

CONCLUSION

An important source of data for ethnographers is the accounts insiders provide. These may be produced spontaneously or elicited by the researcher. Interviews must be viewed as social events in which the interviewer (and for that matter the interviewee) is a participant observer. In interviews the ethnographer may be able to play a more dominant role than usual, and this can be capitalized upon, both in terms of when and where the interview takes place and who is present, as well as through the kinds of question asked. In this way different types of data can be elicited, as required by the changing demands of the research. While this feature of interviews heightens the danger of reactivity, this is only one aspect of a more general problem that cannot be avoided: the effects of audience and context on what is said and done.

The accounts produced by the people under study must neither be treated as 'valid in their own terms' and thus as beyond assessment and explanation, nor dismissed as epiphenomena or ideological distortions. They can be used both as a source of information about events, and as revealing the perspectives and discursive practices of those who produced them. Moreover, while it may sometimes be important to distinguish between solicited and unsolicited accounts, too much must not be made of this distinction. Rather, all accounts must be examined as social phenomena occurring in, and shaped by, particular contexts. Not only will this add to sociological knowledge directly, it can also throw light on the kind of threats to validity that we may need to consider in assessing the information provided by an account.

In this chapter we have rather assumed that insider accounts take an exclusively oral form. While this may be true in non-literate societies, for many settings written documents are an important source of data, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Documents

Ethnographic work in its various guises has frequently been employed in the investigation of essentially oral cultures. Be they the non-literate cultures of much social anthropology, or the street cultures and *demi-monde* beloved of many sociological fieldworkers, the social worlds studied by ethnographers have often been devoid of written documents other than those produced by the fieldworkers themselves.

Although it was not the only rationale originally proposed for ethnographic fieldwork as a method, the fact that the 'exotic' societies studied by ethnographers had no written history was given as a major anthropological justification of the method, as well as of the synchronic functionalist analyses that often went with it. Rather than attempt to reconstruct an essentially unknowable past, the anthropologist was inclined to concentrate on the construction of a working version of the present. The anthropologists thus turned their backs on conjectural history. There was, therefore, more than a coincidental relationship between ethnographic methods and the investigation of non-literate cultures. (This is much less true today; indeed, anthropologists have taken a specific interest in literacy: Goody 1968, 1986, and 1987; Street 1984.)

In a rather similar way, many of the settings documented by sociologists of the Chicago School were ephemeral. It is not that they were 'outside' history or part of some timeless 'tradition' (a fiction even in anthropological contexts); rather, they were cultures that lacked conscious attempts to make documentary records of their activities. Whether or not their members were literate, their collective actions rarely depended on the production, distribution, and preservation of written documents

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Zorbaugh

and records. The urban cultures of hobos, prostitutes, drug-users, and so on are mostly non-literate in that sense.

It has been emphasized repeatedly that ethnography is a method ideally suited to the study of such non-literate cultures. But it must not be forgotten that many of the settings in which contemporary sociologists and anthropologists work are literate. Not only are their members able to read and write, but that capacity is also an integral feature of their everyday life and work (Smith 1987 and 1993). In many instances, therefore, ethnographers need to take account of documents as part of the social setting under investigation.

In recommending attention to written sources and accounts, in appropriate social settings, we are aware of their historical place in the intellectual tradition of interpretative social science. Research that emanated from the Chicago School, for instance, was sometimes based very heavily on written documents. For example, Thomas and Znaniecki (1927) in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* – generally regarded as an early classic of American sociology – relied substantially on written documents, mainly letters but also a life history. Thomas (1967) employed the same approach in *The Unadjusted Girl*. He collected personal documentary accounts, in the belief that 'the unique value of the personal document is its revelation of the situations which have conditioned the behaviour' (1967:42). In both cases what we have is a dense accumulation of personal accounts, which were arranged thematically and juxtaposed in order to draw out the regularities and contrasts in 'definitions of the situation': 'Not only concrete acts are dependent on the definition of the situation, but gradually a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual himself follow from a series of such definitions' (Thomas 1967:42).

In a rather similar vein, the early use of the term 'participant observation' was to designate the generation of documents by participants who might in contemporary parlance be called 'informants'. For instance, in the research that produced *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, Zorbaugh (1929) persuaded people who inhabited the exclusive society of Chicago's 'gold coast' to generate such 'inside' accounts. They were the participant observers as much as Zorbaugh himself.

In a literate culture, then, it is possible to draw on all sorts of 'inside' written accounts – documents produced especially

for the purposes of the research and those generated routinely for other purposes. For the most part we find ourselves dealing with the latter variety: there are many contexts in which members of organizations and groups produce written accounts. We shall begin with a discussion of documents as 'secondary' sources for the ethnographer, and then turn our attention to a more detailed examination of the ethnography of settings where the production and use of documents are an integral feature of everyday life.

TYPES OF DOCUMENTARY SOURCE AND THEIR USES

There is, of course, a quite bewildering variety of documentary materials that might be of some relevance to the researcher. They may be ranged along a dimension ranging from the 'informal' to the 'formal' or 'official'. At the informal end of the spectrum there are many 'lay' accounts of everyday life that the enterprising and imaginative researcher can draw on for certain purposes. These include fictional literature, diaries, autobiographies, letters, and mass media products.

There are, for example, numerous categories of persons in contemporary society who publish versions of their own life story:

More than ever before in history, men of affairs, including politicians, military leaders, and business executives, are intent upon recording their experiences, personal as well as public, for posterity. In recent decades a number of American governmental leaders, including those in the military, have, after resigning from their official posts, published their memories or personal accounts in which they seek public support for causes that the bureaucracy may have rejected during their period of office.

(Sjoberg and Nett 1968:163)

In the decades since that observation, nothing has changed. The output of memoirs continues unabated.

There are, too, a fair number of first-hand accounts published by less eminent folk, including those drawn from the criminal underworld, and the realms of sports and entertainment. Similar personal accounts can be found in newspapers and magazines, or can be culled from radio and television documentaries and

chat-shows, for example. We have an increasing number of personal accounts by or about leading scientists, musicians, and artists to add to the list of contemporary social types represented in published accounts.

Of course, such biographical and autobiographical accounts will rarely, if ever, be those of the actual people we study at first hand. They can, nevertheless prove valuable resources for the ethnographer. They can be a source of 'sensitizing concepts' (Blumer 1954): they can suggest distinctive ways in which their authors, or the people reported in them, organize their experiences, the sorts of imagery and 'situated vocabularies' (Mills 1940) they employ, the routine events, and the troubles and reactions, they encounter. Read in this light, they can be used to suggest potential lines of inquiry and 'foreshadowed problems'.

Documents of this sort have rather particular characteristics. Authors will have interests in presenting themselves in a (usually) favourable light; they may have axes to grind, scores to settle, or excuses and justifications to make. They are often written with the benefit of hindsight, and are thus subject to the usual problems of long-term recall. Authors have a sense of audience that will lead them to put particular glosses on their accounts. For some purposes, such considerations must be treated as potential sources of 'bias' in accounts of this sort. But the sources of 'bias' are, looked at from another perspective, data in themselves. As we noted in the previous chapter, as important as the 'accuracy' or 'objectivity' of an account is what it reveals about the teller's interests, perspectives, and presuppositions.

Such accounts can be used, with appropriate caution, for comparative purposes. They can furnish information (albeit partial and personal) on groups and settings that are not available for first-hand observation. As a general category of data, biographical and autobiographical sources are subject to a further sort of 'bias' in that they tend to over-represent the powerful, the famous, the extraordinary, and the articulate. But even that can also be a strength since it is precisely such social categories that are often difficult to research directly.

In recent years there has been a considerable resurgence of interest in the sociological analysis of biographical or autobiographical accounts. While that interest goes well beyond the scope of ethnographic research, ethnographers can incorporate

many of the insights from this research field. The growth in scholarly interest reflects a renewed emphasis on narrative forms, temporality, and memory. It reflects too a focus on the intersection of the 'personal' and the 'social' (Erben 1993). As Stanley summarizes some of these concerns:

I see a concern with biography and autobiography as fundamental to sociology, because I perceive the grounds of their sociological interest lying within the epistemological problematics concerning how we understand 'the self' and 'a life', how we 'describe' ourselves and other people and events, how we justify the knowledge-claims we make in the name of the discipline, in particular through the processes of textual production.

(Stanley 1993:50)

These sociological perspectives on 'lives' and 'documents' also often reflect commitments to a feminist standpoint. Documentary sources may be drawn on to recuperate the otherwise muted voices of women and other dominated groups, and feminist scholarship affirms the intersection of the personal and the social (Stanley 1992; Evans 1993).

In the collection and investigation of 'informal' documentary materials, the fictional – even the most popular and ephemeral – can be used profitably. The most banal ('pulp' or 'pot-boiler') fiction is often replete with images, stereotypes, and myths bearing on a vast range of social domains. Indeed, the lack of literary merit characteristic of such genres reflects the fact that it unquestioningly trades on stocks of common knowledge and conventional wisdom. Here too, then, we can become sensitized to cultural themes pertaining to sex, gender, family, work, success, failure, class, mobility, regional variations, religious beliefs, political commitments, health and illness, the law, crime, social control, etc. These are not necessarily to be read at face value, as accurate representations of social reality, but can suggest themes, images, or metaphors. This is no less true of more 'serious' fiction: novels can suggest different ways of organizing experience, and alternative thematic models. We need not shy away from the careful use of literary sources. As various authors have pointed out, there is a long and complex set of relationships between literature and the social sciences (for example, Lepenies 1988; Cappetti 1993). And, as F. Davis (1974) notes,

ethnographers and novelists alike find themselves telling 'stories'. (See Chapter 9 for further discussion of parallels between ethnography and literary analysis.)

The goal of comparative analysis, referred to earlier, is also a major use for published sources of a more 'formal' nature, including other published ethnographies. The development of generic concepts demands a broad and eclectic reading of textual sources (formal and informal, factual and fictional) on differing substantive topics. It is, however, important not to start searching out documentary sources only when 'writing up'. Wide and comparative reading should inform the generation of concepts throughout the research process. By and large sociologists and anthropologists are not conspicuously good at this. The textual variety of an Erving Goffman is a rare accomplishment.

There is every reason for the sociologist interested in, say, hospitals or clinics to examine works on a variety of other institutional settings – schools, courts, welfare agencies, religious houses, police stations, university departments, or emergency services, for example. The precise selection of settings, and the lessons drawn from them, will depend on the analytic themes being pursued. Through such comparisons one might trace the variety of 'degradation ceremonies', the conditions of 'information control', or the moral evaluation of 'clients'. There is, in principle, no limit to such comparative work, and no prescriptions can be offered. The part played by serendipitous discoveries and unpredicted insights will be considerable here, as in all creative work. One must establish the right conditions for serendipity, however, and that includes attention to sources of many sorts. As Glaser and Strauss remark with characteristic enthusiasm:

theorizing begs of comparative analysis. The library offers a fantastic range of comparison groups, if only the researchers have the ingenuity to discover them. Of course, if their interest lies mainly with specific groups, and they wish to explore them in great depth, they may not always find sufficient documentation bearing on them. But if they are interested in generating theory, the library can be immensely useful – especially... for generating formal theory. Regardless of which type of theory the theorist is especially interested in, if he browses intelligently through the library (even without

much initial direction), he cannot help but have his theorizing impulses aroused by the happily bewildering, crazy-quilt pattern of social groups who speak to him.

(Glaser and Strauss 1967:179)

As in Goffman's work on topics like 'total institutions' (Goffman 1961), the imaginative use of secondary documentary sources allows for the elaboration of 'perspective by incongruity' (Burke 1964; Lofland 1980; Manning 1980): that is, the juxtaposition of instances and categories that are normally thought of as mutually exclusive. Such sources and devices are ideal for heuristic purposes: they can rejuvenate jaded imaginations and spark off novel conceptualizations. In his or her imagination the researcher is free to wander at large among diverse social scenes, gathering ideas, insights, hypotheses, and metaphors.

In addition to the sorts of documentary source we have referred to, in a literate culture it is possible to emulate researchers like Zorbaugh and draw on the ability of informants to generate written accounts specifically for research purposes. By such means one can gather information that complements other data sources in the field. Some versions of research have indeed drawn extensively on such indigenous written accounts. The entire tradition of 'mass observation' in Britain rested on the ability of literate volunteers to produce 'native' accounts of everyday life around them. The revival of the Mass Observation archive has again depended on such written documents:

The writing has been generated in response to a call from the Mass-Observation Archive, repeated at intervals over the years, for people to take part in a form of collective autobiography. No special skills, knowledge or qualifications are required, only an enjoyment of writing and a willingness to put thoughts and experiences on paper in a discursive way.

(Sheridan 1993:27)

This emphasis on the collection of demotic accounts, characteristic of Mass Observation, is but one version of wide possibilities for the collection of documentary evidence. The collection of diaries of different types is often an important adjunct to fieldwork. This strategy is advocated by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977), who used a diary technique in their study

of counter-cultural life-styles. They comment that while they were committed to participant observation, there were settings and activities that remained hard for them to observe directly. They therefore recruited insider informants, who kept detailed diaries over seven-day periods. Subsequently, the researchers subjected each informant to a lengthy and detailed interview, based on the diaries, 'in which he or she was asked not only to expand the reportage, but also was questioned on the less directly observable features of the events recorded, on their meanings, their propriety, typicality, connection with other events and so on' (1977:484).

Solicited accounts, such as diaries, are especially useful ways of eliciting information about the personal and the private. When carefully managed, and with suitable co-operation from informants, the diary can be used to record data that might not be forthcoming in face-to-face interviews or other data collection encounters. Sexual behaviour is one obvious example. For instance, one major study among gay males made extensive use of personal diaries in order to obtain information on the types and frequencies of sexual practices (Coxon 1988).

Similarly, Davies used personal diaries in her study of student midwives (Davies and Atkinson 1991). Her research shows some of the anxieties and coping strategies associated with status passage, as experienced nurses became novice midwives. It is noticeable from the responses Davies obtained that the students were able to use the research diaries as a kind of personal confessional, often addressing the researcher directly about private anxieties, sources of anger, and frustrations. These personal accounts were complemented by interviews and observations.

Diaries of this sort can also be used to pick up the minutiae of day-to-day social action. Robinson (1971), in the course of an investigation of the experience of illness, persuaded a series of married women in South Wales to keep a diary on the health status of the members of their household. The diaries were kept over a four-week period. They enabled Robinson to gain some insight into the daily symptomatic episodes and health-related decisions characteristic of everyday living. Many of the episodes reported were minor, though by no means insignificant, and could easily have been overlooked in retrospective accounts from, say, interviews or questionnaires.

This sort of procedure has been drawn on widely in work on

educational settings. Ball (1981), for instance, used diaries in combination with a range of other techniques, including sociometric questionnaires on friendship choices. He explicitly notes the value of combining such data sources:

The sociometric questionnaires failed to pick up the casual friendships that existed between pupils outside school, and made it appear that they had no such contact. In addition, they failed to pick up the cross-sex friendships that were established at this time. Perhaps the notion of 'friendships' is too narrow and ill-defined to account for these other kinds of adolescent relationships. . . . The entries in the diaries that several of the pupils wrote for me did, however, refer to these contacts.

(Ball 1981:100)

Research-generated personal documents of this sort embody the strengths and weaknesses of all such personal accounts. They are partial, and reflect the interests and perspectives of their authors. They are not to be privileged over other sources of information, nor are they to be discounted. Like other accounts, they should be read with regard to the context of their production, their intended or implied audiences, and the author's interests. Equally, one must note that a written account is not a debased version. Given the historical and intellectual roots of ethnographic work, one can often detect a romantic legacy that privileges the oral over the literate. It is easy (but wrong) to assume that the spoken account is more 'authentic' or more 'spontaneous' than the written.

We have discussed a range of documentary sources, but we have not yet paid attention to the investigation of social activities that directly involve the production of documents. Fieldwork in literate societies – especially in formal organizations – is likely to encompass the production and use of documents of various sorts. In the following section we turn to such activities and their documentary products.

DOCUMENTS IN CONTEXT

In some settings it would be hard to conceive of anything approaching an ethnographic account without some attention to documentary material in use. For instance, in his study of

locomotive engineers, Gamst drew on a range of documentary sources:

Some documents are published, for example: rule books, timetables, technical manuals for use of equipment, and instructional, regulating, and investigating publications of many kinds used by railroads, trade unions, government, and other firms. Unpublished documents include: official correspondence, reports in mimeographed and other forms, railroad operating bulletins and circulars, train orders, operating messages, and sundry other items.

(Gamst 1980:viii)

Whether or not one would draw on all such sources, one would certainly expect an ethnography of work on the railway to make full reference to such features as operating schedules and timetables (whatever disgruntled passengers might feel). A similar instance is provided by Zerubavel (1979) in his formal analysis of time in hospitals; he necessarily draws on such sources as timetables, work rosters and clinical rotations, as embodied in organizational documents. In many organizational settings the use and production of such documents are an integral part of everyday life.

Similarly, the ethnographic study of scientific work – especially the genre of ‘laboratory studies’ – cannot proceed adequately without acknowledgement of the work of writing. For instance, Latour and Woolgar (1979), in their classic study of a biomedical laboratory, document the centrality of written outputs. The scientific laboratory is fundamentally preoccupied with what they call ‘inscriptions’: that is, representations of natural phenomena, and the texts that are the products of the laboratory. Scientific papers are the currency that circulates within and between scientific research groups. One cannot address the complex social realities of scientific work and the production of scientific knowledge without paying serious attention to how and why scientific papers are written. The sociology of scientific knowledge is now replete with studies of written texts and other forms of representation (for example, Lynch and Woolgar 1990). And the same approach may be extended to all organizational and professional settings.

Douglas, writing in 1967, commented on the importance of ‘official’ data and enumerations in contemporary society, while

simultaneously regretting a relative neglect of such topics by sociological commentators:

Throughout the Western world today there exists a general belief that one knows something only when it has been counted. . . . Considering the importance of such statistics for the formation and testing of all kinds of common-sense and scientific theories of human action, it is a remarkable fact that there is at present very little systematic knowledge of the functioning of official statistics-keeping organizations.

(Douglas 1967:163)

Since Douglas made those observations, there has been an increasing amount of work along the lines suggested. However, in comparison with the sheer volume of ‘literate’ record-keeping and documentation in contemporary society, the coverage remains at best patchy. There is still, apparently, a tacit assumption that ethnographic research can appropriately represent contemporary social worlds as essentially oral cultures. Many studies of medical settings, for instance, focus exclusively on spoken interaction between medical practitioners and their patients, or between health professionals, with relatively little attention to activities of reading and writing. As Rees remarks: ‘Both medicine and medical sociology have to a large extent neglected the record. Indeed, so rarely is it mentioned that one could be forgiven for thinking that medicine is a purely oral discipline’ (Rees 1981:55).

Pettinari (1988) demonstrates the value of close attention to ‘writing’ in a medical setting. Here is provided a detailed account of how surgeons write their reports on operations, and in particular of how junior surgeons learn such occupational skills. There are ways in which the operation is represented competently in surgeons’ reports, and the appropriate forms are acquired over time with professional experience. The written account is a fundamental element in the everyday organization of surgical work. Its production and use are an important focus for an ethnographic account of surgery in general.

In a similar vein is Coffey’s ethnography of accountants in training (Coffey 1993). Based on fieldwork in an office of an international accounting firm, Coffey documents aspects of trainees’ acquisition of accountancy expertise. She studied book-keeping skills together with the trainees, and describes how

they acquired skill and judgment in reading documentary sources such as balance sheets. It would clearly be absurd to represent the world of the corporate accountant as non-literate – and indeed, as non-numerate – and a comprehensive ethnographic account must include reference to how organizational documents are read, interpreted, and used.

Because of the critique of 'official statistics' stemming largely from the ethnomethodological movement, some contemporary ethnographers may feel reluctant to engage in the systematic investigation or use of documentary data. We believe that they are right to treat seriously objections against 'official' data in that context, but that they would be wrong to ignore such materials. The point of departure for critics of 'data from official sources' was the contention that, traditionally, the tendency had been for sociologists to treat such information at face value, and not to pay adequate attention to its character as a social product.

It is, of course, a long-standing concern of sociologists that data derived from official sources may be inadequate in some way: that they may be subject to bias or distortion, or that bureaucracies' practical concerns may mean that data are not formulated in accordance with sociologists' interests. The ethnomethodologists, on the other hand, proposed more radical problems. Cicourel remarks, for instance:

For years sociologists have complained about 'bad statistics and distorted bureaucratic record-keeping' but have not made the procedures producing the 'bad' materials we label 'data' a subject of study. The basic assumption of conventional research on crime, delinquency and law is to view compliance and deviance as having their own ontological significance, and the measuring rod is some set of presumably 'clear' rules whose meaning is also 'ontological and epistemologically clear'.

(Cicourel 1976:331)

The argument is that rather than being viewed as more or less biased sources of data, official documents and enumerations should be treated as social products: they must be examined, not relied on uncritically as a research resource.

In this way attention is diverted towards the investigation of the socially organized practices whereby 'rates', categories, and statistics are produced by those whose job it is to generate

and interpret such artefacts. An early example of work in this vein was that of Sudnow (1965) on the production of 'normal crimes' in a Public Defender's office. Sudnow details the practical reasoning that informs how particular crimes or misdemeanours become categorized in the course of organized activities such as plea bargaining. Thus, Sudnow looks 'behind' the categories of official designations and crime rates – based on convictions – to the work of interpretation and negotiation that generates such statistics. In addition to Sudnow's ethnographic study of crime rates, other studies of the same period included those of Cicourel (1967) on juvenile justice, and of Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) on the organization of educational decision-making, the categorization of students, and their official biographies. More recent research in a similar vein includes a welter of constructionist accounts of social problems (see, for example, Holstein and Miller 1989). Similar in focus is Prior's study of the organization of death, with particular emphasis on the classification of causes of death (Prior 1985). In that context one should also note the observations of Prior and Bloor (1993) on the life-table as a cultural and historical artefact.

The origins of the 'official statistics' debate in sociology were potentially misleading, important though the general perspective was. Issues became polarized quite unnecessarily. The problems associated with data from official sources were important, and they related directly to classic problems of sociological analysis, such as the explanation of suicide (Douglas 1967; Atkinson 1978); but they were by no means unique. The careful ethnographer will be aware that all classes of data have their problems, all are produced socially, and none can be treated as unproblematically neutral or transparent representations of 'reality'. The recognition of reflexivity in social research entails such an awareness (Holstein and Miller 1993). As a result, there is no logical reason to regard documents or similar information as especially problematic or totally vitiated. As Bulmer remarks in this context:

Firstly, there is no logical reason why awareness of possible serious sources of error in official data should lead to their rejection for research purposes. It could as well point to the need for methodological work to secure their improvement. Secondly, a great many of the more thorough-going critiques

of official statistics relate to statistics of suicide, crime, and delinquency, areas in which there are special problems of reliable and valid measurement, notoriously so. The specific problems encountered in these fields are not, *ipso facto*, generalizable to all official statistics whatever their content. Thirdly, cases of the extensive use of official data – for example, by demographers – do not suggest that those who use them are unaware of the possible pitfalls in doing so. The world is not made up just of knowledgeable sceptics and naive hard-line positivists.

(Bulmer 1980:508)

In other words, then, while drawing some inspiration from the ethnomethodological critique of 'official statistics' and similar documentary sources, we by no means endorse a radical view which suggests that such sources are of no value. Data of this sort raise problems, to be sure, but they provide information as well as opening up a range of analytic problems. The ethnographer, like any other social scientist, may well draw on such documents and representations. Furthermore, he or she may be particularly well placed to engage in principled and systematic research bearing on their validity and reliability as data, through first-hand investigation of the contexts of their production and use.

Woods (1979) provides a good example of such an approach in his analysis of school reports. In writing these reports, Woods suggests, teachers draw on 'professional', 'educationist' conceptions of their task, rather than on the negotiated 'survival' ethos of everyday classroom life. Here models of the ideal student are reproduced, and teachers express their 'expert' evaluations of students' activities, motivation, and behaviour. The writing of such apparently authoritative accounts helps to 'cultivate the impression of detachment and omniscience, such as is attributed to the professions' (1979:185). Woods cites a number of striking examples where ideals of behaviour are announced in reports. For instance, the following clearly illustrate the teachers' appeals to norms of appropriate conduct for girls:

Apart from French and music, Sara's report is below standard for a 3rd year, 2nd term, pupil. Her slovenly ways, moodiness and inelegant speech are reflected in her work.

She is a cheerful girl who is rather boisterous, at times too much so. We must in this final year try to turn her into a quieter young lady.

Tends to make her presence heard forcibly and often uses rather strong language. I feel that if she can be made to see that this is not the behaviour we expect from young ladies, it will be to her advantage.

(Woods 1979:188)

Woods abstracts a number of typical categories that were used by teachers in formulating such normative characterizations:

<i>Desirable</i>	<i>Undesirable</i>
Concentration	Easily distracted
Quiet	Chatterbox
Industrious	Lazy
Willing/co-operative	Uncooperative
Responsible, mature	Immature
Courteous	Bad-mannered
Cheerful	Sullen
Obedient	Disobedient

(Woods 1979:173)

In many ways, as Woods points out, such typifications resemble those used by teachers in other contexts (such as staff-room conversations). It is important, however, to resist any temptation to condense all these different usages into a single category of 'teacher stereotypes'. In their differing social contexts, they may be formulated in different ways, for different practical purposes. The audiences for such statements differ, and their rhetoric may do the same accordingly.

Woods also touches on the fact that record-making can provide for the concrete display of 'professional' competence; such documents vouch for the fact that the work that should have been done has indeed been done, and renders that work accountable to superiors. Rees, in his work on medical records, makes the same point:

What the House Officer writes, and the way in which he goes about constructing the history and examination, is one way his seniors can make inferences about the standard of his other activities. The supposition others make is that a House

Officer who writes an organized and clearly thought out account of his work will be well organized in the way he carries out those activities. By paying attention to the construction of the account, and by ensuring that it conforms to the accepted model, the House Officer is able to influence one of the ways in which he will be judged by his seniors.

(Rees 1981:58-9)

This reflects Garfinkel's remarks on records, where he suggests that they should be thought of as 'contractual' rather than as 'actuarial'. That is, they are not literal accounts of 'what happened' but are tokens of the fact that the relevant personnel went about their business competently and reasonably. This is something taken up by Dingwall (1977b) in his study of the education of health visitors. He writes about the students' production of records of their visits to clients, and notes that since the actual conduct of the work is invisible to the supervisor, the record is the main focus of administrative control. Likewise, the record constitutes a major means of self-defence for the 'face-workers'.

In various ways, then, records have considerable importance in certain social settings. In some, the production of 'paperwork' is a major preoccupation. Even in organizations that have people-processing functions, this usually involves the translation of events into records of those events which can be filed, stored, and manipulated. Such files are a primary resource for members of the organization in getting through their everyday work. Often, the exigencies of record-making can play an important part in organizing the work that gets done, and the routines used to accomplish it. Records of previous encounters with clients can be used to formulate appropriate objectives and activities for a current consultation. As Dingwall writes of his student health visitors:

The good health visitor can derive sufficient data from the face sheet to identify the relevant areas of her knowledge about clients and the tasks she should be accomplishing in a visit. Unusual events are flagged in various ways. Thus, a child who is at risk may be marked by a red star on the card. Particular social problems may be pencilled on the cover.

(Dingwall 1977b:112)

Heath (1981) has also commented on this sort of use of medical records in the context of doctor-patient encounters. He explains how general practitioners use their record cards to open the encounter with the patient: 'It is often through the elaboration of the appropriate record's contents, prior to the initiation of first topic, that the doctor is able to render the relevant characteristics of the patient, and thereby design a "successful" first topic initiator' (1981:85).

Records, then, are used to establish actors as 'cases' with situated identities, which conform to 'normal' categories or deviate from them in identifiable ways. Records are made and used in accordance with organizational routines, and depend for their intelligibility on shared cultural assumptions. Records construct a 'documentary reality' that, by virtue of its very documentation, is often granted a sort of privilege. Although their production is a socially organized activity, official records have a certain anonymity, which warrants their treatment by members as objective, factual statements rather than as mere personal belief, opinion, or guesswork. (It is, of course, the case that some records may contain specific entries, such as differential medical or psychiatric diagnoses, that are explicitly flagged as tentative.)

It should be apparent from what we have outlined already that there are many locales where literate social activity is of some social significance, and may indeed be of major importance. Modern industrial and administrative bureaucracies, and professional or educational settings, are obvious cases in point. It requires little reflection to remind oneself of how pervasive are the activities of writing and reading written documents. And even in the case of settings where documents are not a central feature there is often an enormous amount of written material available that can be an invaluable research resource.

The presence and significance of documentary products provide the ethnographer with a rich vein of analytic topics, as well as a valuable source of information. Such topics include: How are documents written? How are they read? Who writes them? Who reads them? For what purposes? On what occasions? With what outcomes? What is recorded? What is omitted? What does the writer seem to take for granted about the reader(s)? What do readers need to know in order to make sense of them? The list can be extended readily, and the exploration of such questions would lead the ethnographer inexorably towards a

systematic examination of each and every aspect of everyday life in the setting in question.

The ethnographer who takes no account of such matters, on the other hand, ignores at his or her peril these features of a literate culture. There is nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, by representing such a culture as if it were an essentially oral tradition. In the scrutiny of documentary sources, the ethnographer thus recognizes and builds on his or her socialized competence as a member of a literate culture. Not only does the researcher read and write, but he or she also reflects on the very activities of reading and writing in social settings. Thus, such everyday activities are incorporated into the ethnographer's topics of inquiry as well as furnishing analytic and interpretative resources.

Recording and organizing data

FIELDNOTES

Fieldnotes are the traditional means in ethnography for recording observational data. In accordance with the ethnographer's commitment to discovery, fieldnotes consist of relatively concrete descriptions of social processes and their contexts. The aim is to capture these in their integrity, noting their various features and properties, though what is recorded will clearly depend on some general sense of what is relevant to the foreshadowed research problems. While it is impossible to provide any description without some principle of selecting what is and is not important, there are advantages (as well as some disadvantages) in adopting a wide focus. At least prior to the closing stages of data collection, then, there is usually no attempt at the point of observation to code systematically what is observed in terms of existing analytical categories. Indeed, the main purpose is to *identify* and *develop* what seem to be the most appropriate categories.

The writing of fieldnotes is not something that is (or should be) shrouded in mystery. It is not an especially esoteric activity. On the other hand, it does constitute a central research activity, and it should be carried out with as much care and self-conscious awareness as possible. A research project can be as well organized and as theoretically sophisticated as you like, but with inadequate note-taking the exercise will be like using an expensive camera with poor-quality film. In both cases, the resolution will prove unsatisfactory, and the results will be poor. Only foggy pictures result.

The completion of fieldnotes is not an entirely straightforward matter, then. Like most aspects of intellectual craft, some care