

Doing Fieldwork

*Ethnographic
Methods for
Research
in Developing
Countries
and Beyond*

WAYNE FIFE



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Ethnographic Methods for Research in Developing Countries and Beyond

Wayne Fife

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DOING FIELDWORK

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In Memoriam

This book is dedicated to the memory of my niece, Alana Fife (1981–2003). Lanny wanted to be a teacher and died in an accident while working as a volunteer in the country of Indonesia with orphans and street children on basic literacy and other life issues. She had strong convictions and she acted on them. Her courage challenges us to find our own convictions and apply them to our everyday lives.

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Believe me, I'm quite capable of making my own mistakes—none of these people had anything to do with any errors or omissions in my book.

Introduction to Ethnographic Research Methods

Open up any introductory textbook in sociocultural anthropology and you will find a section explaining the importance of the concept of holism. The author will typically go on to explain that anthropologists are generally more interested in gaining an understanding of how human lives “make sense” within the contexts in which they live than we are in arriving at universal generalizations or “laws” regarding human behavior. This is particularly true of ethnographic researchers, who traditionally make extensive use of the participant-observation method in their work. Two key terms for an ethnographer are context and pattern. The goal of ethnographic research is to formulate a *pattern* of analysis that makes reasonable sense out of human actions within the given *context* of a specific time and place. This task of holism may seem simple enough when a student is reading about it in an introductory textbook, but when the same person turns into a researcher s/he is inevitably confronted with the following two questions: (1) how much context do I have to cover, and (2) how will I recognize a pattern when I see it? These are other ways of asking how a researcher who follows a qualitative, ethnographic strategy can ever know when a “holistic” understanding has been satisfactorily achieved.

Unfortunately, there are no straightforward answers to these questions. The answers can never be fully determined for the simple reason that ethnographic research occurs simultaneously as an art form and as a scientific endeavor. As a social or human science, empirical evidence must be gathered so that the readers of the ethnographic product (e.g., book, article, thesis, report) can weigh the evidence and therefore judge the researcher’s analysis of the patterns of human behavior that s/he delineates in the work. Ethnography is also an art form because ethnographic literature requires the writer to make an aesthetic judgment about when the context that has been presented is “whole enough,” or when the examples that illustrate a particular pattern of behavior are complete enough to give the reader a proper understanding of the words and actions that led to the analysis. As a method, or more accurately a changing set of methods for gathering information, ethnography is a kind of science; as a written literature that does not have a programmatic style of writing (as might be said of more strictly scientific

approaches to research, such as most forms of psychology), it can also be seen as an art form or as a part of the humanities (i.e., as a literature). Writing (from note-taking to book production) is normally not separated from the other “methods” of information gathering in qualitative research; both are seen as forming an inseparable ethnographic whole (e.g., Emerson, Fretz, Shaw 1995; Kutsche 1998). Because of the aesthetic dimension of ethnography, it is not possible to provide simple answers to the research questions noted above, ones that could be considered valid in all times and for all places. This is, therefore, a book for researchers who want to conduct their studies with the understanding that context cannot be left out of our work simply in order to create the illusion of authoritative infallibility or universal scientific completeness. There are common methodological tools that will help any researcher learn how to deal with working with disadvantaged populations (and you will learn about them in this book), but that does not mean that we have to pretend that there are no differences between doing our research in Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, the Ivory Coast, Canada, or India (for good examples that demonstrate similarities and differences related to qualitative research approaches in regard to education in quite different developing countries, see Crossley and Vulliamy 1997). An open-ended approach, such as the one advocated in this book, will allow scholars the necessary flexibility to cope with the particularities of the contextual differences that they encounter while conducting their own fieldwork. I see research methods as being rather like tools within a tool kit. Well informed scholars should be able to reach into their kits and extract the method or technique of research that will best help them deal with the situation they currently face—enabling them to get the most complete information possible within that specific research context. This book provides readers with just such a tool kit so that they can go on to modify it through their own individual experiences.

The Craft of Ethnography

Formulated in another fashion, we might think of ethnography as a kind of craft and the new researcher as an apprentice who wishes to learn that craft. My goal is to ensure that any scholar (whether a graduate student or professional researcher) who follows the advice contained in this book will learn how to conceptualize a project, collect the information for it, analyze and write the project up in such a way as to create a professional quality article, thesis, or book. Not everything can be covered in this book. For example, it is useless to attempt to discuss how to go about obtaining research permits, as every country has its own specific requirements for them. The focus here, then, is upon the parameters of research that we can expect to find while working with disadvantaged groups of people in virtually any developing or industrialized country.

As a craft, research methods can best be learned through experience. Therefore, the most effective way to teach other scholars ethnographic research methods is to provide them with examples of the decisions that a researcher has actually made in response to a particular research project. I propose therefore to

use extensive examples from my own doctoral and postdoctoral research, carried out during a one-year period in 1986–1987 in the country of Papua New Guinea and during three months of 1994 in the missionary archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. My Papua New Guinea fieldwork focused on the issue of formal primary school education and its relationship to expectations for economic development in that country. Whereas the 1994 archival work was part of an attempt to gain a deeper understanding about the British missionaries who went to Papua New Guinea in the last 1800s and began this formal educational system. Overall, this key example will be supplemented now and again by research experiences I have gained in other fieldwork contexts, such as a study of old age homes in Southern Ontario or the long-term fieldwork project that I am currently engaged in that involves a consideration of the effects of tourism on the Northern Peninsula area on the island of Newfoundland, Canada. I draw on these examples in order to teach the reader how to go about conducting an ethnographic study of disadvantaged people. Ethnographic methods can only be properly taught through specific encounters with real methodological problems in a living research situation. I firmly believe that scholars who wish to conduct a field study of educational practices, medical beliefs, or community development (to name only a few potential projects) in countries such as Kenya, Australia, China, or Fiji will be able to adapt the experience-based methods of this book for their own work in a more useful manner than they would if I presented the material as a set of decontextualized “rules” for qualitative research. Using my own trials and tribulations to illustrate specific research techniques will enable other scholars to think about their own unique situations in a more concrete manner, as well as reassure the scholar that things will not always proceed smoothly, information will not always be “gathered” in a timely fashion, and that constant, imaginative innovation informed by a knowledge of the methods that have worked elsewhere will always remain the touchstone of a good ethnographic study.

In this book, then, I discuss many of the decisions that I made during a year-long field research project concerning education and social change in the province of West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. Along the way, I explain how I arrived at what proved to be workable answers to the two questions listed on the first page of the book. The reader is provided with specific examples of how I collected evidence about individual actions and words, shared forms of cultural expression, and the structures of social formations in such a way as to make it possible to produce a consistent, empirically valid argument regarding education and social change in West New Britain.¹ Owing to the constraints of this type of book, only a very small portion of the actual overall argument can be reproduced here. Therefore, I have chosen to focus upon one particular aspect of my research project. This concerns the impact that the implementation of a state-run educational system has had on issues of social inequality within Papua New Guinea. Throughout the book we return often to the question of social inequality as an illustration of the kind of analysis that can be formulated within each methodological level of the total research project. In addition, I utilize material that I gathered during my archival work at the School of African and Oriental Studies in

1994 in chapter 2 as part of the consideration of the relative merits of using primary versus secondary historical sources in contemporary projects.

Macro and Micro Levels of Research

The book is divided into three main sections, with each of the first two sections corresponding to the methods that are most useful for carrying out research at either the macro or micro level of analysis. It is easiest, for example, for most researchers to begin their initial work (long before they enter the field situation) at the macro level. To take the specific example of educational research, it is no longer adequate to treat individual classrooms or even whole schools as if they formed independent and fully bounded cultural or social units. Education must be seen within its larger social, cultural, and historical context if it is to provide us with useful knowledge about the kinds of relationships that exist between schooling and other social formations inside of a developing (or any) country. It should be obvious that formal education, for example, is closely related to the developing economic institutions of a society and greatly impacts larger trends such as regional patterns of employment/unemployment or the contemporary or potential creation of knowledge-based industries. Perhaps less immediately obvious is the fact that education is intimately tied to religious institutions in most developing countries (and some subregions of industrialized countries) and that trying to arrive at an adequate understanding of education without also learning something about the specific historical relationship between education and religion in these countries will likely lead to seriously underestimating the impact of the moral dimension of education on the citizens of a contemporary nation-state. Schooling is not just about secular concerns such as learning how to read and write, but also about creating the “ideal” citizen—an ideal that has been strongly influenced by moral values that are themselves often at least partially grounded in “missionary” (e.g., Christian, Buddhist, or Islamic) influenced notions of human conduct. In the Papua New Guinea of the twentieth century, for example, various forms of Christian mission institutions were heavily involved in every level of education, from the elementary schools to the Teacher Training Colleges that turned out the future educators of that country. During the period of my primary field research in the late 1980s, the national school system was officially “secular” and had collapsed all of the previously distinct Protestant and Catholic school systems into the formerly much smaller government system in order to create a single federally controlled school system (with the exception of the Seventh Day Adventists, who insisted on maintaining a fully separate board). In reality, as the reader will see later in this book, even the most “secular” school was greatly affected by the built-in Christian morality that had become a standard feature of most Papua New Guineans’ education prior to the independence of their country in 1975.

All this is to suggest that we cannot really understand what a particular school or even a local school system is about unless we are also able to interpret something of the relational role it plays inside of a larger educational system and the society as a whole—including its articulation with preexisting forms of education.²

I would suggest this kind of a contextual lesson is equally valid if we want to understand the place of old age homes in the United States, worker-peasant food production in Spain, or a cigar factory in Cuba. This is the reason behind our concern with macro levels of information gathering and analysis. It is important to note that the boundary between macro and micro levels of research is a relative rather than an absolute distinction. It is obvious, for example, that the world-market system (the buying and selling of commodities on a global level), structures of nation-state formation and re-formation, national educational or medical systems, and so forth would be considered by virtually every researcher as involving macro level research and analysis. Conversely, actual conversations between students and pupils, the interactions between tourists at a heritage site, or the minutiae of a resident's council meeting in a home for the aged would normally be seen as part of the micro level of an educational, tourism, or aging study. But what happens when the two levels meet and merge? To take the educational example, a researcher intensively studying the interactions present in one or two classrooms may consider the school as a whole to make up the most salient macro feature of his/her project; while a scholar studying two or three schools might consider a provincial or statewide school system to be the critical macro feature of his or her study. To a certain extent, what is considered to be "macro" and what is considered to be "micro" levels of information gathering and analysis within a specific study depends upon where the researcher decides to create a primary focus for the project. In my own education study, for example, the essential focus fell upon three different primary schools (grades 1–6) in the province of West New Britain, two of which served urban students and one of which catered to rural students. This meant that anything immediately related to the operation of these three schools (from classroom interactions to parent–teacher associations) were considered by myself to form the micro level of analysis, while anything that fundamentally influenced and was influenced by these schools (from the provincial and national forms of school system organization to national employment structures or the history of the educational system in Papua New Guinea) were considered to be part of the macro level of concern. That in the final analysis the concepts of macro and micro levels of research turn out to be heuristic devices is not only *not* a problem but rather something that must be acknowledged in order to eventually bring these two "levels" of research and analysis back together to form a whole ethnographic study—the goal of any good qualitative project.

In terms of the specific example of research I offer here, the kinds of research methods that belong within each "level" of analysis become much clearer as we proceed through the sections of the book. Again, concrete examples are more useful than abstract rules for illustrating how the researcher can make use of these kinds of conceptual categories for organizing a specific project. I, however, pause for a moment here in order to give readers a brief overview of what they can expect to find within each of the three major sections of this book and the chapters that make up each section of the book.

There are three main parts and ten chapters in this book (including this introductory chapter). Part A is concerned with examples of methods for macro level research, part B with examples of methods for micro level research, and