Ethnography and participant observation

Chapter outline

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Ethnography and participant observation entail the extended involvement of the researcher in the social life of those he or she studies. However, the former term is also frequently taken to refer to the written output of that research. The chapter explores:

- the problems of gaining access to different settings and some suggestions about how they might be overcome;
- the issue of whether a covert role is practicable and acceptable;
- the role of key informants for the ethnographer;
- the different kinds of roles that ethnographers can assume in the course of their fieldwork;
- the role of field notes in ethnography and the varieties of forms they can assume;
- issues involved in bringing ethnographic research to an end;
- the role of visual materials, which have attracted increased attention in recent years, in ethnography;
- the controversy about the nature of feminist ethnography;
- key issues raised by discussions about the writing of ethnography;
- the changing meanings of ‘ethnography’.

Introduction

Discussions about the merits and limitations of participant observation have been a fairly standard ingredient in textbooks on social research for many years. However, for some time writers on research methods have preferred to write about ethnography rather than participant observation. It is difficult to date the point at which this change of terminology (though it is more than just this) occurred, but sometime in the 1970s ethnography began to become the preferred term. Before that, ethnography was primarily associated with social anthropological research, whereby the investigator visits a (usually) foreign land, gains access to a group (for example, a tribe or village), spends a considerable amount of time (often many years) with that group with the aim of uncovering its culture, watches and listens to what people say and do, engages people in conversations to probe specific issues of interest, takes copious field notes, and returns home to write up the fruits of his or her labours.

Key concept 19.1 represents an attempt to deal with some of these issues and to arrive at a working definition of ethnography. The seven bullet points at the end of Key concept 19.1 that make up the definition of ethnography featured there could be viewed as a simple process of joining a group, watching what goes on, making some notes, and writing it all up. In fact, ethnography is nowhere nearly as straightforward as this implies. This chapter will outline some of the main decision areas that confront ethnographers, along with some of the many contingencies they face. However, it is not easy to generalize about the ethnographic research process in such a way as to provide definitive recommendations about research practice. As prefigured at the end of the previous chapter, the diversity of experiences that confront ethnographers and the variety of ways in which they deal with them does not readily permit clear-cut generalizations. The following comment in a book on ethnography makes this point well:

Every field situation is different and initial luck in meeting good informants, being in the right place at the right time and striking the right note in relationships may be just as important as skill in technique. Indeed, many successful episodes in the field do come about through good luck as much as through sophisticated planning, and many unsuccessful episodes are due as much to bad luck as to bad judgement. (Sarsby 1984: 96)
Key concept 19.1
What are ethnography and participant observation?

Many definitions of ethnography and participant observation are very difficult to distinguish. Both draw attention to the fact that the participant observer/ethnographer immerses him- or herself in a group for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions. It is possible that the term ‘ethnography’ is sometimes preferred because ‘participant observation’ seems to imply just observation, though in practice participant observers do more than simply observe. Typically, participant observers and ethnographers will gather further data through interviews and the collection of documents. It may be, therefore, that the apparent emphasis on observation in the term ‘participant observation’ has meant that an apparently more inclusive term would be preferable, even though in fact it is generally recognized that the method entails a wide range of methods of data collection and sources. Ethnography is also sometimes taken to refer to a study in which participant observation is the prevalent research method but that also has a specific focus on the culture of the group in which the ethnographer is immersed.

However, the term ‘ethnography’ has an additional meaning, in that it frequently simultaneously refers to both a method of research of the kind outlined above and the written product of that research. Indeed, ‘ethnography’ frequently denotes both a research process and the written outcome of the research. For example, consider the opening sentences of A. Taylor’s (1993) book on female drug-users, which was mentioned on several occasions in Chapter 17.

This book provides an account of the lives and experiences of a group of female intravenous drug users in Glasgow. It is based on fifteen months’ participant observation of the women in their own setting and on in-depth interviews carried out at the end of the observation period. It is the first full ethnographic account of the lifestyle of female drug users. (A. Taylor 1993: 1)

It is worth noting the following features.

• The book is subtitled *An Ethnography of a Female Injecting Community*. The term ‘ethnography’ therefore seems to apply both to the method of investigation and to the book itself. This is underlined by the phrase ‘the first full ethnographic account’.

• The mention of the main data-collection methods as participant observation and interviewing suggests that the ethnographic research comprises these two techniques of data collection but that interviewing is viewed as something separate from participant observation. In fact, participant observers frequently conduct interviews in the course of their research.

• The passage draws on several qualitative research motifs encountered in Chapter 17, such as the preference for seeing through the eyes of the people being studied (reference to ‘lives and experiences’) and a naturalistic stance (‘in their own setting’).

In this book, ethnography will be taken to mean a research method in which the researcher:

• is immersed in a social setting for an extended period of time;
• makes regular observations of the behaviour of members of that setting;
• listens to and engages in conversations;
• interviews informants on issues that are not directly amenable to observation or that the ethnographer is unclear about (or indeed for other possible reasons);
• collects documents about the group;
• develops an understanding of the culture of the group and people’s behaviour within the context of that culture;
• and writes up a detailed account of that setting.

Thus, ethnography is being taken to include participant observation and is also taken to encapsulate the notion of ethnography as a written product of ethnographic research.
However, this statement should not be taken to imply that forethought and an awareness of alternative ways of doing things are irrelevant. It is with this kind of issue that the rest of this chapter will be concerned. However, issues to do with the conduct of interviews by ethnographers will be reserved for Chapter 20.

**Micro-ethnography**

If you are doing research for an undergraduate project or master’s dissertation, it is unlikely that you will be able to conduct a full-scale ethnography. Ethnographic research usually entails long periods of time in the field in an organization, as part of a community, or in the company of a group. Nevertheless, it may be possible to carry out a form of *micro-ethnography* (Wolcott 1990b). This would involve focusing on a particular aspect of a topic. For example, if you are interested in call centres, you might focus on the way staff manage to interact and discuss work problems in spite of continuously receiving calls and being monitored. A relatively short period of time (from a couple of weeks to a few months) could be spent in the organization—on either a full-time or a part-time basis—to achieve such a tightly defined topic.

**Access**

One of the key and yet most difficult steps in ethnography is gaining access to a social setting that is relevant to the research problem in which you are interested. The way in which access is approached differs along several dimensions, one of which is whether the setting is a relatively open one or a relatively closed one (Bell 1969). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) make a similar distinction when they refer to ‘public’ settings as opposed to ones that are not public (see also Lofland and Lofland 1995). Closed, non-public settings are likely to be organizations of various kinds, such as firms, schools, cults, social movements, and so on. The open/public setting is likely to be everything else—that is, research involving communities, gangs, drug-users, and so on.

**Overt versus covert ethnography**

One way to ease the access problem is to assume a covert role—in other words, not to disclose the fact that you are a researcher. This strategy obviates the need to negotiate access to organizations or to explain why you want to intrude into people’s lives and make them objects of study. As we shall see, seeking access is a highly fraught business, and the adoption of a covert role removes some of the difficulties. These two distinctions—the open/public versus closed setting and the overt versus covert role—suggest, following Bell (1969), a fourfold distinction in forms of ethnography (see Figure 19.1, which contains for each of the four types examples that have been encountered in earlier chapters or will be mentioned in this one).

Three points should be registered about Figure 19.1. First, the open/public setting versus closed setting distinction is not a hard-and-fast one. Sometimes, gaining access to groups can have a near formal quality, such as having to pacify a gang leader’s anxieties about your goals. Also, organizations sometimes create contexts that have a public character, such as the meetings that are arranged for members or prospective recruits by social movements such as religious cults or political movements like the National Front.

Secondly, the overt versus covert distinction is not without problems. For example, while an ethnographer may seek access through an overt route, there may be many people with whom he or she comes into contact who will not be aware of the ethnographer’s status as a researcher. P. Atkinson (1981: 135) notes in connection with his research on the training of doctors in a medical school that, although he was ‘an “open” observer with regard to the doctors and students’, he was ‘a “disguised” observer with regard to the patients’. Also, some ethnographers move between the two roles (see Research in focus 19.1).
Figure 19.1

Four forms of ethnography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open/public setting</th>
<th>Closed setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overt role</strong></td>
<td><strong>Type 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor’s (1993) study of intravenous drug-users</td>
<td>Leidner’s (1993) studies of a McDonald’s restaurant and an insurance firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster’s (1995) study of a high-crime community</td>
<td>Atkinson’s (1981) research on medical school training (see Research in focus 19.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giulianotti’s (1995) research on football hooligans (Research in focus 19.2)</td>
<td>Burgess’s (1983, 1987) research on a Roman Catholic comprehensive school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbs’s (1988, 1993) research on entrepreneurship in London’s East End</td>
<td>Simakova’s (2010) study of the marketing of new technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whyte’s (1955) classic study of street corner life in a Boston slum area</td>
<td>Waddington’s (1994) study of a prolonged strike (Research in focus 17.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Reilly’s (2000) research on the British living on Spain’s Costa del Sol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hodkinson’s (2002) study of goths</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Covert role** | **Type 3** | **Type 4** |
| | Patrick’s (1973) study of a violent Glasgow gang | Holdaway’s (1982, 1983) study of a police force in which he was already a policeman |
| | Pearson’s (2009) study of football hooligans | Research by Hobbs et al. (2003) on bouncers (see also Winlow et al. 2001) |
| | | Research by Mattley (2006) on working for a sex fantasy phone line |

Note: This figure is a development of a table in Bell (1969).

Research in focus 19.1

An example of the perils of covert observation: the case of field notes in the lavatory

Ditton’s (1977) research on ‘fiddling’ in a bakery provides an interesting case of the practical difficulties of taking notes during covert observation as well as an illustration of an ethnographer who shifted his position from covert to overt observation at least in part because of those difficulties:

Nevertheless, I was able to develop personal covert participant-observation skills. Right from the start, I found it impossible to keep everything that I wanted to remember in my head until the end of the working day . . . and so had to take rough notes as I was going along. But I was stuck ‘on the line’, and had nowhere to retire to privately to jot things down. Eventually, the wheeze of using innocently provided lavatory cubicles occurred to me. Looking back, all my notes for that third summer were on Bronco toilet paper! Apart from the awkward tendency for pencilled notes to be self-erasing from hard toilet paper . . . my frequent requests for ‘time out’ after interesting happenings or conversations in the bakehouse and the amount of time I was spending in the lavatory began to get noticed. I had to pacify some genuinely concerned workmates, give up totally undercover operations, and ‘come out’ as an observer—albeit in a limited way. I eventually began to scribble notes more openly, but still not in front of people when they were talking. When questioned about this, as I was occasionally, I coyly said that I was writing things down that occurred to me about ‘my studies’. (Ditton 1977: 5)

In terms of the distinctions in Figure 19.1, Ditton moved from a Type 4 to a Type 2 form of ethnography.
Another interesting case is provided by Glucksman (1994), who in the 1970s left her academic post to work on a factory assembly line in order to shed light on the reasons why feminism appeared not to be relevant to working-class women. In a sense, she was a covert observer, but her motives for the research were primarily political, and she says that, at the time she was undertaking the research, she had no intention of writing the book that subsequently appeared and that was published under a pseudonym (Cavendish 1982). After the book’s publication, it was treated as an example of ethnographic research. Was she an overt or a covert observer (or neither or both)? Whichever description applies, this is an interesting case of what might be termed retrospective ethnography.

A third point to note about Figure 19.1 is that entries are more numerous in the Types 1 and 2 cells than in the Types 3 and 4 cells. In large part, this reflects the fact that ethnographers are far more likely to be in an overt role than a covert one. There are several reasons for this situation. As Key concept 19.2 reveals, the reasons for the preference of most ethnographers for an overt role are to do with practical and ethical considerations, but the latter predominate in most researchers’ thinking. Because of the ethical problems that beset covert research (and indeed some of the practical difficulties), the bulk of the discussion of access issues that follows will focus upon ethnographers seeking to employ an overt role.

**Access to closed settings**

As Van Maanen and Kolb (1985: 11) observe, ‘gaining access to most organizations is not a matter to be taken lightly but one that involves some combination of strategic planning, hard work and dumb luck’. In selecting a particular social setting to act as a case study in which to conduct an ethnographic investigation, the researcher may employ several criteria. These criteria should be determined by the general research area in which he or she is interested. Very often a number of potential cases (and sometimes very many) will be relevant to your research problem. You may choose a certain case because of its ‘fit’ with your research questions, but there are no guarantees of success, as Van Maanen and Kolb’s remark suggests. Sometimes, sheer perseverance pays off. Leidner (1993) was determined that one of the organizations in which she conducted ethnographic research on the routinization of service work should be McDonald’s. She writes:

I knew from the beginning that I wanted one of the case studies to be of McDonald’s. The company was a pioneer and exemplar of routinized interaction, and since it was locally based, it seemed like the perfect place to start. McDonald’s had other ideas, however, and only after tenacious pestering and persuasion did I overcome corporate employees’ polite demurrals, couched in terms of protecting proprietary information and the company’s image. (Leidner 1993: 234–5)

This kind of determination is necessary for any instance in which you want to study a specific organization, such as a particular religious sect or social movement. Rejection is likely to require a complete rethink.

However, with many research questions, several potential cases are likely to meet your criteria. Organizational researchers have developed a range of tactics, many of which may seem rather unsystematic in tone, but they are worth drawing attention to.

- Use friends, contacts, colleagues, academics to help you gain access; provided the organization is relevant to your research question, the route should not matter.
- Try to get the support of someone within the organization who will act as your champion. This person may be prepared to vouch for you and the value of your research. Such people are placed in the role of ‘sponsors’.
- Usually you will need to get access through top management/senior executives. Even though you may secure a certain level of agreement lower down the hierarchy, you will usually need clearance from them. Such senior people act as ‘gatekeepers’.
- Offer something in return (for example, a report). This strategy carries risks in that it may turn you into a cheap consultant and may invite restrictions on your activities, such as insistence on seeing what you write. However, it helps to create a sense of being trustworthy. Some writers on research methodology do not recommend this approach, although, among researchers on formal organizations, it is commonplace.
- Provide a clear explanation of your aims and methods and be prepared to deal with concerns. Suggest a meeting at which you can deal with worries and provide an explanation of what you intend to do in terms that can readily be understood by others.
- Be prepared to negotiate—you will want complete access, but it is unlikely you will be given a carte blanche.
Be reasonably honest about the amount of people's time you are likely to take up. This is a question you will almost certainly be asked if you are seeking access to commercial organizations and probably to many not-for-profit ones too.

Access to open/public settings

Gaining access to public settings is beset with problems, many of which are similar in nature to access to closed settings. An example of the difficulties that await the...
researcher is one of Whyte's (1955) early encounters in the field in his classic case study *Street Corner Society*, when he was trying to make contacts during his early days in the field in Boston's North End. The following incident occurred in a hotel bar:

I looked around me again and now noticed a threesome: one man and two women. It occurred to me that here was a maldistribution of females which I might be able to rectify. I approached the group and opened with something like this: 'Pardon me. Would you mind if I join you?' There was a moment of silence while the man stared at me. He then offered to throw me downstairs. I assured him that this would not be necessary and demonstrated as much by walking right out of there without any assistance. (Whyte 1955: 289)

Sometimes, ethnographers will be able to have their paths smoothed by individuals who act as both sponsor and gatekeeper. In Whyte's case, the role played by 'Doc' has become the stuff of legend, and there is a temptation to seek out your Doc when attempting to gain access to a group. Indeed, when Gans (1962) decided to conduct ethnographic research in an area that was adjacent to the part of Boston on which Whyte had carried out his research, he visited Whyte 'to find out how [he] could meet a “Doc”' (Gans 1968: 311).

In seeking to gain access to one group of football hooligans, Giulianotti (1995; see Research in focus 19.2) actively sought out someone who could adopt this role for him, but, in gaining access to a second group, he was able to draw upon existing acquaintances who could ease his entrée into the group. We see here two common methods of gaining access to groups—via gatekeepers and via acquaintances who then act as sponsors. In seeking access to intravenous female drug-users, A. Taylor (1993) consciously used a gatekeeper strategy. She contacted a local detached drug worker in the area, who introduced her to some local users and accompanied her on her first few research visits. A form of research bargain (see Research in focus 19.2) was set up in that Taylor agreed that the drug worker could refer clients to

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**Research in focus 19.2**

**Access to football hooligans**

Giulianotti (1995) sought access to two groups of football supporters engaged in hooligan activity: Aberdeen and Hibernian ‘casuals’, as the particular groups he was interested in termed themselves. Access to the Aberdeen casuals was reasonably smooth, in that he was a close friend of three of the forty-seven Aberdeen casuals who had been caught by the police at a notorious match in 1985. He had also gone to school and socialized with many of the first group of casuals to emerge in Aberdeen in the 1982–5 period. He also claims that in terms of ‘age, attire, and argot’ his personal characteristics were similar to those of the people he was studying. Gradually his contacts with Aberdeen casuals broadened out and eventually he ‘began socializing freely with the gang at football matches, travelling to and from matches within the main grouping of the Aberdeen casuals’ (Giulianotti 1995: 4). Access to the equivalent Hibernian (Hibs) supporters in Edinburgh was much more difficult for three reasons: absence of prior acquaintanceships; his Aberdonian background and accent; and a high level of negative newspaper publicity about the Hibs casuals at the time he was seeking access, which made the group sensitive to infiltration and people writing about them. Eventually, he was able to negotiate access to the group by striking what he, following Becker (1970), calls a ‘research bargain’: he provided the Hibs supporters with answers to questions about the Aberdeen ‘casual scene’, such as ‘What do Aberdeen say about us?’ (Giulianotti 1995: 6). This allowed him to establish among the Hibs supporters his reasons for studying the Aberdeen casuals as well. Giulianotti also actively sought out a gatekeeper who could ease his entry into the group. After some abortive attempts, he was finally introduced to someone at a game, and this contact allowed his access to further supporters to spread. Giulianotti (1995: 3) describes his overall research approach thus:

The research . . . consists of regularly introducing myself to new research acquaintances; renegotiating association with familiar casuals; talking with them, drinking with them, and going to matches with them; generally participating with them in a variety of social situations; but disengaging myself from preparing for and participating in violence, within and outside of football match contexts.
her if any of his clients said they would prefer to discuss issues with a female. Similarly, Hobbs (1988) says that he used his skills as a football coach to gain access to various entrepreneurial networks for his study of London’s East End.

‘Hanging around’ is another common access strategy. As a strategy, it typically entails either loitering in an area until you are noticed or gradually becoming incorporated into or asking to join a group. The second of these was roughly the approach Whyte was taking, which nearly led to an encounter with a staircase. Wolf (1991) employed a hanging-around strategy in gaining access to outlaw bikers in Canada. On one occasion he met a group of them at a motorcycle shop and expressed an interest in ‘hanging around’ with them but tried to move too quickly in seeking information about and access to them and was forced to abandon his plans. Eventually, a hanging-around strategy resulted in him being approached by the leader of a biker group (Rebels MC), who acted as his sponsor. In order to bring this off, Wolf ensured that he was properly attired. Attention to dress and demeanour can be a very important consideration when seeking access to either public or closed settings.

As these anecdotes suggest, gaining access to social settings is a crucial first step in ethnographic research, in that, without access, your research plans will be halted in

Student experience
The need for persistence

Getting access to organizations can be very difficult. This is likely to be the case for researchers wanting to conduct qualitative research based on interviews, as well as for participant observers. Gareth Matthews’s account of trying to gain access to employers and managers of hospitality organizations suggests that this can be difficult and that it is necessary to allow a considerable amount of time.

I needed to gain access to employers and managers of 40 hospitality establishments while I was living in Brighton. Therefore, I wrote a letter to around 200 employers, which included a description of my research aims and a rough idea as to the content of the interview questions. The letter ended by saying something along the lines of ‘I will telephone early next week to try to arrange an appropriate time for the interview’. The following Monday, I telephoned all these businesses, asking to speak to the manager or employer and, referring to the letter, I requested an interview.

This strategy was not really a success. First, as I did not know the names of the individual managers and employers, not many of the people I spoke to had opened or read the letter, as it was addressed to the ‘manager’. Second, while some of those in small businesses had read the letter, and were relatively easy to get hold of on the phone, it was extremely difficult to speak to the managers of large hotels—partly because there are, of course, numerous ‘managers’ in these organizations.

In the end, it proved useful to draw up a spreadsheet with all the relevant data on each business—under ‘name of business’, ‘address’, ‘telephone number’, etc.—and to record the responses at particular times when I telephoned. This was a good way, first, to narrow down the list by deleting those who refused to be interviewed and, second, to keep track of when I had been told the manager/employer would be likely to be around to speak to.

I had some success with this approach, but I also found that it worked well simply to walk around Brighton asking managers and employers for interviews ‘on the spot’. It seemed that, when not given the easy choice of arranging or postponing the interview (which they often subsequently forgot anyway), managers/employers were more likely to agree there and then, or to ask me to come back later on the same day.

It is also worth noting that both these strategies were far more successful in the winter than in the summer, which is unsurprising considering how busy hospitality businesses are during the holiday months.

Gareth’s last point suggests that it is important to be sensitive to the nature of the organizations to which you are seeking to gain access.

To read more about Gareth’s research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/
their tracks. It is also fraught with difficulties and in certain cases with danger—for example, when the research is likely to be on groups engaged in violent or criminal activities. Therefore, this discussion of access strategies can be only a starting point in knowing what kinds of approach can be considered.

Ongoing access

But access does not finish when you have made contact and gained an entrée to the group. You still need access to people. Simply because you have gained access to an organization does not mean that you will have an easy passage through the organization. Securing access is in many ways an ongoing activity. It is likely to prove a problem in closed contexts like organizations.

- People will have suspicions about you, perhaps seeing you as an instrument of top management (it is very common for members of organizations to believe that researchers are placed there to check up on them). When Sharpe (2000: 366) began research on prostitution in a red light area, she was quickly depicted as being ‘anything from a social worker to a newspaper reporter with hidden cameras and microphones’. When conducting her research on the British on the Costa del Sol, O’Reilly (2000) was suspected of being from the Department of Social Security and of being a tax inspector.
- People will worry that what they say or do may get back to bosses or to colleagues in work organizations and to peers in other kinds of environment. Van Maanen (1991a) notes from his research on the police that, if you conduct ethnographic research among officers, you are likely to observe activities that may be deeply discrediting and even illegal. Your credibility among police officers will be determined by your reactions to situations and events that are known to be difficult for individuals.
- If people have these worries, they may go along with your research but in fact sabotage it, engaging in deceptions, misinformation, and not allowing access to ‘back regions’ (Goffman 1956).

There are three things you can do to smooth the path of ongoing access.

- Play up your credentials. Use your past work and experience; your knowledge of the organization and/or its sector; your understanding of their problems.
- Pass tests. Be non-judgemental when things are said to you about informal activities or about the organization; make sure information given to you does not get back to others, whether bosses or peers.
- You may need a role. If your research involves quite a lot of participant observation, the role will be part of your position in the organization; otherwise, you will need to construct a ‘front’, by your dress, by your explanations about what you are doing there, by helping out occasionally with work or offering advice. Be consistent—do not behave ambiguously or inconsistently.

Similar considerations apply to research in public settings.

- Make sure you have thought about ways in which people’s suspicions can be allayed. You will need a ‘front’, as Ditton (1977; Research in focus 19.1) had when referring to ‘his studies’. Similarly, Giulianotti (1995; see Research in focus 19.2) simply said that he was doing research on football supporters for a book.
- Be prepared for tests of either competence or credibility. A. Taylor (1993) reports that, at a drop-in centre at which she had been allowed to attend a meeting, ‘proper cups’ for tea were put out. Afterwards Taylor (1993: 15) was told that, if she had crooked her ‘wee finger’, as the leader of the centre had done, her informant ‘would have put [Taylor] down in such a way that you’d never want to speak to us again’. When researching gang members in a poor community, Horowitz (Gerson and Horowitz 2002; see Research in focus 19.5) writes that she was frequently told ‘confidential’ stories (which turned out to be fictional) to determine whether she could keep a secret.
- Be prepared for changes in circumstances. Both Giulianotti (1995; Research in focus 19.2) and Armstrong (1993) found that sudden newspaper exposés of football hooliganism or evidence of police infiltration can engender worries that you are not what or who you say you are.

Key informants

One aspect of having sponsors or gatekeepers who smooth access for the ethnographer is that they may become key informants in the course of the subsequent fieldwork. The ethnographer relies a lot on informants, but certain informants may become particularly important to the research. They often develop an appreciation of the research and direct the ethnographer to situations, events, or people likely to be helpful to the progress of the investigation. Whyte’s (1955) study is again an extreme example of this development. Whyte reports
Doc as saying to him at one point: ‘You tell me what you want to see, and we’ll arrange it. When you want some information, I’ll ask for it, and you listen. When you want to find out their philosophy of life, I’ll start an argument and get it for you. If there’s something else you want to get, I’ll stage an act for you’ (Whyte 1955: 292). Doc was also helpful in warning Whyte that he was asking too many questions, when he told him to ‘go easy on that “who”, “what”, “why”, “when”, “where”, stuff’ (Whyte 1955: 303). Patrick (1973) was able to develop a similarly fruitful relationship with ‘Tim’ for his study of a violent gang in Glasgow. A. Taylor (1993) says that her period of participant observation was in relation to fifty female drug-users and that intensive interviews were carried out with twenty-six women, but that eight of the women were key informants.

Key informants can clearly be of great help to the ethnographer and frequently provide a support that helps with the stress of fieldwork. However, it also needs to be borne in mind that they carry risks in that the ethnographer may develop an undue reliance on the key informant, and, rather than seeing social reality through the eyes of members of the social setting, the researcher is seeing social reality through the eyes of the key informant.

In addition, the ethnographer will encounter many people who will act as informants. Their accounts may be solicited or unsolicited (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Some researchers prefer the latter, because of its greater spontaneity and naturalism. Very often, research participants develop a sense of the kinds of events the ethnographer wants to see or encounters that it would be beneficial to be present at. Armstrong (1993) says that, while doing research on ‘The Blades’, a group of supporters of Sheffield United Football Club who were engaged in hooligan activity (see Chapter 17 for other references to this research), he would sometimes get tip-offs:

‘We’re all gonna’ Leeds in a couple o’ weeks . . . four coaches, Pond Street, town centre. If you’re serious about this study you’ll be down there on one of ‘em.’ I often travelled on the same coach as Ray [an informant]; he would then sit with me at matches and in pubs and point out Blades, giving me background information. Sometimes he would start conversations with Blades about incidents which he knew I wanted to know about and afterwards would ask ‘Did you get all that down then?’ . . . There was never one particular informant; rather, there were many Blades I could ring up and meet at any time, who were part of the core and would always welcome a beer and a chat about ‘It’, or tell me who I ‘ought to ‘ave a word wi’. (Armstrong 1993: 24–5)

Such unsolicited sources of information are highly attractive to the ethnographer because of their relative spontaneity, although, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 130–1) observe, they may on occasions be staged for the ethnographer’s benefit. Solicited accounts can occur in two ways: by interview (see Chapter 20) or by casual questioning during conversations (though in ethnographic research the boundary between an interview and a conversation is by no means clear-cut, as Burgess (1984) makes clear). When the ethnographer needs specific information concerning an issue that is not amenable to direct observation or that is not cropping up during ‘natural’ conversations, solicited accounts are likely to be the only way forward.

## Roles for ethnographers

Related to the issue of ongoing access (or relationships in the field, as it is sometimes called) is the question of the kind of role the ethnographer adopts in relation to the social setting and its members. Several schemes have been devised by writers on research methods to describe the various roles that can be and have been adopted by ethnographers (Gold 1958; Gans 1968; Adler and Adler 1987). These classifications usually focus on the degree of involvement of the ethnographer in the social world he or she is researching.

Figure 19.2 attempts to bring together some of the underlying features of these classifications of ethnographers’ roles. It distinguishes six roles which are best thought of as ideal-typical forms (Weber). It is reasonably exhaustive and most ethnographic roles can be subsumed more or less under each type. The six roles are arrayed in terms of levels of participation in the life and core activities of the group or social context being investigated. There is a tendency, which is apparent from the descriptions of the roles, for those that entail higher
### Figure 19.2
Field roles and participation in ethnographic research

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<tr>
<th>Participation and Involvement</th>
<th>Type and description of role</th>
<th>Example studies</th>
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| **Covert Full Member**       | Full membership of group but the researcher’s status as a researcher is unknown. In closed settings like organizations, the researcher works as a paid employee for the group. The employment may be extant or something that takes place after a decision to do the research has been arrived at. In the case of open settings like communities, the researcher moves to the area for a significant length of time or employs a pre-existing identity or location as a means of becoming a full member for the purposes of research. | Pearson’s covert participant observation of football hooligans: ‘Whilst it was possible to avoid committing some individual offences, a refusal to commit crimes on a regular basis would have aroused suspicions and reduced research opportunities. As a result, I committed “minor” offences (which I tentatively defined as those which would not cause direct physical harm to a research subject) on a weekly basis as part of the research routine. My strategy was to commit only the offences which the majority of the research subjects were committing and that I considered necessary to carry out the research. Furthermore, whilst I would commit lesser offences with regularity I would, if possible, avoid more serious ones’ (Pearson 2009: 246–7).  
Research by Winlow et al. on bouncers: ‘As our researcher became more conversant with the environment, acting like a bouncer became almost second nature and the covert role relatively easy to sustain. He was after all not just pretending to be one of them, he actually was. He was being paid to be a bouncer, and with the job came involvement in virtually every violent incident that occurred in his place of employment during the research period . . . The fact that being a bouncer involves dealing with violence means that our ethnographer was not able to lurk on the periphery and observe’ (Winlow et al. 2001: 544, 546).  
Mattley’s study of telephone sex line work: ‘in 1993 I got a job working for a phone fantasy line, and conducted covert participant observation’ (Mattley 2006: 142). |
| **Overt Full Member**         | Full membership of group but the researcher’s status as a researcher is known. In other respects, same as Covert Full Member. | Simakova’s study of the marketing of new technologies: ‘Between February 2003 and July 2005, I conducted participant observation with Virtual World, one of the world’s largest IT corporations, at the company’s EMEA (Europe, the Middle East, and Africa) headquarters near London. I participated in preparations for RFID [Rapid Frequency Identification] launch by following a marketing manager, Alex, who was my “line manager” during most of my ethnography . . . While working with the corporation, I progressed through the department’s hierarchy of marketing jobs: from postal room operations to becoming a project manager, and culminating in joining a prestigious marketing team’ (Simakova 2010: 551, 572).  
Hodkinson’s participant observation study of goths and their culture and lifestyle. ‘I had been an enthusiastic participant in the goth scene since the beginning of [the 1990s], but in 1996 my personal involvement became one part of an extensive research project . . . I adopted a multi-method ethnographic approach, which included participant observation, in-depth interviews, media analysis and even a questionnaire . . . in some respects my insider status was actually enhanced, as the project was built around an intensified attendance of clubs, gigs and festivals across Britain . . . Participation on internet discussion groups and other goth internet facilities widened the scope of my research . . .’ (Hodkinson 2002: 4–5). |
### Ethnography and participant observation

#### Figure 19.2

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<th>Participation and Involvement</th>
<th>Type and description of role</th>
<th>Example studies</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Participating Observer.</strong></td>
<td>Participates in group’s core activities but not as a full member. In closed settings like organizations, the researcher works for the concern often as part of a research bargain to gain entry or to gain acceptance; in open settings, the researcher is a regular in the vicinity and is involved fully in the principal activities.</td>
<td>Anderson’s study, conducted in the 1970s, of Jelly’s, a bar in Chicago, in order to understand the social lives of street corner black men: ‘an understanding of the setting came to me in time, especially as I participated more fully in the life of the corner . . . As the ethnography progressed, I felt increasingly included in the activities of the group members, especially the regulars. I felt this inclusion especially during times when the group members would call my name in a familiar manner . . . People seemed more at ease with me, as I did with them . . . But probably the most important thing about my getting the trust of the men was my continued presence at Jelly’s’ (Anderson 2006: 45, 48, 54).</td>
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<td>Zilber’s study of a rape crisis centre in Israel over a nineteen-month period: ‘I spent at least two days per week in the center, observing board and staff meetings, volunteer gatherings, and weekend get-togethers. I also participated in the training course and served as a volunteer, answering calls and meeting with victims of sexual assaults. In addition to keeping a detailed field diary, I recorded meetings and daily discussions, which were later transcribed. For ethical reasons, I did not observe support sessions held by phone or in person. I used indirect sources—mainly volunteers’ stories and the activity log—to learn about this aspect of the organization’s life’ (Zilber 2002: 239). In addition, she conducted thirty-six interviews with centre members and analysed organizational documents.</td>
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<td>Foster’s study of Riverside, a London housing estate that was the focus of an intervention to improve perceptions of the estate and to reduce crime on Riverside and on some other estates: ‘The fieldwork on the London estate was conducted between April 1987 and June 1990. Over that period I spent 18 months on Riverside getting involved in as many aspects of life there as possible from attending tenant meetings, the mothers and toddlers group, and activities for young people, to socializing with some of the residents in the local pub. I adopted an overt role and made initial contact with the Tenants Association. As my contacts developed I visited a small number of households on a regular basis and gradually extended my associations from the initial tenant group to other residents by “snowball” techniques, asking people to introduce me to others they knew on the estate. I also accompanied survey researchers conducting interviews for the “after” survey. In addition to my detailed observations I conducted extended interviews with 45 residents . . . on the two London estates (the majority of which were on Riverside) and 25 “officials” including police officers and housing staff’ (Foster 1995: 566).</td>
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### Figure 19.2

#### Participation and Involvement

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| **Partially Participating Observer.**  
Same as Participating Observer, but observation is not necessarily the main data source. Interviews and documents can be as significant as observation and sometimes more significant as sources of data. | For her research on McDonald’s, in addition to interviewing Leidner attended management training classes and was then placed in a franchised restaurant: ‘The manager of the franchise arranged for me to be trained to serve customers; once trained, I worked without pay for half a dozen shifts, or a total of about twenty-eight hours of work . . . I also spent long hours hanging around the crew room, where I talked informally with workers . . . and listened as workers talked with each other about their experiences and their reactions to those experiences’ (Leidner 1993: 16).  
Búriková and Miller’s study of fifty Slovak au pairs in London in which the first-named author ‘spent nearly every day of her year in London in the direct company of au pairs . . . Most of the au pairs spent the day in isolation looking after children and cleaning houses. Not surprisingly, they welcomed the presence of a fellow Slovak who could assist in these tasks. Zuzana’s study often developed into more general friendships in which she shared a wide variety of experiences and confidences’ (Búriková and Miller 2010: 3). In addition, all fifty au pairs were interviewed, and the researchers, who were both interested in material culture studies, ‘paid particular attention to the details of how exactly they decorate their rooms within the family house’ (Búriková and Miller 2010: 3). |
| **Minimally Participating Observer.**  
Observes but participates minimally in group’s core activities. Observer interacts with group members but observation may or may not be the main source of data. When observation is not the main source of data, interviews and documents play a prominent role. | Fine’s study of the work of restaurant cooks: ‘I conducted participant observation in four restaurants in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, spending a month observing and taking notes in each kitchen during all periods in which the restaurant was open . . . In each restaurant, I interviewed all full-time cooks, a total of thirty interviews . . . At no time did I “cook”, but occasionally, when a need existed, I served as an extra pair of hands, occasionally peeling potatoes or destringing celery. Generally I would sit or stand in a corner of the kitchen and take notes, conversing with the cooks or servers in slow periods’ (Fine 1996: 93, 94).  
Venkatesh’s study of the Black Kings, a Chicago gang, led by J. T., who befriended him: ‘I realized that if I truly wanted to understand the complicated lives of black youth in inner-city Chicago, I only had one good option: to accept J. T.’s counsel and hang out with people’ (Venkatesh 2008: 22). However, for one day only, Venkatesh crossed the line and became gang leader for a day. However, it would be unwise to suggest that he became a Full Member on that day, because he was unwilling to engage in a physical confrontation on behalf of the Black Kings, when one was expected, and instead opted for a more intellectualized solution of the problem.  
Watts’s research in a cancer drop-in centre: ‘The opportunity to visit the centre and become an informal volunteer helping with social aspects of the drop-in sessions were a pre-cursor to the researcher role. For the
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<td>Non-Participating Observer with Interaction</td>
<td>Observes (sometimes minimally) but does not participate in group's core activities. Interaction with group members occurs, but often tends to be through interviews, which, along with documents, tend to be the main source of data.</td>
<td>duration of the study my “volunteer time” was taken up with making tea, offering round cake and biscuits, setting up and joining in board games, playing cards, running quizzes, tidying up and generally chatting to those attending the sessions that run for three to four hours in the afternoon . . . The methods used were a mix of participant observation and informal conversations with users of the twice-weekly drop-in sessions . . . much of the data have been drawn, not from conversations between participants and myself, but from listening to talk between group members and from close observation of the social interaction within the group’ (Watts 2011 in press).</td>
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Gambetta and Hammill’s study of taxi drivers and their fares in Belfast and New York (see Thinking Deeply 19.1). In the Belfast part of their study, the authors write that in addition to interviews: ‘We sat in the dispatcher office of five different taxi companies and observed the dispatcher and the interaction between the drivers; we also drove around with five drivers while they were working’ (Gambetta and Hammill 2005: 21). |

Swain’s study of friendship groups in schools: ‘My descriptions and interpretations . . . are based on two major sources of data: firstly, my non-participant observations of the boys and girls during lessons, and around the school environs; and secondly, on a series of 104 loosely structured interviews . . . based on nominated friendship groups of between two and three pupils’ (Swain 2004: 169). |

A study by Valentine et al. of the strategies employed by pro-LGBT groups at the Anglican Communion’s Lambeth conference in Canterbury in 2008: ‘The research included recorded interviews and participant observation . . . The research team lived in Canterbury, and conducted a detailed ethnography of those elements of the event accessible to the public. Thirty semi-structured interviews (and less formal participant observation interviews) were conducted with a range of relevant actors . . . A researcher had access to the press room or conferences, and thus also conducted participant observation of the reporting of the conference as well as interviewing journalists formally about their approaches to this event’ (Valentine et al. 2010: 930). |

Gusterson’s study of a nuclear weapons laboratory (see Thinking deeply 19.4). The top-secret nature of the work meant that the primary sources of data were interviews and documents. However, he was given access to open areas: ‘although I was not allowed to wander freely around the areas where people do classified work, it was not entirely off-limits to me. Two of the laboratories’ three cafeterias were open to the public and I often ate lunch and met with laboratory employees in them’ (Gusterson 1996: 33). |
levels of participation and involvement to exhibit a greater reliance on observation rather than interviewing and/or examination of documents; with lower levels of participation, there is a reversal with a greater reliance on interviewing and/or examination of documents and a lower level of reliance on observation.

Each role carries its own advantages and risks. The Full Member (Covert and Overt) and Participating Observer roles carry the risk of over-identification and hence of ‘going native’ (see Key concept 19.3), but offer the opportunity to get close to people and thereby glean a more complete and intense understanding of their culture and values. Which role is adopted is only partly a matter of choice. Not everyone has the credentials to be a Full Member so that they can become a bouncer (Winlow et al. 2001), a goth (Hodkinson 2002), or get hired by an IT company (Simakova 2010). Equally, the kind of access associated with being a Full Member would be very unlikely for someone like Gusterson (1996) for his study of a nuclear weapons laboratory or inconceivable for a study of school friendship groups because of age issues (Swain 2004). Also, the ethnographer’s research questions are likely to be relevant in that they may or may not require an intensive examination of a particular social context.

Also, it is important to realize that ethnographers often move between these roles at different times during the life cycle of their research. Skeggs (1994) appears to have begun her research as a Participating Observer. She was supplementing her grant with some part-time teaching and gradually got to know her students—a group of young working-class women (eventually there were eighty-three of them) whom she realized were highly relevant to a doctoral project with a strong feminist orientation she was planning.

Over a period of three years [during 1980–3] I did the research by spending as much time as I could with the young women. . . . I traced the trajectories of the young women through the educational system and asked them for biographical details . . . I also conducted formal and informal interviews and meetings with family members, friends, partners and college teachers. . . . Obviously, it was physically impossible to do intensive participant observation with all eighty-three of them all of the time, so during the three years, I concentrated on different groups at different times. (Skeggs 1994: 72, 73)

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**Key concept 19.3**

**What is ‘going native’?**

‘Going native’ refers to a plight that is supposed sometimes to afflict ethnographers when they lose their sense of being a researcher and become wrapped up in the worldview of the people they are studying. The prolonged immersion of ethnographers in the lives of the people they study, coupled with the commitment to seeing the social world through their eyes, lie behind the risk and actuality of going native. Going native is a potential problem for several reasons but especially because the ethnographer can lose sight of his or her position as a researcher and therefore find it difficult to develop a social scientific angle on the collection and analysis of data. When Hobbs (1988: 6) writes in connection with his fieldwork on entrepreneurship in London’s East End that he ‘often had to remind himself that [he] was not in a pub to enjoy [himself] but to conduct an academic inquiry, and repeatedly woke up the following morning with an incredible hangover facing the dilemma of whether to bring it up or write it up’, he may have been on the brink of going native.

However, it should not be assumed that going native is an inevitable risk associated with ethnography or indeed that it is the only risk to do with how participant observers relate to the social situations in which they find themselves. Lee-Treweek (2000) carried out research on auxiliary carers in two homes for the elderly. She describes how in one of these homes she had an almost completely opposite reaction to going native. She disliked the home and appears to have found the staff unappealing because of their lack of sympathy for and their uncaring approach to the elderly people for whom they were responsible. None the less, she felt that she ‘was gathering good data, despite [her] feelings of being an outsider’ (Lee-Treweek 2000: 120). The lesson of this story is that going native is not an inevitable accompaniment to ethnography.
She adds that the ‘time spent doing the ethnography was so intense that the boundary between my life inside and outside the research dissolved’ (1994: 73). Subsequently, she ‘followed the women’s progress through further interviews in 1985, 1989 and 1992’ (1994: 73). As such, it is likely that she would have moved into something closer to a Non-Participating Observer with Interaction role. It is arguably the case that, even if it were possible to adopt a single ethnographic role over the entire course of a project, it is likely that it would be undesirable, because there would be a lack of flexibility in handling situations and people, and risks of excessive involvement (and hence of going native) or detachment would loom large. The issue of the kind of role(s) the ethnographer adopts is of considerable significance, because it has implications for field relationships in the various situations that are encountered.

Further, the kind of role adopted by an ethnographer is likely to have implications for his or her capacity to penetrate the surface layers of an organization. One of the strengths of organizational ethnography is that it offers the prospect of being able to find out what an organization is ‘really’ like, as opposed to how it formally depicts itself. For example, Michael Humphreys conducted ethnographic research in the UK headquarters of a US bank referred to pseudonymously as Credit Line (Humphreys and Watson 2009). He was aware of the firm’s commitment to corporate social responsibility but became increasingly conscious that, although people working in the organization were publicly enthusiastic about its ethical stance, many were privately sceptical about the firm’s actual commitment. For example, he quotes one employee (Charity) as saying:

My problem is that, in this organization, corporate social responsibility is a sham—it’s just rhetoric—I mean how can we call ourselves responsible when we give credit cards to poor people and charge them 30 per cent APR [annual percentage rate] just because they are high risk? (in Humphreys and Watson 2009: 50)

For employees to divulge such private views which cast doubt on the integrity of their organization, the ethnographer will probably need to become something of a confidant, since it requires the organizational participants to be confident about sharing their private views which could lead to them being censured by senior managers.

Active or passive?

A further issue that is raised about any situation in which the ethnographer participates is the degree to which he or she should be or can be an active or a passive participant (Van Maanen 1978). Even when the ethnographer is in a predominantly non-observing role, there may be contexts in which either participation is unavoidable or a compulsion to join in a limited way may be felt, resulting in the ethnographer becoming a Minimally Participating Observer (see Figure 19.2). For example, Fine’s (1996) research on the work of chefs in restaurants was carried out largely by semi-structured interview. In spite of his limited participation, he found himself involved in washing up in the kitchens to help out during busy periods. In many instances, the researcher has no choice. Researchers who do ethnographic research on the police, for example, unless they are covert observers like Holdaway (1982) or take steps to become police officers like Rubinstein (1973), are unlikely to be able to be active participants beyond offering fairly trivial assistance. An example of this can be found in an incident reported in Punch’s field notes in connection with his research on the police in Amsterdam:

Punch travelled with the officers in their cars but in civilian clothes and employed as a ‘front’ the role of a plain-clothes policeman. On the other side of the coin, in taking the job of a bouncer, the participant observer is not going to have the luxury of deciding whether to become involved in fights, since these are likely to come with the territory (Winlow et al. 2001).

Sometimes, ethnographers may feel they have no choice but to get involved, because a failure to participate actively might indicate to members of the social setting a lack of commitment and lead to a loss of credibility. Ryan (2009) conducted research on commercial cleaning in Australia and found that being prepared to help cleaners with some of their tasks helped to build up his credibility and made them more prepared to be interviewed by him.
However, participation in group activities can lead to dilemmas on the part of ethnographers, especially when the activities in which they actively take part (or might do so) are illegal or dangerous (see Research in focus 19.3). On the other hand, many writers counsel against active participation in criminal or dangerous activities (Polsky 1967). Both Armstrong (1993) and Giulianotti (1995; see Research in focus 19.2) refused to participate in fights while doing research into football hooliganism. The latter writes: ‘My own rules are that I will not get involved in fighting or become a go-between for the two gangs in organizing fights’ (Giulianotti 1995: 10). Indeed, we see here a strong argument against covert research on criminals or those involved in dangerous activities, since it will be much more difficult for someone in such a role not to participate.

Research in focus 19.3
Active ethnography and illegal activity

In the context of his study of entrepreneurship (a euphemism for several kinds of legal and illegal activity) among East Enders in London, Hobbs (1988: 7, 15) admits he engaged in illegal activities:

A refusal, or worse still an enquiry concerning the legal status of the ‘parcel’, would provoke an abrupt conclusion to the relationship. Consequently, I was willing to skirt the boundaries of criminality on several occasions, and I considered it crucial to be willingly involved in ‘normal’ business transactions, legal or otherwise. I was pursuing an interactive, inductive study of an entrepreneurial culture, and in order to do so I had to display entrepreneurial skills myself. . . . [My] status as an insider meant that I was afforded a great deal of trust by my informants, and I was allowed access to settings, detailed conversations, and information that might not otherwise have been available.

Field notes

Because of the frailties of human memory, ethnographers have to take notes based on their observations. These should be fairly detailed summaries of events and behaviour and the researcher’s initial reflections on them. The notes need to specify key dimensions of whatever is observed or heard. There are some general principles.

- Write down notes, however brief, as quickly as possible after seeing or hearing something interesting.
- Write up full field notes at the very latest at the end of the day and include such details as location, who is involved, what prompted the exchange or whatever, date and time of the day, and so on.
- Nowadays, people may prefer to use a digital recorder to record initial notes, but this may create a problem of needing to transcribe a lot of speech. However, see Tips and skills ‘Dealing with digitally voice-recorded field notes’.
- Notes must be vivid and clear—you should not have to ask at a later date ‘what did I mean by that?’
- It is worthwhile to write some personal reflections about your own feelings about occasions and people. Such notes may be helpful for formulating a reflexive account of fieldwork. Czarniawska (2007) provides a lot of field notes in connection with a study in Warsaw of what she calls Big City Management. She sought to shadow a finance director (as well as several others on different occasions) who was uncooperative, and these notes are revealing as much for the self-doubt and anxiety about her research skills that crept in as for the substantive findings conveyed.
- There is likely to be considerable value in including initial analytic thoughts about what is observed and heard. These may be useful for acting as a springboard for theoretical elaboration of the data.
- You need to take copious notes, so, if in doubt, write it down. The notes may be of different types (see below).
Obviously, it can be very useful to take your notes down straight away—that is, as soon as something interesting happens. However, wandering around with a notebook and pencil in hand and scribbling notes down on a continuous basis runs the risk of making people self-conscious. It may be necessary, therefore, to develop strategies of taking small amounts of time out, though hopefully without generating the anxieties Ditton (1977) appears to have occasioned (see Research in focus 19.1).

To some extent, strategies for taking field notes will be affected by the degree to which the ethnographer enters the field with clearly delineated research questions. As noted in Chapter 17, most qualitative research adopts a general approach of beginning with general research questions (as specifically implied by Figure 17.1), but there is considerable variation in the degree to which this is the case. Obviously, when there is some specificity to a research question, ethnographers have to orient their observations to that research focus, but at the same time maintain a fairly open mind so that the element of flexibility that is such a strength of a qualitative research strategy is not eroded. Ditton (1977; Research in focus 19.1) provides an illustration of a very open-ended approach when he writes that his research ‘was not set up to answer any empirical questions’ (1977: 11). Similarly, in the context of her research on female drug-users, A. Taylor (1993: 15) explains that in her early days in the field she tended to listen rather than talk because she ‘did not know what questions [she] wanted to ask’. Armstrong (1993: 12) writes in connection with his research on football hooliganism that his research ‘began without a focus’ and that as a result ‘he decided to record everything’. As a result, a typical Saturday ‘would result in thirty sides of notes handwritten on A4 paper’. This period of open-endedness usually cannot last long, because there is the temptation to try to record the details of absolutely everything, which can be very trying. Usually the ethnographer will begin to narrow down the focus of his or her research and to match observations to the emerging research focus. This approach is implied by the sequence suggested by Figure 17.1, and can be seen in the account by P. Atkinson (1981; see Research in focus 19.4). For these reasons, ethnographers frequently try to narrow down their focus of interest and to devise specific research questions or relate their emerging findings to the social scientific literature (see Research in focus 19.5).

For most ethnographers, the main equipment with which they will need to supply themselves in the course of observation will be a note pad and pen (see, e.g., Armstrong 1993: 28 and P. Atkinson 1981; see Research in focus 19.4). A recording device like a digital voice recorder can be another useful addition to the participant observer’s hardware, but, as suggested above, it is likely radically to increase the amount of transcription (though see Tips and skills ‘Dealing with digitally voice-recorded field notes’ above) and is possibly more obtrusive than writing notes. Most ethnographers report that after a period of time they become less conspicuous to participants in social settings, who become familiar with their presence (e.g. P. Atkinson 1981: 128). Speaking into a recording device may rekindle an awareness of the ethnographer’s presence. Also, in gatherings it may be difficult to use, because of the impact of extraneous noise. Photography can be an additional source of data and helps to stir the ethnographer’s memory, but it is likely that some kinds of research (especially involving crime and deviance) will render the taking of photographs unworkable.
As I noted in Chapter 17, research questions in qualitative research, and in ethnographic research in particular, are usually open ended, though the extent to which this is the case varies a great deal. Elijah Anderson (2006) has provided a fascinating account of the background to his participant observation research into the lives of black street corner men in Chicago in the 1970s (Anderson 1978). This study was undertaken by focusing on the lives and habits of clients of Jelly’s—a drinking establishment that acted as both a bar and a store for the sale of alcoholic drinks. Anderson says that, at the outset of his fieldwork, he ‘had absolutely no idea where the research would lead’ and had ‘no explicit sociological problem or question’ (2006: 40). Indeed, he writes that ‘this open-ended approach was a conscious act’, arguing that to go in with a pre-designed set of issues ‘could preclude certain lines of enquiry that might prove valuable later’ (2006: 40). Gradually, the research questions emerged: ‘Why did men really come to and return to Jelly’s corner? What did they seek to gain? What was the nature of the social order there? What was the basis for their social ranking?’ (2006: 46).

Anderson’s open-ended strategy can be interestingly contrasted with a study of taxi drivers in New York and Belfast whose data are described as ‘of an ethnographic kind’ (Gambetta and Hamill 2005: 18). The researchers were fundamentally interested in the sociological study of trust and sought to explore how taxi drivers establish whether prospective passengers that they might pick up are trustworthy. Taxi drivers are very vulnerable in many ways: the passenger may not pay or worse may rob the driver or even worse may rob and assault the driver. Therefore, they are forced to make more or less instant decisions about whether someone who hails them is trustworthy. Their hypothesis is worth quoting: ‘drivers screen passengers looking for reliable signs of trust- or distrust-warranting properties, in the sense that they look for signs that are too costly for a mimic to fake but affordable for the genuine article’ (Gambetta and Hamill 2005: 11; emphasis in original).

To investigate this explicit research question, Gambetta and Hamill (2005: 18) conducted ‘partially structured interviews and participant observation with drivers, dispatchers, and passengers’. Unlike Anderson’s initially open-ended strategy, where research questions emerged in the course of the study, Gambetta and Hamill collected their data to examine the validity of their research question, which they also refer to as a hypothesis. Their findings are presented in order to shed light on this research question, and new research questions do not appear to have emerged in the course of the study.

On a personal note, I have an impression that an open-ended approach of the kind used by Anderson is less frequently seen than in the past. That is not to say that researchers veer towards the highly explicit formulation that we see in Gambetta and Hamill’s study but that there is a greater tendency towards explicitness nowadays. I suspect that this is often to do with the expectations of research funding bodies when deciding whether to fund investigations and perhaps also to do with the expectations of journals. It may also be to do with the expectations of committees that review the ethical integrity of proposed projects, because securing ethical clearance forces the researcher to be clear about what he or she intends to do and why. However, this is an impression only—maybe it could be called a hypothesis!

In the context of his research in a medical school, P. Atkinson (1981: 131–2) provides an account that strongly implies that ethnographers need to be flexible in their note-taking tactics:

‘I found that my strategies for observation and recording changed naturally as the nature of the social scene changed. Whenever possible I attempted to make rough notes and jottings of some sort whilst I was in the

Taking field notes: encounters with doctors and patients in a medical school training programme

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Types of field notes

Some writers have found it useful to classify the types of field notes that are generated in the process of conducting an ethnography. The following classification is based on the similar categories suggested by Sanjek (1990) and Lofland and Lofland (1995).

- **Mental notes**—particularly useful when it is inappropriate to be seen taking notes (for example, during the coffee breaks referred to by P. Atkinson in Research in focus 19.4).
- **Jotted notes** (also called scratch notes)—very brief notes written down on pieces of paper or in small notebooks to jog one's memory about events that should be written up later. Lofland and Lofland (1995: 90) refer to these as being made up of 'little phrases, quotes, key words, and the like'. They need to be jotted down inconspicuously, preferably out of sight, since detailed note taking in front of people may make them self-conscious. These are equivalent to the 'rough notes and jottings' that P. Atkinson refers to in Research in focus 19.4.
- **Full field notes**—detailed notes, made as soon as possible, which will be your main data source. They should be written at the end of the day or sooner if possible. Write as promptly and as fully as possible.

field. Such notes were then amplified and added to later in the day when I returned to the office. The quantity and type of on the spot recording varied across recurrent types of situation. During 'tutorials', when one of the doctors taught the group in a more or less formal manner, or when there was some group discussion . . . then it seemed entirely natural and appropriate to sit among the students with my notebook on my knee and take notes almost continuously. At the other extreme, I clearly did not sit with my notebook and pen whilst I was engaged in casual conversations with students over a cup of coffee. Whereas taking notes is a normal thing to do, taking notes during a coffee break chat is not normal practice . . . . Less clear cut was my approach to the observation and recording of bedside teaching. On the whole I tried to position myself at the back of the student group and make occasional jottings: main items of information on the patients, key technical terms, and brief notes on the shape of the session (for example, the sequence of topics covered, the students who were called on to perform, and so on).

Research in focus 19.5

**Narrowing the focus of an ethnography**

Ruth Horowitz has written about the process of narrowing down the focus of her research on groups on the margins of society in Gerson and Horowitz (2002). As she puts it, she tends to be interested in such questions as:

- 'What is really going on' in such groups and communities? How do people make sense of their social worlds?
- How do they strike a balance between group membership and wider social participation? And finally, what limits and what helps create the social worlds of the people? (Gerson and Horowitz 2002: 202)

In her early research on young people in a very poor community in Chicago, she used these general research questions to guide her data collection but ‘began to focus on specifying the sociological issues only after some time in the field’ (Gerson and Horowitz 2002: 202). She found a great deal of variety in the ambitions, orientations, patterns of interaction, attitudes towards street life, and behaviour in different settings among the young people she observed. Horowitz began to ask questions about how well the world of these young people fitted with two prominent models used to explain the worlds of the poor. Her research questions about the degree of fit between these models and her data led her to conclude that the models ‘failed to account for young people’s creativity or for the struggles they mounted and the choices that they made in the face of great obstacles’ (Gerson and Horowitz 2002: 202).
Write down information about events, people, conversations, and so on. Write down initial ideas about interpretation. Record impressions and feelings. When P. Atkinson (in Research in focus 19.4) refers to notes in which he ‘amplified and added to’ the jottings made during the day, he was producing full field notes. An example of a full field note is provided in Research in focus 19.6.

It is worth adding that field notes are often to do with the ethnographer as well as with the social setting being observed. It is frequently in field notes that the ethnographer’s presence is evident. We see this in the field note on page 446 from Punch’s study of police work, in which he confirms his (false) status as a plain-clothes officer, and in the field note in Research in focus 19.6, when he lends support to letting the cyclist go. Precisely because they record the quotidian as observed and experienced by ethnographers, it is here that ethnographers come to the surface. In the finished work—the ethnography in the sense of a written account of a group and its culture—the ethnographer is frequently written out of the picture (Van Maanen 1988). A major difference here is that field notes, except for brief passages like those taken from Punch’s work, are invariably for personal consumption (Coffey 1999), whereas the written ethnography is for public consumption and has to be presented as a definitive account of the social setting and culture in question. To keep on allowing the ethnographer to surface in the text risks conveying a sense of the account as an artifice rather than an authoritative chronicle. This issue will be addressed in further detail below.

Research in focus 19.6
A field note: police work in Amsterdam

Punch’s (1979) ethnographic research on police work in Amsterdam was briefly mentioned above. One of the ideas he developed was the way in which police officers often cultivated distinctive styles of working. One of them, Anton, was inflexible and therefore disinclined to use his discretion (perhaps because he was new to the work), as the following passage from Punch’s field notes suggests:

Once Jan had been sitting inside for a couple of hours doing nothing and was desperate to get out. He was sent out in a car with a newcomer, Anton. The three of us stepped outside the station and immediately saw a young man cycling erratically the wrong way down the Warmoesstraat which is a one-way street. Anton stopped him, smelt his breath, and ordered him to leave the bike and walk home. The man refused and Anton threatened to take him inside and book him for being drunk on a bike [under an article normally applied to car-drivers and almost never used for cyclists]. Jan pleaded with Anton to let the man go so that we could get out on patrol. I also added support to Jan’s plea. But Anton was adamant and took the youth inside where the brigadier talked the cyclist into seeing reason and proceeding by foot. (Punch 1979: 110–11)

There is also an issue of how far the ethnographer should aim to be comprehensive in how much is recorded. Wolfinger (2002) has observed that, if the ethnographer does not seek to be comprehensive, his or her background expectations are likely to influence what is or is not recorded. He suggests that the ethnographer may be particularly inclined to make a note of events that stand out and what is taken to stand out is likely to be influenced by other events that have been observed or by the ethnographer’s expectations of what is likely to happen. It may be that what stood out for Punch in the field note in Research in focus 19.6 is that it was an unusual event—a cyclist going down a one-way street in the wrong direction—which produced a typically rigid response from Anton that made it noteworthy.

Sometimes, field notes may seem to describe incidents that are so mundane that they seem barely worth recording. For example, the following field note is taken from Watts’s (2008) study of train travel. The idea of ‘mobile ethnography’ has garnered interest as social geographers and sociologists have become increasingly interested in studying people on the move and in the research methods that might be employed. She travelled on the same train service once a week over three weeks. In her field note she writes:
The sense of ennui is unmistakable and hardly seems worth recording. However, quite apart from providing insight into her own experience of train travel, Watts also reveals the tediousness of the experience of train travel for others. While she reports some things that did happen, they are not striking or colourful. As a result, ethnographers in such circumstances have to be on their guard to allow the dullness of the experience to come through but not to get sucked into the boredom so that they lose sight of recording it in their field notes.

Bringing ethnographic research to an end

Knowing when to stop is not an easy or straightforward matter in ethnography. Because of its unstructured nature and the absence of specific hypotheses to be tested (other than those that might emerge during data collection and analysis), there is a tendency for ethnographic research to lack a sense of an obvious end point. But clearly ethnographic research does come to an end! It may be that there is an almost natural end to the research, such as in Waddington’s study of a strike (see Research in focus 17.4), but this is a fairly rare occurrence. Sometimes, the rhythms of the ethnographer’s occupational career or personal and family life will necessitate withdrawal from the field. Such factors include: the end of a period of sabbatical leave; the need to write up and submit a doctoral thesis by a certain date; or funding for research drawing to a close. As regards family and personal commitments, for example, Taylor (1993) writes that one of the factors that was instrumental in her departure from the field was an illness of her youngest son that lasted many months.

Moreover, ethnographic research can be highly stressful for many reasons: the nature of the topic, which places the fieldworker in stressful situations (as in research on crime); the marginality of the researcher in the social setting and the need constantly to manage a front; and the prolonged absence from one’s normal life that is often necessary. The ethnographer may feel that he or she has simply had enough. A further possibility that may start to bring about moves to bring fieldwork to a close is that the ethnographer may begin to feel that the research questions on which he or she has decided to concentrate are answered, so that there are no new data worth generating. The ethnographer may even feel a strong sense of déjà vu towards the end of data collection. Altheide (1980: 310) has written that his decision to leave the various news organizations in which he had conducted ethnographic research was often motivated by ‘the recurrence of familiar situations and the feeling that little worthwhile was being revealed’. In the language of grounded theory, all the researcher’s categories were saturated, although Glaser and Strauss’s approach would invite you to be certain that there are no new research questions to be asked or no new comparisons to be made or no new theoretical insights to be developed.

The reasons for bringing ethnographic research to a close can involve a wide range of factors from the personal to matters of research design. Whatever the reason, disengagement has to be managed. For one thing, this means that promises must be kept, so that, if you promised a report to an organization as a condition of entry, that promise should not be forgotten. It also means that ethnographers must provide good explanations for their departure. Members of a social setting always know that the researcher is a temporary fixture, but over a long period of time, and especially if there was genuine participation in activities within that setting, people may forget that the ethnographer’s presence is finite. The
farewells have to be managed and in an orderly fashion. Also, the ethnographer’s ethical commitments must not be forgotten, such as the need to ensure that persons and settings are anonymized—unless, of course, as sometimes happens, there has been an agreement that the nature of the social setting can be disclosed (as often occurs in the study of religious sects and cults).

Michael Humphreys, in his research on Credit Line, which was referred to above, went even further in his desire for organizational participants to remain anonymous (Humphreys and Watson 2009). He became aware that the gulf between the company’s public position on corporate social responsibility and the private views of many staff about that position presented him with an ethical dilemma in that he clearly needed to protect their anonymity so that they would not get into trouble with the firm. On page 446, the words of ‘Charity’ were quoted, but Charity is not a pseudonym, the usual tactic used by researchers to preserve the identity of their informants. ‘Charity’ is a composite person rather than a real person. Her views and words are in fact an aggregation of those of several employees who expressed identical or similar positions.

Can there be a feminist ethnography?

This heading is in fact the title of a widely cited article by Stacey (1988). It is a rebuttal of the view that there is and/or can be a distinctively feminist ethnography that both draws on the distinctive strengths of ethnography and is informed by feminist tenets of the kind outlined at the end of Chapter 17. Reinharz (1992) sees feminist ethnography as significant in terms of feminism, because:

- it documents women’s lives and activities, which were previously largely seen as marginal and subsidiary to men’s;
- it understands women from their perspective, so that the tendency that ‘trivializes females’ activities and thoughts, or interprets them from the standpoint of men in the society or of the male researcher’ (Reinharz 1992: 52), is militated against; and
- it understands women in context.

Similarly, Skeggs (2001: 430) has observed that ethnography, ‘with its emphasis on experiences and the words, voice and lives of the participants’, has been viewed by many feminist researchers as well suited to the goals of feminism. Reinharz’s principles lay behind Mattley’s (2006) choice of participant observation for collecting data on working for a sex fantasy phone line in order to explore the notion of emotional labour (see Research in focus 17.1 for a brief discussion of the emergence of this concept). She writes:

I knew that as a feminist my goals were to understand the phone workers’ experiences, to document their experiences using their own words and perspectives, and to understand how their emotional labor was a part of their work context. I also knew that understanding their experiences from their own point of view was important to challenge the dominant sociological view of sex workers as deviants, which has most often been written by male sociologists. (Mattley 2006: 143)

However, such commitments and practices go only part of the way. Of great significance to feminist researchers is the question of whether the research allows for a non-exploitative relationship between researcher and researched. One of the main elements of such a strategy is that the ethnographer does not treat the relationship as a one-way process of extracting information from others, but actually provides something in return.

Skeggs’s (1994, 1997) account of her ethnographic research on young women, which was briefly mentioned in Chapter 17, represents an attempt to address this issue of a non-exploitative relationship when women conduct ethnographic research on other women (see Research in focus 19.7). J. Stacey (1988: 23), however, argues, on the basis of her fieldwork experience, that the various
Stacey also argues that, when the research is written up, it is the feminist ethnographer’s interpretations and judgements that come through and that have authority. Skeggs responds to this general charge against feminist ethnography by acknowledging in the case of her own study that her academic career was undoubtedly enhanced by the research, but argues that Stacey’s views construe women as victims. Instead, she argues:

Similarly, Reinharz (1992: 74–5) argues that, although ethnographic fieldwork relationships may sometimes seem manipulative, a clear undercurrent of reciprocity often lies beneath them. The researcher, in other words, may offer help or advice to her research participants, or she may be exhibiting reciprocity by giving a public airing to normally marginalized voices (although the ethnographer is always the mouthpiece for such voices and may be imposing a particular ‘spin’ on them). Moreover, it seems extreme to abandon feminist ethnography in situations of inauthenticity, dissimilitude, and potential, perhaps inevitable betrayal, situations that I now believe are inherent in fieldwork method. For no matter how welcome, even enjoyable the fieldworker’s presence may appear to ‘natives’, fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer to leave.

The young women were not prepared to be exploited; just as they were able to resist most things which did not promise economic or cultural reward, they were able to resist me. . . . They enjoyed the research. It provided resources for developing a sense of their self-worth. More importantly, the feminism of the research has provided a framework which they use to explain that their individual problems are part of a wider structure and not their personal fault. (Skeggs 1994: 88)

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Research in focus 19.7

A feminist ethnography

Skeggs (1997: 1) refers to ‘the 83 White working-class women of this longitudinal ethnographic study, set in the North West of England’ and writes that it was

based on research conducted over a total period of 12 years including three years’ full-time, in-the-field participant observation. It began when the women enrolled on a ‘caring’ course at a local college and it follows their trajectories through the labour market, education and the family.

The elements of a distinctively feminist ethnography can be seen in the following comments:

- ‘This ethnography was politically motivated to provide space for the articulations and experiences of the marginalized’ (Skeggs 1997: 23).
- The ‘study was concerned to show how young women’s experience of structure (their class and gender positioning) and institutions (education and the media) framed and informed their responses and how this process informed constructions of their own subjectivity’ (Skeggs 1994: 74). This comment, like the previous one, reflects the commitment to documenting women’s lives and allowing their experiences to come through, while also pointing to the significance of the understanding of women in context, to which Reinharz (1992) refers.

Skeggs also feels that the relationship with the women was not an exploitative one. For example, she writes that the research enabled the women’s ‘sense of self-worth’ to be ‘enhanced by being given the opportunity to be valued, knowledgeable and interesting’ (Skeggs 1994: 81). She also claims she was able to ‘provide a mouthpiece against injustices’ and to listen ‘to disclosures of violence, child abuse and sexual harassment’ (Skeggs 1994: 81).
on the grounds that the ethnographer cannot fulfil all possible obligations simultaneously. Indeed, this would be a recipe for the abandonment of all research, feminist or otherwise. What is also crucial is transparency—transparency in the feminist ethnographer’s dealings with the women she studies and transparency in the account of the research process, both of which are a great strength in Skeggs’s work. Nonetheless, it is clear that the question of whether there is or can be a feminist ethnography is a matter of ongoing debate.

The rise of visual ethnography

One of the most striking developments in qualitative research in recent years has been the growth of interest in the use of visual materials. The use of such materials in social research is by no means new; for example, social anthropologists have made use of photographs of the tribes and villages in which they resided for many decades. In sociology, it was not uncommon to encounter articles that made use of photographs in the *American Journal of Sociology* at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. However, from around the time of the First World War, their use fell away. One factor in this loss of interest in the use of photographs is likely to have been a feeling that their inclusion was inconsistent with the discipline’s growing scientific pretensions. However, in recent years, there is a clear sense that the use of visual materials in social research has entered a new phase of interest that can be discerned in the number of books that appeared around the turn of the millennium on this area (Banks 2001; Pink 2001; Rose 2001).

Photographs did not disappear completely from the outputs of social scientists, of course. Particularly in book-length monographs, photographs could sometimes be found. For example, Blauner’s (1964) well-known book on alienated work under different technological conditions contained several photographs that were used to illustrate each of the technologies. Of particular significance is that the photographs were accompanied by quite detailed captions that more or less informed readers of what they were seeing in the images. These photographs were essentially being presented as having uncontested meanings, which was very much in tune with the realist stance on visual images (see Thinking deeply 19.2 on the distinction between realist and reflexive approaches to visual materials and Thinking deeply 19.3 for more on issues relating to Blauner’s use of photographs).

A distinction can be made between the use of visual materials that are *extant* and those that are produced more or less exclusively for the purposes of research. The former will be featured in Chapter 23 and take the form of such artefacts as people’s collections of photographs and images in newspapers and magazines. In this chapter I will be emphasizing research-driven visual images, and my main focus will be upon photographs. Visual images that are research driven may be taken either by the researcher or by the research participants themselves. In either case, the images may be used as a basis for what is often referred to as *photo-elicitation*, whereby the researcher uses the images as a springboard for discussion with the producers of the photographs concerning the meaning and significance of the images (see Research in focus 19.9 for an example). Wright et al. (2010) equipped African Caribbean young people who had been excluded from school with disposable cameras and instructed them to take photographs of family and friends who had been sources of support. The researcher wanted to understand how the young people managed their transition into adulthood. The images tended to be of events and contexts that were significant at that particular juncture of their lives and that were therefore significant for the development of their personal identities. The authors argue that the use of a visual research approach helped to empower these marginalized young people and to reduce some of the power distance between the researchers and their participants. Photo-elicitation is often employed in connection with extant images too, and this point will be addressed further in Chapter 23.

The distinction between extant and research-driven visual materials is not an entirely satisfactory one. For example, when research participants are asked to discuss items in their photograph collections, this is similar to asking participants to take photographs and then to discuss the images that are taken. However, in order to restrict the discussion of documents in Chapter 23 only to items that have not been produced for research purposes, the distinction is required.

It is also worth observing that, although the term ‘visual ethnography’ is becoming increasingly popular (e.g. Peñaloza 1999; Pink 2001), it is sometimes used in
I have been intrigued by something that I call ‘Disneyization’, which refers to the process by which the principles associated with the Disney theme parks have permeated many aspects of modern society and economy. In my book on Disneyization (Bryman 2004a) I included several photographs that I felt illustrated the processes I was describing quite well. In addition to serving this role, the photographs were very helpful in acting as reminders of contexts that revealed the process of Disneyization for me. This was especially the case with an article I wrote on the Disneyization of McDonald’s (Bryman 2003). At one point in this article I discussed the rather bizarre case of a themed McDonald’s in Chicago that employed a rock ‘n’ roll narrative. I had visited Chicago a year previously to give a paper at the American Sociological Association conference and took the opportunity to take some photographs of the restaurant. These images were very helpful in remembering the restaurant, although I did not use them for illustrative purposes in either the book or the article. Two of the images are presented here—Plate 19.1 shows the restaurant’s exterior against the Chicago skyline and Plate 19.2 shows statues of three members of the Beatles, which were among many other artefacts that contributed to the musical theme.
Ethnography and participant observation

a way that does not imply the kind of sustained immersion in a social setting that has been taken in this chapter to be a feature of ethnography. Sometimes, the term is used to include interviews of the kind covered in Chapter 20 in which visual materials figure prominently. However, in order to avoid splitting visual resources and research methods across too many chapters, I have located the discussion of their use in qualitative research in this chapter.

In the discussion that follows, I will emphasize photographs, mainly because they are the visual medium that have received the greatest attention. There are a number of ways in which photographs have been employed by qualitative researchers.

• As an aide-mémoire in the course of fieldwork, in which context the images essentially become components of the ethnographer’s field notes. This is how I have tended to use images in my own work (see Research in focus 19.8).

• As sources of data in their own right and not simply as adjuncts to the ethnographer’s field notes (see Research in focus 19.10).

• As prompts for discussion by research participants. Sometimes the photographs may be extant, and this kind of context will be examined in Chapter 23. In other contexts, the discussions may be based on photographs taken by the ethnographer or by research participants (see Research in focus 19.9) more or less exclusively for the purposes of the investigation. In the case of photographs that are taken by research participants and that form the basis for an interview or discussion, Pink (2004: 399) writes: ‘By working with informants to produce images that are meaningful for them we can gain insights into their visual cultures and into what is important for them as individuals living in particular localities.’

Pink (2001) draws attention to two different ways in which visual images have been conceptualized in social

Plate 19.2

Disneyization in pictures: The Beatles in the themed McDonald's
research. She calls these the *realist* and *reflexive* approaches (see Thinking deeply 19.2). The latter approach to the visual is frequently collaborative, in the sense that research participants may be involved in decisions about what photographs should be taken and then how they should be interpreted. Further, there is a recognition of the fluidity of the meaning of images, implying that they can never be fixed and will always be viewed by different people in different ways. Thus, in Pink’s research on Spanish bullfighters, the images she took of bullfights were interpreted by enthusiasts in terms of their performative qualities of the bullfighter. UK viewers of the images employed a different interpretative frame to do with animal rights and cruelty. Further examples of the use of visual resources in ethnographic contexts can be found in Thinking deeply 19.2 and Research in focus 19.10.

### Thinking deeply 19.2

**Two stances on the role of visual images in ethnography**

Pink (2001) draws an important distinction between two positions on visual materials. The traditional framework is a *realist* one (see Key concept 2.3 on realism) in which the photograph or video recording simply captures an event or setting that then becomes a ‘fact’ for the ethnographer to interpret along with his or her other data. The image and what it represents are essentially unproblematic and act as a window on reality. This has been the dominant frame within which visual resources have been produced and analysed. Researchers who employ photographic images to illustrate their work or as adjuncts to their field notes typically operate within a realist frame of reference that treats the image as relatively unproblematic (see Research in focus 19.8 and Thinking deeply 19.3 for examples). In contrast, Pink draws attention to a position that she calls *reflexive*, which entails an awareness of and sensitivity to the ways in which the researcher as a person has an impact on what a photograph reveals. This sensitivity requires a grasp of the way that one’s age, gender, background, and academic proclivities influence what is photographed, how it is composed, and the role that informants and others may have played in influencing the resulting image.

The various examples of the use of visual materials give a sense that they have great potential for ethnographers and qualitative researchers more generally. Their growing popularity should not entice readers into thinking that visual methods should necessarily be incorporated into their investigations: their use must be relevant to the research questions being asked. For her research on Niketown in Chicago, Peñaloza (1999; Research in focus 19.10) was interested in what she dubs ‘spectacular consumption’—that is, turning what could otherwise be a mundane consumption event (purchasing sportswear) into a spectacle through the use of sporting images, sounds, and atmospheres. When she explored research questions to do with this topic (for example, the role of the environment in creating a sense of spectacular consumption), an approach that included photography was very appropriate, since spectacle is a visual phenomenon.

As sources of data, visual research methods require an ability on the part of the researcher to ‘read’ images in a manner that is sensitive to: the context in which they were generated; the potential for multiple meanings that may need to be worked through with research participants; and, where the researcher is the source of the images, the significance of his or her own social position. In other words, the analyst of visual materials needs to be sceptical about the notion that a photograph provides an unproblematic depiction of reality. In addition, researchers will usually include non-visual research methods in their investigations (such as interviews). This leads to the question of the relative significance of words and images in the analysis of data and the presentation of findings. Since words are the traditional medium, it is easy to slip into seeing the visual as ancillary.

However, at the same time, Pink (2004) reminds us that visual research methods are never purely visual. There are two aspects to this point. First, as Pink points out, visual research methods are usually accompanied by other (often traditional) research methods such as interviewing and observation. Second, the visual is almost always accompanied by the non-visual—words—that are the medium of expression for both the research participants and the researchers themselves.
Research in focus 19.9
Photographs in a study of the experience of homelessness

Radley et al. (2005) were interested in the ways in which homeless people visualize their lives. They were especially interested in how their lives are visualized in the context both of their hostels and on the streets of London. Following an initial interview, twelve homeless people were each given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs ‘that represented their experience of being a homeless person. They were told that photographs could be of key times in their day, of typical activities and spaces, or of anything else that portrayed their situation’ (Radley et al. 2005: 277). The films were developed shortly after the photographs had been taken, and the participants were interviewed shortly after that. On each occasion, participants were asked about all the photographs and which ones best expressed their experience of being a homeless person. This approach to interviewing—namely, asking people to discuss photographs and their meaning and significance for them—is often referred to as the technique of photo-elicitation. Plates 19.3 and 19.4 provide examples of the kinds of photograph that were taken. The photograph in Plate 19.3 was taken by Rose (the names are pseudonyms) and shows the entrance to her day centre. For Rose, this photograph had significance because it is where she is welcomed and where she welcomes others and where she is given the opportunity to move between her two worlds—as someone who sleeps rough at night but who during the day is able to mix with others with more conventional lives in terms of having jobs and homes. The photograph in Plate 19.4 was taken by Mary, who, unlike Rose, did not sleep rough at night, as she made use of a hostel that was in fact close to Rose’s day centre. For Mary, this photograph took on significance because it ‘shows us a community of friends who share not only

Plate 19.3

Images of homelessness

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a place [referred to as The Wall situated on Vauxhall Bridge Road] but also an activity—drinking' (Radley et al. 2005: 283; note how the faces are pixelated to protect the individuals in the photographs). The photographs and the discussions of them by the participants provide insights into the experience of homelessness and how the homeless navigate an identity in a world in which homelessness is on the fringes of society.

Plate 19.4
Images of homelessness

Research in focus 19.10
Visual ethnography? Just do it

Peñaloza (1999) conducted what she calls a 'visual ethnographic' study of Niketown in Chicago. The Niketowns are huge stores that act as showcases for Nike's products and can be found in many large cities worldwide, including one in London on Oxford Street. She was interested in the store as a spectacle that has been designed specifically for the consumer and that is meant to create a sense of awe. Peñaloza (1999: 34) argues that an approach that included photography was well suited to her research, given her interest in the environment within which consumption occurred, 'particularly its architecture, furnishings, displays of artifacts, images, sounds and textures in relation to consumers' behaviors'. Her corpus of data included: 148 pages of field notes; 58 pages of entries in a diary; and 357 photographs. In addition, interviews were conducted with employees and consumers. Through her data, Peñaloza shows, for example, that the display of artefacts and images of revered athletes are deployed to transfer the sense of power and awe in which these individuals are held to Nike as a corporation.
An interesting fairly early use of photographs can be found in Blauner’s (1964) influential book on work in four different technological conditions. Blauner used photographs to illustrate each of the four technologies and the kinds of work with which each was associated. They are very memorable photographs, which were accompanied by a detailed description of the work beneath the image. I wanted to include a photograph very similar to the one in Plate 19.5 to demonstrate Blauner’s use of photographs to illustrate assembly-line work in the automobile industry in the USA in the 1950s and early 1960s. Blauner’s photograph had the title ‘Subdivided jobs and restricted freedom’ and was accompanied by a description of employees’ work and the following comment:

These men perform the identical tasks shown above all day long and may fasten from eight hundred to one thousand wheels in eight hours. The movement of the cars along the conveyor belt determines the pace of their work and kept them close to their stations, virtually ‘chained’ to the assembly line. (Blauner 1964: 112)

Thus, Blauner used the image to illustrate the work of assembly-line workers and was operating very much within a realist view of the role of the photograph. I write above that Plate 19.5 is ‘very similar’, because it proved impossible to track the owner of the image. In Blauner’s book the image he used is described as ‘Courtesy of the

Plate 19.5
The automobile assembly line

Courtesy of Chrysler Group LLC.
Finally, visual research methods raise especially difficult issues of ethics, an area that is explored in Chapter 6. The Visual Sociology Group, a study group of the British Sociological Association (BSA), has provided a statement of ethical practice for researchers using visual research methods:


This is a useful statement, which draws on the BSA's Statement of Ethical Practice, which was referred to in Chapter 6. Here are some statements of ethical practice that are recommended:

As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used. Here again clarity about the status and ownership of visual data will benefit the participants and the reputation of the discipline.

Researchers may want to discuss the status of the images with participants in order to clearly explain the dissemination strategy of the research project. In certain circumstances, the researcher(s) may want to create a written or verbal contract guaranteeing the participants ownership of the images produced. Under UK law copyright can be waived by participants and given to the researcher(s); however it is recommended that researchers read the current legislation or seek legal advice if taking this option (please note that the date of the creation of the image affects the legal status).

As these points reveal, there is a special sensitivity to the use of visual materials, like photographs, in that the subjects who appear in them may have their images widely disseminated. It is important, therefore, to ensure that permission is gained from those whose images appear and that they are fully aware of the implications of that agreement. If you are considering using visual research methods, you should consult this statement of ethical practice.

Writing ethnography

The term ‘ethnography’ is interesting, because it refers both to a method of social research and to the finished product of ethnographic research. In other words, it is both something that is carried out in doing research and something that one reads. Since around the mid-1980s, the production of ethnographic texts has become a focus of interest in its own right associated with what Denzin and Lincoln (2005b: 20) call ‘the postmodern period of ethnographic writing’ (see Thinking deeply 17.1). This means that there has been a growth of interest not just in how ethnography is carried out in the field but also in the rhetorical conventions employed in the production of ethnographic texts.

Ethnographic texts are designed to convince readers of the reality of the events and situations described, and the plausibility of the ethnographer’s explanations. The ethnographic text must not simply present a set of findings: it must provide an ‘authoritative’ account of the group or culture in question. In other words, the ethnographer must convince us that he or she has arrived at an account of social reality that has strong claims to truth.
The ethnographic text is permeated by stylistic and rhetorical devices whereby the reader is persuaded to enter into a shared framework of facts and interpretations, observations and reflections. The ethnographer typically works within a writing strategy that is imbued with realism. This simply means that the researcher presents an authoritative, dispassionate account that represents an external, objective reality. Van Maanen presents an authoritative, dispassionate account that with its explicit focus on contributing to institutional theory, provides a good example, as does Maitlis and Lawrence’s (2007) study of three British orchestras, which uses the literature on sensegiving in organizations as its raison d’être.

1. **Realist tales**—apparently definitive, confident, and dispassionate third-person accounts of a culture and of the behaviour of members of that culture. This is the most prevalent form of ethnographic writing.

2. **Confessional tales**—personalized accounts in which the ethnographer is fully implicated in the data-gathering and writing-up processes. These are warts-and-all accounts of the trials and tribulations of doing ethnography. They have become more prominent since the 1970s and reflect a growing emphasis on reflexivity in qualitative research in particular. Several of the sources referred to in this chapter include confessional tales (e.g. Armstrong 1993; Hobbs 1993; Giulianotti 1995). However, confessional tales are more concerned with detailing how research was carried out than with presenting findings. Very often the confessional tale is told in one context (such as an invited chapter in a book of similar tales), but the main findings are written up as realist tales.

3. **Impressionist tales**—accounts that place a heavy emphasis on ‘words, metaphors, phrasings, and . . . the expansive recall of fieldwork experience’ (Van Maanen 1988: 102). There is a heavy emphasis on stories of dramatic events that provide ‘a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker’s way of knowing it’ (Van Maanen 1988: 102).

Van Maanen (2011) has since revised his characterization of ethnographic writing, suggesting that increasingly confessional tales are routinely incorporated within standard ethnographies rather than largely appearing as distinct chapters or appendices. He also distinguishes:

1. **Structural tales**—accounts that link observation of the quotidian but then link this to wider ‘macro’ issues in society at large. Burawoy’s (1979) ethnography of a factory, which was heavily influenced by labour process theory, is an example. It was mentioned briefly in Chapter 2.

2. **Poststructural tales**—accounts that suggest that reality is a ‘fragile social construction subject to numerous lines of sight and interpretation’ (Van Maanen 2011: 248). This is done by peering behind the scenes of a manifest reality and suggesting that things are not quite what they seem. Van Maanen proposes that a good example of this type of tale is Fjellman’s (1992) deconstructive account of what lies behind many of the design features of Disney World in Florida in terms of the corporation’s manipulation of our perceptions and wallets.

Adler and Adler (2008) have provided a categorization of genres of ethnographic writing that builds, at least in part, on an earlier version of Van Maanen (2010)’s categorization of types of ethnographic writing (Van Maanen 1988). They distinguish four genres:

1. **Classical ethnography**—realist tales that are accessible and aim to provide a persuasive account of a setting. The discussion of research methods often takes on the style of a confessional tale. The literature review is often used to show a gap in previous research on the topic area. Leidner’s (1993) study of a McDonald’s restaurant and Hodkinson’s (2002) study of goths (both in Figure 19.2) provide examples of this genre.

2. **Mainstream ethnography**—also realist tales, but oriented to a wider constituency of social scientists rather than just other qualitative researchers. It tends to be deductive in approach, and, although Adler and Adler do not put it this way, it has many of the trappings of a positivist style of representation. Mainstream ethnographies draw explicitly on an established literature and tend to be explicit about the research questions that drove the investigation. The research methods are laid out in a formal and specific manner. Zilber’s (2002) study of a rape crisis centre in Israel, with its explicit focus on contributing to institutional theory, provides a good example, as does Maitlis and Lawrence’s (2007) study of three British orchestras, which uses the literature on sensegiving in organizations as its raison d’être.

3. **Postmodern ethnography**—the ethnographer/writer is overtly insinuated into the writing and indeed often within the data and findings themselves.
Postmodern ethnographies often take the form of auto-ethnographies, in which the text is heavily personalized and the overall approach intensely reflexive. Adler and Adler give as an example of this form of ethnography an article by Ronai (1995) on childhood sexual abuse which is harrowing to read.

4. Public ethnography—in fact a form of ethnography that has existed for decades, the public ethnography is written with a general audience in mind. It is usually highly accessible, it is fairly light on the discussion of previous literature, and the presentation of the research methods is brief. Examples of this genre are Venkatesh’s (2008) study of a Chicago gang (see Figure 19.2) and Búriková and Miller’s (2010) study of Slovak au pairs in London. Public ethnographies are more likely to be in book than article format.

It should also be appreciated that any ethnography may well contain elements of more than one category in these classifications. Thus, although Hodkinson’s (2002) ethnography of goths has been classified above as a classical ethnography in Adler and Adler’s scheme, it has elements of a postmodern ethnography in the way in which the author/researcher himself crops up in the text on a number of occasions. As such, these various ways of portraying modes of writing and representation in ethnography are best thought of as tendencies within ethnographies rather than as descriptions of them.

The changing nature of ethnography

Ethnography has been a research approach that has been very much in flux since the end of the twentieth century. The arrival of new forms or modes of ethnography such as visual ethnography and virtual/online ethnography (see Chapter 28) along with a growing interest in alternative forms of writing ethnography gives a sense of a vibrant and highly flexible approach. At the same time, there are concerns that are sometimes voiced that the term ‘ethnography’ is used loosely and that many so-called ethnographies are not obviously ethnographic in the traditional sense of involving a period of prolonged participant observation in a social setting (see Thinking deeply 19.4). There is a further suggestion that the traditional ethnography is in decline. Zickar and Carter (2010) have argued that workplace ethnographies, which have in the past been a rich vein of research (see Research in focus 13.4), have declined in use. One reason is possibly to do with the pressures on researchers nowadays. They write: ‘The time commitment of traditional ethnographic research is intense and would require a reorganization of academic rewards and tenure policies given that ethnographic research often does not get published until 7 to 10 years after the original fieldwork began’ (Zickar and Carter 2010: 312). This trend may be behind Emerson’s (1987) suggestion that many ethnographers do not spend sufficient time in the field nowadays (see Thinking deeply 19.4). It implies that, if they do conduct ethnographic research at all, qualitative researchers are more likely to have relatively brief sojourns as fieldworkers so that their work may be closer to the characteristics of what Wolcott (1990b) calls ‘micro-ethnographies’ (see Tips and skills ‘Micro-ethnographies’). For inclusion in the Workplace Ethnography Project (see Research in focus 13.4), an ethnography had to have been conducted for at least six months’ duration in the workplace concerned. It is interesting to contrast this requirement with DeSoucey’s (2010) account of her ethnographic fieldwork. In terms of the classification in Figure 19.2, she was a Non-Participating Observer with Interaction. She writes in connection with her case study of the controversy surrounding foie gras and its production in France:

I collected primary data during four months of ethnographic fieldwork at 10 foie gras farms and 7 production facilities . . . a Parisian gourmet food exposition, local outdoor markets . . . tourist offices, foie gras museums, ships, restaurants, and a hotel management school. (DeSoucey 2010: 436)

Here we have an ethnographic study that over a four-month period collected data from nineteen organizations plus unspecified numbers of markets, tourist offices, museums, and restaurants, implying that it is unlikely that prolonged immersion in any setting took place.
The constraints on modern qualitative researchers to which Zickar and Carter refer may also have produced a tendency for the term ‘ethnographic’ to have broadened to include studies that include little or no participant observation. Research methods like qualitative interviewing are flexible and are less disruptive of the work and personal lives of both researchers and research participants. Given both the growing diversity of forms/modes of ethnography and a tendency towards a stretching of the kind of investigation to which the term ‘ethnography’ refers (with prolonged participant observation no longer a sine qua non), it may be that the term is losing its original meaning.

One factor that may lie behind the apparently growing tendency towards ethnographies of shorter duration is that, as Van Maanen (2011) has observed, more and more such studies are ‘multi-site’ (Marcus 1998). This term can be employed in two connections. One is that the tendency towards global flows of people means that increasingly ethnographers have to follow their subjects across sites. An example is Scheper-Hughes’s (2004) ethnography of the illegal traffic in organs (see Research in focus 18.2). We are given an insight into the multi-sited nature of her research when she writes:

My basic ethnographic method—‘follow the bodies!’—brought me to police morgues, hospital mortuaries, medical-legal institutes, intensive care units, emergency rooms, dialysis units, surgical units, operating rooms, as well as to police stations, jails and prisons, mental institutions, orphanages and court rooms in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. (Scheper-Hughes 2004: 32)

The other is that there has been a growing tendency towards multiple case study ethnographies of the kind discussed in Chapter 3. Several of the ethnographic studies that have been discussed in this chapter have been conducted in two or more locations (Leidner 1993; Fine 1996; Swain 2004; Gambetta and Hammill 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence 2007; DeSoucey 2010). The decision to study more than one site more or less inevitably means that the duration of the ethnographic research is shorter than in single-site research, given the career and personal constraints on ethnographers.
Key points

- Ethnography is a term that refers to both a method and the written product of research based on that method.
- The ethnographer is typically a participant observer who also uses non-observational methods and sources such as interviewing and documents.
- The ethnographer may adopt an overt or covert role, but the latter carries ethical difficulties.
- The method of access to a social setting will depend in part on whether it is a public or closed one.
- Key informants frequently play an important role for the ethnographer, but care is needed to ensure that their impact on the direction of research is not excessive.
- There are several different ways of classifying the kinds of role that the ethnographer may assume. These roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
- Field notes are important for prompting the ethnographer’s memory and form much of the data for subsequent analysis.
- Feminist ethnography has become a popular approach to collecting data from a feminist standpoint, but there have been debates about whether there really can be a feminist ethnography.
- Visual materials such as photographs and video have attracted considerable interest among ethnographers in recent years, not just as adjuncts to data collection but as objects of interest in their own right.

Questions for review

- Is it possible to distinguish ethnography and participant observation?
- How does participant observation differ from structured observation?
- To what extent do participant observation and ethnography rely solely on observation?

Access

- ‘Covert ethnography obviates the need to gain access to inaccessible settings and therefore has much to recommend it.’ Discuss.
- Examine some articles in British sociology journals in which ethnography and participant observation figure strongly. Was the researcher in an overt or covert role? Was access needed to closed or open settings? How was access achieved?
- Is access to closed settings necessarily more difficult to achieve than to open settings?
- Does the problem of access finish once access to a chosen setting has been achieved?
- What might be the role of key informants in ethnographic research? Is there anything to be concerned about when using them?

Roles for ethnographers

- Why might it be useful to classify participant observer roles?
- What is meant by going native?
- Should ethnographers be active or passive in the settings in which they conduct research?
Field notes
● Why are field notes important for ethnographers?
● Why is it useful to distinguish between different types of field notes?

Bringing ethnographic research to an end
● How do you decide when to complete the data-collection phase in ethnographic research?

Can there be a feminist ethnography?
● What are the main ingredients of feminist ethnography?
● Assess Stacey’s argument about whether feminist ethnography is possible in the light of Skeggs’s research or any other ethnographic study that describes itself, or can be seen, as feminist.

The rise of visual ethnography
● What kinds of roles can visual materials play in ethnography?
● Do photographs provide unproblematic images of reality?

Writing ethnography
● How far is it true to say that ethnographic writing is typically imbued with realism?
● What forms of ethnographic writing other than realist tales can be found?

The changing nature of ethnography
● What factors lie behind some of the changing meanings of ‘ethnography’?

Online Resource Centre
www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/
Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of ethnography and participant observation. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher’s Toolkit.