society and occasionally lashed out at the Trobrianders in his diary (Malinowski, 1967):

Monday, 4.16 . . . I took a walk through the little villages—11 huts and a couple of *bwaymas* [storehouses] scattered pell-mell on the sand. . . . For the first time deep regret that E. R. M. is not Polish. [E. R. M. was Elsie R. Masson, Malinowski's first wife.] But I rejected the idea that perhaps our engagement is not definitive. I shall go back to Poland and my children will be Poles.

Tuesday, 4.24. . . . Last night and this morning looked in vain for fellows for my boat. This drives me to a state of white rage and hatred for bronze-colored skin, combined with depression, a desire to "sit down and cry," and a furious longing "to get out of this." For all that, I decide to resist and work today—"business as usual," despite everything.

6.27. Cold day, sky overcast. Worked to the point of complete exhaustion. . . . In the morning Tokulubakiki and Tokaka'u from Tilakaywa. Then Tokaka'u alone. After lunch, short talk with Towese'i, then went to observe construction of big *gugula,* [a display of food] and to Kwaybwaga, where they were roasting *bulukwa* [a European type of pig]. . . . I felt rotten and wondered whether I should risk a long walk or lie down and sleep. I went to M'tava, and this did me a great deal of good. When I came back I wrote down *wosi* [songs] . . . During my walk I thought that some day I'd like to meet Anatole France. (From "A Day in the Strict Sense of the Term" by Bronislaw Malinowski. Reprinted by permission of John Hawkins & Associates, Inc., pp. 253-254, 261, 293-294)

Fieldwork is an intense experience that will test your ability to function as a scientist under sometimes stressful conditions. Your diary will give you an outlet for writing things that you don't want to become part of a public record. Publication of Malinowski's and Boas's diaries have helped make all field workers aware that they are not alone in their frailties and self-doubts.

The Log

A log is a running account of how you plan to spend your time, how you actually spend your time, and how much money you spent. A good log is the key to doing systematic fieldwork and to collecting both qualitative and quantitative data on a systematic basis.

A field log should be kept in bound books of blank, lined pages. There are schedule-planning computer programs, of course, but I suspect they will never take the place of a big, clunky logbook for anthropological fieldwork. Don't use a skimpy little notebook for your log, like the kind you might keep in your pocket for jottings. Use a book around 6″ × 8″ in size, or one even larger.

Each day you are in the field should be represented by a double page of the log. The pages on the left should list what you *plan* to do on any given day. The facing pages will recount what you *actually* do each day.

Begin your log on pages 2 and 3. Put the date on the top of the even-numbered page to the left. Then, go through the entire notebook and put the successive dates on the even-numbered pages. By doing this in advance, even the days on which you "do nothing," or are away from your field site, will have double log pages devoted to them.

The first day or two that you make a log you will use only the right-hand pages where you keep track of where you go, who you see, and what you spend. Some people like to carry their log around with them. Others prefer to jot down the names of the people they run into or interview, and enter the information into their logs when they write up their notes in the evening. Keep an alphabetized file of 25-word profiles on as many people you meet as you can. It will make it much easier to remember who you're dealing with.

For the first few weeks, at least, and then for 2-week periods at various times in your field trip, jot down the times that you eat and what you eat, especially if you are doing fieldwork in another culture. Also, write down who you eat with and how much you spend on all meals away from your house. You are likely to be surprised at the results you get from this.

After a day or two, you will begin to use the left-hand sheets of the log. As you go through any given day, you will think of many things that you want to know but can't resolve on the spot. Write those things down in your jot book or in your log. When you write up your field notes, think about who you need to interview, or what you need to observe, regarding each of the things you wondered about that day.

Right then and there, open your log and commit yourself to finding each thing out at a particular time on a particular day. If finding something out requires that you talk to a particular person, then put that person's name in the log, too. If you don't know the person to talk to, then put down the name of someone whom you think can steer you to the right person.

Suppose you're studying a local educational system. It's April 5 and you are talking with an informant called MJR. She tells you that since the military government took over, children have to study politics for 2 hours every day and she doesn't like it. Write a note to yourself in your log to ask other mothers about this issue and to interview the school principal.

Later on, when you are writing up your notes, you may decide not to interview the principal until after you have accumulated more data about how mothers in the community feel about the new curriculum. On the left-hand page for April 23 you note: "target date for interview with school principal." On the left-hand page of April 10th you note: "make appointment for interview on 23rd with school principal." For April 6 you note, "need more interviews with mothers about new curriculum."

As soon as you think that you need to know how many kilowatt hours of electricity were burned in a village, or the difference in price between fish sold off a boat and the same fish sold in the local market, commit yourself in your log to a specific time when you will try to resolve the questions. Whether the question you think of requires a formal appointment, or a personal observation, or an informal interview in a bar, write it down in one of the left-hand pages of your log.

Don't worry if the planned activity log you create for yourself winds up looking nothing like the activities you actually engage in from day to day. Frankly, you'll be lucky to do half the things you want to do, much less do them when you want to. The important thing is to fill those left-hand pages, as far out into the future as you can, with specific information that you need, and specific tasks you need to perform to get that information.

This is not just because you want to use your time effectively, but because the process of building a log forces you to think hard about the questions you really want to answer in your research and the data you really need. You will start any field research project knowing some of the questions you are interested in. But those questions may change; you may add some, and drop others—or your entire emphasis may shift.

The right-hand pages of the log are for recording what you actually accomplish each day. As I said, you'll be appalled at first at how little resemblance the left-hand and the right-hand pages have to one another. Remember that good field notes do not depend on the punctuality of informants or your ability to do all the things you want to do. They depend on your systematic work over a period of time. If some informants do not show up for appointments (and often they won't), you can evaluate whether or not you really need the data you thought you were going to get from them. If you do, then put a note on the left-hand page for that same day, or for the next day, to contact the informant and reschedule the appointment.

If you still have no luck, you may have to decide whether it's worth more of your time to track down a particular informant or a particular piece of information. Your log will tell you how much time you've spent on it already and will make the decision easier. There's plenty of time for everything when you think you've got months stretching ahead of you. But you only have a finite amount of time in fieldwork to get useful data, and the time goes very quickly.

Field Notes

There are three kinds of notes: notes on method and technique; ethnographic, or descriptive notes; and notes that discuss issues or provide an analysis of social situations.

Methodological Notes

Methodological notes deal with technique in collecting data. If you work out a better way to keep a log than I've described here, don't just *use* your new technique; write it up in your field notes and publish a paper about your technique so others can benefit from your experience. If you find yourself spending too much time with marginal people in the culture, make a note of it, and discuss how that came to be. You'll discover little tricks of the trade, like the "uh-huh" technique, discussed in Chapter 10, in which you learn how and when to grunt encouragingly to keep an interview going. Write up notes about your discoveries. Mark all these notes with an "M" at the top—M for "method."

Methodological notes are also about your own growth as an instrument of data collection. Collecting data is always awkward when you begin a field project, but gets easier as you become more comfortable in a new culture. During this critical period of adjustment you should intellectualize what you're learning about doing fieldwork by taking methodological notes.

When I first arrived in Greece in 1960, I was invited to dinner at "around 7 p.m." When I arrived at around 7:15 (what I thought was a polite 15 minutes late), I was embarrassed to find that my host was still taking a bath. I should have known that he really meant "around 8 p.m." when he said "around 7." My methodological note for the occasion simply stated that I should not show up for dinner before 8 p.m. in the future. Some weeks later, I figured out the general rules for timing of evening activities, including cocktails, dinner, and late-night desserts in the open squares.

When I began fieldwork with the Otomí people of central Mexico in 1962 I was offered *pulque* everywhere I went. Pulque is fermented nectar from the maguey cactus. I tried to refuse politely; I couldn't stand the stuff. But people were very insistent and seemed offended if I didn't accept the drink. Things were particularly awkward when I showed up at someone's house and there were other guests there. Everyone enjoyed pulque but me, and most of the time people were too poor to have beer around to offer me.

At that time, I wrote a note that people "felt obliged by custom to offer pulque to guests." I was dead wrong. As I eventually learned, people were testing me to see if I was affiliated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics, an evangelical missionary group that had its regional headquarters in the area where I was working.

The SIL is comprised mostly of excellent linguists whose major output is translations of the Bible into the various nonwritten languages of the world. There was, and is, serious friction between the Indians who had

converted to Protestantism and those who remained Catholic. It was important for me to disassociate myself from the SIL, so my methodological note discussed the importance of conspicuously consuming alcohol and tobacco in order to identify myself as an anthropologist and not as an evangelical missionary.

Nine years later I wrote:

> After all this time, I still don't like pulque. I'm sure it's unhealthy to drink out of the gourds that are passed around. I've taken to carrying a couple of six-packs of beer in the car and telling people that I just don't like pulque, and telling people that I'd be pleased to have them join me in a beer. If they don't offer me beer, I offer it to them. This works just fine, and keeps my reputation of independence from the SIL intact.

Eight years later, in 1979, I read that William Partridge had a similar predicament during his work in Colombia (Kimball & Partridge, 1979:55). Everywhere he went, it seems, people offered him beer, even at 7 a.m. He needed an acceptable excuse, he said, to avoid spending all his waking hours getting drunk.

After a few months in the field, Partridge found that telling people "*Estoy tomando una pastilla*" ("I'm taking a pill") did the trick. Locally, the pill referred to in this phrase was used in treating venereal disease. Everyone knew that you didn't drink alcohol while you were taking this pill, and the excuse was perfect for adding a little virility boost to Partridge's reputation. Add this to your file of methods notes.

Methodological notes, then, have to do with the conduct of field inquiry itself. You will want to make methodological notes especially when you do something silly that breaks a cultural norm. If you are feeling particularly sheepish, you might want to write those feelings into your diary where no one else will see what you've written; but you don't want to waste the opportunity to make a straightforward methodological note on such occasions, as well.

Descriptive Notes

Descriptive notes are the meat and potatoes of fieldwork. Most notes are descriptive and are from two sources: watching and listening. Interviews with informants produce acres of notes, especially if you use a tape recorder and later write down large chunks of what people say. Observations of processes, like making beer, skinning animals, feeding children, hoeing, house building, and so on, also produce a lot of notes. Descriptive

field notes may contain birth records that you've copied out of a church registry; or they may consist of summary descriptions of a village plaza, or an urban shopping mall, or any environmental characteristics that you think are important.

The best way to learn to write descriptive field notes is to practice doing it with others who are also trying to learn. Get together with one or more partners and observe a process that's unfamiliar to all of you. It could be a church service other than one you've seen before, or it could be an occupational process that you've not witnessed. (Until recently, I had never seen plasterers hang ceilings. They do it on stilts.)

Whatever you observe, try to capture in field notes the details of the behavior and the environment. Try to get down "what's going on." Then ask informants who are watching the ceremony or process to explain what's going on and try to get notes down on their explanation. Later, get together with your research partner(s) and discuss your notes with one another. You'll find that two or three people see much more than just one sees. You might also find that you and your partners saw the same things but wrote down different subsets of the same information.

Gene Shelley studied people who suffer from end-stage kidney disease. Most patients are on hemodialysis. Some are on peritoneal dialysis. The "hemo" patients go to a dialysis center, several times a week, while the "pero" patients perform a dialysis (called CAPD) on themselves several times a day. Here are four descriptive notes from Shelley's research. (The numbers at the top of each note are topical codes. More on topical codes in a bit. And ignore the dollar sign. We'll get back to that, too.)

> $ 81689: 757.3; Dr. H
>
> Dr. H explains that in peritoneal dialysis you exchange 2 liters of fluid several times a day (based on body size). Women do it about 3 times and men about 4 times because of larger body size. People mostly do a "dwell" for about 8 hours overnight while they sleep (fluid is inflowed into peritoneal cavity and allowed to sit there overnight). Then they do peritoneal dialysis when they wake up and another time or two during the day. Peritoneal dialysis patients are pretty close to being healthy. They have to take medication but you can not tell them from healthy people, he says.

> $ 83089: 57.3, 757.5; Nurse Ralph B.
>
> CAPD training takes about a week to 10 days. During this time, the patient comes in every day and receives training. Ralph thinks that when the whole family comes in for the training, the patients do better. They have about 20 CAPD patients right now. Ralph said there are 3 types of CAPD patients: (1) those patients who are already on hemo and in pretty good shape, usually

well-motivated, (2) those who are late getting started and are in trouble (medically) and are hurriedly trying to learn the procedure (It takes 2 weeks to get a catheter inserted and then have it heal. Since this surgery is viewed as "elective surgery," it can be bumped and rescheduled. Only after surgery and healing can the training take place.), and (3) those who have lost a kidney which was transplanted. They are just waiting for another kidney and they view CAPD as temporary and are not that motivated to learn it because they think they won't be on it long.

$ 9589: 57; 572; 752.2; 76; 157; Inf. #2

She says the social network is important, in her opinion. It is important to have a person to support you (emotionally and physically). Her friends and school children (she was a teacher for deaf students for a short time), called her to see how she was doing and they still get in touch with her now. However, her friends cry and say what a brave person she is and she doesn't like them to cry. "People get upset, so I don't talk to them about it." She also doesn't like to talk to people for another reason. She started dialysis in 1972. Since then, all others who started with her (in her cohort) are dead. She doesn't want to meet new people. She doesn't want to talk to other patients about personal stuff because she will get attached to them and they will die (or suffer horribly with another disease like diabetes). Even with people who are not sick, she doesn't always tell everyone about CAPD. She would rather talk to them about normal things, not her disease.

$ 12689: Waiting Room 571; 580; 580.7; 580.1; 264; 12

While waiting to talk to Dr. H, I sat in the hemodialysis waiting room. I watched and listened to patients (and waiting family) who were waiting to get on the dialysis machines. They were talking about how sometimes the staff is rough with them when putting the needles in to get the vein access. One guy said the needle went once "right into my bone." Another guy said "the girl had to try 7 times" to get his blood and he was about to hit her. (The nurse said at the time, "I know this hurts.") Another woman threatened physical harm to technicians who draw blood roughly. One patient mentioned that sometimes they have to get different vein access sites (i.e., the groin or the top of the foot). They were all talking, not always to anyone in particular (but sometimes they were). They were talking in a way so that everyone in the room could be in the conversation if they wanted to. (Gene A. Shelley, 1993, by permission)

Analytic Notes

You will write up fewer analytic notes than any other kind. This is where you lay out your ideas about how you think the culture you are studying is organized. Analytic notes can be about relatively minor things. When I

finally figured out the rules for showing up on time for evening functions in Greece, that was worth an analytic note. And when I understood the rules that governed the naming of children, that was worth an analytic note, too.

As I said in Chapter 2, in the section on theory, it took me almost a year to figure out why the casualty rate among Kalymnian sponge divers was going up while the worldwide demand for natural sponges was going down. When it finally made sense, I sat down and wrote a long, long analytic field note about it. Recently, after thinking about the problem for some years, I finally understood why bilingual education in Mexico does not result in the preservation of Indian languages (it's a long story; see Bernard, 1992a). As the ideas developed, I wrote them up in a series of notes.

In her research on kidney patients, Shelley noticed that African-Americans were far more likely to be on hemodialysis than on peritoneal dialysis, or CAPD. In her analytic notes, she explains that white physicians tend to assign African-American patients to hemodialysis because CAPD is very demanding and the physicians don't trust black patients to handle properly the chores involved.

Analytic notes are the product of a lot of time and effort and may go on for several pages. They are often the basis for published papers, or for chapters in dissertations and books. They will be the product of your understanding, and that will come about through your organizing and working with descriptive and methodological notes over a period of time. Don't expect to write a great many analytic notes, but write them all your life, even (especially) after you are out of the field.

Writing Field Notes

The difference between field*work* and field *experience* is field *notes*.

Plan on spending 2 to 3 hours, every working day, writing up field jottings into field notes, working on your diary, and coding interviews and notes. Ralph Bolton asked 34 anthropologists about their field note practices; they reported spending anywhere from an hour and a half to 7 hours a day on write-up (1984:132).

Set aside a time each day for working on your notes. I tried to "squeeze in" the time to work on notes and it was a disaster. Don't sleep on your notes, either. That is, don't write up notes in the morning from the previous day's jottings. You'll forget a lot of what you would like to have in your notes if you don't write them up in the afternoon or evening each day. The same goes for your own thoughts and impressions of events. If you don't write them up every day, while they are fresh, you'll forget them.

This means that you shouldn't get embroiled in a lot of activities that prevent you from spending time writing up your day's jottings. Of course, when an informant calls at your house and tells you to come quickly because there is an important event going on, well, that's another matter. But you can easily let this become the norm rather than the exception, and your research will suffer for it if you do.

Create many small notes rather than one long, running commentary. If you write your notes on a computer, make many separate files—one for each day is fine—rather than adding to the same humongous file day after day. The advantage is that you can name your notes by their date of creation. That way, the computer will present the notes to you in chronological order so you can always find a particular day's (or week's) notes. Many small files are also easier to handle when you get to text management and retrieval programs.

Plan on spending twice as long writing up notes about tape-recorded interviews as you spend conducting the interviews in the first place. You have to listen to a recorded interview at least once before you can write up the essential notes from it, and then it takes as long again to get the notes down. Actually *transcribing* a tape takes about six to eight hours for each hour of interview.