

## Secret notes, artful stories and temporal compression.

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*Notes for a talk given to QUEST discussion seminar on Ethnography 11/12/13*

*Please note this is the pre-presentation version of my ideas for this talk. What I ended up saying probably strayed from this text.*

Ethnography is about telling stories. I am going to forgo the safety net of PowerPoint and allow myself to talk about ethnography.

I thought I would keep it simple. I am going to talk about the craft of ethnography. I'll talk a bit about note taking and storytelling and if there is time the problem of temporal compression.

When we think of ethnography, when we teach and study it, we often see its origins in anthropology, a discipline that became demarcated from other social sciences in 19<sup>th</sup> century. I often trace its path from the eminent Victorians like Malinowski and Boaz before landing securely on the Chicago School and the co-option of anthropological methods to undertake urban sociology. (it is perhaps worth noting that that the idea of a unified disciplinary Chicago School of Sociology is something of a myth as Becker explains: <http://home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/articles/chicago.html>)

Classic ethnographies I read as an undergraduate - William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society*, Erving Goffman's *Asylums*, described worlds that I, as a 1980s polytechnic student in north east London could only dream about.

We can trace ethnography back earlier than 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Consider this writing by Herodotus, the Greek historian born 484BC. This is his description of the forerunner of the modern post office:

*Nothing mortal travels so fast as these Persian messengers. The entire plan is a Persian invention; and this is the method of it. Along the whole line of road there are men (they say) stationed with horses, in number equal to the number of days which the journey takes, allowing a man and horse to each day; and these men will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance which they have to go, either by snow, rain, heat, or by the darkness of night. The first rider delivers his dispatch to the second and the second passes it to the third; and so it is borne from hand to hand along the whole line, like the light in the torch-race, which the Greeks celebrate to Vulcan. The Persians give the riding post in this manner, the name of 'Angarum'. The History of Herodotus, Book 8, trans. G. Rawlinson <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/herodotus/h4/>*

This is a world we can never know. Yet we re-imagine the Angarum in our minds. We can see those men and horses, we can feel the vicissitudes of the weather. We understand this ancient communication system, we 'get' how it worked.

This is ethnography: stories which tell us about things we didn't know and help us explain them.

We use the term ethnography as a short hand to denote a collection of methods - observation, participation, discussion, analysis of documents and self-reflection (and sometimes quantitative methods).

Ethnography is an embodied method. It epitomises the researcher as the research instrument. There is a lovely bit in 'On Fieldwork' where Goffman describes participant observation as a technique.

*"It's one of subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation, or whatever. So that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them".* (Goffman 'On fieldwork' in Weinberg D. *Qualitative Research Methods* Oxford: Blackwell 2002 p149)

The idea is that we collect data from co-experience of 'what life does'. To do this we have to inscribe experiences: we take field notes.

There is advice about what field notes should contain. I sometimes use Spradley's (*Participant Observation* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1980) list of things to record. There are similar lists in Lofland and Lofland's book (*Analysing social settings*. Belmont: Wadsworth. 1984) and others, covering the who, what, whys, the spaces, actors, objects, events, goals and the emotions we should note.

But we seldom see other people's notes. Why is that?

For me this to do with the messiness of my handwriting. I once put a snippet of a fieldnote in a journal paper as an illustration. But I usually don't want people to see my field notes. I take notes in a reporter's spiral bound notebook. The result can look like hieroglyphics. There are half words, abbreviations and a kind of shorthand derived from years spent hanging out with clinicians and trying to write things quickly. Ca is cancer. Pt is patient. Squiggles and line drawings to show layout and positioning. My notes make sense to me but they might not make much sense to anyone else. I take notes contemporaneously - in clinics and meetings, in operating rooms, in ambulances. If I cannot make a note at the time I make it as soon as I can afterwards, in the loos, in the cafe, on the bus.

I was taught that *"every night you should type up your fieldnotes. And you have to do it every night because you have too much work to do and you'll begin to forget."* (Goffman 2002 p152).

I no longer type up my notes the night after every time. I tend to do this if I am stuck in a Travelodge bedroom. But sometimes, if it has been a long day or night I don't get round to the transcription until later. But one habit I do have, is that when I leave the field I get a coffee and sit and 'go over' my notes. Page by page, adding, in a different coloured pen if I have one, details that I missed, fleshing out the diagrams, expanding abbreviations so that they will make sense when I do get round to typing them up. So already there are two versions of my notes. The contemporaneous version and the enhanced one. These are then transformed into the typed up version. But even this may not be the final version. I may, when using the notes in a paper, add in explanations or interpretations.

These field notes are also rendered invisible because they are destroyed once a transcript is made. It might be helpful to refer to Bella by name so that I am clear who my notes refer to, but afterwards a cleaned up version is produced: a second anonymised version of my notes.

Here's an example of a finished note from a study of 999 emergency ambulance calls - pathways is the computer support system used to help call handlers triage calls:

*There are lots of other conversations are going on in the room and there is 'down time' between calls which means that, if you want, you can dip into other people's calls. This produces a rich soundscape. Talk produces laughter and discussion. There is a constant buzz in the room. The fourth call proves difficult because it is a mobile telephone call from a bus. A passenger is calling about a lady who feels faint. There is some trouble finding the address because the caller says her location in terms of the shops and the clocktower she can see from the vantage point of the bus. I have no idea where this might be as I am not familiar with the town, and it transpires that Kay also has not visited this place. Kay opens and enlarges a street map on the right hand computer screen and talks through possible locations, adding a road name when it is given. A duty manager has been listening into the call and comes over to say that buses cannot go along the road because of roadworks. Kay is busy processing some of the patient symptom details in the pathways system on the left hand screen and simultaneously reviewing the location issue, talking to the caller, looking at the map, and establishing that the bus is parked up, what colour it is, what the registration number is. She types comments in the left screen that will, she hopes, help the ambulance to locate the bus. There are several tabs in this section to choose from but she quickly selects the ones she needs and seems, to me to be very accomplished at quickly picking a box and filling it in. She types quickly and clicks the mouse to enter details all the while talking to the caller through her headset. The pathways disposition is not quite completed, I cannot see a final disposition on the screen, when Kay presses the button on the screen to make an 'early exit' from the system. She places an electronic request for an ambulance. She turns to me - I must look bemused because she says that she 'knew' that the disposition would be for this patient to attend an urgent care centre but given that the patient was on a bus, now halted because of this unfolding drama, this 'needed' an ambulance. Observation site A*

Field notes are necessarily crafted into stories. In the example, I have given the call handler a pseudonym. Kay might be a woman (you probably imagined her) but could be a man. I sometimes change genders to support anonymity. The notes contain descriptive details - what Kay did typing in comments. They contain interpretation and reflexivity - I think that I look bemused and this has provoked Kay's explanation. I have also added some contextual detail - the buzz of the conversations - to try to bring the scene alive.

Writing stories is a vital feature of ethnographic craft. Van Maanen acknowledges this too *"ethnography continues to carry a slight literary air compared to other forms of social science writing. It remains I think a less congealed, passive-verb, congested form of discourse thus suggesting that a textual self-consciousness has been with us for quite some time. This I think keeps the non-specialist interested in what we do and occasionally pushes certain forms of ethnography into the trade or general reader domains and brings the seemingly distant and alien or proximate but puzzling worlds we study to more readers beyond the warrens of our own research guilds"* John Van Maanen, (2006) "Ethnography then and now", *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 1 Iss: 1, pp.13 - 21

The transformation of notes into stories is an important part of what we do. Stories open up unimagined worlds. I have been re-reading Mitchell Duneier's *Slim's Table*. His description of a cafe on Chicago's south side is vivid and profound. This is a book about (mainly) Black African-American men. It is about masculinity, old age, race and working class life. It is about a world I

could not possibly know as a white British woman, but reading Duneier's ethnography it is a world that I can almost taste.

Telling stories is fundamental to ethnography. We craft stories from our first field note to the final published account. Perhaps we need to understand this and be more transparent about the creative practices involved?

I said I would also talk about temporal compression. This is a fancy way of saying there is not enough time to do ethnography.

In Goffman's advice about fieldwork he said:

*I think you should spend at least a year in the field. Otherwise you don't get the random sample, you don't get the range of unanticipated events, you don't get deep familiarity.* (Goffman 'On fieldwork' 2002 p152)

At least a year.

Martyn Hammersley noted that early ethnography was based on long term engagement with the field but that this was not the case with much contemporary research. He argued that

*shortness of fieldwork can encourage a rather a historical perspective, one which neglects the local history of the institution being studied as well as the biographies of the participants. Furthermore, many ethnographers tend to treat what they observe in the situations they study as if this can be assumed to be typical of what always happens there.* (Talk given in the Qualitative Research Methodology Seminar Series, School of Nursing and Midwifery and the School of Education, University of Southampton, sponsored by the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. January, 2005 p3)

Martyn illustrated his argument with a story about a study of schools that completely failed to understand the patterns of the whole school week and so misinterpreted the level of teacher control over children's learning.

There are serious problems with trying to compress fieldwork into shorter and shorter periods. But for many of us - especially in health care research, long term ethnography is less and less possible. Increasingly laborious and extended ethics processes and funding constraints mean that few of us have anything like 'enough' time in the field. Does this mean we are not doing it right?

I don't think so.

We need to recognise the challenges of more limited opportunities to be in the field - and combat potential pitfalls by thinking carefully about research design e.g. sampling different time periods. Outside PhD research we often work in teams and this can also help tackle the problem. This may allow coverage of different times of day, days of week and different aspects of the work. On our recent ambulance study we 'observed' 56 shifts which amounted to just over 650 hours and conducted 19 formal interviews - and had researchers based at the hospital and on the ambulance to cover different perspectives in the same time period. This is not the same as 3 years living spent with a tribal community but it can produce the basis for some interesting and meaningful analyses of health care work.

I firmly believe that ethnography is a craft. I am learning more with each study we do. I've had the luxury here of thinking out loud about note taking and writing stories and having enough time to do ethnography. These are just some aspects of that craft that I think we could acknowledge and think about.