

UNIT TWELVE

Data Analysis 2

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SECTION ONE

1. Introduction

Processes of theory construction, hypothesis formulation, categorisation, data production, coding and interpretation are intricately bound up with one another.

(Ellen 1990:285)

(Of Malinowski's field diary) ... It was never intended for publication These diaries are not about the Trobriand Islanders ... They are a partial record of the struggle that affects every anthropologist in the field: a struggle to retain a sense of his (sic) own identity as an individual and as a member of a culture ... Under these circumstances a diary is your only chance of expressing yourself, of relieving your tensions, of obtaining any sort of catharsis ... The negative side of field work ... predominates in the diaries ... A place to spew up one's spleen, so that tomorrow one can start a fresh.

(Anthony Forge 1972: 292-96 quoted in Sanjek)

This unit is an extension of Unit 11. Further practice is given in the type of interpretive analysis introduced in the previous unit. This unit also covers a number of issues related to field-notes including the different types of field-notes, the procedures to use in organising the data as they are collected and the writing of a diary. Unit 11 encouraged students to develop an ethnographic imagination, not to take things at face value but to look for underlying patterns, interesting tensions and ways of looking at the apparently trivial and banal as conceptually interesting. This unit continues that process but also highlights the fact that data collection, organisation and analysis are also a matter of being methodical, systematic, even mechanical at times, if a thick description of cultural practices is to be built up.

2. Links with other units

The obvious link is with the previous unit but the focus on field-notes here also links back to Unit 8 on participant observation and any other units where some form of PO has been carried out. This unit also links forward to Unit 18 on writing up, since the relationship between data analysis and writing up is a close one. In terms of themes, there is a link with the Motorway description in Unit 4 and with the Independent Truck Drivers in Unit 11.

3. Background notes

The background notes to Unit 11 are also relevant here and, in particular, the notion of reflexivity in the process of both data collection and analysis is important for students to keep in mind. Data analysis of transcribed interviews has been introduced before the analysis of field-notes, not because they are more significant than field-notes (that will depend on the kind of project students are doing) but

because students may find it easier to develop an interpretive approach on what look, at least, like texts. It can be more daunting to try out a similar approach on scrappy jottings on the back of a beer mat! The point to reinforce is that data will come from many different sources but most of it will need to be analysed interpretively. (Of course, documents and records such as a cash-flow sheet, a laundry list or a rota for cleaning the kitchens are probably less interpretively rich than most ethnographic conversations, but any piece of data has some cultural richness in it).

Since data collection and data analysis are inextricably tied together in ethnography, the business of taking notes is tackled here alongside the business of organising and categorising them. These notes are based on Ellen's edited collection (particularly pages 278-285) on ethnographic methods and Sanjek's on field-notes (particularly his chapter entitled A Vocabulary for Field-notes). One of the questions he raises is 'Where is the field?' You do not have to be out there in some strange environment, the field may be where you are now. It only requires a shift of attention. For example, the task students did on their own classroom transformed it into a 'field'.

Notetaking

There is a range of different kinds of notes:

'Head-notes': (a term coined by Simon Ottenburg). These are the notes that are never written down but are in your head. They influence the way you write your original field-notes, any subsequent analysis of them and the writing-up process. For example, you may read a text or speak to informants and as a result read your field-notes in a completely different way.

'Scratch-notes': (another term coined by Ottenburg). These are jottings, key words, mnemonics, shorthand or any rough notes which you manage to write down on anything while you are observing and/or talking to informants. These are sometimes produced in the view of informants and sometimes out of their sight. James Clifford calls the scratch-note production 'inscription' because 'the flow of action and discourse has been interrupted, *turned* to writing' (quoted in Sanjek).

'Field-notes': '... a substantial corpus of sequentially produced wide-ranging field-notes is at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise.' (Sanjek). This is what Clifford calls 'description': 'the making of a more or less coherent representation of an observed cultural reality ... for later writing and interpretation aimed at the production of a finished account'. This writing up is a *consolidation* process. It is the beginning of a long love (hate?) affair with the data. As Ellen says, consolidation 'facilitates a constant and cumulative *dialogue* with your material' (Ellen 1990: 283). Some ethnographers write up a more permanent set of field-notes or what Sanjek calls 'field-notes proper' but students may not have time for this. As long as students convert their scratch-notes into field-notes, carefully referenced with time, place and date, and keep them in date order, these should be quite adequate for their purposes. The field-notes, then, constitute a permanent record from which the writing-up process will be done.

Another important tip is to write the field notes before the scratch notes go cold on you. Gulick, for example, found that if he did not write up his notes every night, by the next day, all he could produce was a 'second-hand account, an oversimplified version'.

There are, of course, other ways of recording data – for example, transcribing ethnographic conversations or more formal interviews and writing letters or brief reports. The most well known alternative way of recording experiences in the field is through a field diary.

Field Diary

This is a record of personal reactions, frustrations and assessments of your life while in the field. The most famous of these diaries is the one written by Malinowski when he was in the Trobriands. When his *Diary in the strict sense of the term* was finally published in 1967, more than 40 years after his ethnographies, many people were shocked at how bitter it was and indeed it appeared racist and full of sexual tension. But the fact was that it was a real diary into which he had poured his frustrations, as well as other reactions which might be thought more suitable writing from the pen of an ethnographer. So, as well as using the diary to vent spleen or discuss frustrations, it can also be used to write down analytic memos (see Unit 11). This technique used in grounded theory helps the ethnographer to 'build the evolving process of your own reflection'.

Referencing, coding, indexing and categorising (see Brian Street's examples in Handout 2)

One of the most difficult aspects of doing an ethnographic project is the organisation of data. This unit focuses on the different steps students should go through in order to classify their data. This is obviously important if students are not to end up hopelessly riffling through carrier bags of scrappy notes. But it is also part of the process of engaging or having a dialogue with the data which encourages reflection and interpretation.

Referencing

Each note should be carefully referenced in the field notes with:

- Date, time, place of observation
- Name, sex, age, status/occupation of informant(s) (if appropriate and if this can be elicited)

It is important to number each page of the field notes so that it is easy to make an index. Similarly, tape recording transcripts should be referenced with time, counter number and a transcript identifier, e.g. based on the name (or pseudonym) of the informant

Coding

This is a basic descriptive category and might include: settings, places, situations, people, animals, activities, things/objects, items, notions, themes, sequences,

connections, e.g. the market, marriage, breakfast time, etc. This coding must make the data easily identifiable and retrievable.

Indexing

This is a cumulative contents page (or set of pages) in which the different descriptive codes are brought together, e.g. the theme of marriage might have, say, 15 entries and each of these will appear on the contents page with a date or a page number to refer to. It is also useful to start cross-referencing at this stage.

Categorising

This is the beginning of the analytic and interpretive phases of data analysis which have been covered in Unit 11. As more analytic themes or theoretical concepts begin to emerge, e.g. Agar's notion of 'dependence' among the truckers or Manjula's tension between independence and family control, it may be useful to add to or start a new cumulative contents page so that the analytic themes and patterns are also easily retrievable. An alternative is to produce a type of scattergram or conceptual diagram (see Ana Barro's diagram on the caretakers).

More on inferences

As students become more used to interpretive data analysis, the question of inferencing from the data becomes increasingly important. It is at the heart of all cultural learning and the claims made from the evidence in the data they collect will shape the whole ethnographic project. For this reason, some similar exercises to the ones in Unit 11 are given. If students have collected some data by this stage, then it would be even more useful to base the exercises on their own data. Wengraf (1992) has a lot to say about making inferences and one of his exercises is included in this unit. He makes the point that under-motivated students tend not to infer enough, and make banal statements, while strongly motivated students tend to infer too much from their data.

References

- ◆ Ellen, R (Ed) (1984) *Ethnographic Research: A guide to general conduct*. London: Academic Press
- ◆ Malinowski, B (1967) *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- ◆ Silverman, D (1993) *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage
- ◆ Wengraf, T (1992) *Research Depth Interviewing*. London: Middlesex Polytechnic

SECTION TWO

1. Outline of a session

1. Introduction
2. Assignment feedback
3. Note-taking
4. Referencing, coding, indexing and categorising
5. Further practice in interpretive data analysis
6. Going beyond descriptive accounts

2. Description of a session

2.1 Introduction

The aims of this session are to:

- ◆ Describe the different kinds of field-notes students may take and to see their purpose
- ◆ Introduce different ways of organising their data
- ◆ Introduce the idea of a field diary
- ◆ Practise some more interpretive analysis.

Overall, the students should appreciate how important it is to collect lots of data, organise it systematically and see the process of writing and organising as a central part of data analysis.

2.2 Assignment Feedback: Despatch Riders

Students should have looked at both the notes and Chris's write-up of the theme of 'freedom'. Use the assignment questions, in groups, to analyse Chris's data and to assess the relationship between claims and evidence in Chris's writing.

2.3 Note taking

Use the reading assignment from Sanjek, Handout 1, and the background notes to introduce students to different kinds of note taking and the idea of a field diary. Emphasise again the importance of getting as much data as possible. Even the smallest and apparently most trivial observation is worth recording. It is easy to say to yourself 'Oh, I know that anyway' and not write it down. Do not assume that you will remember what you have seen or heard. You probably won't, or only in a very partial way. Also, certain sights or ways of doing things quickly become commonplace and so invisible. Remember that the job of the ethnographer is to make the invisible visible. Think of yourselves as data scavengers – get it all down! Resist the temptation not to write! Remind them of Shirley Jordan's ethnography about the cleaners. She noticed the way in which the tables were placed in the

room, the pictures on the lockers and the dirt. All these were written down in her scratch notes and were used later on. Stress that the field diary is a place to have a moan but also to put down possible interpretations, half-baked ideas, ideas about the future and so on. It is also a place to record your experiences just in case you lose your notes.

2.4 Referencing, coding, indexing, categorising

Use Handout 1 and the background notes to introduce students to ways of organising their data. If they have already started on their home ethnographies, they may have data of their own on which they can try out these procedures. Or, indeed, they may have worked out their own techniques for making their data easily identifiable and retrievable which they can share with the rest of the group.

Some students may feel that this advice is too obvious or too mechanical for them and they could figure it out for themselves but most students seem to be very relieved to be given a straightforward, simple-to-follow set of tools. Methodical and consistent data recording can help you feel more confident from the start. Remind students that writing up field notes is part of the process of the analysis. Analysis is not something you start to do AFTER you have collected the data. Remember that these early stages of data also help you see where the gaps are in your data.

Look at Handout 2, showing Brian Street's consolidated contents page and his notes (typed up for the course since Brian's hand-written notes are not too easy to read). Also, show the students Handout 3 which shows Ana's mental map or scattergram. Explain that this is a good way of trying to find connections between apparently disparate concepts and descriptions. Put headings on the sheet and then see what connections can be drawn between them. You may find you need to collect further data where there are some, but not complete, links between items. Your agenda for how to proceed may be at least partly based on the connections you *can't* make.

So data indexing and coding is a great practical help and it can also help with the conceptual, theoretical aspects of the project.

2.5 Further Practice in Interpretive Data Analysis

This exercise gives students another chance to go through the basic analytic procedures outlined in Unit 11. The suggested data comes from the transcript of the ethnographic interview discussed in Unit 9. The section is from pp 6-8 on the transcript, counter numbers 233-276. It starts from: 'If there was no Preparatory course...' and finishes with 'he accept me and give me a job.' Students should use the handout from Unit 11 to go through the same procedure as before. Their attempts should look something like this:

Step One

Hard to get a job; refused just looking at face; some people take you if they know your ability; mostly discriminate against Asians; Aero-Electrics no vacancies so to the Job Centre; Job Centre said there were vacancies; took JC chit to AE where refused again, 'Silly woman'; she persisted 'You got vacancies'; Pers. Mg. accepted

her; original lady challenged this; so PM interviewed her; had a reading test for an assembly line job; asked 'You understand English?'; He accepted her.

Step Two

Themes:

Persistency – need to work/refusal to be put off

Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity/skin colour/only take you if know

Your ability/Job Centre more objective

Gatekeeping process/levels of English

Step Three

Take one theme, e.g. Persistency

Hard; went myself; read in the paper; to JC because needed work; 'Give me' the chit; 'You got vacancies'; JC gave you a ring; ignores the woman's refusal and her rudeness; 'Of course' speak English

Step Four

What is not in the data:

Her feelings of anger

Little overall evaluation of the story

Step Five

Patterns:

1. Persistence and defiance are connected through a story line in which the 'heroine' seeks, is thwarted and finally overcomes opposition. It is a heroic tale told in the heroic manner with little explanatory or evaluative comment. The heroine is always presented in an active way – lots of direct quotes and activity.
2. Public opportunity and private discrimination. The JC and the formal interview by the PM, on the one hand, and the individual, reactive gate-keeper on the other.

Some students, particularly those with a literature background, may like to link the idea of a heroine overcoming difficulties to the analysis of narrative structure developed by Propp. Silverman (1993) has a very good introduction to this form of analysis and its use on modern urban interview data (pp.71-80).

2.6 Going beyond descriptive accounts

There are other ways of forcing a more analytic and conceptual reading of the data. Wengraf (1992: 7/1:26-28) discusses the fact that, if several of your informants give you accounts about the same thing, they are likely to be different. Just describing these differences is not enough: the summarised data does not 'speak for itself' but needs to be interpreted. That may mean holding in your head a variety of possible explanations at the same time. Handout 4 is a good exercise in helping students to think about concepts or theories that go beyond mere summaries of the informants' statements.

3. Advice and comments

This session usually helps students overcome some of their anxieties about writing a home ethnography. They can see that there is a relatively simple and almost mechanical aspect to organising the data which also helps with the slow process of analysis and conceptual development. They may be surprised at how ordinary Brian's notes and cumulative contents page seem to be. This is just the point – that the data they collect should be about the everyday, the ordinary, the smallness of things. Nothing is too trivial to make a note of. Sherlock Holmes often says that 'the observation of trifles' gives him the clues for solving the mysteries of detection.

The interpretive data exercises should help the students to make links between the routine collecting of notes and the intellectual work required to analyse and make connections.

Student comments

We learnt that a coding system for retrieving and dividing up interview data is very advisable. We were also encouraged to think of suitable headings for different dialogues and therefore learnt to categorise data. A helpful process of thinking.

Now when I listen to someone I try not to assume that I know what they mean, although it comes so automatically to me that it is very difficult to do this.

SECTION THREE

1. Assignment

DATA ANALYSIS

This assignment is based on a home ethnography by Chris Day on Despatch Riders (DRs). Chris worked in the Easter vacation as a despatch rider and used this opportunity to write his project about the group of riders he worked with. There are some obvious connections between Agar's ethnography about the independent truckers discussed in Unit 11 and Chris' theme. You should also look back to the project on Motorway workers discussed earlier in the course.

- ◆ Have a look at the notes that Chris made as part of his PO. Understanding the social and cultural patterns of another group involves a great deal of meticulous and seemingly boring detail. Look at Example 1.
- ◆ His PO notes also helped him design the diagram (see Example 2) on social relationships – who was involved and who excluded.
- ◆ Then read the segment from his writing about the riders (see Example 3) where he draws on concepts from anthropology and sociology. Read this section carefully and critically so that you are prepared for a discussion of it in groups in the next session. Use what you have learned about data analysis so far when you do this, as well as the following questions:

Despatch Riders: Claims, evidence and inferences

1. What notion of 'freedom' is the author working with?
2. He uses the informant's comment 'You've got to be on the controller's back all the time...'. Is this an example of an 'exchange of favours'? If so, in what way could you say this system of exchange constituted 'freedom'?
3. How is the identity of the despatch rider as a free-wheeling individual different from the Motorway workers' identity (from the project discussed in Unit 4)?
4. How far does Chris back up his claims with the evidence? (relate the concepts he uses to the evidence and interpretations). Does he make any high inferences?

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EXAMPLE ONE

Example One 4 4.91 1600 →

Pam looks behind van. He doesn't get tricked although I don't think she was really trying to ~~do him~~ give him one.

⑮ Police arrive at 1655 to take car number in (A).

[every 3 mins rider seen either entering or leaving Vogue House. each visit lasts between 3 → 7/11 mins]

⑯ Bike parked in (B) with helmet on ~~bag~~ mirror blowing beam there? → 1 min later, appears from T? puts parcel in top box. Gets on. Puts on helmet rider off

⑰ Bike parks edge of C rider walks into Vll taking off helmet. 10 mins later, comes at and leaves in 15 seconds.

⑱ Bike parks in A. goes into Jll. & re-emerges & uses radio after 20 seconds.
Holding radio, waiting to get into control.
Chats to pedestrian — driver of van parked
in Brook st to pick up from ~~SEPT~~ (20 sec, driver goes in)
+ 1 min, gets on bike leaves.

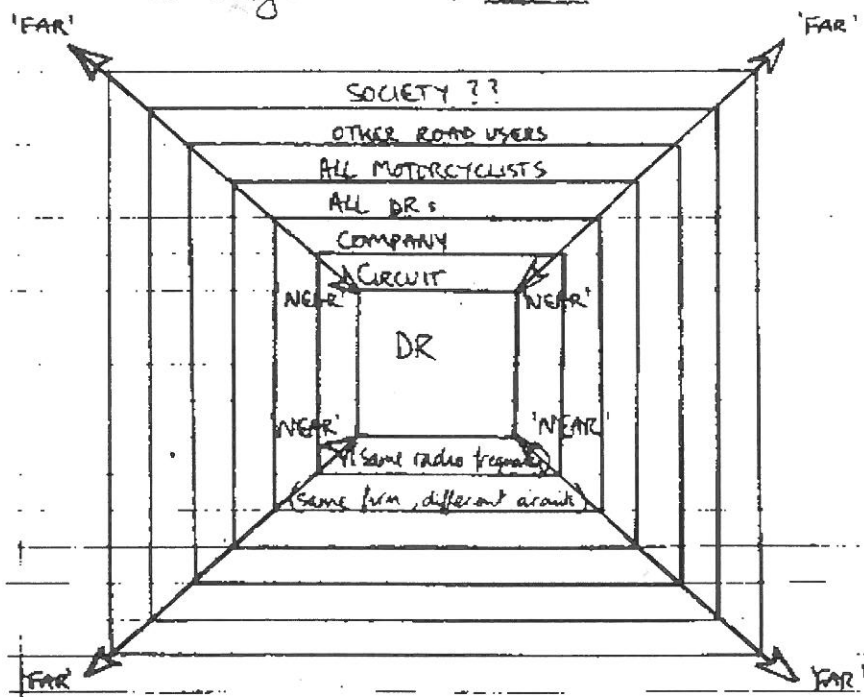
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EXAMPLE TWO

Example Two

I was certainly struck by the company grouping of riders. In some cases, there was an odd rider out (observation 3, 12-49, 7/4/91) but I sensed somehow that he must be an ex-member of the main group - all knew him and he appeared to be treated as a "novice" member, possibly even receiving a slightly more animated welcome than the others - a friend returns?

From this and the fact that some other riders remained aloof whilst company groups formed, and adding my own general background knowledge, I will represent this scale of social affinity in terms of belonging and exclusion, purity and danger, in the diagram below, Fig. 2



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HANDOUT 1 – note taking, field diaries, referencing, coding, indexing and categorising

TRY TO WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING YOU CAN REMEMBER AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER THE PERIOD OF OBSERVATION.

Different kinds of notes

- ◆ Verbatim texts: actual words (*Very important to record as much of these as possible*)
- ◆ Descriptions of actions/activities
- ◆ Summaries of conversations
- ◆ Generalisations about behaviour (*Be reflexive about these!*)
- ◆ Interpretations (again beware – remember Unit 4 on the distinction between description and interpretation)
- ◆ Diagrams and illustrations
- ◆ Quantified statements/tables

Field Diaries

Use these to put down your thoughts, feelings, problems and frustrations and any ideas that don't fit anywhere yet might be interesting. The diary is your personal write-up of the experience of doing ethnography. It is your private record of what is happening but it may also be useful to look back on, when you come to write up the reflexive element of your ethnographic project. In some ways, it may be where the most explicit element of cultural learning is recorded.

Field-notes

Head-notes: These are the notes that you don't write down! But they are always there to help you with your interpretation, e.g. the feeling you have about an incident, the particular quality of an interaction etc.

Scratch-notes: All those jottings which you put down in a hurry. They may be written on anything.

Field-notes: These are the permanent notes on which your writing up of the ethnographic project is based. Try to write up your scratch notes as field notes every day, otherwise the scratch notes can easily go cold on you. Barley suggests 2,000 words a day. This may not be possible if you are not working on your ethnography full-time but it's something to aim for. Becker and Geer in their study of medical students made 5,000 pages of field notes. Make sure your field notes are carefully referenced and each page numbered and keep your notes in date order. The process of writing, re-writing, extending and consolidating is a vital part of data

analysis and it is the beginning of a *dialogue* with your material. This dialogue helps you to see gaps, plan for the next stage, generate new ideas, encourage creativity and make you feel you are really going somewhere.

Referencing

Notes: All your notes, transcriptions, etc. must be identifiable and retrievable i.e. date, time, place, details of informants, etc. Use references that are simple and precise. When writing up your field notes, number the pages and the separate sections on each page and number each notebook clearly, e.g. vol. 3 p.48 (ii). This would refer to your third notebook, page 48, second paragraph or section.

Tape recordings: Label tapes carefully with names, dates, etc. When transcribing, number the lines or chunks of speech and note the counter numbers (remember that different tape recorders will have different speeds for counting).

Coding

This is the first stage of labelling and identifying themes (see stage one of the basic qualitative data analysis procedure in Unit 11). These are descriptive themes and may be quite general at first and become increasingly more precise and detailed as you focus down on your particular ethnographic topic, e.g. marriage, breakfast time, clothes, rules of the game, etc. If there are overlapping themes, at this stage, give them as many labels as necessary.

Indexing

Once you have done some coding, start drawing up a cumulative contents page or index (see the example from Brian Street's ethnographic work in Iran.) Put down each theme with a date and page number reference. You could also start cross-referencing. For example, 'Despatch riding:

- Clothing: p.8/23/47/92 (iii)
- Motor bike: clothing for p23/92
- Fred: on clothing p8/23, etc.

If you find you have masses of headings for one item, say, 'marriage', you may then need to divide it into sub-headings. Also you may find that some things that seemed very important in the beginning turn out to be referred to very little in your cumulative contents page.

Categorising

This is the analytic and conceptual stage which was introduced in Unit 11. As themes and patterns emerge, the data will need to be re-read and the index will need to be expanded to include new analytic categories. As the data is worked on this way, an overall 'story line' will (hopefully) begin to emerge. It is often useful to draw a mental map (see Ana's map of her study of caretakers).

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HANDOUT 2 – excerpts from Brian Street's field-notes

Brian Street is an anthropologist who did his field work in Iran in 1972. He was interested in the uses of literacy and has subsequently written a number of books on literacy.

August 15th

Man arrived with loudspeaker advertising clothes for sale, carpeting, towels, some people bought.

AB - - student starting 6th grade high school in Mashad, wants to go on to study literature (Arabic, Farsi, English) in university at Mashad or Tehran. Helping to build house with father, brother and helper - bricks fired, wood: reckons it costs not too much as wood and labour are own - 80,000. Chats to me.

AS has room in Mashad, rents from friend, shares with one person. Comes home in summer and at weekends to help with gardens – has some of his own. Send fruit to Tehran or Mashad, get money immediately. Has 5 brothers and one sister.

August 17

(last lines of this day's notes)....

Large lorry with S. arrived 10.30 p.m. unloaded opposite the tea house.

Earthquake at 9.30 p.m.

August 18

Went to S for injection – not many people at the clinic.

Man had epileptic fit in street – L. massaged and helped him, didn't want to call S. K helped quickly.

Kh. Came back from Mashad in exceedingly smart gear, now works for heating firm in mornings and other in afternoons. Earns 6001 a month

August 18 (contin)

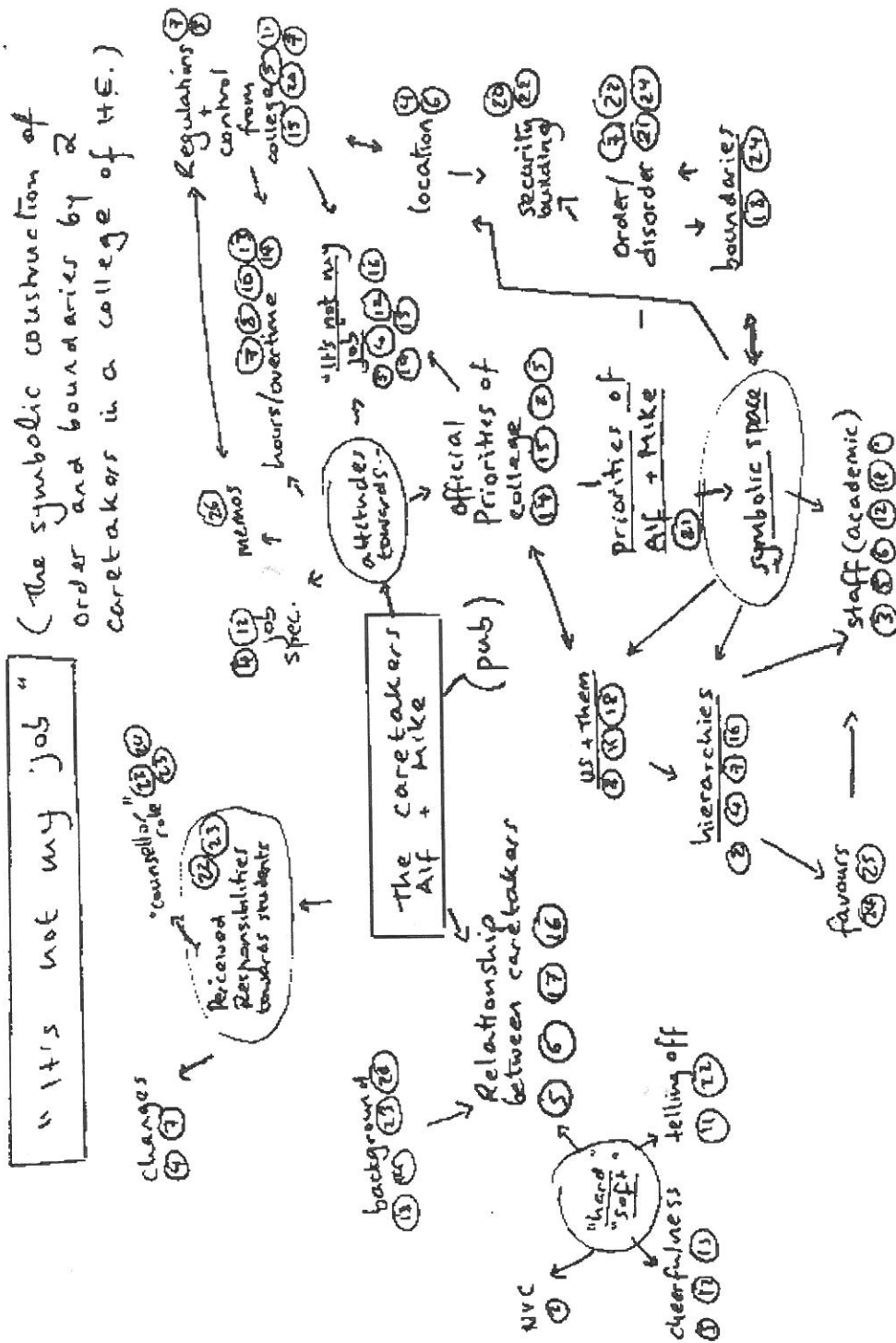
BM talked about emigration Daughters not expected to go on (with school). They will leave and get married. "It's our custom for women not to have a job, but to work in the home." His eldest daughter will find a fiancé soon. In the country it is allowed for girls too have jobs e.g. teaching ... and anyone who wants to can go, but villagers prefer girls to marry or work in the house.

HANDOUT 2 (CONT.) – a cumulative contents page

1977 ⁵ abt. - Zucht

15

HANDOUT 3 – Ana's scattergram



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HANDOUT 4 – going beyond descriptive accounts

A student at the Middlesex University did an ethnographic project around the design of pubs. Female informants (in their twenties) who went regularly to one of two different pubs was asked why they did not go to the other one. Each set of informants said the other pub was 'too crowded, too many hardened drinkers, too many macho men, unfriendly service and welcome.' He simply summarised the differences and left it at that. But he should have gone on to think about why.

Now, think of as many explanations as you can. Then turn over the page.

Some possible theories to explain the data.

1. That one set of informants was right and the other wrong, i.e. one pub was much more horrible than the other. In this case, you need evidence to come to this conclusion
2. Stereotypical discourse: that these are standard ways of talking about pubs if you are female and in your twenties. Such discourse, therefore, represents group solidarity. To support this theory, the writer needs to have evidence and give reasons why these are not objective descriptions but ways of representing 'the other' in order to keep in with your own group.
3. Newcomer treatment: that new customers in a pub tend to be treated less well than regulars. So the informants generalised from their own experience of being badly treated as newcomers, to all clientele in the pub. To support this theory, the ethnographer would have to gain evidence from regulars in both pubs.
4. Known other pub user: this theory is the same as (3) except that the explanation is different. Here the newcomer is treated badly because they are known to go to the 'enemy' pub down the road. What evidence would you need to support this theory?
5. Unconscious entrant aggression: that the newcomers gave off some kind of challenge when they entered the pub and the treatment in the pub was a response to this apparently aggressive behaviour. What evidence would you need to support this theory?

You may have thought of others which you can try out on the rest of the group.

A few points to make:

- ◆ When trying to develop a theory or story line, keep on going back to the data to check that it supports what you are saying
- ◆ Be ready to modify or even jettison your original theory if a re-analysis of the data means the theory doesn't hold up
- ◆ You may have to collect more data to confirm or enrich your original hunch/pattern/concept/theory so do not wait to start the process of analysis, start as soon as you have some data
- ◆ If it is not possible to collect more data, then you need to tell the reader that your theory is still in the early stages etc. i.e. that there is some evidence to support your interpretation but other theories are possible etc. Be modest about what you have achieved but not too modest!

(Based on Wengraf 1992: 7/1:26-30)

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READING

♦ Extract from Chris Day's Home Ethnography

Chris explains that, from his interviews with despatch riders, several attractions of the job are described. The idea of 'freedom' was the dominant one.

FREEDOM

This was the first idea occurring to five of the three interviewees and was of major importance to a fourth. It was not mentioned explicitly by one, (D.17) but his comments about working flexible hours (tape 122 and 142-163) are based on an assumption of freedom expressed by other informants. This freedom is defined in terms of choosing your own hours of work, and hence, to an extent, your earnings, and of not being told to do things - being your own boss and using your own initiative. For examples of this see C9 interview 24/3/91; W1 interview 22/4/91; tape interview 1, D17 -122,142-163; interview 2, 255-280; interview 3, CDS 16, 388 to the end of side one.

A rider feels (and wishes to feel) that he is not subject to an authority who can tell him to turn up at a certain time in the morning and stay till a certain time at night. This is part of an idea of self-esteem - "no one tells me what to do!" - and also to cast a glance towards the individual psychology involved. (This supports C9's comment about DRs being loners - 24/3/91).

To put this notion of freedom in context, however, I am reminded again that this was not one of the characteristics which featured on my list, written on 30th March. Why was this?

It is because I am intimately aware of the position of the DR and am aware that the converse of this freedom - the freedom from authority and discipline - is the freedom to not be told what to do in terms of work. In other words, the DR must earn money and the only way to do this is to turn up for work when there is work to be done. The clients and the despatch firm wish the jobs to be done and the controller will be inclined to favour riders who 'work hard' or are 'reliable'.

Favours are thus exchanged in many different ways. A concrete example from my own experience, very similar to many other riders I have questioned: It is 7 pm, most riders have gone home and an important client suddenly has an urgent job going to Wanstead in East London. Of the three riders left in town (that is near the client's offices) two live in Fulham, the other lives in Brentford - both in West London. Therefore, it is very inconvenient to make the delivery to Wanstead. You would finish at 7.30 and it would then take an hour, at least, to get home 'empty' and thus unpaid. The rider who volunteers to 'help the controller

out' by 'covering the job' not only earns the relatively measly £7.50 but also the unspoken right to a favour in return. This may be in the form of a sought-after high paying trip to Leeds another day or a couple of late starts which go 'unpunished'. The details of this ongoing process of exchange vary. For example, according to CDS 16(side 2, 103-9): "You've got to be on the controller's back all the time; he's on your back all the time. It's just a battle every day." Hectic negotiation indeed.

Suffice it to say that whatever conditions firms try occasionally to impose, to ensure riders work early and late, there is, in fact, a great deal of flexibility based on this exchange of favours between riders and controller, and the jobs (almost) always get covered somehow.

Hence, the 'free' rider is equally free to turn up late, go home early and earn nothing as he is to slave all day, help the controller out and earn a fortune. But, importantly, to quote one informant (p2:259): "it's my choice". And it is.

Freedom can be seen, then, to be, to a certain extent, illusory unless it is realised that this apparent facade of freedom (which is obviously important to these riders) is a sort of reward given to themselves. They involve themselves in a situation which gives them more of this 'freedom' from authority than they might expect in another job, because it serves their purpose to be, or equally importantly appear to be, free. It is thought of as a positive ideal and thereby constitutes a part of their image or identity - a bond of solidarity or camaraderie (Interview 1, D17:088, 240 - 255)- and as a way of making despatch riders different from other people; that is, giving their social group a boundary. A crude summary might be: 'You're either a freedom-loving despatch rider or you're one of those who gets ordered around all the time.'