UNIT EIGHTEEN

Writing the Ethnographic Project

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SECTION ONE

1. Introduction

> When you're doing ethnography it's you and the place, it's you and the people. You can't not write yourself into it; you are a part of it. (Former ethnography student)

> Addressing the question of how to write ethnography is not solely a matter of experimentation with style, it is also a rediscovery of the world. (Kirsten Hastrup: 1995. 116)

> You will understand, Excellency, that I am offering you simply one version among many. Even in that Mr Bowles and I are alike, the version chosen being that which lends itself to the shaping fantasy at the time. Everything is thus enveloped in its own thick aura of alternatives, including me, the observer. One chooses a convenient self, a suitable standpoint. I could have been a different kind of voice in this report.
>
> (Barry Unsworth 1980: 187 *Pascali's Island.* Penguin.)

Our opening quotations highlight a number of essential characteristics of contemporary ethnographic writing. They point to the reflexivity required of the ethnographer / author and the way that he or she figures explicitly within the text. They suggest that writing ethnographically brings the author to focus on ways of knowing and presenting other people and their worlds. They also show how ethnographic writing is characterised by considerations which are epistemological, political and ethical, and which are highly relevant for students of languages and cultures who are involved in 'translating' other people's worlds and learning to become good cultural mediators.

This unit is intended to help students focus on what is involved in 'writing culture' (Clifford and Marcus: 1986). It will enable them to gain a better understanding of what is required from a sustained piece of ethnographic writing such as the project, and of the status and limitations of what they are to write. It will remind them of what is distinctive about ethnographic writing by contrasting it with other types of writing they are familiar with, or other types of writing they are required to produce for academic purposes. It will also attempt to problematize any idea that the production of the project is a kind of 'writing up', as if it were merely a scientific, factual report of the results of some experiment. We argue that it is much more interesting for our students if we replace this notion with the more complex idea, generated by postmodern theories, of the project as a 'true fiction' (Clifford 1986:6) which is not 'written up', but 'written' or 'authored'.

Some of the ideas involved here are consequently complex ones, requiring a fairly sophisticated analytical ability. They need not be daunting, however, and students will already have been encouraged to explore many of the relevant considerations through their weekly experiments with analysing and presenting data even though all the theory has not been presented to them explicitly. As has been the case with other units, the aim here is not to cover all the theory about ethnographic writing, but to foster what we consider to be good textual practice. Clearly, a student cannot be

'shown' how to write the project in one classroom session. All we hope to achieve here is to get students to focus on *some* of the key features that make an account ethnographic. These are expanded and supplemented by the fulsome handout, 'Thoughts on Writing an Ethnographic Project' (see Section 3) which is distributed in the session and which will be invaluable as a checklist both when students are writing the project and as they are gathering and recording data. However, no amount of analysis of other people's ethnographies or of statements *about* ethnographic writing can substitute for the experience and practice of the difficulties of doing one's own writing. Much of the real application of these ideas will come only when students are actually attempting to write the final document and are requiring tutorial help with drafts.

A final point: it is anticipated that tutors will organise a separate session in order to deal with other issues surrounding the project. For example, students will need help in thinking through their preliminary research plans and they will need information on practicalities such as the length of the project, conventions for referencing, aspects of presentation, what to expect in terms of project supervision, etc. It is not the purpose of this unit to cover such material.

2. Links with other units

This unit spans all the other course units in as much as it pulls together everything that has been said to students throughout about presenting data with appropriate reflexivity, writing in a way that 'makes strange', considering the importance of grounded data, verbatim data and thick description in ethnographic accounts, and so on. It will therefore encourage them to draw on their cumulative experience of presenting and interpreting data in the weekly assignments.

There are particularly strong links with units which focus on methodological issues such as the discussion and practice of data collection and analysis (Unit 11), the work on recording, describing and interpreting naturally-occurring data (e.g. Unit 8 on participant observation, and Unit 12 on recording and analysing naturally occurring events) as well as any of the sessions where pieces of ethnographic writing – either by anthropologists or by former students – are read and critiqued (e.g. Units 2, 6, 7, 8).

Finally, there are links to the Butterfly Unit (Unit 19) which has a section on other aspects of project production.

3. Background notes

'Look after the field notes...'

Let us begin this section with a second quote from a former student, acknowledging the interactive dimension and the sustained focus on the foreign language that are encouraged by the ethnographic project: 'If a student goes abroad doing ethnography, she is going to be talking all the time'. One could equally replace the

word 'talking' with 'writing': a student who undertakes an ethnographic project is also going to be *writing* all the time, and doing so in a number of very distinctive and focused ways. Anthropologist David Fetterman's reminders that 'Writing is hard work', that 'Writing well is even harder' and that 'Ethnography requires good writing skills at every stage' (1989: 111) are therefore worth stressing to students long before they embark on the final version of the project.

Processes of ethnographic writing in the field are characterised by their immediacy, their provisional status and their diversity (e.g. scratch notes, field notes, transcription of interview data, etc.). Such writing always carries the freshness of discovery, taking place as it does usually no more than a few hours after the experience / encounter that has generated the data, and involving detailed thick descriptions. The recording and analysis of experience in writing leads meaningfully on to yet more experience and more writing, so each act of writing is a spring-board to further discovery and ethnographic texts develop organically as the researcher gradually becomes steeped in her or his data. And to the scratch notes, field-notes and transcriptions of verbatim interview data already mentioned we could add the field-diary, any notes taken from academic studies dealing with relevant concepts, and notes developed from other text-based sources such as articles, reports or documents that are written or provided by informants or in some way relevant to their lives.

Student ethnographers, then, will produce many written documents while in the field. Somehow, once the excitement of fieldwork is over, elements from this mass of very diverse textual sources must come together in a sustained piece of writing with a meaningful framework. One student who was focusing on themes of gender and exclusion in the Nice carnival gave a fairly typical account of the difficulties involved in starting this process:

> I mean, it is good fun, you know, going out there and seeing loads of people and interviewing, but it's hard, really hard, writing up. [...] to tell you the truth I don't know where to start on my question of exclusion / inclusion [...] it's just trying to put in other sub-headings which are the most connected really, like hierarchy and honour, things like that, family, but I mean there's just so much ... I've just so much data.

She had to synthesise and select from a mass of material, including notes on herself as a researcher and on the field situation, transcribed interviews with her four main informants and an accompanying detailed index of twenty-seven recurring themes, some factual and historical data on the carnival drawn from a variety of published sources, as well as a number of articles from anthropological literature on concepts around family, gender, boundaries, hierarchies, local-level politics, honour and shame and so on. She also knew that ideally her final piece was to remain marked by the vitality, immediacy and fullness of detail, as well as the considered reflexivity and analytical perceptions of all the acts of writing that preceded it. So whilst it is not entirely accurate to say 'look after the field notes and the project will take care of itself', there is nevertheless a fair bit of truth in this re-worked saying. Writing well from the start will prove invaluable later.

Debates on ethnographic writing

'Writing well' has meant different things to different people throughout the history of anthropology, and one of the favourite topics on which anthropologists have been writing for the past few decades is in fact the nature of ethnographic writing itself. Recent debates have been marked in particular by post-modern theories which have meant a focus on the interdependent nature of form and content and have problematised the relationship of the text to any 'reality' or 'truth' outside it. Questions addressed within this context include the overlapping ones of authority, authorship, the means of textual production, and the status of the text as a product. Every consideration within ethnographic research and writing is therefore properly perceived as political: as Geertz has put it, 'What once seemed only technically difficult, getting "their" lives into "our" works, has turned morally, politically, even epistemologically, delicate' (1988: 130).

Whilst the works of relevant practitioners or theorists have not been discussed in detail during the preceding classroom sessions, many of these debates have nevertheless fed into the materials produced for this course, and therefore we hope into all aspects of student ethnographic practice. The principal areas with which students should be familiar and upon which they will need to focus in their writing are outlined below.

1. Versions of lives

Firstly, perhaps the most fundamental consideration is that the ethnographer is not to be thought of as producing some unmediated 'Truth' or 'definitive version' of the cultural scene they write about. Writing an ethnographic text does not involve a positivistic relaying of recorded 'facts' about other people's lives. It is not empirical or scientific but interpretative. It is 'a' version of other people's lives, presenting sets of meanings that are not absolute but that have been negotiated with informants and which are the product of a unique and unrepeatable set of encounters between the researcher and the researched. Referring to this shift within anthropology, Hastrup cites the examples of the 1970s writings of Mead and Wax, explaining that 'neither [...] appears to have any clue to the extent to which fieldwork participation itself generates the events that are then portrayed as 'facts'' (118). In the same vein, in a series of essays exploring the overlap between ethnography and autobiography, Okely and Callaway remind us that 'like fieldwork, the process of writing and the creation of the final text involve a series of choices which depend on the selective interests of the ethnographer: monographs, often presented and read as definitive and timeless, are in fact selective and historically contingent'.(1995: i).

Instead, in much contemporary ethnographic writing, it is made clear that the text records not some pure cultural world, but a shifting *between* cultural worlds (Clifford: 1988; Tedlock: 1983) as the ethnographer moves between the strange and the familiar, drawing on her or his own limited resources and lived experience and eliciting narratives from her informants which are equally subjective and limited. The space which informants and ethnographer inhabit as fieldwork progresses is 'a liminal, self-conscious world between cultures' (Hastrup: 121). The authority of the ethnographer to speak for a whole culture, or indeed for any group with any absolute

authority, is therefore in question, and it is recognised that the production of meaning in these encounters is dialectical.

Thus the ethnographic text is now concerned to display its own awareness that it is a partial and provisional document. The meta-textual and self-interrogating apparatus that is now often built into the text deliberately clouds its status as mirror, and draws the reader into a dialogue not only with the cultural experiences described, but also with the implications of the manner of describing.

Students recognize some of these ideas under the broad heading of 'reflexivity', with which they have been familiarised from the early stages of the course. Their interpretations and comments throughout, whether verbal or written, will have been discussed by tutors in the light of this concept and all that it implies – although infusing the final project with reflexivity still represents a considerable challenge. Typically, students will include an introductory, reflexive section in their project where methodology and the problems and processes of research are described, and where they discuss issues such as how the researcher's own background, gender, age, etc. may have affected the data they collected or the ways their informants responded to them. In the remainder of the project, however, a heightened awareness of the way findings are presented must also be in operation. For example, the ability to distinguish between description and interpretation, to catch oneself slipping into inappropriate value judgements that are a part of one's own value-system, to ask whether or not a generalisation is warranted, or to resist concluding the project with some grandiloquent statement about what has been 'proved' are also important aspects of a reflexive approach. It must be shown throughout that an attempt has been made to understand informants and account for their lives in their own terms, whilst at the same time demonstrating awareness that one can never genuinely be in somebody else's shoes.

2. Speaking subjects

The issue of voice within the ethnographic text is also a key one. Current thinking attempts to incorporate informants as speaking subjects and to foreground their voices as much as possible. Students have also been encouraged not only to incorporate a good deal of verbatim data (rather than indirect speech or paraphrase) in order that the voices of their informants be heard, but also to be sensitive about how this is done. Once again, it should be acknowledged that the voices of informants are not carrying cultural truths, but circumstantial responses to the ethnographer's presence and questioning. And all the verbatim quotes in the world do not alter the fact that the ethnographer's voice is always the strongest, and it is the ethnographer who selects and edits the speech of informants. The idea of plural authorship, of giving informants the status of co-writers, has been pursued in some cases (Dwyer, for example, attempted to make a monograph solely out of transcripts of dialogue (1982)), but the questions of control and of what has been called the 'symbolic violence' (Hastrup 124) of ethnographic writing are never really resolved. Instead they are part of the dynamic within which any ethnographer must consciously write.

3. Ideas of authorship

A further development in recent theory has been the notion of the ethnographer not so much as a writer but as an author of texts (e.g. Clifford and Marcus: 1986; Geertz: 1988; Okeley and Callaway: 1995). In other words, he or she is not just writing *about* culture, writing *about* the 'other', but writing culture and writing the other. This is consistent with the perspectives on ethnographic writing discussed above. It acknowledges the gap between experience in the field and text, and it suggests that this is something much more substantive than just a temporal gap. The text does not simply record past experiences, but writing the text is in itself a means to experience – an act of comprehension and of giving shape to experience. In this perspective, the confrontation with fieldwork data and with what happened during fieldwork goes on way after the fieldwork has finished and the text is a product not so much of the past, but of the present moment. Perhaps it would be debilitating rather than enabling to try to get students to keep such ideas in mind as they write, but it should certainly be possible to foster in them an awareness that writing ethnography does not mean 'writing up' something already there. In ethnographic writing where we are responsible for producing versions of other people's lives, it is especially important that we consider ourselves as authors not as scribes, that we replace ideas of 'writing up' with ideas of 'writing' or 'authoring', and that we think of writing as always creating, never simply reflecting reality in some neutral fashion. It is in this sense that the term 'true fictions' has been applied to ethnographic writings because whilst such writings are not pure fabrications, they nevertheless bear an uneasy relationship to any putative truth outside the text (see Clifford 1986:6 who reminds us that ethnographies can be called fictions in the sense of something made or fashioned from the Latin root *fingere*. But ethnographies are not just making but making up.) Ideas of the 'ethnographic imagination' (Atkinson: 1990) also point in the same direction.

4. The 'I' in the text

As has already been suggested, the author's presence in recent ethnographic writing is highlighted as is her or his responsibility for the shape and nature of the text. 'Earlier', as Hastrup tells us, 'the anthropologist stated her [sic] presence in the field and then disappeared from the text. Today we require that she remain there because her presence in the field was the locus of the field-world.' (126). This foregrounding of the 'I' in the text is something that students find problematic. Although they have absorbed the idea that they need to highlight the experiential nature of their research and learning amongst other people, using the first person in the final project contravenes the stylistic rules that apply to the majority of academic work they are required to produce. In general, they are encouraged to adopt an objective, scholarly tone and avoid subjective intrusions. Here they must instead tread a tightrope where the first person is present, but in a controlled way. In other words, where the personal does not take over to the extent that the focus shifts to the experience of fieldwork as it was for the student (e.g. 'I really enjoyed my fieldwork and learnt a lot about myself'). We might call this a 'knowing subjectivity'. It means that the reader is not allowed to forget the extent to which the author is instrumental in writing the project, but that there is also a scholarly element so that, as Hastrup puts it, '[the text] connects an important personal experience with a general field of knowledge' (117).

5. Making generalisations

The question of generalisation is frequently raised as students attempt to write their ethnographic projects. Generalising about a particular culture is, of course, the basis of stereotyping and often negative stereotyping. Helping students to think about the problems of generalising is a way of helping them to challenge their preconceptions and stereotypes. Most students feel that, if they cannot generalise, then what they have learnt is merely local and fleeting. Ethnography aims to help them see significance in the local. Indeed, it may also encourage them to question the value of generalisations of people and their behaviour. We live our lives locally, not at the level of generality, and the reflexive, questioning orientation towards their informants and towards the writing process which students are developing should help them to question the generalisations that so easily come to mind.

This is not to argue that there should be no generalisation in their ethnographic projects. Cultural learning is about linking the local and immediate to the general principles and concepts that underlie social action. The task of the ethnographic writer is to ask how far any specific example of action or reflection links to these more general concepts. One way of doing this is to place the individual in her or his context as completely as possible – describing all the conditions under which, for example, they have taken a particular stance on a subject in order to understand where they are coming from. For example, Sophie had to find out as much as she could about the context of her informant, the *carnavalière*, in order to understand how she felt excluded from the male-dominated carnival process. Sophie could then write about the concepts of exclusion and boundaries more generally. So ethnographic projects are case studies in Mitchell's sense of providing 'telling' examples rather than 'typical' ones (1984). General principles can thus be seen to manifest themselves in a given set of particular utterances.

6. Descriptive skills

Linked to the idea of authorship and of 'true fictions' is a further writing skill required by ethnography: the ability to describe in such a way that the sights, sounds, smells and sensations of a given cultural scene are vividly recreated on the page for the reader. As Fetterman puts it, 'From simple notes about small events, special landmarks, or even the temperature to efforts to describe an experience or explain a sudden insight, ethnographic writing requires an eye for detail, an ability to express that detail in its proper context, and the language skills to weave small details and bits of meaning into a textured fabric'(1989: 111). Again, this is not something students are required to do for other academic pieces of work. They are persuaded of the epistemological importance of 'thick description' which provides contextual detail about a cultural scene in order that events, incidents or patterns of behaviour taking place within it be better interpreted and understood. They are also accustomed to reading the kind of sustained description that can be involved in making strange (Singer's 'Money on the Table' reading (Unit 4) is a good example here). However, they have had little practice in writing descriptions and they tend to think of this kind of vivid recreation of a scene as having a connection with literature, with fiction and creative writing workshops rather than with what they have been accustomed to thinking of as academic writing. But there are considerable overlaps between writing ethnography and writing fiction: both have a plot (they tell the story of the fieldwork as well as the story of other people's lives), both play with narrative

voice (ethnography has a first-person narrator), both have protagonists (including the author) who are attentively delineated and who become familiar to the reader, and both allow diversity and experimentation.

As suggested, this is no more than a brief overview of some of the salient issues discussed by contemporary writers of ethnography. It is probably sufficient however, to indicate some of the tensions that will have to be borne in mind by students as they write ethnographic projects, and by teachers as they supervise and mark them. Hopefully, the point has also been made that the writing itself is part of the process of cultural learning. This is so not only because it crystallizes the ideas that were developed in the field, but more importantly because, in the effort to write ethnographically, students have to make numerous decisions which repeatedly draw them into the epistemological and political issues that are at the heart of any attempt to know and to write about other people.

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SECTION TWO

1. Outline of a session

1. What is different about an ethnographic project?
2. 'After the Thrash, the Trash': What is distinctive about an ethnographic account?
3. Despatch riders and debt collectors: Different levels of ethnographic writing
4. Using concepts in ethnographic projects.
5. Distribution of handouts: Thoughts on writing an ethnographic project, Project assessment criteria

2. Description of a session

2.1 What is different about an ethnographic project?

Begin with David Fetterman's quote about the good writing skills needed at every stage of the ethnographic process (see Background Notes). Tell students that the focus here will be on writing ethnographically, and remind them that, while they are in the field, writing will be a constant (mention again fieldnotes, field diary, interview transcriptions etc.).

Tell students that the session will cover:

- Some revision (what constitutes an ethnographic approach to the project? What kinds of things will you be doing / thinking about if you are doing ethnography?)
- How do you go about writing ethnography? What kinds of things do you have to take account of? This is important because some of the conventions are rather different from types of academic writing you are perhaps more accustomed to.
- We will help you to consider the different levels of writing (that is, the different types of statement you will be making) in the project. It is important to be aware of these and to be able to distinguish between them.
- We will also focus on what makes a research question a good, or a less good one, and on using the concepts from the course to illuminate your data.

Next, move on to a short brainstorming session aimed to focus the mind and have students revise what they already know. As has been suggested, there is little to be gained in taking them through all the theoretical material in the background notes: it is not theory we want them to discuss, but the practice we want them to be able to implement in their own writing. In all likelihood, students will have produced projects before, even if these are not as long as the dissertation. They will probably also have peers undertaking projects in other areas of foreign language studies. The aim here is to briefly recap on what makes a project ethnographic.

Answers should include elements of the following:

- the position of the researcher (participant observation; not detached but in the thick of things);
- the development of the research question (beginning with the foreshadowed problem, keeping an ethnographic eye and ear open and fixing on a research question that gradually emerges. It may change as you progress, so you need to remain flexible);
- the *type* of research question (likely to be part of a wider issue, but your study will be local and narrow and micro in focus, e.g. you would not set out to look at 'Immigration in France' or 'Women in Spain' – these are too broad to be manageable. But your research amongst particular groups into their experience as lived out on the ground on a day-to-day basis might involve the experience of certain Spanish women in a particular context, or the experience of North African or other immigrant people who live in France. In other words, your overarching framework will require you to refer to larger issues, but your study is of how these are actually lived out in daily interactions and practices);
- the concepts drawn upon for analysis of the data (many of these will be from social or linguistic anthropology or from sociolinguistics);
- the wide range of data collection techniques that is available to students doing this kind of project;
- the use of informants as the main source of data (interaction, ethnographic conversations and interviews, verbatim data);
- the focus on language use (sensitivity to this in its social and cultural contexts. Drawing out concepts / key terms / rich words);
- the fact that the text will have many voices (a 'plurivocal' account) although yours will always be dominant;
- the need to consider ethical issues (transparency – letting informants know what you are doing);
- reflexivity (awareness you are the main research tool and you are affecting and filtering the data);
- your presence as the 'I' in the text;
- the inclusion of the narrative of the research itself (how it came about and developed). This is one of the project's frameworks – a kind of 'plot'; you can write your research trajectory and problems *into* the dissertation. They may be revealing of tension at work between your perceptions and those of your informants, and showing your awareness of this is part of a reflexive approach;
- the question of style: you will be dipping in and out of the scholarly register we generally require in academic writing. Sometimes you will be 'story telling', and sometimes describing in fine-grained detail – rather like a novelist might describe;

- a certain creativity. The best ethnographies are a 'good read'; they recreate the texture of lived experience of your informants in lively, energetic, vividly descriptive accounts, so that the appearance, sounds, smells, sensations associated with particular places, people, events are convincingly present;
- throughout, the use of what has been called by Atkinson 'the ethnographic imagination'.

2.2 'After the Thrash, the Trash': What is specific about an ethnographic account? (Assignment 1)

Use the text on the Glastonbury litter pickers (see Section 3). Ideally the text should have been given out with accompanying questions as an assignment to be considered prior to the session. Alternatively, students can be asked to focus in class on the following three sections:

1. 'Benbo, a rugged knight of the road...' to '...someone has to clean up';
2. Glastonbury is a tribal affair...' to '...putting dog-ends in my pocket';
3. 'Next morning, after the customary two-hours' sleep...' to '...we've given it back'.

Explain the context of the text (it is a piece of journalism about the various groups of litter-pickers who clean up the site at Glastonbury once the festival is over). Split students up into groups of three and ask them to come to some conclusions on:

- What is good about this piece (in terms of an ethnographic account)?
- What is not so good about it (i.e. what is not ethnographic)?
- What questions would you put to Benbo and other informants if you were researching amongst the litter pickers for an ethnographic project? What kinds of thing might you want to find out about?

Discuss feedback with the class. Attempt to elicit comments about the text which direct students towards the following broad conclusions:

i) Vividness of the account (liveliness and detail of description)
Verbatim data (there is lots of it – lots of what informants say)
The text tries to come to some definitions of different groups as well as of the boundaries between them
There is the idea of a conceptual system underlying the broad idea of 'rubbish' (i.e. one could draw up a taxonomy of different kinds of rubbish)
There is an inventive title
Use of visuals (here photographs, a staple of journalism, but, as well as photographs, ethnography can also use diagrams, maps, charts, plans and a wide range of other documents).

ii) The text is an impressionistic overview (not thorough or searching enough)
There is not enough detail (we only know what bits of the litter pickers' day are like)

There is no attempt to be holistic (e.g. trying to find out in as complete a way as possible about some aspect of their lives).
Patterns in their lives are not clearly drawn out (they are not related to any underlying social systems / groupings; e.g. how are they different from travellers?)
There is no account of how the research was set up and conducted
There is no reflexivity on the part of the researcher
Verbatim data is not interrogated, interpreted or built on. It is simply quoted.
No concern is shown for the language used by informants to describe their world. For example, key terms such as 'crusties', or the statement that Greens are deemed insufficiently 'crusty' need developing.
The piece is not particularly analytical. No concepts are developed.
In fact there is no main focus / research question. The text is diffuse, with some very detailed, local information, but no attempt to relate this to any bigger, overarching questions. In an ethnographic account we would expect the researcher to draw out an interesting question of a particular type. The main focus might be, for example:
The nature of litter / rubbish
The group and how it defines itself in relation to the job
Identity

iii) What makes them a group (an 'A.F.')?
How do they relate to other groups of litter-pickers?
What motivates them to do this work (ecological concern? Mysticism? Reciprocity?)
What makes this 'work'? How do they relate to it as work? What are their notions of work?
Other aspects of their world view in general. Is it 'peace, man', or are they doing this for themselves? And why is being at the deserted Glastonbury site 'better than bloody London'? An ethnographer would wish to get to the bottom of statements like this.

Students may well raise other avenues they would wish to pursue and develop in order to conduct research and organise their account more ethnographically.

End this section by pointing out that the question of moving from the local and the very detailed to the level of larger concepts and broader, overarching questions is one students themselves will have to think about as they organise material for their project. The next activity will focus on just this: moving from the local and particular detail to larger concepts / generalisations that may help to make sense of that local detail.

2.3 Despatch riders and debt collectors: Different levels of ethnographic writing. (Assignment 2)

This material should be prepared by students prior to the session as it requires some detailed consideration of extracts from former student projects to illustrate the different levels of statement made in ethnographic writing. Students should have read the explanatory sheet, 'Ethnographic Writing: The Particular and the General',

as well as the project extracts, and should have brought their findings on the following questions:

- What are the different levels the writers use? (Give examples)
- Is the proportion of levels (i.e. the relationship between the general and the particular) about right?
- Are there any levels the writers don't use?
- What ideas could the writers take further?

For example, the first paragraph of the extract from 'The Debt Collector' is a combination of levels, moving between general statements about a specific organisation ('The management also have a responsibility...') to statements about common / habitual practices ('...occasionally things do go wrong.'), statements about specific incidents ('The company received a complaint...') and general statements about the wider activity ('..."You've got to smooth that kind of thing over"').

Throughout the extract there is a fair mix of stating what informants say or do, and setting local incidents in a wider context. There is, however, little in the way of general conceptual statements (level 5 type statements) in spite of the promising heading 'Politics and Boundaries' which seems to promise an overall conceptual framework. The extract from 'Despatch Riders in London' is more successful in terms of framing the particular details of the riders' lives with general conceptual statements.

Point out to students that, although they should not mechanically be attempting to include a certain quota of each type of statement, all levels should be present in their project. Being aware of these different levels should help steer them away from texts which are too anecdotal and do not involve enough conceptual thinking (i.e. over-reliance on levels 1 and 2).

2.4 Using concepts in ethnographic projects

This part of the session focuses on the concepts that have been introduced throughout the course and on how these can be used by students to help them make sense of their data and organise it persuasively for the project.

Remind them that their project will enter into dialogue with other studies – some of which we have read in the course, some the students may find for themselves - usually by anthropologists or sociolinguists. Drawing on concepts developed in such works, quoting from them and relating their own data to them will be an important part of the project. It may help to remind them of the way they were asked to relate their data for the mixed-gender conversation assignment to the article by Pamela Fishman (Unit 6). The fact that students often come up with evidence from their own observations which appears to cast doubt on the universal validity of Fishman's claims can also be mentioned. This reminds them that their project will form part of a larger debate around much discussed concepts (in this case, the idea of power and gender at work in everyday conversation).

Make the point that familiarity with these is a great asset in the early stages when students are asking themselves what might be a good cultural scene in which to do fieldwork, and wondering what kinds of thing they might find out there. Remind them that it is unusual to use concepts such as this as a *starting point*: a student who wanted to look at notions of purity, dirt and taboo (see Unit 16) and who decided there would be a lot of relevant data if she conducted fieldwork amongst a group of cleaners was forced to change tack since there was little said or done in this group that allowed her to draw on these concepts. The message here is that it is difficult to squeeze people's lives to fit your own interest, and not really the right way to approach ethnography. However, thinking about these concepts may equip students to approach fieldwork with more confidence since this will give them some idea of the kinds of interesting questions that might be asked in a given context.

Begin by asking students which concepts they remember as the most striking / interesting. Then show the OHT (see Section 3) which is a reminder of some of the conceptual work to which they have been introduced in the ethnography course.

With the OHT still displayed, look again at the extracts from the student projects. It is clear that the author of the project on despatch riders is attempting to use conceptual categories to order his material (see in particular the contents page). This is less evident in the study on the debt collector, despite the inclusion of the heading 'Politics and Boundaries'. Ask students what kinds of concept might be appropriate to underpin this data.

Within each course unit we have included a paragraph or two illustrating how former students have exploited the concepts introduced. Some of these may usefully be picked up and mentioned again here.

2.5 Distribution of handouts

- Thoughts on writing an ethnographic project
- Project assessment criteria

3. Advice and comments

If all students are required to do a dissertation while abroad, there are likely to be general worries about how to write a substantial piece. This unit on writing ethnographic projects should not be a substitute for a more general session where issues about structuring writing, accurate references and plagiarism, etc are likely to be covered. (However, whereas plagiarism may be a real problem with more conventional book-based projects, it is difficult to imagine how it could be an issue with ethnographic projects.)

Students find it quite hard to think analytically about their own writing and find the idea of analysing student ethnographic texts for different levels of generalisation quite daunting or lacking in purpose. It can be helpful to link this exercise directly with any stereotypes about a particular culture they may have and push them to think about any disconfirming evidence which challenges this generalisation.

They also need a lot of encouragement to write themselves into their project and resist the classic academic 'objectivity' and 'impersonality'.

The following are comments that staff have made about ethnographic projects in the past and they may be useful in emphasising certain points to students:

Good points:

- Good data
- Imaginative titles and approaches
- Personal involvement
- Some projects well focused
- Show a lot of commitment and thought

Points to work on:

- Overall structure weak
- Lack of development of points – often only mentioned
- Lack of confidence in being explicit about ideas
- Sometimes too chatty and diary-like
- Data not analysed enough
- Concepts thrown in rather than really integrated with the data
- Foreshadowed questions not clear.

Student comments

> (On the unit)
> Several anxieties came to the surface - like the use of ethnographical jargon, whether spelling matters, what it means to be systematic. Some people had worries about their ability to analyse, and the response from A—(the tutor) that we needed to trust ourselves was much appreciated.
>
> (And looking back at the course as a whole)
> The course has given an appreciation and awareness of what scientific analysis *should* be, and what it involves to achieve it, i.e. systematic collection of data, structure, thought, conclusion, reflection..'
>
> '[The course] has been invaluable as regards preparation for the project abroad . It clarifies our self-imposed limitations and intolerances.

SECTION THREE

1. Assignment

After the Thrash, the Trash.

Read Ed Vulliamy's piece (see readings) on the Glastonbury litter-pickers. This cultural scene might be an interesting one for an ethnographic study, although this article is obviously a piece of journalism not a piece of ethnographic writing. We would like you to consider the following questions and bring your notes to the session for discussion:

1. What is good about the account in ethnographic terms?
2. What is not so good about it (i.e. what is un-ethnographic)?
3. What questions would you put to Benbo or other informants if you were doing an ethnographic project among the litter-pickers? What kinds of thing would you want to find out about?

Different levels of ethnographic writing

(Based on Spradley: *The Ethnographic Interview,* Chapter 12)

Introduction

When you are writing up your ethnographic project, you will be dealing with very general observations at one extreme, and at the other extreme very specific, concrete events and words.

To help you think about the different levels at which you can write, use the following examples as a guideline and relate them to two short extracts from Home Ethnographic projects written by former students, 'Despatch Riders in London' and 'The Debt Collector'.

Try to identify the different levels the writers use. Is the proportion of levels (i.e. the relationship between the general and the particular) about right? Are there any levels they don't use? What interacting ideas could the writers take further?

Levels of ethnographic writing
(examples from Spradley and Mann, 'The Cocktail Waitress' and from student projects).

Notice that the first two levels involve what informants say or do, and the remainder involve conceptualising this and setting it in a wider context.

1. **Statements about specific incidents or specific remarks:** i.e. actual level of behaviour and objects.

e.g. remarks made by informants about specific incidents: 'When I went to get his order he grabbed me by the waist and started fooling around'.

e.g. remarks made by the writer: (Sandy) "steps up to the table and asks 'Are you ready to order now?' One of the males grabs her by the waist and jerks her towards him 'I already know what I want! I'll take you'..."

2. Statements about common / habitual practices:

e.g. statements made by informants: 'They never ask for a drink without teasing or hassling the girls.'

e.g. statements made by the writer: '...they ask instead for the waitress. This may be done in the form of teasing, hustling, hassling."

3. More general statements about a specific organisation, group or scene:

e.g. "Brady's Bar is a place where men can come to play out exaggerated masculine roles."

4. General statements about the wider group / activity, etc.

e.g. "Bars, in general, are places of employment for thousands of women, almost always as a cocktail waitress. Their role in bars tends to be an extension of their role at home, serving the needs of men."

e.g. 'Debt collecting is not as hasardous in rural areas as in urban ones.'

e.g. 'The cocktail waitress is similar in many ways to the British barmaid.'

5. General conceptual statements / statements that have universal significance:

e.g. 'Debt collecting is organised around protecting the 'face' of the debtor'

e.g. 'the biological differences between female and male tend to create a special kind of reality: feminine and masculine identities.'

OHT1

WRITING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PROJECT

- What's different about an ethnographic project?
- What's distinctive about an ethnographic account?
- Different levels of ethnographic writing
- Using concepts in ethnographic writing
- Handouts

OHT 2

USING CONCEPTS FROM THE ETHNOGRAPHY COURSE

Unit 3:	Non-verbal communication and social space
Unit 4:	Shared cultural knowledge
Unit 5:	Primary socialisation in the family
Unit 6:	Gender relations
Unit 7:	Secondary socialisation and education
Unit 13:	National and local identity and boundaries
Unit 14:	Language and social identity
Unit 15:	Local-level politics: exchange, reciprocity, obligation, etc.
Unit 16:	Symbolic classification and rituals
Unit 17:	Discourse and power

Handout 1 – Thoughts on Writing an Ethnographic Project

(Based on Spradley, Werner and Schoepfle, Clifford and Marcus, Hammersley and Atkinson, Ellen).

"Transforming what you know into what you communicate" (Ellen)

You the writer: being reflexive

1. Think about your immersion in another cultural group – how far do you become like them? Do you ever stop being yourself?
2. Make a distinction all the time between what your informants say and what you say. Ultimately what you write is **your** construction of a particular mode of life. You are the narrator and it is your voice which will be the strongest.
3. So you need to be self-aware and self-critical – both of your presence when doing the ethnography and of your "representation" of others. Perhaps you are creating and not representing?
4. Remember that you can never get the 'final version' on the particular aspect of social life you are studying. All that you've obtained, heard and experienced gets reduced to a text. Also, remember that sounds, smells, music etc. are all worth recording.
5. Ethnographers are expected to be culturally relative – i.e. to understand and accept differences in other cultural practices without being judgmental. This is fine – but whether you are charitable or critical, it is important to remember that it is your version of reality which will be read and remembered – and perhaps fed back to your informants! In other words, as an ethnographer with 'inside knowledge', you also have power.
6. More generally, cultural description and interpretation is always within power relations. It is easy to interpret behaviour as simply 'cultural' when, in fact, there are good historical and political reasons for it.
7. And just as everything you observe and hear arises out of historical processes, power relations and language, so your own interpretations and writing are constrained by them – e.g. in the 19th century, 'niggers' and 'savages' were OK terms, and in the 1950s and '60s, 'man' meant men and women. It was not that people were intrinsically less humane and understanding.
8. So you need to be reflexive about:
    - the contexts and data you collect (i.e. who, what, when, where, etc)
    - you the narrator and your presence in those contexts
    - how you move from data to description, interpretation and explanation.

9. In a way, all ethnography is translation. It involves making sense of one set of cultural meanings to another group. In doing this 'translation' it is important to think about the limits of your own language and cultural meaning. Not just how can I convey the concept so that people in my community can understand it – but what does the difficulty of translating tell me about my own language and cultural practice?

10. As an ethnographer, you are looking for social patterns and underlying meanings. What Geertz calls 'symbolic action'. But you need to be reflexive about this process as well. There is a danger of presenting a set of integrated implicit meanings as 'the knowledge of X culture' – which you have access to but the informants do not – rather like a psychoanalyst telling her patient about herself. In other words, there is a danger of an overly coherent account. Perhaps the article you have read by Mary Douglas entitled 'Taking the Biscuit' goes too far in this direction...

11. Finally, perhaps writing an ethnography says as much about you and your cultural world as about the one you are bringing to life in your writing.

Steps in writing an ethnography

1. Data analysis

- Remember that analysis should be carried out as you collect data and not only afterwards.
- Look back at the handout and your notes on how to index your data. Another technique is to use file cards of different colours and make a distinction between:
  - different informants
  - notes on individuals and summary notes on a theme drawn from several informants
- Remember you have different kinds of data and you need to be explicit about this:

  e.g. systematic and exhaustive
  systematic and not exhaustive
  intuitive knowledge

  e.g. data you have observed
  data you have elicited (i.e. you have pushed people into talking / behaving in a certain way)

2. Beginning to write

Start writing as early as you can and don't let the data go cold on you.

Select your audience. Writing is much easier when you write for one target reader (i.e. one of your lecturers)

Use your reading to give references and establish your argument.

3. Select a thesis

You have probably already got a good idea what your main argument is going to be. It may not be the 'foreshadowed problem' you started with. Some typical theses are:

- What is it like to be a ... ? This has been called the 'moral career' approach. It is a tracing through of the socialisation process. E.g. What is it like to be a debt collector?'
- Taking a cultural meaning system and seeing that it is much more complex than you think. E.g. membership of a friendship group in a Yorkshire village.
- Communicative competence – what are the tacit 'rules' underlying the particular activity of a group? E.g. kissing as greeting in an Italian community.
- Illustration of a broad theme. E.g. notion of boundary (but remember that broad cultural themes are always embedded in political realities).

4. Rough out your topics and an outline

There are many different ways of organising your material.
Your outline should at least include:

- History of the project, i.e. how you came to choose it and how you set about becoming a participant observer.
- Geographic location – where it happened
- Actors – who were your informants (as much detail as is necessary to contextualise the data without breaking confidentiality)
- Activities – the behaviour / activities and the patterns underlying them
- A justification for the project and any benefit you can see for your informants.

5. Drafts and re-drafts

Do a rough draft. You will probably find you want to structure your material in the way that fits best with your thesis (see 3 above).

For example:

- Moral career – take a sequential approach – describing a day, a week etc.
- Zoom lens approach (general to specific and vice-versa) useful for describing the complexity of cultural meaning systems
- Zoom lens, detailed transcripts and analysis, for the communicative competence approach
- Thematic Organisation and using anthropological or social categories or informant tenons.
  e.g. Agar's 'Coping', 'The Bust', etc.
  e.g. Spradley's 'Hassling', useful for illustrating broad themes.

These are examples only. The important thing is to find a clear structure that fits your argument. Rearrange the outline if things now seem in the wrong order.

6. As you are writing, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I got a good balance between **description** and **analysis?**

Analysis should have been taking place from the start of the research and guiding the process of data collection (we have spoken already during the course of a 'constant and cumulative dialogue with your data'). You should be anchoring your data to concepts continuously. Students who have not done this may leave the field with no more than a descriptive record of unfocused and anecdotal detail. This will make the final write-up very difficult, it is the result of what we might call the 'trolley dash' approach, which involves rushing in, grabbing what you can, then unpacking it afterwards. Afterwards is too late.

- Is my description **'thick'** or **'thin'** (e.g. superficial)?

Remember that one of the hallmarks of ethnographic accounts is that they are grounded in detail. The context is always given as a basis for interpretation (remember the example given from Geertz earlier in the course involving the different possible interpretations of a wink, which could be read in a variety of ways according to the context, or which could simply be a twitch).

- Have I looked closely enough at my data to **'unpack' it sufficiently?**

Are there any further questions you could ask? Are you still making assumptions and not peeling off enough layers? Remember how the Singer reading 'Money on the Table' unpacked the apparently simple act of tipping in a restaurant. Because you will have acquired a lot of knowledge about the cultural scene you are studying, you might assume certain features are 'too obvious' to be mentioned, that 'everybody knows this'. In other words, you might forget just how much you have found out. IN fact, much of what is now familiar to you will not be to the reader. Early field notes can help you remember the freshness of discovery.

- Am I being **too anecdotal** and not exploring the underlying patterns and causes of what I am describing?

Remember to tie your descriptions to analysis. For example, the student who studied the world of the Carnavaliers in Nice and who came to the conclusion that it was a 'male domain' was making a large statement that required cultural interpretation and analysis, not just description. She could have asked, for example, what are the processes that bring about and sustain this state of affairs?

- Have I shown how my data is **related to some of the concepts** (anthropological / sociolinguistic) we have studied in the course?

Through drawing in some of these concepts and engaging with the secondary reading in which they are developed by other researchers, you will be giving a solid

academic underpinning to your work and making the organisation of your data more convincing. The concepts should help to provide the framework of your project (this may involve, for example, aspects of group identity, styles of talking, gender roles, aspects to do with social space or boundaries, etc.)

Your analysis of relevant concepts also allows you to contribute to wider debates. For example, in the unit on Gender Relations we looked at a piece of research by Pamela Fishman about differing conversational styles between men and women. Through the related assignment, students have often come up with disconfirming evidence which they can pit against Fishman's findings. Whether your evidence confirm existing theories or seems to point in other directions, it is important to show that you are considering its value within this wider academic context.

- Do I concentrate enough on **describing the activities of my informants?**

Some ethnographic accounts written by former students have 'missed out the people' so that there is no longer a vivid impression made on the reader of the texture of their lives and of what they do and say.

- Have I used **verbatim data:**

a) Enough?

Remember the importance of repeating the actual words used by your informants. This is an essential part of your attempt to give an emic (insider) perspective. It is also essential evidence to back up many of the claims you will make in your project.

b) Analytically

Try to adopt a questioning, sensitive approach to statements from your informants. Ideally you should know enough about your informants to see what they say reflexively. Above all, demonstrate that you have analysed and interpreted their statements. Do not assume that a quote inserted in the project 'speaks for itself'; it usually doesn't. The key words, names, categories, etc. that people use to describe their world often require elucidation and 'translation'. For example, one student studying a group of firemen quoted an informant as saying, à propos of his watch, 'we're not typical firemen'. Clearly, this needs exploring and an obvious next step would be to take the idea of 'typical firemen' as a lead and unpack it (what does the idea consist of? where does it come from?) as well as attempting to ascertain in what ways his watch was considered to differ.

Make sure you recognise the distinction between an informant speaking about what life is like for her/himself, and an informant generalising about what it's like for everyone. The second type of statement needs further verification.

- What about **my voice?**

Writing ethnography is challenging because it requires you to combine an academic, analytical and objective approach with a first-person narrative account of your own research experiences. Some students have written up their data in a way that

makes them sound like informants rather than researchers (e.g. chatty, informal, un-analytical). Make sure the 'storytelling' tone of parts of your account does not take over, but is balanced with a more scholarly resister. Whatever the register, make sure you consider whether you have presented your material articulately and clearly.

- **Is my evidence adequate** to back up my assertions and claims?

Projects often suffer from sweeping generalisations and judgements that appear to be grounded in very little except personal opinion. During the course of research you are bound to form a wide range of judgements as you go along, but you are expected to check these against the data you are gathering to see to what extent they are founded and to get as complete a picture as possible. When presenting your analyses and judgements in the written project it is essential to show that they are the product of a thorough process of research. For example, a student writing an ethnography of a French market who claimed of a stall holder that 'The old man on the stall is proud of his work' is not doing enough. She should be asking herself 'How do I know?' and telling the reader what had led her to draw this conclusion. In other words, the points you make need to be proved, not just stated.

- **Have I been reflexive** about my role in the research process / in my analysis of data?

This involves showing appropriate awareness of the things that influenced you as you collected your data. Your personal experience, cultural background, gender, etc. act as a filter. Show you are aware of this interactive aspect of ethnographic research (see the opening part of this handout).

- Am I **using the data to best effect** or letting some of it go to waste?

E.g., am I slipping in a point incidentally when I should really be framing it as important, developing it more thoroughly and highlighting its significance? Have I ignored disconfirming evidence because it doesn't fit my interpretation? Wouldn't it be better to include it and modify my claims?

On this last point, dealing with 'failures' is an interesting issue. It can be fruitful to include these in the project and analyse why they occurred. For example, the student studying the Camavaliers in Nice originally regarded her inability to collect data about or from the wives of Carnavaliers as a 'failure' – something that would certainly be omitted from her final account. It turned out that this 'failure' was a key to the gender issues that were, in the end, the main focus of her study of the Camavaliers' world.

- Would some of my information be more appropriately presented in **list, chart or diagram** form?

This sometimes works better than a verbal description in order, for example:

- to show the organisation of groups (family groups, work hierarchies, etc)
- to show the main informants and say who they were

- to show the tasks that need to be undertaken in preparation for a given event (e.g. the things that needed doing in preparation for the Camaval in Nice were represented by the student ethnographer by a chart, showing clearly who does what according to gender and to their place in the carnival hierarchy)
- to unpack concepts by which informants organise and understand their world (e.g. the hundred or so ways High School girls know of to 'fool around', including 'doodling', 'playing with food', 'bugging other kids', etc.)
- to recreate the physical aspect of a scene where this is judged to be important for analysis. 'Maps' of whole areas might be helpful, or drawings of premises, houses, clubs, shops, etc. In Unit 7 the Classroom Observation assignment showed how a teacher used a diagram of the layout of her class to help analyse patterns of interaction. In Unit 16 the diagram of the layout in a supermarket was an important part of the piece of research on 'Supermarket Semiology'.

Photographs can also help to convey the texture of a cultural scene you are studying, particularly if it involves a one-off, unrepeatable event such as a wedding or a performance of some sort. This should not replace verbal description of course; photographs should be used judiciously and not result in an 'album' effect.

♦ Do I have an **appropriate conclusion?**

The conclusion is where you 'wrap up' your main theme or argument. Be wary of claiming too much for your study (e.g. do not try to 'clinch' an argument with phrases such as 'I believe I have proved that...') Above all, avoid the common pitfall of ending on a personal note. The process of research may well have been a voyage of discovery but statements such as 'I've really enjoyed doing this', or 'Now I know that X is more complex than I thought' are inappropriate conclusions to projects whose main purpose is to give an account of aspects of others' lives.

♦ Do I have an **appropriate title?**

This should be related to your main theme. You can play with it at the end and be inventive.

7. Final draft

Write the final draft.

Put in references and a bibliography. These should include references to informants' data as you have indexed it.

8. Treat yourself to a drink or a cream cake or...

Parts of this section are based on excerpts from chapter 9 of Roberts, C., Byram, M., Barro, A., Jordan, S., and Street, B., (2000) *Language Learners as Ethnographers* Multilingual Matters. This chapter was largely written by Michael Byram.

Handout 2 – The Ethnographic Project: Assessment Criteria

- The ability to pose interesting and innovative questions that lead to an illumination of the material
- Evidence of theoretical understanding of reading to underpin the particular study
- The ability to use appropriate data collection methods both systematically and creatively
- A proper recognition of some of the methodological problems involved in the collection of ethnographic data
- A proper recognition of ethical issues related to informants
- The ability to select, order and describe research material in a coherent and persuasive way
- An ability to draw interesting, analytical conclusions from it which demonstrate underlying patterns and causes
- Sensitivity to language use in its social and cultural contexts and an understanding of the construction of concepts and meanings out of the language used by participants in social settings
- Initiative, commitment and reflexivity in developing an ethnographic project
- The amount of effort that you have put in to overcome difficulties, collect data systematically, etc. will also be evaluated.

UNIT EIGHTEEN – Writing the Ethnographic Project

READING

- **Vulliamy, E. 'After the Thrash the Trash'. The Guardian ©, Tuesday July 4, 1995.**

The Glastonbury festival has ended for another year – but not for the army of litter-pickers who stayed on to clean up a record 470 tonnes of left-overs. Ed Vulliamy joined them.

Benbo, a rugged knight of the road, surveys the post-apocalyptic that was, a few days ago, the charmed mayhem of Glastonbury festival, and says: "This is special land, man."

The megalopolis of stages, tents, teepees, bars, circuses and green technology shows is now an ocean of bilge – the sediment of 150,000 people. "Sometimes I look at all that shit," Benbo says, "and I think 'Oh no, I just can't'. Then I think 'Hang on, we love this place'. Small victories, man, small victories."

This is terrain charged with history. It is where Joseph of Arimathea lodged the Holy Grail, where King Arthur met his death, where lay-lines meet each other and where Mother Earth meets the microchip for the annual beanfeast of alternative living, rock 'n' roll. "People come here for all different reasons," says Benbo, kicking a semi-devoured burger. "They do their thing, and then someone has to clean up."

This latest festival deposited a record 470 tonnes of scum. The site now teems with chugging trucks and tractors. Trailers loaded with brightly-painted bins clunk over dirt-tracks and everywhere men are de-rigging scaffolding in the dusty heat.

Attacking the debris are people like Julia Davis, whose T-shirt says: "Same Shit, Different Day." Her father, agricultural contractor John Davis, has undertaken to remove hundreds of thousands of gallons of human excrement from the portable toilets. "Phoooaaah-*yuk* ", Darren shouts, emptying another "Tardis" (Turdis, says the graffito) portaloo into the 2,000 gallon tanker. "Lucky it's only once a year."

Benbo, from Scarborough, is on a different mission. Known across the valley by his calling cry – "Keep on rocking in the free world!" – he is a regular in the army of 600 litter-pickers who clean up after the festival.

Glastonbury is a tribal affair. Fans throng around the main stages but up the slopes of the Vale of Avalon, in mud-huts, "benders" (patchwork tents) and caravans are the Jungle House tribe, the Teepee tribes, Rave tribes – and the litter-pickers. "We don't go down to Babylon," says Dave, referring to the main stage, "we stay up in the 'Green Fields' until its over." Even litter-pickers are divided into tribes. The Green

Litter crews, organised by the Green Party, get free festival tickets for their labours. Their camp is seen as "suburban" by the After-Festivals, or AFs, paid £20 plus three meal coupons a day. "Were the 'crusties'," Benbo says. They are deemed birds of passage, rovers and rolling stones. But here they are, turning their scum-strewn Vale of Avalon back into a dairy farm.

For years, the AF litter-pickers laboured under a gaffer called "Bogfix" Pallet, but Bogfix was killed in a mountaineering accident, so this year a newcomer has arrived, to general apprehension: DC Site Services plc, veterans of 11 years of Reading rock festivals. It's 8am: AF Team Two, 100-strong, ambles out from breakfast for the roll-call. There are two kinds of litter-picking: "Big Shit" and "Nicky-Picking". The former tackles raw scum, the second is the fine toothcomb. Today is nicky-picking:" In a line. I want every fag-end," says foreman Tim. "This is where I get embarrassed, "Jimmy from the Wirral mumbles, "in case anyone else sees me putting dog-ends in my pocket."

You bend and scoop the 470 tonnes into plastic bags. The muscles in the small of your back and behind the thighs go first. Then there is the heat, rising into the nineties. Skin burns and the water-runs are frequent ("Funny, you drink all day, and never piss"). By afternoon, the sun is making the situation on the ditch slopes serious "from the honk point of view". Special ditch-teams clean out the troughs, but the banks within the hedgerows are Team Two's responsibility, and it isn't hard to imagine what 150,000 people used them for. Picking up tissue paper wrapped around excrement is pivotal to the litter-picker's craft.

Eyes are trained like an eagle's in search of the perk of the job – "tat". The tat's broken tools, tobacco, knives, marquee hooks, cutlery, clothes, sunglasses and hundreds of pounds in small change. " Who wants a bit of tarp [tarpaulin]?" "Sound," says Dan from Bristol, "Go nicely on the bender." Traveller Beth, in braided dreadlocks, is the queen of "cash-tat" today, having just found another pound coin. It'll go into the kitty for a trip to the Czech Republic. Edith from Swansea found all her jewellery litter-picking down the years. "This, this and this," she says, pointing to a bracelet, ring and silver fishbone necklace.

Eddie has uncovered a little tube of brown and white powder. Maybe that's herbal speed; problem is you've got to neck so much it works out same price as a gram of whizz." The powder is sampled during a spliff stop in the shade. An hour later, nothing remarkable has happened.

Eddie changed his latest Giro into Dutch gilders "to stop me spending it". He's going to Holland once this is over." It's cool there, the cops are more sorted – but then, everywhere's *here* in the end."

Taffy, with the magic mushroom T-shirt, says Holland is far better. He's heading back to Maastricht to perform his "human street statue". Taffy, from Blackburn, was a chef for 12 years: "I want to cook my way round

the world, specialising in sauces and new methods. Cooking is giving the simple things your own personal touch. Bit like life really."

The working day done, it's time to adjourn to the AF encampment, a hamlet of benders, old caravans, retired mobile-library-vans and tat sofas round campfires. Vinny speaks in song, and is offended: "I'm from the valleys, man, not a fucking Jack [from Swansea], and I live in Cardiff and support Cardiff City." He offers round what he calls the festival cuppa." Do you ever wonder why people go around smiling? It's because they're drinking the happy brew." Vinny's pot of tea is made with 500 psilocybin mushrooms.

It's past midnight. The plan is to gatecrash a Green Litter party, and Vinny sets out under a deep sky lambent with stars. "It's our sky," says Vinny, "and look at the fields we picked. Not a fag-butt. If anyone drops a fag or does a billy on that, I'll poke his eye out. Let's celebrate, we deserve it." The Greens are deemed insufficiently "crusty", so Vinny joins a swelling platoon from Team Two heading for the Dog and Vomit.

For 10 days a year, the Dog and Vomit is one of the more agreeable pubs in the West Country. Serving real ale and cider, it is situated in a field just off the festival site, a marquee with cardboard Grecian pillars. Around the campfire sit people with painted faces. Alongside litterpickers are swagmen and hippies at their own post-festival festival. There is a tape by Vinny's favourite band, the Levellers. Their song Underneath The Sky Forever sends Vinny and his cuppa sinking happily into the hay bales.

Next morning, after the customary two hours' sleep, Team Two awakes to find the heat already preparing its assault for "Big Shit" day.

Big shit has an acutely disagreeable scent and comes further up your ankles than nicky-picking, but is easier in its way because the bags fill up quicker: half-eaten chickens, tampon-inserters, used nappies, beer bottles, stools (as medicine calls them), beer cans – a superior class of tat. "*Wow!* It's a painted Furry Freak Brothers Rizla tin!", Jenny from Tiverton exclaims.

The Rizla papers are duly rolled during the next spliff-stop, to accompany some chat about Stonehenge. "I went to that Solstice gathering, " says Jenny. "I was asleep on a burial mound and got woken up by a helicopter above me!"

The litter-pickers are an established and respected, if ephemeral, working class. Among those camping on at Glastonbury are the smackheads who thieve off and live off the litter-pickers. The contents of Jenny's rucksack were stolen yesterday. Now, Nicola's car windscreen has been smashed. Someone else has lost an entire bender. A man with a shaven head made a violent dive for the meal vouchers – envied items among the new-underclass.

So David and Helen have withdrawn from the picking to take charge of security. "It's been hectic," David says. "They're coming down into the valley hungry, and taking stuff left, right and centre." "It's disgusting," says Tessa. "They've got no respect."

Flame-haired Tessa is with her five-year-old daughter, Gaye. Tessa is the sort of single mother some politicians find alien and inexcusable. "I suppose she should have been back at school last week, "Tessa says. "They don't like my lifestyle. But this is work, we're enjoying it, she's made friends, it's better for her here than in bloody London and it's a chance to get a bit saved up."

With Glastonbury's sacred tor rising behind him from what were once mud-flats, Dick Collins, gaffer at DC Site Services, says: "These people are supposed to be the scum of the earth. But look at what they've done. They're the best workers I've ever employed and I admit the money they're paid is not the best."

Farmer Michael Eavis, who owns the festival site, is putting herds back on the land for the first time in weeks. A new smell is drifting across the valley, a strange odour after all that Big and Little Shit. It takes a while to realise what it is: the inimitable, wholesome scents of a dairy farm. "Look", says Benbo with his toothy grin, "we've given it back."

UNIT EIGHTEEN – Writing the Ethnographic Project

READING

- **Excerpts from two student ethnographies**

THE DEBT COLLECTOR

KATE WALLIS

The management also have a responsibility to the company and if the collectors are not obtaining their target figures then the jobs of all concerned could be at risk. It is a chain in which if one of the links is weak everything could topple. Although occasionally things do go wrong. The company received a complaint that two agents had been calling – at the same address. Jim told me that "One of the girls down at the office must have got the wrong postcodes, sent another agent to them and he went and did it." The debtor could then use this as an excuse not to pay and as Jim said, "you've got to smooth that kind of thing over." It is important to note that although there is this hierarchical order in operation, on further analysis of the situation one can see that there is almost a kind of 'triangulation' of power. By this I mean that each party (i.e. the management, the collectors and the debtors) has a certain amount of control at any given time. Hence the fact that the company would not be in operation at all without each of these particular groups.

Politics and Boundaries

For various reasons some people choose not to speak directly to Jim. Some people leave money in the porch or the letter box. This is sometimes because they work at night or because they are too ill, but in many cases it was simply because they did not want to speak to a collector. An example of this was a family who were living in rented accommodation in a so-called 'nice' area of Stratford. The man was hanging out some washing in the back garden whilst we were in the porch collecting the money. He acknowledged our presence but did not come over to speak to us directly. There were other people who would pretend to be out.

Also there were others who even sent their children to the door rather than face a collector themselves. In all of these cases there appears to be a factor of "guilt" involved. Some people ask Jim not to take his book to their door because they are worried about their neighbours finding out that they are in debt. There were also some cases where people did not want Jim to go to their door at all and would ask a neighbour to pay the debt on their behalf

There is also a 'guilt' factor attached to the collector. This is because the collector can sometimes feel as though he or she is making a living out of people who are in financial difficulty. Although Jim did say, "You can

make a living out of it but it's a lot of hard work; its not quite as easy as they think, you know." However, despite his hard work, Jim feels guilty when people say to him, "How can you afford that new car, Jim?" He also told me that he is often surprised by people's generosity, for example, one old lady said to him at Christmas time "Here is one pound for you", despite the fact she was in trouble financially.

The 'guilt' factor has yet wider implications as there were some people who were once friendly towards Jim when they were in debt but who will no longer speak to him because he appears to be a symbol of their former misfortune. This is especially the case in a small town as the collector may be fairly well known.

However, it is quite unusual for a collector to receive a hostile reception. There is nearly always more than one debtor in a particular area, even in the same house sometimes, and on many occasions these people will form what could be termed 'a common support group'. Therefore if a stranger comes into their area they are perceived as the common enemy and frowned upon. We were often carefully watched by neighbours upon arrival in an area until we had finished collecting.

There are those who may even set out to malign the collector, although Jim has only ever had one complaint made against him. This was made by a former 'debtor'. The reason this lady complained was because Jim had been looking for another debtor and she happened to be living at the same address. Collectors are not allowed to disclose the details of a debt to anyone except to the 'debtor'. However the lady recognised Jim and realised that he must have been trying to collect a debt. Therefore she made a complaint to Head Office to the effect that Jim had disclosed the debt to her. This was most probably out of spite. In that way, a collector could be seen as a 'victim of his own job', because in some cases however amicable the collector is, the fact that his job is to collect, an amount of money can leave him open to animosity.

In saying this, however, I must point out that the majority of debtors we encountered during my time 'in the field' were very amicable. This again may be a reflection on the area. Jim told me that his 'round' is "heaven" compared to the rounds that collectors make in more urban areas. Jim's round is interesting because it is urban as well as rural. Jim believes that there is a difference between urban and rural collection. He told me that "country people are more crafty." This seems to be for logistical reasons. It is easier for a person living out of town to avoid Jim. If the person is out when Jim calls he will make what is termed a 'back-call'. However, because the 'rural areas are out of town it is not worth Jim making a back-call unless he is guaranteed to receive some money on his next call. The people who live in these areas are aware of this and may use it as an excuse either to avoid paying for a week or two, or to avoid paying at all.

There is another important category, of debtors which cannot be ignored and those are the "professional debtors". To these people it is, as Jim put it, "a way of life". Many of them have known Jim for the fourteen years that he has been collecting in the area. Jim told me that it is like a "vicious circle". There is one family which illustrates his point. In this particular family the grandmother had always been in debt. Her son then fell into debt [...]

DESPATCH RIDERS IN LONDON

CHRIS DAY

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From the evidence, the riders are aware of the reasons for this decline (which I outlined above) and some have left.

There would appear to be a self-regulating mechanism in operation whereby the number of riders varies as a function of the amount of work available, with the controlling factor being how much money people are prepared to do the job for before other forms of employment are more attractive. A trade-off between attractions and problems is in constant flux. Each person has their own standards, levels and tolerances which makes generalisation difficult (if not pointless) but overall, the money has to make the job worth it. Defining these attractions and problems, "gifts and poison", gives part of the frame of reference used by the DR. In the past the reward was dominated by high wages. This is enough on its own to attract some people to the job. However, there are other attractions which in the current business trough are more accentuated. First and foremost among these is the concept of freedom.

FREEDOM

This was the first idea occurring to three out of the five interviewees and was of major importance to a fourth. It was not mentioned explicitly by one, D17, but his comments about working flexible hours – tape 122 and 142-163 – are based on an assumption of the 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 interviews 1, D17:-122, 142-163; 2, p.2: 255-280; 3, CDS16: 388 to end of side 1.

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, 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 ultimately aware of the position of the DR and am aware that the converse of this freedom to not be told what to do (in terms of authority or 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 job 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 spoken to in the past: it is 7.00 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 clients' offices) two live in Fulham, the other in Brentford, both in West London. Therefore it is very inconvenient to make the delivery to Wanstead. You finish at 7.30pm and it then takes 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 for going to Wanstead 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 according to CDS 16, side 2: 103-109: "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 negotiating 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 and earn a fortune. But importantly, to quote P2 (259) "It's my choice." And it is.

Acknowledgements

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