Ethnographic Fieldwork
A Beginner's Guide

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Chapter 4

The Sequence 2: In the Field

Fieldwork itself is humanly demanding, as a fieldworker will need to give proof of all the good qualities in life: patience, endurance, stamina, perseverance, flexibility, adaptability, empathy, tolerance, the willingness to lose a battle in order to win a war, creativity, humour and wit, diplomacy, and being happy about very small achievements. Put that in a job advertisement and you will never find a suitable candidate.

Chaos

Since most of us are only human, fieldwork is often a period of deep frustration, disappointment and confusion, sometimes even of bitter tears. The main frustration is due to the widespread perception and experience that fieldwork is *chaotic*. It can contain long periods in which nothing seems to happen, and then suddenly all sorts of things co-occur rapidly and seemingly without structure or patterns, certainly not with the clear structure and patterns one had picked up from the literature. (At these moments of acceleration, you discover that you forgot your tape recorder of course.) People contradict each other, and just when you think you found the key to the whole thing, the whole thing changes again. The plan has to be revised over and over again, as certain administrative procedures take forever and some of your key informants are on leave or have better things to do. Above all, the topic you had so nicely sketched in your research proposal turns out to be either very different than what you expected, or to be more than one topic and a cluster of things that need to be investigated step by step in ways you had not anticipated.

It was certainly chaotic when Dong Jie set off for her fieldwork in Beijing migrant schools.[1] The fieldwork was well-prepared: she had read tons of literature around the topic, decided on the theoretical frame, gone through the research plan with colleagues and friends,

built up contacts that would have ideal access to the fieldwork sites. She even corresponded with a couple of key researchers in this field for half a year prior to the fieldwork. As soon as she landed in the field, however, she discovered that fieldwork was full of surprises, not always pleasant ones. First, the contact person who was keen to introduce Dong Jie to one of the migrant schools was away for a research project in a remote village and no one had any idea when she would be back to Beijing.

Thus as soon as the fieldwork started Dong Jie had to revise the research plan and adopt new strategies: she mobilised everyone she knew to look for accessible migrant schools and she conducted a carpet-searching for such schools. Luckily several migrant schools were found in the area and she decided to knock on the schoolmasters' doors. According to her plan, teaching in a migrant school would be an ideal pattern for the research as teaching would enable her to interact with the pupils and would in turn yield deeper understanding of the population. 'To be a teacher here? Yes of course you are welcome. But you have to teach from 7AM to 5PM, Monday to Saturday for at least one year and we require school residence'. These were impossible commitments for Dong Jie to make as she had other duties to perform in the meantime.

Once again, she had to be flexible and to devise new strategy. This time she decided to negotiate with the schoolmasters about her access to their schools for research and see what the schools wanted in return. 'Research? No, we don't accept any researcher except you have a recommendation from the LEA'. If this was what Dong Jie needed, she was determined to get one. She approached the LEA and presented her research plan. 'Yes it is an interesting research. We will consider it'. Unfortunately, the consideration took very long. A couple of months passed in the wait-and-search mode, and it was increasingly frustrating to see so little progress. Nobody could foresee at that moment that Dong Jie would be on 'a rollercoaster of luck' and running between schools in the second half of the fieldwork.

Chaos is the normal state of things. It is nothing to worry about. Remember what we set out to do: to describe and analyse *complexity*, not to simplify a complex social event into neat tables and lines. So we should not be surprised if the social events we observe are not linear, not perfectly logical, not clearly sequential, not dominated by rational decisions and so on: life is not like that. Try to describe *everything* you do when you perform

a single activity such as crossing a busy street – every sensory and bodily movement, and every thought and decision – and you know what we are talking about: human behaviour is stunningly complex. But there is an interesting twist: the perception of chaos is gradually replaced by one of order, and this has to do with the learning process of fieldwork. ***The more we get to understand the contexts of events, the less we experience such events as chaotic***. If we return to the example of crossing a street: for most people this would be a single action – you simply cross the street – and the reason is that we've done it thousands of times and have developed routinised procedures for it, procedures we no longer perceive as part of the activity, but just as a canvas, a neutral background to the activity itself. *Of course* we look carefully left and right before we decide to cross, *of course* we adjust our walking speed to that of approaching vehicles, and *of course* we will step back when a car is approaching too fast or is already too close to us. *How else could we cross the street*? So what is essentially a tremendously complicated bundle of activities is now seen as one logically structured, almost automatic activity of extreme simplicity. And if crossing a street is already a complex thing, one can imagine what degree of complexity a social network must have; yet all of us move through various such networks on a daily basis and seem not to encounter major problems doing so. Chaos becomes order because we got used to the chaos.

Fieldwork has to start from the assumption that what is observed will be chaotic. Also, we need to understand that *a priori*, we never know the boundaries of events. We never know exactly in advance what we will need to include in our observations and what not. We can set out to investigate literacy practices and quickly discover that we first need to investigate oral proficiency levels among pupils, for instance. This will determine a lot of what follows, as we shall see.

The Learning Process

Fieldwork is traditionally seen as 'data collection'. This is true to some extent. Of course you should return from the field loaded with bags full of 'data': raw and half-processed materials that reflect and document the realities in the field. But fieldwork should not just be reduced to data collection, because essentially it is ***a learning process***. The researcher almost by definition arrives as an outsider: someone who is not part of the social environment in which s/he will do research, has limited knowledge of the people, the normal patterns of everyday conduct, the climate and culture of the place. The preparation has ideally provided some knowledge, but as we know, social environments drive on a lot of tacit understanding, on unspoken routines and conventions, on shared experiences and

outlooks – and none of that belongs to the researcher's background. The fieldworker gradually learns these tacit codes, and gradually moves from the margins of the social environment to a more central position.

There can be a degree of overlap, of course, when the researcher does have experience in that field. In educational research, for instance, researchers can have a long and rich experience as teachers, and so be familiar with the life world and the organisation of an educational environment. But even so, when that teacher turns into a researcher s/he stops being a teacher. For one thing, when you do fieldwork you don't enter the school to teach but to do research. A lot of what is understood and taken for granted from the perspective of the teacher needs to be called into question by the researcher. Thus, there is a long history of difficult relationships in 'native ethnography' as it is called: the colleagues you observe may be surprised, even upset by the reflections and comments you make as a researcher, and the researcher may be annoyed by the fact that erstwhile close colleagues now see him/her as an intruder and adapt their behaviour accordingly. The fact that you are familiar with the rules of a place does not necessarily work for your benefit: as a researcher you almost necessarily *transgress* these rules – you ask silly questions, you pry on people's activities, you stand where you are not supposed to stand, you disturb normal routines – and such transgressions can be held against you precisely because the others know that you are familiar with the rules. The outsider has the advantage of innocence (provided this is granted to him/her). Early in your fieldwork, you can find that people are very tolerant towards your deviant behaviour; the longer you stick around, however, the more they may expect you to adjust to expected behaviour. Your initial ignorance can be a useful fieldwork instrument, but it rarely lasts.

Being an outsider, to be sure, does not mean that you are non-existent and of no consequence to what goes on. When a researcher enters a classroom, the whole classroom changes, and a lot of what the researcher will witness are reactions, adjustments and adaptations to this change. As a fieldworker, you never belong 'naturally' or 'normally' to the field you investigate, you are always a foreign body which causes ripples on the surface of smooth routinised processes. **There is always an observer's effect**, and it is essential to realise that: you are never observing an event as if you were not there. You are there, and that makes it a different event.

> The observer's effect was obvious at the beginning of Dong Jie's fieldwork. After several months' searching, she ended up with a primary school, of which the schoolmaster was interested in the research – she asked Dong Jie to set up and to lead a research team of four teachers and the schoolmaster herself, and insisted that the research team

should observe the class with Dong Jie. You can imagine how the class would look like with six people sitting at the back and watching: the teachers were nervous, students quiet, classes rehearsed! In the first few days the observation was fruitless – what they observed was miles away from its usual state. The four teacher researchers quickly dropped out because they were busy with their own teaching, but the schoolmaster was in class with Dong Jie for several weeks. This was the last thing Dong Jie expected in the fieldwork – teachers and pupils were nervous of the schoolmaster's presence and their behaviours were adapted to her preference. In Dong Jie's plan, she would chat with the teachers and pupils during breaks, but the schoolmaster often invited Dong Jie to her office for a cup of tea (which was very kind of her but did no good to the fieldwork). There was little Dong Jie could do, except privately hoping that the schoolmaster suddenly became very busy with her routine work. Fortunately the schoolmaster stopped the class observation about a month later, and by then the teachers and pupils had become familiar with Dong Jie.

There are different stages and degrees to this effect. When you sit in a classroom for the 25th day in a row, chances are that the others have long started seeing you as part of the décor and take no notice of you anymore. The observer's effect is significant in the early stages of fieldwork and may diminish as fieldwork goes on. As to degrees, it is clear that if you stuff the classroom with video cameras and audio-equipment, or move around with a camera continually pointed at the teacher's face, chances are that you will be perceived to be seriously disrupting. Hanging a microphone around a teacher's neck may make him/her feel quite uncomfortable, as s/he will have a tendency to 'talk to the mike' and not to the class.[2] Talking to teachers and pupils during breaks, on the other hand, is obviously less of a distortion of set practices.

The learning process is thus mutual: the others learn about you, get used to your presence and start understanding what you are after; you start to get accustomed to the normal ways of organising their activities and the patterns such activities take, you start knowing the teachers and their reputations (and you start forming an opinion about them), as well as the pupils – the 'good' and 'bad' ones, the 'nerds' and the 'cool' ones – the school culture, the neighbourhood, the institutional context in which the school operates. This mutual learning process becomes the 'common ground' between researchers and subjects, the thing that enables particular forms of interaction to take place and particular kinds of knowledge to travel between the two parties. ***The things we call 'data' gain***

profile and relevance in relation to this more general learning process. And to these data we now turn. We will address three clusters of activities: (1) observation and fieldnotes; (2) interviewing and what we shall for the sake of convenience call (3) the collection of rubbish.

Observation and Fieldnotes

You observe all the time. Whenever your eyes and ears are open and you are in a clear state of mind, you register things that strike you. In everyday life we don't have a word for this (we just do it); in fieldwork we call this 'observation'. And the rule is: you start by observing *everything* and gradually start focusing on *specific targets*. The main instruments for that are your eyes, your ears, your mouth and your notebook, and you can use visual and other recording devices in support of that.

Observing 'everything'

Saying that you observe 'everything' is not very helpful of course. You can only watch if you know where to look, and that depends on understanding, where you are and what you're doing there – here is the issue of preparation again. But the point is that the beginning phase of fieldwork is a phase of finding your way around a particular place, registering faces and voices, discovering itineraries to get from one place to another (and for those working in educational environments, schools can be awfully complex spaces, to be sure). You have a particular topic in mind – say, observing the classroom literacy practices in the third grade – and your attention will quickly go in that direction. But pending full focus on these bits, *you observe indiscriminately in an attempt to get an overall image*. You try to see all the teachers and staff, discover the whole of the school, make walks in the neighbourhood so as to know and understand where the pupils come from, and try to get a more or less precise idea of what goes on there. Make sure you have this general image before you actually move in to your focal site, the third grade classroom. It will help you grasp what goes on there, as the school is obviously a context of major importance for the class. You may discover that the third grade teacher has an excellent reputation among his colleagues; everyone speaks highly about him. But soon after that, you may discover that his reputation is mainly built on his rigorous insistence on strict discipline, that he is known for being severe on underachievers, and that his class actually has a very high failure and drop-out rate.

Knowing such things creates, as said earlier, *patterns of expectation*: when you now enter his classroom you know more or less what you will

encounter there. You can start zooming in on particular aspects of that now: the struggle of the underachievers, the way in which the teacher makes judgement calls about who does well and who doesn't, the criteria he appears to use for that (e.g. 'clean' and aesthetically elaborated writing as opposed to correct but rather sloppy writing) and the way in which his system of discipline has effects on the pupils' behaviour (e.g. how some try to ingratiate themselves with him by volunteering for housekeeping tasks, others rather remain silent than give a wrong answer …). You also find out that some of the most obedient and servile pupils in class are vitriolic and rebellious about the teacher during the break, and that some of the silent ones in class are highly vocal and articulate during breaks. All of these small things now start making sense as parts of a broader pattern, the particular learning regime created by the teacher's focus on discipline and achievement. Your search around the school has also yielded another insight: the teacher has a good reputation among his peers because the school has a poor reputation, and he is seen as one of the teachers who 'gets results', makes no compromises with weaker pupils, and maintains a regime of learning that matches that of 'better' schools. Small things start becoming meaningful in relation to bigger things, and you begin to see how these bigger things have their grounding in small things. You start seeing how the events you observe form part of a *system*.

Finding out such things demands, as you now can see, ***observation at various levels, different times and places*** – the classroom during class periods, the breaks, the school more generally, the staff common room, and so on. And it also (even more importantly) demands ***making connections*** between bits of information gathered at these different levels, times and places – this is the work of *contextualisation*: things you find here need to be connected to things found elsewhere in attempts to establish contextual connections ('this is an effect of that', 'this belongs to the same category as that', 'this can only be understood in relation to that' …).

> Dong Jie came across a teacher at the school – he was one of the only two male teachers there. He enjoyed a reputation of being kind, easy-going, and ready to help among his colleagues. Dong Jie felt the same at the beginning until she found his class (drawing class) was often either curiously silent or easily out of control. Dong Jie also noticed a girl who was considered a 'good' student by most other teachers was rather undisciplined in his class. The pupils later told Dong Jie that the pupils did not like the drawing teacher because he used physical punishments to discipline them. They had reported this to other teachers, as physical discipline is a serious breach of teaching code in China (especially in Beijing), but nothing was changed. This is rather

puzzling: why his reputation among teachers and that among pupils were so contradictory, and why no action was taken against his behaviour.

To understand this, we have to posit the case in the context at different levels: at a personal level, the drawing teacher used to teach in a secondary school and was calmer while dealing with adults but might easily lose his temper with children; at a school level, the primary school was seriously imbalanced in term of teachers' male/female ratio and therefore needed him; at a country level, education reform encourages self-autonomy and individuality among pupils whereas practitioners (also the drawing teacher at this school) complain that the new approaches are not as effective as the traditional ones in disciplining pupils, given the particular characteristics of Chinese children – most of whom are the only child of their families and can be self-centred and difficult to discipline.

It's like making a big jigsaw puzzle, and you will find yourself developing numerous hypotheses about such connections and making numerous attempts before the puzzle fits.

Making recordings

Part of the observation process (but as we have seen, by no means *all* of the observation process) consists of making recordings: audio, video and/or visual recordings; we should add 'collecting' as well: collecting copies of pupils' notebooks or coursework, or of tests you developed and administered; collecting samples of the teaching materials used by the teacher, and so on.

The finality of recordings is dual. On the one hand, these recordings provide you with the 'raw data' that will eventually substantiate your analysis as 'evidence' and 'examples'. They will be the bits of first-hand information that will be crucial in making your account of events stick academically. So your recordings have an important function *after the fieldwork*, and we'll come back to it later. On the other hand, recordings also have important functions *during fieldwork*. They provide you with **an archive of your own research**. Recordings made in the beginning of fieldwork will be different from recordings made at a more advanced stage of your work, the reason being that your gaze has shifted towards more specific topics and events. Consequently, whereas in the initial stages you would be highly satisfied when you made a long audio recording of a whole class period, including all the not-so-relevant bits, such recordings would be seen as less than satisfactory later on in the game. The collection

of recordings, in that sense, documents your own progression through the learning process, it testifies to the way in which you yourself have become familiar with what goes on there.

This is very important, because one of the features of the learning process is that you tend to forget where you came from. Things that strike you as strange and remarkable in the beginning cease to do that soon after, and after some time all kinds of initially remarkable things are taken for granted because they have become part of your own outlook on things. Yet, your initial ignorance and amazement are crucial: they provide the beginning stages of *ethnographic understanding*, and the accumulation of knowledge during fieldwork is exactly the process you need to document and establish. The archive of your fieldwork ideally contains *everything you need to reconstruct your itinerary from being an outsider to being a knowing member of a community*, someone who now can analyse confidently what went on.

> Upon going through Dong Jie's audio recordings again, we find that her early recordings are either entire class sessions or hours of long and unstructured interviews. These recordings remind us of how curious she was at the beginning – the teaching was organised rather differently from what she expected and the pupils were a lot more active and vocal than Dong Jie's generation. A couple of weeks later everything became natural and the length of her recordings was reduced to between ten and twenty minutes. The topics in the interviews were narrowed down to just a few: comments on migrant pupils' accents, the friends they made in schools, and parents' expectations of their academic career.

As a fieldworker you often travel from an innocent outsider to a knowledgeable member of the field, and you therefore need a careful record of that trajectory – we will come back to that below when we discuss fieldnotes.

Photographs can be an important help in the creation of your own archive. There too, you will find yourself making different pictures in the beginning and towards the end of your fieldwork. In the beginning, you will try to capture documentary things, things that assist you in finding your way around. Gradually, the photographs will become 'data': snapshots of children writing, of the teacher lecturing – things you perhaps think can be useful as illustrations in your dissertation and/or in publications or presentations afterwards. You will start taking pictures of pages from the notebooks or textbooks used in class, of the blackboard, of drawings made by pupils, of notices displayed in the school; etc. Afterwards, all of these images will be tremendously helpful in reminding

Figure 4.1 Pupils watching a performance (taken in the beginning of Dong Jie's fieldwork)

you of what places, moments and people were like. Looking at a picture will trigger a vivid memory of the moment when you took it; it will trigger the recollection of an anecdote that might exactly be the thing you need in a particular place in your analytical argument (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

Figure 4.2 A pupil's homework, taken in the second month

Let's now return to the issue of recordings. Usually, making recordings is considered to be an intrusive measure. In fact, it is, of course, because what you do is to capture something which normally remains 'on the spot', and 'export' it, so to speak, to other times and places. Words spoken by someone without further thoughts can become crucial building blocks in someone else's academic argument; they can find their way into published papers, and they may be accompanied by critical remarks about the words and the one who uttered them. Innocent utterances may become politically sensitive ones due to interventions from the researcher. Recordings are always sensitive materials, things that people may experience as threatening.

Normally, therefore, people will impose *conditions on recording*. They will insist that you obtain official permission for making recordings (from the principal, the teacher, the pupils' guardians, sometimes the higher authorities as well), they may insist that you leave a copy of the recordings with them or that your recordings will be destroyed after the completion of your research, and so on. They might also request that you do not record certain things, or that you restrict your recording to specific times and occasions ('not now' is a frequently heard answer to a request for making recordings).

You submit to these conditions of course, but you should make sure that people understand, and agree to, two things very clearly:

(1) That your recordings will be used exclusively for academic purposes, but that they are essential for your academic purposes. In other words: it is no use if they allow you to make recordings but insist on the destruction of your recordings immediately after the completion of research. These data should be granted a life beyond the PhD, since they are *scientific* materials that will only be treated scientifically.[3] Your own integrity is at play here: you will have to convince people of your good intentions. You can commit this to paper in a protocol, you can refer to existing ethical guidelines to which you subscribe and against which your conduct can be measured, and you can invoke higher authorities by producing written assurances from your supervisors or research officers.

(2) That the scientific use of these recordings will involve a process of modification of these data, such that the personal interests of the recorded individuals are protected: all names will be changed, faces may be made unrecognisable, people will be consulted in cases of doubt. This too can be committed to paper in a protocol. Sometimes the effects of this are cumbersome. Imagine video data in which

precisely the direction of the pupils' gaze is essential to your analysis. Ethically, you should cover the eyes of the children visible on the video stills, which is rather awkward if your analysis is about their gaze. A way out is to make a print of the stills, put them on a lighted glass plate, put a blank sheet on top of it and make a drawing of the picture. This effectively anonymises the children, while it affords you enough detail to state your case about gaze direction.

Since recording is considered sensitive and intrusive, *don't make your recording sessions a turkey shoot*. Don't start recording anything and all the time; make arrangements and appointments, prepare your recording sessions well, and record things you believe will be maximally salient and informative. Better return with a limited collection of high-quality recordings than with a pile of recordings of which only a small fraction will deserve further attention. Make sure your recording devices are in good working order – try them and double check!

> Once a teacher became very open (which was very rare) and telling Dong Jie her about her insight on her migrant pupils' education and commented on their language use, which was the exact data Dong Jie wanted; to Dong Jie's great disappointment, her digital voice recorder ran out of battery, because it was switched on by mistake in her pocket on the way to the school until it ran out. She of course made fieldnotes immediately afterwards, but it wouldn't be as good as a recorded interview, as the teacher herself had a strong Beijing accent and she mimicked her pupils accents and these interesting data could only be reconstructed by voice recording.

Confirm that your recording devices work, and put them in such spots that they capture adequate quality data without disturbing the normal order of the setting too much. If you put a big microphone on the teacher's desk in such a way that s/he cannot put his/her papers there, that is usually not a good idea.[4] As for the placing of your recording devices: it is an old tradition to focus on the teacher in classroom research, but one must realise that a classroom (and this counts by extension for almost any social environment) is *polycentric*, it has more than one focal point. The pupils are also a 'centre', and ideally, your recordings would reflect what goes on in relation to the different centres. You want to capture the teacher's voice as well as that of the pupils, and if the principal walks in or a piece of music is played during a class period, you also want this to be recognisable from your recordings. That means that you use a wide-scope microphone (not a 'pointer', a microphone that captures sounds from one

direction only) and put it in such a position that everything you want to record can be recorded. But remember: a recording is *never* comprehensive, there will always be 'blind spots' – a problem which is more outspoken with video than with audio recordings.

> Listening to Dong Jie's early class session recordings when the schoolmaster was always present, you might consider the classes well organised, the teachers confident, and pupils quickly responding to questions. Dong Jie's fieldnotes, however, reveal how tense the teachers looked, and how straight the students sat: enough to realise that the class sessions were not in their natural state and were rehearsed, and the recordings are misleading without the company of fieldnotes.

Therefore, if you are physically present during the recording session, *make notes* of what you see and hear; that creates a secondary, back-up record of the session, and it can fill important blanks when you start analysing the recorded materials (e.g. it is often hard to identify who speaks from a recording, especially when there are group discussions or multilateral interactions going on; your notes can then tell you who participated, what they said and so on).

Remove your equipment immediately after the session and check the quality of the recording. If the circumstances allow that, *listen to the whole recording as soon as possible after the recording session, and make notes while you listen*. Do not postpone this: your memory of faces, voices and particular events will fade quickly, and whereas you will still be able to recognise a voice as that of a particular pupil a few hours after the recording, you won't be able to do that a few weeks later.

> As Dong Jie's fieldwork became increasingly demanding, especially when she was allowed access to another school, she didn't manage to go through recordings for a couple of weeks until she made an appointment for a follow-up interview and realised that she needed to listen to the first interview (which was a group interview) again. It was a researcher's nightmare to search a twenty minute long recording in a collection of 20 hours of recordings; what was more disturbing was that she couldn't make up her mind which one of the pupils was the interviewee she was looking for. At least, this worked as a warning for Dong Jie to tide up and label the recordings before it piled up to 30 hours or 40 hours.

You of course keep a detailed *catalogue* of your recordings. You can do this in your fieldnotes or in a separate document. In that catalogue, you give every recording an 'identity tag': a number or a code, along with the

date, time, place of recording, the participants, and either a brief description of the contents or a number of key words that distinguish that particular recording. This will be of immense help afterwards when you want to dig out particular parts of your corpus for purposes of transcription and analysis.

We have emphasised the notion of an *archive* of your research at various places already. What you collect during fieldwork are building blocks for an archive that documents your work and your own gradual process of learning and understanding. You construct this archive *for yourself*, not for your supervisors or your doctoral committee, and you will need it for any further step in the process of research. It is all about building a disciplined and structured recollection of the events you observed. This will become even more prominent when we discuss fieldnotes.

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are a variant of a very old genre: the diary. In anthropology, their value is controversial because fieldnotes often contradict the end result of ethnography – books or articles. The publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's fieldwork diaries called into question a lot of what he had written in his classic ethnographic works. Here was a man who expressed extreme confusion, boredom, anger, racial superiority even about the people whose culture he afterwards described in flattering and affectionate terms. The confusion and emotional orientations in the fieldnotes eventually make way for the aesthetics and genre requirements of academic prose, and contradictions or paradoxes there become coherent and linear features, obscure pieces become symbolic, and what looked like a half-finished jigsaw puzzle now becomes a fine painting.

We attach great importance to fieldnotes, if for nothing else because we still use and re-use our own field notebooks, some of which, in Jan's case, are now over two decades old.[5] They still provide us with invaluable information, not only about *what* we witnessed in the field, but even more importantly about *how* we witnessed it – amazed, outraged, amused, factual and neutral, puzzled, curious, not understanding, confident about our own interpretations. They still tell us a story about *an epistemic process*: the way in which we tried to make new information understandable for ourselves, using our own interpretive frames, concepts and categories, and gradually shifting into new frames, making connections between earlier and current events, finding our way in the local order of things.

That is the main function of fieldnotes: along with the other materials we discussed here, they are crucial in building the archive of your

research. They will be, and will remain, your material memory of field-work, of the things you learned and how you learned them. Hence, you must be meticulous about them: make a habit – a *disciplined* habit, which not even a night out with friends can break – of writing entries in them, and make your entries comprehensive and detailed. This can be tough: after a very long day in which all went wrong, a bottle of beer and your bed may have a far stronger appeal than an additional hour behind your desk penning down your day's notes. But you *have* to do it, the reward for such hardship will come later, when you have forgotten events and details and when your notes remind you of important things you were about to overlook.

> An example came from Dong Jie's fieldnotes: after visiting many private migrant schools, Dong Jie was puzzled with a phenomenon the schools shared: they all had their school gates tightly locked (which posed big problem for her to get in touch with anyone inside), whereas most public schools kept their gates open. Why? All of them smiled but nobody gave any answer. Only when going through her earliest fieldnotes Dong Jie recalled that an informant once said some-thing like a child was kidnapped from a nearby private migrant school. So this makes sense: the private migrant schools were more vulnerable than public schools because they were not officially recog-nised in the first place; they therefore had to be more concerned with security issues especially when there was news about child kidnap-ping; they were reluctant to tell this to Dong Jie (as a researcher) because this was not a piece of comforting news and might discour-age their potential pupils as well as their parents. Moreover, most private migrant schools were operating on a limited budget so that they couldn't afford hiring a security guard, which was a common practice of public schools.

Do not attempt to be Cartesian in your fieldnotes: you can afford your-self to be subjective and impressionistic, emotional or poetic. Use the most appropriate way of expressing what you want to express, do not write for an audience, and do not feel constrained by any external pressure: your fieldnotes are private documents, and you will be the only one to decide what you will release from them. You can use them for anything apart from their 'diary' function: for cataloguing the materials you have col-lected, for preliminary transcripts and analyses, for notes made during recording sessions, for anecdotes or accounts of things you saw on TV – their use is unrestricted as long as you make it a repository of knowledge gathered in a learning process. If you keep that final function well in mind,

your notes will be rich and useful, way beyond the immediate purpose they serve.

> The idea of writing up fieldnotes for her supervisors was very real for Dong Jie in the initial stage of her fieldwork; indeed she needed to hand in monthly reports so that her supervisors would know how the work went on, and fieldnotes made up the reports naturally. However, she soon realised that by writing for others, she tended to disguise such things as the deep frustration when she couldn't find any field site, the sense of confusion when the observations didn't support her arguments, the helplessness when the bits and pieces seemed unrelated to each other. This concealed an important part of her fieldwork – her personal journey in the field. Therefore it is better to make your own fieldnotes separated from the reports you write up for others (your fieldnotes could be the basis for reports).

Make a habit of re-reading your notes. Gradually, you will start reading them as a source of 'data' which you can group, catalogue and convert into preliminary analyses. You will also notice that the entries gradually become shorter and more focused. The entries of the first days in fieldwork might be very short as well – you feel that there is very little to report on as yet – but the opening stages of fieldwork usually result in long entries, because *everything is still new*. You find yourself in a strange environment in which you need to find your bearings; every aspect of that experience is new, strange, puzzling. The more you get used to your environment (and your environment gets used to you), the more you 'normalise' the conduct, social relations and encounters you experience. You don't see them as marked and deviant anymore, and you don't feel that they are in need of description and explanation any more: they have become *your* social and cultural codes, no longer just *theirs*. Thus, the longer you dwell in the field, the less you will report on 'strange' events and encounters and the more you will start focusing on the business at hand: talks you have with informants, bits of material you transcribed and annotated, reports of visits to libraries, documentation centres, archives, addresses and phone numbers of new contacts, *aide-mémoires* to send material to certain people upon your return, and so forth. Your fieldnotes, like the other records you keep, thus testify to the shift in your own gaze and attention as you start learning and become familiar with the environment in which you work and live.

> In Dong Jie's notebook you could find anything – from drawings of the schools to photos of pupils' performances. Figure 4.3 is a drawing
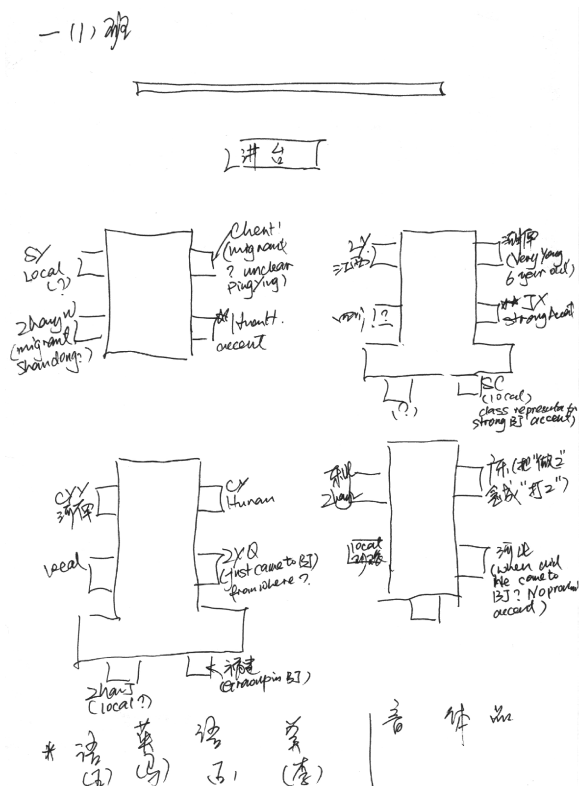
Figure 4.3 Classroom layout

of the classroom layout[6] that Dong Jie made on the very first day in the school. Although organising class around groups was perhaps only natural for the teachers and pupils, this was striking for Dong Jie – when she was in school all pupils sat in rows, and she didn't expect any difference in this sense. The fact that pupils sat around table and did group work was very telling in Dong Jie's eyes initially, but this sort of observations quickly lost the charm as Dong Jie gradually settled into school routines and became one of the community.

Less things will *amaze* or *surprise* you, and these feeling of surprise and amazement are what Agar (1995) calls **'rich points'** in ethnography: moments at which you think 'hey, that's strange' or 'what the hell is this?' (Agar provides an excellent illustration of this; see also Fabian's 1991 'Rule and Process' for similar accounts.)[7] This feeling is important: it indicates

that *you bumped into the boundary of what is readily understandable for you* – the boundaries of your cultural and social conventions – and that the event that caused the surprise fell outside your established, familiar categories of understanding. Such feelings, or rich points to continue with Agar's term, are the start of ethnographic investigation: in order to make sense of what happened, you need to cross the line and try to get into the other's cultural and social world, find out the contexts for what happened and start using these instead of your own contextualisations in interpreting what goes on. The length of your fieldnotes in the initial stages of fieldwork suggests that the days were littered with 'rich points', and that you bumped into the boundaries of your own sociocultural codes on every street corner. The fact that they decrease in length and density later on shows that there are less and less 'rich points', and that you have started adopting a lot of the local codes, customs and patterns of conduct. Your fieldnotes provide an archive of that immensely important process, and it is of crucial importance that you recognise them as such: as a repository of rich points that emerge, get explained, and disappear because they are *known*.

Do not think that you need an exotic environment to experience rich points. Of course, when a sophisticated urbanite from New York, London or Berlin arrives in a native village deep in the Amazon Forest, chances are that s/he will only experience rich points, that the whole world is one big rich point. But that is just a matter of degree, not of substance. Even while doing research in an environment of which you think that it is familiar, you will be surprised and amazed – you will come across rich points. Research in one's own immediate neighbourhood usually results in an awareness of how little one actually knew about it prior to the inquiries; research in a school in which one spent years as a pupil or a teacher may likewise yield surprises.

There are two main reasons for that. First, we tend to have a unified, homogeneous image of our own life world. Everything looks simple and straightforward; the people all look the same and speak the same language. A few days of research will teach you that this erstwhile familiar environment now appears to contain at least three or four subcultures, microcosms where things are very different from what you expected and populated by people who are rather sharply different from what you thought they were. You discover that people in your neighbourhood have widely divergent interests, do their shopping in very different places, watch very different TV channels, and talk with accents you never picked up before. Societies are a patchwork of micro-units, they only *look* homogeneous. Second, as a fieldworker, you tend to start asking questions that

no one normally asks; you tend to establish connections between the here-and-now and other contexts, connections that no one ever established; you tend to problematise things that nobody ever calls into question (and you problematise them perhaps precisely because of that). In other words, you have a very different orientation towards social reality, one that takes nothing for granted and which treats everything which is considered 'normal' as suspect, intriguing and worthy of some investigation.

Interviewing

We should probably begin by correcting a widespread error. Many people call their research 'ethnographic' when it contains interviews. In fact, it is very common to see 'ethnographic' and 'interview' as a fixed collocation: 'I will use *ethnographic interviews* to inquire into X'. Let it be clear right from the start: there is nothing intrinsically ethnographic about an interview, and doing interviews does not make your research ethnographic. As we discussed earlier, research is ethnographic because it accepts a number of fundamental principles and views on social reality. Consequently, interviews can be thoroughly non-ethnographic: when they are decontextualised, massacred, and reduced to something that never happened in a real interaction. A former friend of Jan's, a historian who had done extensive studies on recollections from ex-soldiers in the Nazi SS, once proclaimed that he re-used the tapes on which he recorded his interviews. He recorded them, went home, threw out all the questions from his transcript and reduced the answers of the respondents to a prose story. Afterwards the sound recording was destroyed and replaced by another one. That, ladies and gentlemen, is non-ethnographic interviewing, and the man ceased to be Jan's friend at once.

Another widespread belief which demands qualification is that interviews are the 'core' of your data, that they are *the* data you should bring back from the field. And yet another is that interviews are strange, specialised forms of interaction that require extensive preparation, training and technique. Many people think of Jeremy Paxman on BBC Newsnight when they think of interviewing.

As for the first assumption: it should be clear that you are supposed to bring back far more than just some recorded interviews. You have observed events and processes on a daily basis and these observations have found their way in hundreds of pages of fieldnotes; you have made recordings and photographs, and (as we shall see in the next section) you have collected bags full of ethnographic rubbish. Your interviews will represent but a tiny fraction of the materials you bring back and of the 'data' that

will inform your work. They are important, to be sure, but they are not *more* important than the other kinds of materials. As for the second assumption: interviews usually go wrong when you conduct them like Jeremy Paxman does on Newsnight. We shall have more to say about that below.

There are some excellent books on ethnographic interviewing, and the most outstanding one is undoubtedly Charles Briggs' *Learning How To Ask* (1986, recently republished). Briggs treats fieldwork interviewing from a linguistic-anthropological perspective, as a socioculturally loaded communicative activity in its own right. He emphasises that interviews, like every form of human interaction, always have a metalevel. It is not just *what* people tell you, but also *how* they tell it that requires our attention. Someone may be very confident in giving answers, but his answer to one particular question is hesitant, pronounced somewhat softer than the others, with a body language that articulates discomfort. The respondent here communicates something *about* what he says: he signals that he feels awkward, ill at ease, uncertain, embarrassed about what he says, and that perhaps this is a topic he'd rather close than continue. Briggs draws our attention to these metapragmatic (meaning: something that comments on the action) levels of communication in fieldwork interviews; he demonstrates that overlooking them may sometimes lead you to very wrong conclusions, and he focuses our eyes on the communicative complexity and the density in meanings that characterise such encounters.

Briggs' book should be read and thoroughly read. There is no substitute for it. We will use his basic insights in what follows, and will restrict our discussion to comments on a number of points:

(1) Interviews are conversations.
(2) You are part of the interview.
(3) The importance of anecdotes.
(4) No such thing as a bad interview.

Before embarking on these comments we should remind you of the fact that many of the points raised with respect to recordings also apply to interviews. People tend to perceive them as slightly threatening, formal and abnormal speech situations (often because they expect you to start behaving like Jeremy Paxman), and they know that they 'go on record'. So there might be conditions imposed on interviewing and the use of interviews. Also, and similar to what we said above, because of this sensitivity, you should again not be cavalier about your interview sessions. Make appointments and *keep them*, prepare well and check your equipment, better a handful of good ones than a large number of insignificant ones,

listen to the interview soon after the recording session, and if the situation favours it, make notes during the session. Like in every other aspect of fieldwork, this creates good conditions for successful work but does not ensure that your work is successful. Outside forces might conspire against you – as when a cleaning lady decided to start vacuum cleaning the living room, right in the middle of a long and concentrated interview by Jan with a very old informant whose voice was rather weak and unclear anyway. There is nothing one can do about that (alas!) other than to curse the gods of science and commerce.

An interview is a conversation

Never behave like an interviewer: people will behave like interviewees. They will try to keep their answers brief and to the point, formulate them in factual declarative sentences, and ask at the end 'next question?' Interviews are conversations: a particular kind of conversation, but a conversation nonetheless. It is an *ordered* conversation, one that is structured by questions or topics you may want to see discussed (more on that further on), and one in which you (the interviewer) will have to make sure that a particular order is being followed. The interview becomes something special *afterwards*, when you take its recorded version back home and start using it as 'data'.

But apart from that, the interview responds to precisely the same kinds of opportunities and constraints as 'ordinary' conversation. That means: it is dialogical in the sense that both parties contribute to it. That also means that things such as *rapport* are crucial: does the interviewee like you or not? If s/he finds you not too sympathetic (or when you find him/her not too sympathetic) chances are that there won't be much of an interview. *Cooperativity* is another factor: there must be a shared desire to talk to one another. If one of the two parties decides that this is rubbish and withdraws in deep taciturnity, or starts checking email while you try to continue the interview, or looks at his/her watch every two minutes, the result may be rather poor, and predictably so.

In an earlier research project, Dong Jie interviewed socially disadvantaged people in London. Initially she held a list of questions and went through them with the interviewees; soon it attracted Dong Jie's attention that the interviewees only gave short and focused answers, sometimes with brief explanations if Dong Jie insisted on more details. There was not much more information yielded from the interviews than from structured questionnaires. The interviewees' dry and factual responses also influenced Dong Jie, as she struggled to get more out of

the interviews. Were socially disadvantaged people reluctant to talk about what they had in their mind? Perhaps, but many of the interviewees became very vocal and expressive as soon as Dong Jie put the list down, which meant 'the interview finished and we can chat on whatever you/we like'. It could be the list that troubled the interviewees (as well as the interviewer) – they thought about the next question while answering the current one. Answering against a list also made them feel that they were questioned by rather than talked to Dong Jie, which made the interactions awkward. The interviewees appeared more relaxed and talkative without a list, and Dong Jie rarely forgot any topic she wanted to talk about.

Things such as *formality/informality* and *politeness* also play a role. Like in every human interaction there are rules to be observed: rules of distance, of not transgressing certain boundaries (e.g. the use of rude language or insults, sexual or racial abuse and misconduct, rules of social status recognition, etc.). And if your interlocutor sees you as someone who takes undue liberties with him/her, a swift end to the interview (as well as a very bad reputation for the interviewer afterwards) is to be expected. And finally, like every human interaction interviews are also prone to *misunderstanding*: 'technical' misunderstanding as when a name of word is not correctly understood, 'pragmatic' misunderstanding as when, for example, a joke is misunderstood as a serious statement (or vice versa), or 'cognitive' misunderstanding as when someone produces a statement you simply cannot comprehend. Our social world is unfortunately sprinkled with misunderstandings between human beings, so why should an interview be any different?[8]

Do not expect your interviews to be perfect instances of communication in which both speakers manage to talk in absolute clarity and faultless sentences, producing relevant new information in every sentence. Interviews are like everyday conversations: messy, complex, often containing contradictions and statements that are made off the top of one's head, with people shifting topics and getting lost in details, losing the line of their argument, not finding the exact words for what they wish to say, and with *silences*, hesitations, pauses. Recording devices often have a 'voice activation' tool; if you switch it on it will only record when there is an audible voice. Never ever switch that thing on. If you do, you would lose that crucial part of conversations which we call silence. Silences are not an absence of speech, they are the production of silence, they are very much part of speech. We produce silence when we need to think, when we hesitate (i.e. when we find something sensitive, controversial or emotional), when we do not wish to say something.

The interviewer must be silent at times: it is a prerequisite for the other to talk. If the interviewee can't get a word in edgewise, the interview may not be as rich as you expected it to be. Your silence, in addition, can be a powerful instrument of elicitation. If you ask a question and the interviewee gives an answer, s/he will expect you to take over straight away after the conclusion of the answer. If you remain silent for a moment and continue to hold your 'listening' body posture, the interviewee will continue to talk, for s/he will think that you're not satisfied with the answer, or that you believe the answer is incomplete (raising your eyebrows when you sit there silent may be a particularly powerful prompt, but it often triggers an embarrassed reaction from the interviewee). It is a natural feature of conversational structure in many cultures that long silences are to be avoided, and if the other one doesn't speak, you will. Be aware of this dynamic: it will make your interviewees be more generous and talkative. They will break into anecdotes, repeat what they said with more details, and so on.

> This was a useful tactic in Dong Jie's research, although it was not very easy to use in the beginning, because in Dong Jie's culture the one who initiates a conversation (such as the one who asks for a talk, who invites the other one, and here the one who interviews) has more responsibility than the other one to keep a conversation going, otherwise people would regard him or her as being shy or asocial. It's worth trying this tactic, however, and Dong Jie found it was not as uncomfortable as she thought.

But the interviewer should not be the silent one. It is a conversation, so conversational engagement is expected of you, and it should be 'natural' conversational engagement, not something like 'all right, thank you; the next question is . . .' or 'could you please stay to the point'. You must provide the natural reactions and responses of surprise, amazement, interest, fascination, amusement that someone expects in a conversation: the nodding, the 'uh uh', 'mhh', 'yes', 'really?' must all be there, along with a sufficient dose of 'that's interesting'. If someone engages in a story, do not try to cut him/her off (we shall see below why this is relevant). Provide reactions with a rising intonation ('yes?') and you will get more. In general, try to be a good, interested and sympathetic listener, who every now and then provides some stories and recollections of his/her own. Do provide such supporting narratives, they can be very helpful in getting more and more detailed information.

A conversation is *not an interrogation*. It is talk between people on a variety of topics. We emphasise *topics*, not *questions*, because (as Hymes said in the beginning of this book) not all there is to be found out can be

found out by *asking*. Not everyone has an opinion about everything, and sometimes, your question could be the first time they are asked to *form* an opinion about it. It is better therefore to develop *topics*. Rather than introducing something as a question, you introduce it as something you'd like to talk about 'I'm interested in … and I've seen that you …'. The topic, then, will be gradually developed – your statement won't have the bombshell effect of a point-blank question – and people can qualify what they have to say ('I don't know much about it, but …'), make comments about *how* they know something ('I've been there quite often and …', 'I've only heard it from others') and offer what they have to offer.[9] By carefully developing the topic you'll discover how the interviewee relates to what s/he says: s/he can only talk about it in anecdotes, or is able to provide general statements interspersed with examples; s/he heavily relies on 'borrowed discourses' (e.g. phrases handed down from the media or from public fora) or talks in very much his/her own words, is sure about what s/he says or displays lots of doubts and hesitations and so on. By offering your own bits, you can find out whether s/he knows about them ('I recently saw a report on TV in which …' – 'Oh yes, I saw it too!') or not, whether your information comes as a surprise or fits into his/her view of things and so on. All of that information is crucial, and it is easier to release when one is involved in an 'ordinary' conversation than in a question-and-answer sequence where one very often feels put on the spot by direct questions.

As to *topics*, here too you must realise that an interview is just a conversation. Not every topic can be broached in any conversation, and some topics will be seen as sensitive by some people and not by others. For some topics, you need particular context conditions (e.g. a life history usually requires a long interview, it cannot be done in half an hour), and so on. So too in interviews. Not all of your informants will volunteer their opinion on any topic (if they have an opinion on it!), some topics cannot be launched abruptly but need some preparatory lines of discussion, some topics can simply not be opened because you know the answer beforehand: denial, rejection, closure of the conversation. A few examples: very few people self-qualify as 'racists', and very few men would happily go on record that they believe that men are superior to women. Few people indeed would qualify themselves as 'radical' or 'fundamentalist', few would openly admit that they would favour a dictatorship over a democratic system, few would commit themselves publicly to eugenetic views and so on. So if you open an interview by asking 'are you a racist?', the answer would be very predictable: 'No. Next question'.

The tactic you use to discuss such sensitive topics is by taking an ***indirect*** route. Rather than 'racism' and 'racist', you use more circumspect

descriptions – things that circulate publicly as *euphemisms* on racism. So you don't use the loaded words themselves, but you carefully work your way through a series of issues *that together belong to and make up the field of racism*. You could talk about the quality of schools where there are large numbers of immigrant children (a typical 'objectification' of racism is that one doesn't send one's kids to a 'coloured' school because 'the level of academic achievement in such schools is low' and 'one wants only the best for the kids'); or about safety problems in the inner cities (where you could bump into another widespread image: the direct correlation between crime and the presence of immigrants); or about issues of security (where you are likely to meet the collocation of *Muslim* terrorism), and so on. People can talk in a very reasonable and moderate way for hours, constructing a tower of meanings which taken together is very irrational and radical.[10] Please note, and this is very important, that *you can do an interview on racism without mentioning the term or without announcing your interview as being on racism*. This is not a violation of any ethical rule, you are not lying to your informants or misguiding them, and there are two reasons for that: (1) You don't have to *mention* racism to *talk about* racism; most of us have experiences in which we talked about something while pretending to talk about something else; (2) 'racism' in your research is an *analytical category*, not a term. You have constructed your own 'field' of racism in preparing the ground: various kinds of related activities, ideas and images have been grouped under that term. The word 'racism', therefore, has a deeply different scope and meaning that it has in the everyday respondent's mind. You are looking for one 'racism', your informants may have quite another one in mind. Using the term, on the assumption that the word would be crystal clear and perfectly similar in meaning for you and for your informant, would be ludicrous.[11]

> In Dong Jie's fieldwork of rural migrant pupils in urban schools, the word 'discrimination' was very sensitive, in a society of largely egalitarian ideology. It would be very offensive if Dong Jie asked directly 'are the rural pupils discriminated', or 'are local children more important than migrant pupils'. Even migrant pupils and their parents rarely acknowledged the unequal status they had compared to those of local pupils. However, talking about who should be student leaders or win merit student awards, the teachers were surprisingly straightforward: definitely local pupils, because outstanding records would be helpful for them to continue to secondary school – those who held such awards would have a better chance of getting into the good secondary schools. What about migrant pupils? They usually had to either go back to their

hometown/village for secondary education or to an appointed school which was normally one of the underachieving secondary schools in the district, and therefore titles and awards to them would be wasted. The teachers were frank about this because it was not a case of discrimination as far as they were concerned, but thinking practically.

You are part of the interview

It is very clear by now: the 'interview' is not just the part in which your respondent speaks; it is very much a dialogue with you, and you also build, construct and make the interview into what it is. This is important, because as mentioned earlier, it is a widespread practice in a lot of research to erase the interviewer's questions and interventions from the record of the interview. It is as if the interviewer wasn't there or had no other effect than to push buttons that set the respondent talking – the interviewer as the neutral extension of the tape recorder. And so an 'interview' is usually understood to be 'what the interviewee said'. That the interviewer had a tremendous influence on what was said and how it was said (in other words: that nothing that the interviewee said could come about *without* the interviewer's active input) escapes the attention of the researchers.

Let us not commit that error. As an interviewer engaged in an ordered conversation with the interviewee, your impact is enormous, and *this impact is part of your 'data'*. When a respondent voices radical opinions, they should be contextualised: it could be an effect of the way in which you framed and pitched the issue; had you used other formulations the opinions may have come across as less radical. You co-construct the interview, and every statement made by the interviewee is a statement that reflects your presence and your level and mode of participation.

That means that *your turns in the interview also need to be transcribed and analysed*. An analysis of the interview is never just an analysis of what the interviewee said, it is an *analysis of a dialogue between you and the interviewee*. Usually that is a source of deep embarrassment. In re-listening to the interview, you will have to spend an equal amount of attention to your own voice and statements as to those of the interviewee. And for most of us, that means a painful confrontation with badly formulated statements, errors in comprehension, missed opportunities in the interview, your own accent, your irritating insistence on particular points and so on. It is not a nice, but often an illuminating experience, and it makes you into a better interviewer: you will discover, analytically, what you do in such dialogues, and in so doing you will learn from your mistakes.

In a recorded interview fragment two young interviewees were telling Dong Jie the rarely spoken issue of discrimination – the girl said something like the local pupils looked down on them (migrant children). She then gave as an example that the student leaders (all of whom were local pupils) often picked on migrant pupils and blamed them for any mistake. Dong Jie was perhaps too excited by the unexpected story the pupil told her – instead of letting her tell more of that story, Dong Jie unfortunately turned to the other pupil and asked whether he had similar experiences. Unfortunately, the boy did not have much to say about that and soon changed the topic. Dong Jie tried a few times to bring the conversation back on track but the break finished and the pupils had to go back to their chairs. It was a pity, and there is nothing we can do but to learn from mistakes.

Your involvement in the interview also has wider dimensions. As an interviewer, you will often be imagined as a figure of *authority*. You approach people with the label of researcher stuck on you, someone affiliated with the prestige institution we call the university, and surrounded by assumptions of intellectual brilliance and sophistication. In addition to that, most of us are clearly and identifiably middle class people, we carry some expensive equipment and so on. We are a particular kind of people, and this usually differs from our informants; they consequently have a particular set of images about us and a set of expectations about us. Nobody enters an interview situation as a blank page; as soon as you enter, you are someone.

Let us look at an example of how the interviewer influences the interviewee. The example below is a small fragment of an interview in which two young female Belgian researchers (both in their early 20s) talk with a 16-year-old female high school student from a poor township near Cape Town, South Africa. The interviewers are identified by M and N in the transcript; the interviewee by E. The interviewee is from Xhosa descent, which means that according to South African criteria she is 'black'; English is the language of instruction in school and is not her native language. The two interviewers are obviously 'white', and for them as well English is not their native language. We will emphasise some features of the transcript in **bold** and ***bold italics***.

1   **M:**   ehr do you . like ehr . going to school?
2   **E:**   **[quietly] yah xxxxx**
3   **M:**   this one *you like /
4   **N:**   yeah?
5   **E:**   yes it's very nice /
6   **M:**   how come? . . . why do you like it / or

7	**E:**	ehr it's the first / it is the first time tha' we have a *community school here in westbank/ and now come together to school so
8	**M:**	yeah
9	**E:**	.. like .. meeting new people .. and sort of . we are getting ***proud*** of our school
10	**M:**	You're ***pride*** of your school?
11	**E:**	yeah we ***pride***
12	**N:**	do you like all the courses . that you follow here?
13	**E:**	**yes miss**

The point here is to see how the interviewers are given a particular identity of authority here by the interviewee. In line 2, we see that the first question by M is answered by a quiet and almost inaudible answer from E (the xxxx signals something which could not be understood from the recording, so it was spoken very quietly). Naturally, this pitch level signals that E is not very much at ease. This is a strange format for her: two 'white' women talking to her. Being 'white' is still something very different from being 'black' in South Africa: it immediately projects identities of superiority and power; E seems to absorb these. She is also not very familiar with the question-and-answer format of the interview, and we see how she searches for a frame in which she can organise her own behaviour. The frame she finds is that of classroom Q-and-A; we see this in line 13, when she calls N 'miss' – the label she normally uses for her school-teacher. The 'yes miss' is a classroom response.

But there is more. In lines 9–11, the interviewee adopts an error introduced by the interviewer. In line 9, she says correctly 'we are getting proud of our school'. This is followed up by M as 'you're pride of your school' – in which we see 'proud' being replaced by 'pride', incorrectly. The girl adopts 'we pride' in line 11, rather than 'proud' as in line 9. What we see here is that the interviewer, clearly, is also a figure of authority *in English*. An incorrect expression by the interviewer is ratified (positively sanctioned by repeating it) by the interviewer. The interviewer here not only shapes the particular information produced in the interview, but also the particular linguistic ways in which this information is communicated to her. In this particular case – a South African township school – historical relations of superiority and inferiority (articulated in 'race': white versus black) creep into the interview and give it an importance beyond the immediate event. What we see here is how the interviewer–interviewee relation becomes an instance of old, deeply entrenched group relations in the country. A white person is almost by definition 'right', a black one 'wrong'.

It is very, very hard to manoeuvre such factors, as they belong to the living reality in which fieldwork takes place. You cannot become 'black' if

you are 'white', a woman when you are a man, young when you are old and vice versa. You can *act* young when you're old, or pretend to be working class if you are upper class, but there will be moments where that role cannot be sustained, where age and class features suddenly occur and start twisting the event in peculiar directions. You cannot be someone or something else in fieldwork, and it is wise not to try too hard being someone or something else: you cannot keep it up. You are not an extension of your tape recorder: you're not a nicely manufactured Sony XC350, but you are Marianne Jones or Josh Patel, PhD researcher at the Institute of Education, someone who is a real person in interaction with someone else, who also is not just 'data', but a real person.

The importance of anecdotes

If your interviews are conceived of and conducted as conversations, they will contain the features of ordinary conversations, and one of the well-known features of that is *narrative*. Whenever we talk, we construct our talk around stories, big and small. We call such stories 'anecdotes', and this suggests that they are not very important, just scaffolding for an argument, illustrations or embellishment (or boring!). In fact, anecdotes are the raw diamonds in fieldwork interviews. They are often your best and most valued 'facts'.

The reason is that in narratives, people produce very complex sociocultural meanings. It is through an anecdote that we see what exactly they understand by a particular term, how our questions resonate in their own life worlds, how relevant it is, how their own life worlds are structured, which influences they articulate. We also see, by attending to anecdotes, that they have *cognitive, affective (emotional) and argumentative* functions. Telling an anecdote not only provides knowledge and organises it in a particular way. It also provides hints at how the storyteller relates to that knowledge (whether she likes it or not, whether she is confident about it or not, whether it is a thing that upsets her or leaves her unaffected …). And it also shows us how particular bits of experience and knowledge are invoked to support, modify or attack an argument. Anecdotes, in sum, contain all the stuff we are after.

Consider the following example. It is a translated part of a Dutch interview between two students (T and B) and a male asylum seeker from Ivory Coast (R). The fragment is from the beginning of the interview, and it is an answer to the question: 'why did you leave the Ivory Coast?'

R: (sighs) **yeah/for *everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast because/ it is never discussed**/ but over there

we still have the *French army/ ehr ehr our airport is a French army base/ and these people are there anyway and we=we=we have no right to choose our=our own government/ yes these people are appointed by France/ but we are *not a colony anymore…since thirty-eight years we ehr have obtained our independence/ but until now our ministers have always been appointed by France…our country is in the center of West-Africa/ and that is a strategic position

T: =yes yes

R: yes/so…yes there is=we are not rich/ and..okay..eight years ago we tried to create political par=parties and so [louder] but the government itself has created *thirty-eight parties/ while this is the difficult thing to ehr get elected or to lead a country.. If you are not a member of a party/ *then they=we obtained different ehr permission to create parties/ and apart from that or on *top of that the government has created thirty eight parties/ apart from the=*plus the thehh monopartism like that

T: yes

R: yes the monopartism exists since sixty/ till ninety/ thirty years/ and yes they have themselves created thirty=thirty-eight parties/ the people who *don=t work for the government/ I mean/ in ehr..the=the private the private sector is very small/ everyone already works for=for the government/ and if.. yes the people who work for the government they are like ehr the prison/ they are like imprisoned/ because you..you=you are always afraid of losing your job/ maybe in your family with your nephews and nieces and so maybe you are about one hundred people and you are the only one who has a job/ that/ yes/ all these other people are/ they=they are poor and they all count on you / then you have to keep your job *if not *someone from your family will be bought to be used against you/ yes things like that..small things like that/ and we…yes [sighs] yes there is our president of our party [points to a picture on the wall] / we also have=we also try to get organised here in Belgium in Holland in France/ the=the large group is in France in Italy in Germany also in other countries..in Holland/ the people from Holland will come here the day after tomorrow we have our/ yes large meeting in Brussels… that=s it…yes thehh reason was that in nine=ninety five/ we had to do an election/ and in thirty four=ninety four a list of all the *inhabitants had to be made/ but the people who did that when they came to you and they know that you are a=a member of the opposition/ then your name=ehr your name would not be written down/ and if your name is not written down you can=t vote/ and

  that=s what they did/ yes we tried to find that list/ yes and make
  another one
B: yes
R: but that was illegal
B: yes
R: if it/ yes/ then we are prosecuted/ **and so I had to escape**/

The answer to the question is, as we see, not a straightforward and linear one, beginning with 'because'. The answer in that narrow sense is given at the end of the fragment: 'and so I had to escape'. What precedes is a long and complex narrative which displays a lot of structure and offers lots and lots of information. Let us look at the way in which this story is constructed by R.

Why did you escape from the Ivory Coast?

Point of departure

1. For everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast

General reason: neocolonialism

2. We still have the French army
3. And we have no right to choose our own government
        {reasons:} we are in the centre of West-Africa
4.   {that is why the French are there, because} we are not rich

Specific reason: membership of political opposition party

5. Eight years ago we tried to create political parties
6.   {this is problematical, because} the government itself has created
        38 parties
        {the government manipulates the democratization process:
        monopartyism plus 38 bogus parties}
        {iron grip of the régime on society} you are always afraid of losing
        your job
7.   {our party also exists in Europe}
8. The *{immediate} reason* was {election fraud}
        {the régime tried to commit fraud in voter registration}
        {we tried to counterfeit our own voter registration list}
        but that was illegal

Conclusion

9. Then we are prosecuted and so I had to escape

We see that R starts his story with what we can call an epistemic framing: 'For everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the

Ivory Coast'. This means: I'll have to tell you something in order for you to understand my reasons, and I will have to tell you something not just about myself but about politics in the Ivory Coast. This, clearly, is a reflection of experience. Like so many asylum seekers, R had had the experience of having to tell his story of escape over and over again to authorities and support agencies, and of being either not heard or not understood by them. So we now know that the story he tells us is an *important* story for him, a story which he considers crucial for us to understand why he has applied for asylum.

The story itself, then, starts from a broad perspective: that of neo-colonialism. This, of course, has at first sight very little worth as an answer to the question as to why *he* fled his country. But its function becomes clear afterwards. He moves from neo-colonialism to the problems facing new opposition parties in his country, and to his own involvement in one such movement, and his part in events surrounding the elections. Note that he ends his story with 'but that was illegal'. R had indeed broken the law in his country, and this proved to be disastrous for his asylum application, since people who have committed criminal acts cannot get asylum. The whole contextual story, starting with neo-colonialism and ending with his involvement in election fraud, is meant to offer arguments for seeing his illegal behaviour as legitimate: not his actions were illegitimate, but the laws he broke are neo-colonial laws that need to be broken in order to create a democracy in his country.

Many a researcher would dismiss this long and winding story as irrelevant or as 'babble', providing hardly any hard facts. In effect, the way in which such stories are received by asylum authorities is to scrap all such anecdotes and reduce the story to a sequence of established facts. Yet, the narrative provides crucial clues to understanding such 'facts': R here provides all kinds of connections between his own personal predicament and larger factors influencing it; he articulates his own political, social and moral position while doing so; and he tells us something about his experiences with intercultural communication in Belgium by saying that 'For everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast': Belgians usually don't know anything about this, and if they do they don't listen or don't care about it.

Thus, in your interviews, try to have people produce stories, anecdotes. If they embark on one, let them do so and do not interrupt it, even if some voice in your head tells you that the informant is getting side-tracked. S/he is only getting sidetracked in *your* universe, in relation to your research questions. But *the side-tracking may be precisely what there is to find out*: a connection between things, one that you had not previously spotted,

but which the informant establishes by his/her seemingly erratic and weird jump from one topic to another. Things that in your world are disconnected may be solidly connected in their life worlds, and anecdotes offer you a rich way into that. The story provides you with contexts, experiences, motives, fragments of what Bourdieu called 'practical reason': the way in which people build argumentative constructs out of their socially and culturally conditioned experiences, and how such arguments help them to make sense of their world.

No such thing as a bad interview

This leads us to another issue. What is a *good* interview and what is a *bad* interview? When does an interview yield the 'data' you're after? The answer to that is by no means simple, as each time there will be real yardsticks and objectives, specific to the piece of research you intend to do. But the rule of thumb is: every interview yields *something*, and often it yields something in unexpected ways.

The reason for that is that every interview *produces* something: a discourse organised between two parties (interviewer and interviewee) in a particular context. Such discourses may be rich and dense (ideal data! Best examples!) but they can also be shallow and thin. The interviewee is less than forthcoming, withdrawn and shy; reluctant and resistant to your introducing particular topics or arguments. S/he looks down on you and imposes a line of answering that does not satisfy your expectations. S/he restricts him/herself to the production of commonplaces and hand-me-downs from media discourses or institutional ones.

The example given earlier, of the township high school student, could be read as such a failure. It was clear that the girl assumed a very submissive stance towards the interviewers, and even that she produced echoes of the interviewers' voices in her responses. This could be a failure if we see this from an angle in which we are out to find 'pure', uncontaminated evidence – these data are obviously contaminated by the interviewer. Similarly, the long narrative produced by the man from Ivory Coast could also be seen as a 'bad' case, because he takes us on an endless tour of the history of West Africa, distorting a swift flux of well-targeted information. Both can be turned into *successful* pieces of work, though, as we have seen. In both instances, looking carefully into the issue of positioning – your own and that of the informant – reveals that our informants there were following a particular logic, a contextual logic which reveals how they see us, the information we are asking for, and themselves. Thus, interviews that fail to produce one kind of data can still yield another kind

of data: data about the context, about social positions from which people speak. And such positions generate and constrain the discourses they can produce.

> One of Dong Jie's main respondents was the teacher of the class that Dong Jie observed for several months. She and Dong Jie spent a lot of time together exchanging ideas about the pupils, and she saw Dong Jie as an educational researcher (i.e. expert) who would be able to help her with problems she came across in practice. The teacher's main concerns were about two underachieving pupils; to Dong Jie's disappointment, both pupils were local, while Dong Jie's research interest was in migrant pupils. The teacher talked about the two pupils for hours, how hard it was to help them, what influence they had from their families, etc., but Dong Jie desperately wanted to set their conversations on the track of migrant pupils. At the end Dong Jie saw the day wasted although she was loaded with fieldnotes on and recorded interviews of the two local pupils. Reluctantly, she did her routine job and went through the data she'd got during the day (reading fieldnotes and listening to the recordings) … but hang on, what was she saying here 'they are even not as good as XXX (a migrant pupil who was also considered underachieving), and there 'they are not popular among other local pupils, but they do make friends with XXX and XXX (both were migrant pupils)'. Why the teacher was concerned with the local pupils, not the migrant ones, although all of them had unsatisfactory results? Did the two pupils feel excluded by their local peers? Did they prefer to make friends with migrant children given their different backgrounds? The conversations turned out to produce interesting staring points for further inquiries.

Imagine that the topic of your work is unemployment, and that among your respondents you have a number of unemployed people and a number of employers. Obviously and predictably, they will produce very different answers to the same questions. None of the answers is intrinsically 'better' than the other; both answers reveal the particular position from which they see this bit of reality. And what they say (and how they say it) will reveal traces of their positions. It is not unlikely that the interview with the unemployed respondent will be emotionally charged, full of anger and frustration, strongly connected to his/her own life world and everyday experiences, and with very little references to macro-economic issues. It is also not unlikely that the discourse of the employer would be more detached, more factual and unemotional, and that there would be abundant references to the larger economic and political dimensions of

the issue. These data are incomparable and incompatible: it makes very little sense to try and 'measure' who speaks the truth and provides the best diagnosis of the problem. Both, however, reflect different positions from which they see the problem, and in that sense lead you into the way in which social structure influences the way we see the world. These are great data.

Thus, when people are taciturn in an interview, their taciturnity becomes data and needs to be examined. Is it because the respondent does not know anything about this? Or feels that s/he has nothing significant to say about it? Or that the topic invokes painful personal experiences that cannot be communicated in this manner? Or that s/he feels that this is so delicate a topic that s/he wants to be prudent when going on record? Or that your recording device scares him/her? Or that s/he feels that you are not in a position to ask such questions (who do you think you are!), or that the way you put them testifies to a lack of tact and politeness? Or that you are intimidating to him/her? All of this is possible, and interesting to look into, because again the answer to such questions can bring you closer to understanding a fundamental point: that not everyone in a society has access to the same discourses, and that certain discourses can only be produced under certain circumstances.[12] Don't be discouraged when an interview of which you expected a lot is finished after 20 minutes of superficial talk. Ask why it went that way, and think about the different contextual possibilities for that event. A failure will quickly become a success.

Collecting Rubbish

Ethnographers are notorious for collecting rubbish. In their anxiety not to overlook a single piece of information that might be the key stone to their interpretation, they collect everything: objects, texts, newspaper clippings, audio and video tapes, books and booklets, flyers, announcements, advertisements … name it, you will find it in the ethnographer's bags upon return to the home or academic base camp. All of this is collected in an attempt to get as rich a picture as possible of the environment in which the fieldwork was done. It combines with photographs, recordings and fieldnotes into one huge pile of materials that, together, allow us to make a careful reconstruction of the place, time and occasion on which we did our work. It helps us remember and recall features, details, characters, an atmosphere we found crucial for our understanding of what went on. And since we are always distrustful of our own memory, we collect it, catalogue it, describe it, and carry it with us back home.

We are saying this to the chagrin of mothers, partners and roommates and we shall be cursed by them: *do collect that kind of rubbish*. It is very much similar to making photographs, recordings and fieldnotes: they are essential ingredients of your record, of the archive of your own journey into knowledge. And they respond to the same laws: you will collect more rubbish in the beginning than at the end of your fieldwork, because again, you will know more about the place and less will be new and amazing. So do collect, and collect well.

There is only one rule of thumb here: like with fieldnotes, take everything that closely or remotely looks of interest. Don't be too restrictive, and even if it doesn't tell you much on the spot, it can always become a very relevant bit of data later on. There are a good number of cases in which what looked like a side issue on the spot gains prominence a lot later. It can even become a new project, or ideal data for an article. We are speaking from experience here. When Jan was in Tanzania in 1985, the topic of his fieldwork was local and national political discourse. He quickly noticed, however, that the people he spoke with produced a lot of code-switching between Swahili and English. He got intrigued by it, finding himself sometimes in the awkward position of the only speaker of 'pure' Swahili and English (and eventually being forced to learn how to do that kind of code-switching). Thus, while Jan was collecting material on his 'real' topic, another topic developed alongside it through recordings and rubbish – tapes with urban pop music in which such switching was present; letters, newspaper clippings, cartoons and so on. And by the time Jan submitted his dissertation on Swahili political style he had several published articles on code-switching in Tanzania. In spite of his best efforts, interest in that topic has never left him.

Make a point of collecting with some discipline. Use your fieldnotes to catalogue them, offer small bits of description in your notes, documenting what this particular bit of rubbish suggests or tells you about the things you're interested in. Perhaps also indicate how it could be used later in your analysis: you'll forget what it meant later in your fieldwork or after your return, and things that looked like valuable information then can quickly become just scraps of paper later.

Conclusion

Your bag is full now, and what do we have? We have background information collected during the preparation of your fieldwork; we have observations that found their way in your fieldnotes, recordings and visual materials, and we have recorded interviews. We are ready to go home

now and start working on our analysis and on the daunting task of writing all of this up in a dissertation or publication.

Note that what we have in our bag is a widely divergent collection of materials. *Ethnographic fieldwork data are not uniform* but widely diverse, ranging from material artefacts over subjective notes to recordings and interviews and photographs. Together they create an archive of your own learning process. They tell a story of 'the field', to be sure, but even more eloquently they tell a story about yourself in the field, of how you became someone who started understanding things in a strange environment, thus gradually reducing the strangeness of that environment to such a point where it became a familiar place. This, then, will have to be carried over into your analysis.

Notes

1. Migrant schools in Beijing are private schools specifically for children whose parents relocate to Beijing as low-paid workers from mainly rural areas within the country; migrant schools often operate with a low budget and offer basic education.
2. Or when the wire of the microphone runs down the body and stops at the underbelly – causing giggles and suggestive winks from the pupils.
3. We disagree with a number of esteemed colleagues and ethics committees on this and invite students to seek a second opinion on this point. Sometimes the conditions imposed on recording and the use of recorded materials are absurd, curtailing the essence of research: the freedom to return to earlier work and revisit it in light of new developments or evidence. Such multiple and repeated use of existing data is essential if we want to prevent research from becoming an atomised enterprise, consisting of a myriad of unique but unconnected (and unconnectable), isolated pieces of work. We are familiar with the ethical issues involved in this and they need to be taken very seriously; but we have successfully negotiated the freedom to use recorded data beyond the particular project on a large number of occasions, often against all odds with very stubborn interlocutors. Our experience is that people, even if they are initially apprehensive, quickly grasp the importance of the argument for free use of data for research purposes.
4. In these days of micro-electronic sophistication, this is significantly easier than in the days when the fieldworker could be spotted from miles away because of the bulky tape recorder dangling from his/her shoulder. There are excellent digital audiorecorders, the size of a cigarette pack, that capture many hours of high-quality sound, can be simply uploaded on any PC through a USB connection, and come with software packages that allow editing and sound quality improvement. Even certain types of mp3 players allow such facilities. They are cheaper than any conventional device and are the best audiorecorders yet made. It is always advisable to have *more than one* recording device, again a thing which is now more affordable than a generation ago.

5. Allow us to indulge for a minute in this hopelessly romantic imagery: Jan's own field notebooks are real books, thick linen-bound notebooks filled to the brim with entries and drawings of things he saw, photos and letters stuck to the pages. Jan still uses handwriting for such purposes, and finds it important to continue doing so. Handwriting has a particular slowness and circumspect quality to it that he cannot associate with working on a PC. A PC could be stolen, while no one has ever expressed an interest in these grotesque notebooks. And the paper notebooks allowed him to write my entries late at night on a tropical beach, something which a PC would not allow. Students, by all means seek a second opinion on the topic of hand- versus computer-written fieldnotes; we are not unbiased.

6. The thin and long rectangle was a blackboard, after that was a platform for teachers. The rectangles and the 'T' shapes were tables and pupils were resembled with the small rectangles around the tables. Dong Jie tried to note down the pupils' names so that she could talk to and make friends with them soon. Besides each name was key information that Dong Jie collected on the first day about the pupils. At the bottom of the page were the class sessions for that day: morning – Chinese, English, Chinese (which should have been math, but the math teacher was sick), drawing; afternoon – music, physical exercises, humanity.

7. Fabian's well-known *Power and Performance* (1990) is completely built around such a 'rich point'. During a dinner with friends in Congo, he was offered a piece of meat; when he suggested that it should be shared with others, the answer was 'power is eaten whole'. Fabian sensed that this was a kind of proverb – here is the rich point – and started inquiring into its meaning. The explanation of this saying took months, as the friends – members of a theatre troupe – decided that the best way of demonstrating its meaning would be through the creation of a play. The play was developed, performed, and even made it to national TV in Congo.

8. Maryns (2006), in her study on asylum interviews in Belgium, provides a telling example. An African applicant tells the story of her escape. One phrase from her story was 'A man carry me to the boat'. The phrase was spoken in broken English, with a strong African accent, and the interviewers' notes and official report afterwards read: 'A man called Karimi took me to the boat'. When the applicant was afterwards questioned about the identity of this man called Karimi, she was of course extremely puzzled.

9. An interesting phenomenon, and very widespread, is that people often refer to someone else as an authority: 'you should talk to X' or 'I'm not very familiar with it, my wife knows that better'. Such statements point towards *networks* of knowledge: the ways in which people rely on others as authoritative sources on particular topics and the way in which they themselves are part of patterns of circulation of information.

10. Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) offer a detailed analysis of different 'acceptably' racist discourses.

11. Which is incidentally one of the headaches for questionnaire research: the assumption that the terms used in the questionnaire mean the same things to everyone.

12. This is one of the main themes in Blommaert (2005b): the fact that access to certain discourses is seriously constrained by all kinds of social and cultural

factors, often invisible a priori and only detectable, precisely, through 'bad' fieldwork experiences. When people don't talk, it is not always because they have no words for it, but also because they have never had an occasion to talk about it.

Read up on it

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