Part One
ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Ethnographic fieldwork is the hallmark of cultural anthropology. Whether in a jungle village in Peru or on the streets of New York, the anthropologist goes to where people live and "does fieldwork." This means participating in activities, asking questions, eating strange foods, learning a new language, watching ceremonies, taking fieldnotes, washing clothes, writing letters home, tracing out genealogies, observing play, interviewing informants, and hundreds of other things. This vast range of activities often obscures the nature of the most fundamental task of all fieldwork—doing ethnography.

Ethnography is the work of describing a culture. The central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native point of view. The goal of ethnography, as Malinowski put it, is "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world" (1922:25). Fieldwork, then, involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different. Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*. Consider the following illustration.

George Hicks set out, in 1965, to learn about another way of life, that of the mountain people in an Appalachian valley (1976). His goal was to discover their culture, to learn to see the world from their perspective. With his family he moved into Little Laurel Valley, his daughter attended the local school, and his wife became one of the local Girl Scout leaders. Hicks soon discovered that stores and storekeepers were at the center of the valley's communication system, providing the most important social arena for the entire valley. He learned this by watching what other people did, by following their example, and slowly becoming part of the groups that congregated daily in the stores. He writes:

At least once each day I would visit several stores in the valley, and sit in on the groups of gossiping men or, if the storekeeper happened to be alone, perhaps attempt to clear up puzzling points about kinship obligations. I found these hours, particularly those spent in the presence of the two or three excellent storytellers in the Little Laurel, thoroughly enjoyable. . . . At other times, I helped a number of local men gather corn or hay, build sheds, cut trees, pull and pack galax, and search for rich stands of huckleberries. When I needed aid in, for example, repairing frozen water pipes, it was readily and cheerfully provided (1976:3).

In order to discover the hidden principles of another way of life, the researcher must become a *student*. Storekeepers and storytellers and local farmers become *teachers*. Instead of studying the "climate," the "flora," and the "fauna" that made up the environment of this Appalachian valley, Hicks tried to discover how these mountain people defined and evaluated trees and galax and huckleberries. He did not attempt to describe social life in terms of what most Americans know about "marriage," "family," and "friendship"; instead he sought to discover how these mountain people identified relatives and friends. He tried to learn the obligations they felt toward kinsmen and discover how they felt about friends. Discovering the *insider's* view is a different species of knowledge from one that rests mainly on the outsider's view, even when the outsider is a trained social scientist.

Consider another example, this time from the perspective of a non-Western ethnographer. Imagine an Eskimo woman setting out to learn the culture of Macalester College. What would she, so well schooled in the rich heritage of Eskimo culture, have to do in order to understand the culture of Macalester College students, faculty, and staff? How would she discover the patterns that made up their lives? How would she avoid imposing Eskimo ideas, categories, and values on everything she saw?

First, and perhaps most difficult, she would have to set aside her belief in *naive realism*, the almost universal belief that all people define the *real* world of objects, events, and living creatures in pretty much the same way. Human languages may differ from one society to the next, but behind the strange words and sentences, all people are talking about the same things. The naive realist assumes that love, snow, marriage, worship, animals, death, food, and hundreds of other things have essentially the same meaning to all human beings. Although few of us would admit to such ethnocentrism, the assumption may unconsciously influence our research. Ethnography starts with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance. "I don't know how the people at Macalester College understand their world. That remains to be discovered."

This Eskimo woman would have to begin by learning the language spoken by students, faculty, and staff. She could stroll the campus paths, sit in classes, and attend special events, but only if she consciously tried to see things from the native point of view would she grasp their perspective. She would need to observe and listen to first-year students during their week-long orientation program. She would have to stand in line during registration, listen to students discuss the classes they hoped to get, and visit departments to watch faculty advising students on course selection. She would want to observe secretaries typing, janitors sweeping, and maintenance personnel plowing snow from walks. She would watch the more than 1600 students crowd into the post office area to open their tiny mailboxes, and she would listen to their comments about junk mail and letters from home and no mail at all. She would attend faculty meetings to watch what

went on, recording what professors and administrators said and how they behaved. She would sample various courses, attend "keggers" on weekends, read the *Mac Weekly,* and listen by the hour to students discussing things like their "relationships," the "football team," and "work study." She would want to learn the *meanings* of all these things. She would have to listen to the members of this college community, watch what they did, and participate in their activities to learn such meanings.

The essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand. Some of these meanings are directly expressed in language; many are taken for granted and communicated only indirectly through word and action. But in every society people make constant use of these complex meaning systems to organize their behavior, to understand themselves and others, and to make sense out of the world in which they live. These systems of meaning constitute their culture; ethnography always implies a theory of culture.

CULTURE

When ethnographers study other cultures, they must deal with three fundamental aspects of human experience: what people do, what people know, and the things people make and use. When each of these are learned and shared by members of some group, we speak of them as *cultural behavior, cultural knowledge,* and *cultural artifacts.* Whenever you do ethnographic fieldwork, you will want to distinguish among these three, although in most situations they are usually mixed together. Let's try to unravel them.

Recently I took a commuter train from a western suburb to downtown Chicago. It was late in the day, and when I boarded the train only a handful of people were scattered about the car. Each was engaged in a common form of *cultural behavior: reading.* Across the aisle a man held the *Chicago Tribune* out in front of him, looking intently at the small print and every now and then turning the pages noisily. In front of him a young woman held a paperback book about twelve inches from her face. I could see her head shift slightly as her eyes moved from the bottom of one page to the top of the next. Near the front of the car a student was reading a large textbook and using a pen to underline words and sentences. Directly in front of me I noticed a man looking at the ticket he had purchased and reading it. It took me an instant to survey this scene and then I settled back, looked out the window, and read a billboard advertisement for a plumbing servce proclaiming it would open any plugged drains. All of us were engaged in the same kind of cultural behavior: reading.

This common activity depended on a great many *cultural artifacts,* the things people shape or make from natural resources. I could see artifacts like

books and tickets and newspapers and billboards, all of which contained tiny black marks arranged into intricate patterns called "letters." And these tiny artifacts were arranged into larger patterns of words, sentences, and paragraphs. Those of us on that commuter train could read, in part, because of still other artifacts: the bark of trees made into paper; steel made into printing presses; dyes of various colors made into ink; glue used to hold book pages together; large wooden frames to hold billboards. If an ethnographer wanted to understand the full cultural meaning of reading in our society, it would involve a careful study of these and many other cultural artifacts.

Although we can easily see behavior and artifacts, they represent only the thin surface of a deep lake. Beneath the surface, hidden from view, lies a vast reservoir of *cultural knowledge*. Think for a moment what the people on that train needed to know in order to read. First, they had to know the grammatical rules for at least one language. Then they had to learn what all the little marks on paper represented. They also had to know the meaning of space and lines and pages. They had learned cultural rules like "move your eyes from left to right, from the top of the page to the bottom." They had to know that a sentence at the bottom of a page continues on the top of the next page. The man reading a newspaper had to know a great deal about columns and the spaces between columns and what headlines mean. All of us needed to know what kinds of messages were intended by whoever wrote what we read. If a person cannot distinguish the importance of a message on a billboard from one that comes in a letter from a spouse or child, problems would develop. I knew how to recognize when other people were reading. We all knew it was impolite to read aloud on a train. We all knew how to feel when reading things like jokes or calamitous news in the paper. Our culture has a large body of shared knowledge that people learn and use to engage in this behavior called *reading* and make proper use of the artifacts connected with it.

Although cultural knowledge is hidden from view, it is of fundamental importance because we all use it constantly to generate behavior and interpret our experience. Cultural knowledge is so important that I will frequently use the broader term *culture* when speaking about it. Indeed, I will define culture as *the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior*. Let's consider another example to see how people use their culture to interpret experience and do things.

One afternoon in 1973 I came across the following news item in the *Minneapolis Tribune:*

CROWD MISTAKES RESCUE ATTEMPT, ATTACKS POLICE

Nov. 23, 1973. Hartford, Connecticut. Three policemen giving a heart massage and oxygen to a heart attack victim Friday were attacked by a crowd of 75 to 100 persons who apparently did not realize what the policemen were doing.

Other policemen fended off the crowd of mostly Spanish-speaking residents until an ambulance arrived. Police said they tried to explain to the crowd what they were doing, but the crowd apparently thought they were beating the woman.

Despite the policemen's efforts the victim, Evangelica Echevacria, 59, died.

Here we see people using their culture. Members of two different groups observed the same event but their *interpretations* were drastically different. The crowd used their cultural knowledge (a) to interpret the behavior of the policemen as cruel and (b) to act on the woman's behalf to put a stop to what they perceived as brutality. They had acquired the cultural principles for acting and interpreting things in this way through a particular shared experience.

The policemen, on the other hand, used their cultural knowledge (a) to interpret the woman's condition as heart failure and their own behavior as a life-saving effort and (b) to give her cardiac massage and oxygen. They used artifacts like an oxygen mask and an ambulance. Furthermore, they interpreted the actions of the crowd in an entirely different manner from how the crowd saw their own behavior. The two groups of people each had elaborate cultural rules for interpreting their experience and for acting in emergency situations, and the conflict arose, at least in part, because these cultural rules were so different.

We can now diagram this definition of culture and see more clearly the relationships among knowledge, behavior, and artifacts (Figure 1). By identifying cultural knowledge as fundamental, we have merely shifted the emphasis from behavior and artifacts to their *meaning*. The ethnographer observes behavior but goes beyond it to inquire about the meaning of that behavior. The ethnographer sees artifacts and natural objects but goes beyond them to discover what meanings people assign to these objects. The ethnographer observes and records emotional states but goes beyond them to discover the meaning of fear, anxiety, anger, and other feelings.

As represented in Figure 1, cultural knowledge exists at two levels of consciousness. *Explicit culture* makes up part of what we know, a level of knowledge people can communicate about with relative ease. When George Hicks asked storekeepers and others in Little Laurel Valley about their relatives, he discovered that any adult over fifty could tell him the genealogical connections among large numbers of people. They knew how to trace kin relationships and the cultural rules for appropriate behavior among kinsmen. All of us have acquired large areas of cultural knowledge such as this which we can talk about and make explicit.

At the same time, a large portion of our cultural knowledge remains *tacit*, outside our awareness. Edward Hall has done much to elucidate the nature of tacit cultural knowledge in his books *The Silent Language* (1959) and *The Hidden Dimension* (1966). The way each culture defines space often occurs at the level of tacit knowledge. Hall points out that all of us have acquired
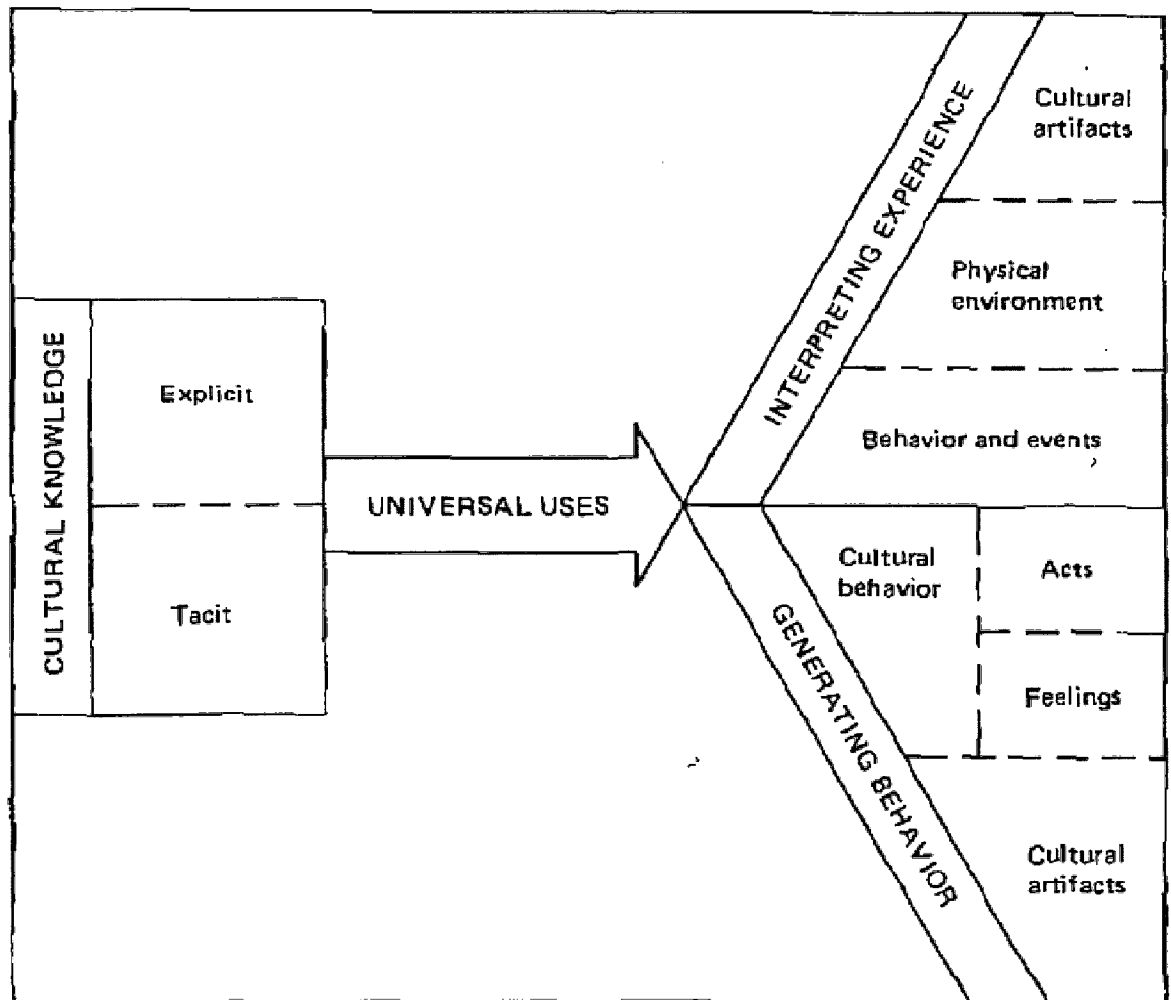
FIGURE 1. The Two Levels of Cultural Knowledge

thousands of spatial cues about how close to stand to others, how to arrange furniture, when to touch others, and when to feel cramped inside of a room. Without realizing that our tacit culture is operating, we begin to feel uneasy when someone from another culture stands too close, breathes on us when talking, touches us, or when we find furniture arranged in the center of the room rather than around the edges. Ethnography is the study of both explicit and tacit cultural knowledge; the research strategies discussed in this book are designed to reveal both levels.

The concept of culture as acquired knowledge has much in common with symbolic interactionism, a theory that seeks to explain human behavior in terms of meanings. Symbolic interactionism has its roots in the work of sociologists like Cooley, Mead, and Thomas (Manis and Meltzer 1967). Blumer has identified three premises on which this theory rests (1969).

The first premise is that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (1969:2). The policemen and the crowd in our earlier example interacted on the basis of the meanings things had for them. The geographic location, the types of people, the police car,

the policemen's movements, the sick woman's behavior, and the activities of the onlookers—all were *symbols* with special meanings. People did not act toward the things themselves, but to their meanings.

The second premise underlying symbolic interactionism is that the "meaning of such things is derived from, or arise out of, the social interaction that on has with one's fellows" (Blumer 1969:2). Culture, as a shared system of meanings, is learned, revised, maintained, and defined in the context of people interacting. The crowd came to share their definitions of police behavior through interacting with one another and through past associations with the police. The police officers acquired the cultural meanings they used through interacting with other officers and members of the community. The culture of each group was inextricably bound up with the social life of their particular communities.

The third premise of symbolic interactionism is that "meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person dealing with the things he encounters" (Blumer 1969:2). Neither the crowd nor the policemen were automatons, driven by their culture to act in the way they did. Rather, they used their cultural knowledge to interpret and evaluate the situation. At any moment, a member of the crowd might have interpreted the behavior of the policemen in a slightly different way, leading to a different reaction.

We may see this interpretive aspect more clearly if we think of culture as a cognitive map. In the recurrent activities that make up everyday life, we refer to this map. It serves as a guide for acting and for interpreting our experience; it does not compel us to follow a particular course. Like this brief drama between the policemen, a dying woman, and the crowd, much of life is a series of unanticipated social occasions. Although our culture may not include a detailed map for such occasions, it does provide principles for interpreting and responding to them. Rather than a rigid map that people must follow, culture is best thought of as

a set of principles for creating dramas, for writing script, and of course, for recruiting players and audiences. . . . Culture is not simply a cognitive map that people acquire, in whole or in part, more or less accurately, and then learn to read. People are not just map-readers; they are map-makers. People are cast out into imperfectly charted, continually revised sketch maps. Culture does not provide a cognitive map, but rather a set of principles for map making and navigation. Different cultures are like different schools of navigation designed to cope with different terrains and seas (Frake 1977:6–7).

If we take *meaning* seriously, as symbolic interactionists argue we must, it becomes necessary to study meaning carefully. We need a theory of meaning and a specific methodology designed for the investigation of it. This book presents such a theory and methodology.

MAKING CULTURAL INFERENCES

Culture, the knowledge that people have learned as members of a group, cannot be observed directly. In his study of glider pilots, for example, Rybski (1974) observed pilots at the airport and in their gliders, watching them take off, maneuver, and land. But only by "getting inside their heads" could he find out what flying meant to these glider pilots. If we want to find out what people know, we must get inside their heads. Although difficult, "this should not be an impossible feat: our subjects themselves accomplished it when they learned their culture and became 'native actors.' They had no mysterious avenues of perception not available to us as investigators" (Frake 1964a:133).

People everywhere learn their culture by making inferences. We generally use three types of information to make cultural inferences. We observe what people do (cultural behavior); we observe things people make and use such as clothes and tools (cultural artifacts); and we listen to what people say (speech messages). Every ethnographer employs this same process of inference to go beyond what is seen and heard to find out what people know. Making inferences involves reasoning from evidence (what we perceive) or from premises (what we assume). Children acquire their culture by watching and listening to adults and then making inferences about the cultural rules for behavior; with the acquisition of language, the learning accelerates. Whenever we are in a new situation we have to make inferences about what people know. An American student studying in a European country observed all the other students in a class immediately rise to their feet when the professor entered the room. She made an inference—"standing recognizes the authority or position of the teacher." Later, the students explained further to her the importance of standing when a professor entered the class and gave reasons for doing it. Through what they said she made additional inferences about their cultural knowledge.

In doing fieldwork, you will constantly be making cultural inferences from what people say, from the way they act, and from the artifacts they use. At first, each cultural inference is only a hypothesis about what people know. These hypotheses must be tested over and over again until the ethnographer becomes relatively certain that people share a particular system of cultural meanings. None of the sources for making inferences—behavior, speech, artifacts—are fool-proof, but together they can lead to an adequate cultural description. And we can evaluate the adequacy of the description "by the ability of a stranger to the culture (who may be the ethnographer) to use the ethnographer's statements as instructions for appropriately anticipating the scenes of the society" (Frake 1964b:112). (See Figure 2.)

Sometimes cultural knowledge is communicated by language in such a direct manner that we can make inferences with great ease. Instructions to children such as "wash your hands before dinner" and "don't go swimming
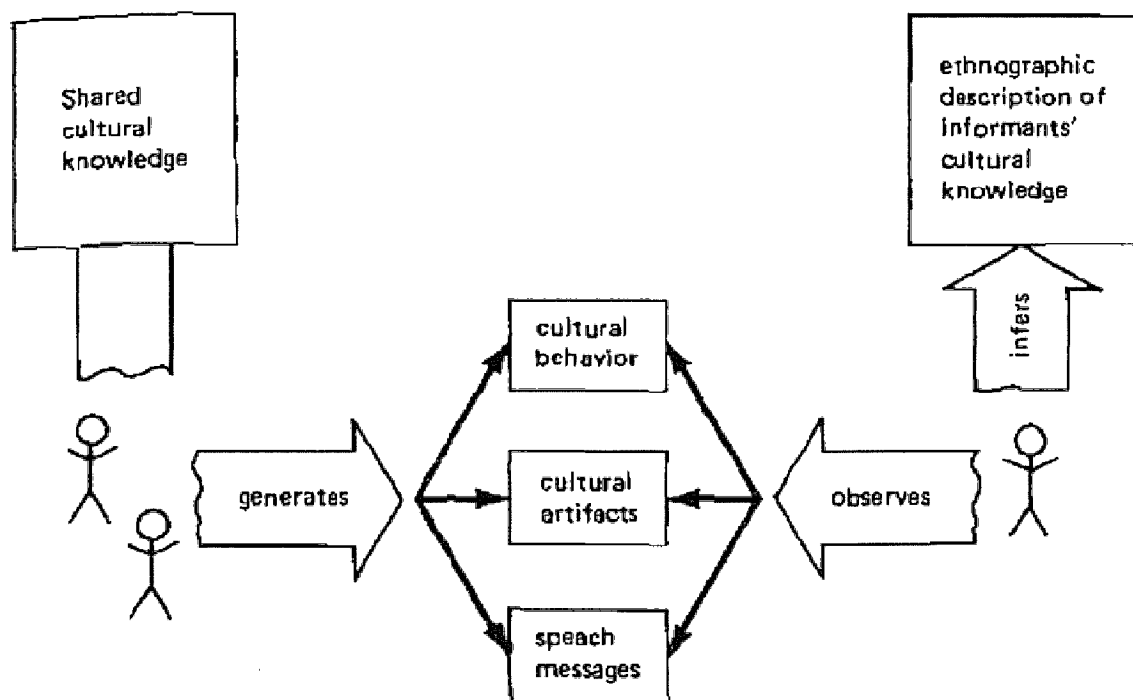
FIGURE 2. Making Cultural Inferences

after you eat or you'll get cramps" are representative expressions of such *explicit cultural knowledge*. In his study of glider pilots, Rybski (1947) learned from informants that the flying they did was called "soaring" and involved three distinct forms: *ridge soaring, wave soaring,* and *thermalling*. Informants could talk easily about this cultural knowledge. It is important to point out that studying explicit culture through the way people talk does not eliminate the need for making inferences. It only makes the task less difficult.

However, as I said earlier, a large part of any culture consists of *tacit knowledge*. Informants always know things they cannot talk about or express in direct ways. The ethnographer must then make inferences about what people know by listening carefully to what they say, by observing their behavior, and by studying artifacts and their use. With reference to discovering tacit cultural knowledge, Malinowski wrote:

The native takes his fundamental assumptions for granted, and if he reasons or inquires into matters of belief, it would be always in regard to details and concrete applications. Any attempts on the part of the ethnographer to induce his informant to formulate such a general statement would have to be in the form of leading questions of the worst type because in these leading questions he would have to introduce words and concepts essentially foreign to the native. Once the informant grasped their meaning, his outlook would be warped by our own ideas having been poured into it. Thus, the ethnographer must draw the generalizations for himself, must formulate the abstract statement without the direct help of a native informant (1950:396).

Every ethnographer makes use of what people say in seeking to describe their culture. Both explicit and tacit cultural knowledge are revealed through speech, whether in casual comments or lengthy interviews. Because language is the primary means for transmitting culture from one generation to the next, much of any culture is encoded in linguistic form. In the companion volume, *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979), I have focused exclusively on making inferences from what people say. In this book (*Participant Observation*), I have focused more on making inferences from what people do (cultural behavior) and what they make and use (cultural artifacts). Because every ethnographer who does participant observation will record things people say, I have also included some discussion of making inferences from what they say (speech messages).

Ethnography is a culture-studying culture. It consists of a body of knowledge that includes research techniques, ethnographic theory, and hundreds of cultural descriptions. It seeks to build a systematic understanding of all human cultures from the perspectives of those who have learned them. Ethnography is based on an assumption that warrants careful examination: knowledge of all cultures is valuable. To what end does the ethnographer collect information? For what reasons do we try to find out what people have to know to traverse the polar cap on dog sled, live in remote Melanesian villages, or work in New York skyscrapers? Why should anyone do ethnography?

UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN SPECIES

Let's begin with the goal of scientific anthropology: to describe and explain the regularities and variations in social behavior. Perhaps the most striking feature of human beings is their diversity. Why does a single species exhibit such variation, creating different marriage patterns, holding different values, eating different foods, rearing children in different ways, believing in different gods, and pursuing different goals? If we are to understand this diversity, we must begin by carefully describing it. Most of the diversity in the human species results from the cultures each human group has created and passed on from one generation to the next. Cultural description, the central task of ethnography, is the first step in understanding the human species.

It is one thing to describe differences, another to account for them. Explanation of cultural differences depends, in part, on making cross-cultural comparisons, but this task, in turn, depends on adequate ethnographic studies. Much of the comparative work in anthropology has been hampered by shoddy ethnographies, often caused by investigations that impose Western concepts onto non-Western cultures, thereby distorting the results. Comparison not only reveals differences but also similarities, what is common among all cultures of the world. In the most general sense, then, ethnography contributes directly to both description and explanation of regularities and variations in human social behavior.

Many of the social sciences have more limited objectives. In any study of human behavior ethnography has an important role to play. We can identify several specific contributions.

Informing Culture-Bound Theories

Each culture provides people with a way of seeing the world, by categorizing, encoding, and otherwise defining the world in which they live. Culture includes assumptions about the nature of reality as well as specific information about that reality. It includes values that specify the good, the true, and the believable. Whenever people learn a culture, they are to some extent imprisoned without knowing it. Anthropologists speak of this mode of existence as being "culture-bound," that is, living inside of a particular reality that is taken for granted as "the reality."

Social scientists and their theories are no less culture-bound than other human beings. Western educational systems infuse all of us with ways of interpreting experience. Tacit assumptions about the world find their way into the theories of every academic discipline—literary criticism, physical science, history, and all of the social sciences. Ethnography alone seeks to document the existence of *alternative* realities and to describe these realities in their own terms. Thus, it can provide a corrective for theories that arise in Western social science.

Take, for example, the theory of cultural deprivation, an idea that arose in concrete form in the United States during the 1960s to explain the educational failure of many children. In order to account for their lack of achievement, it was proposed that they were "culturally deprived." Studies of cultural deprivation were undertaken, mostly focusing on Indians, blacks, chicanos, and other cultural groups. This theory can be confirmed by studying children from these cultures through the theory's protective screen. However, ethnographic research on the cultures of so-called culturally deprived children reveals a different story. They have elaborate, sophisticated, and adaptive cultures that are simply different from the ones espoused by the educational system. Although still supported in some quarters, this theory is culture-bound. Cultural deprivation is merely a way of saying that people are deprived of "my culture." Certainly no one would argue that such children do not speak adequate Spanish or Black English, that they do not do well the things that are considered rewarding in *their* cultures. But the culture-bound nature of psychological and sociological theories extends far beyond notions of cultural deprivation. All theories developed in Western behavioral science are based on tacit premises of Western culture, usually the middle-class version most typical of professionals.

Ethnography in itself does not escape being culture-bound. However, it provides descriptions that reveal the range of explanatory models created by human beings. It can serve as a beacon that shows the culture-bound nature of social science theories. It says to all investigators of human behavior, "Before you impose your theories on the people you study, find out how those people define the world." Ethnography can describe in detail the folk theories that have been tested in actual living situations over generations of

time. And as we come to understand personality, society, individuals, and environments from the perspective of other than the professional scientific cultures, it will lead to a sense of epistemological humility; as we become aware of the tentative nature of our theories, we are thus able to revise them to be less ethnocentric.

Discovering Grounded Theory

Much social science research has been directed toward the task of *testing* formal theories. One alternative to such theories, and a strategy that reduces ethnocentrism, is the development of theories grounded in empirical data of cultural description, what Glaser and Strauss (1967) have called "grounded theory." Ethnography offers an excellent strategy for discovering grounded theory. For example, an ethnography of successful school children from minority cultures in the United States could develop grounded theories about school performance. One such study revealed that, rather than being culturally deprived, such children are *culturally overwhelmed*, that success in school performance required the capacity to become *bicultural*. But grounded theory can be developed in any substantive area of human experience. Personality theories can be informed by careful ethnographies of folk medical theories. Decision-making theory can be informed by first discovering the cultural rules for decision-making in a particular organization. The list could go on and on, for almost every area of social science theory has its counterpart in the taken-for-granted cultures of the world.

Understanding Complex Societies

Until recently, ethnography was largely relegated to small, non-Western cultures. The value of studying these societies was readily accepted—after all, we didn't know much about them and we couldn't conduct surveys or experiments, so ethnography seemed appropriate. However, the value of ethnography in understanding our own society was often overlooked.

Our culture has imposed on us a myth about our complex society—the myth of the melting pot. Social scientists have talked about "American culture" as if it included a set of values shared by everyone living in the United States. It has become increasingly clear that our culture is not homogeneous, that people who live in modern, complex societies actually live by many different cultural codes. Not only is this true of the most obvious ethnic groups but each occupation group also exhibits cultural differences. Our schools have their own cultural systems, and even within the same institution people see things differently. Consider the language, values, clothing styles, and activities of high school students in contrast to high school teachers and staff. The difference in their cultures is striking, yet often ignored. Guards and prisoners in jails, patients and physicians in hospitals, the el-

derly, the various religious groups—all have cultural perspectives. The physically handicapped live in a different world from those not handicapped even though they live in the same town. As people move from one cultural scene to another in complex societies, they employ different cultural rules. Ethnography offers one of the best ways to understand these complex features of modern life. It can show the range of cultural differences and how people with diverse perspectives interact.

Understanding Human Behavior

Human behavior, in contrast to animal behavior, has meanings to the actor, meanings that can be discovered. We can ask a person collecting seashells about her actions, what she is doing, why she is doing it. Even when people participate in carefully contrived scientific experiments, they define the experiment and their involvement in it. And these definitions are always influenced by specific cultural backgrounds. Any explanation of behavior which excludes what the actors themselves know, how they define their actions, remains a partial explanation that distorts the human situation. The tools of ethnography offer one means to deal with this fact of meaning.

One end of ethnography, then, is to understand the human species. Ethnography yields empirical data about the lives of people in specific situations. It allows us to see alternative realities and modify our culture-bound theories of human behavior. But is knowledge for understanding, even scientific understanding, enough? I believe it is not. However, ethnography offers other dividends to anyone involved in culture change, social planning, or trying to solve a wide range of human problems.

ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE SERVICE OF HUMANKIND

There was a time when "knowledge for knowledge's sake" was sufficient reason for doing social science, at least for those who believed in the inevitability of progress and the inherent goodness of science. But that time has long since passed. One reason lies in the changes in the human situation:

In the last few decades, mankind has been overcome by the most change in its entire history. Modern science and technology have created so close a network of communication, transport, economic interdependence—and potential nuclear destruction—that planet earth, on its journey through infinity, has acquired the intimacy, the fellowship, and the vulnerability of a spaceship (Ward, 1966:vii).

That vulnerability makes our responsibility clearer if not easier. To ignore this vulnerability is like astronauts studying the effects of boredom and weightlessness on fellow astronauts while the spaceship runs out of oxygen, exhausts its fuel supply, and the crew verges on mutiny.

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In addition, scientists can no longer ignore the uses to which research findings are put. This applies not only to research in genetics and atomic energy but also to ethnographic studies. Cultural descriptions can be used to oppress people or to set them free. I know of one case in which the South African government used ethnographic descriptions to make its apartheid policy more effective. I knew that my own descriptions of the culture of skid row drunks could be used by police departments to more easily arrest these men. That knowledge placed a special responsibility on me regarding where and when to publish the ethnography. In our world-become-spaceship where knowledge is power, ethnographers must consider the potential uses of their research.

In spite of these facts, some people continue to maintain that scientists need not concern themselves with the practical relevance of their research, a view that is deeply rooted in the academic value system. More than forty years ago, in his classic book *Knowledge for What?*, Robert Lynd described the dichotomy.

The time outlooks of the scholar-scientist and of the practical men of affairs who surround the world of science tend to be different. The former works in a long, leisurely world in which the hands of the clock crawl slowly over a vast dial; to him, the precise penetration of the unknown seems too grand an enterprise to be hurried, and one simply works ahead within study walls relatively sound-proofed against the clamorous urgencies of the world outside. In this time-universe of the scholar-scientist certain supporting assumptions have grown up such as "impersonal objectivity," "aloofness from the strife of rival values," and the self-justifying goodness of "new knowledge" about anything, big or little. . . . The practical man of affairs, on the other hand, works by a small time-dial over which the second-hand of immediacy hurries incessantly. "Never mind the long past and the infinite future," insists the clattering little monitor, "but do this, fix this—now, before tomorrow morning." It has been taken for granted, in general, that there is no need to synchronize the two time-worlds of the scholar-scientist and of the practical man. Immediate relevance has not been regarded as so important as ultimate relevance; and, in the burgeoning nineteenth-century world which viewed all time as moving within the Master System of Progress, there was seemingly large justification for this optimistic tolerance (1939:1–2).

One force at work today that makes it imperative for ethnographers to synchronize these two perspectives comes from the people we study. In many places we can no longer collect cultural information from people merely to fill the bank of scientific knowledge. Informants are asking, even demanding, "Ethnography for what? Do you want to study our culture to build your theories of poverty? Can't you see that our children go hungry? Do you want to study folk beliefs about water witching? What about the new nuclear power plant that contaminates our drinking water with radioactive wastes? Do you want to study kinship terms to build ever more esoteric the-

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ories? What about our elderly kinsmen who live in poverty and loneliness? Do you want to study our schools to propose new theories of learning? Our most pressing need is for schools that serve our children's needs in the language they understand."

One way to synchronize the needs of people and the goals of ethnography is to consult with informants to determine urgent research topics. Instead of beginning with theoretical problems, the ethnographer can begin with informant-expressed needs, then develop a research agenda to relate these topics to the enduring concerns within social science. Surely the needs of informants should have equal weight with "scientific interest" in setting ethnographic priorities. More often than not, informants can identify urgent research more clearly than the ethnographer. In my own study of skid row men (Spradley 1970), for example, I began with an interest in the social structure of an alcoholism treatment center. My informants, longtime drunks who were spending life sentences on the installment plan in the Seattle city jail, suggested more urgent research possibilities. "Why don't you study what goes on in that jail?" they would ask. And so I shifted my goals to studying the culture of the jail, the social structure of inmates, and how drunks were oppressed by the jail system. My theoretical and scholarly interests could have been served by either project; the needs of tramps were best served by studying the oppression they experienced in jail.

Another way to synchronize human needs with the accumulation of scientific knowledge is through what I call "strategic research." Instead of beginning ethnographic projects from an interest in some particular culture, area of the world, or theoretical concern, strategic research begins with an interest in human problems. These problems suggest needed changes and information needed to make such changes. For example, in a discussion on strategies for revitalizing American culture, I suggested the following priorities for strategic research (Spradley 1976a:111):

1. A health care system that provides adequate care for all members of the society.
2. The provision of economic resources for all people sufficient to eliminate poverty and provided in a way that does not destroy the privacy and dignity of any recipient.
3. Equal rights and opportunities for all classes of citizens, including women, blacks, native Americans, chicanos, the elderly, children, and others.
4. Public institutions, such as schools, courts, and governments, that are designed for a multicultural constituency.
5. Socially responsible corporations that operate in the public interest as well as in the private interest.
6. Zero population growth.

7. An ecologically balanced economy based on recycling and responsible for the protection of natural resources.
8. Education for all people, at every stage of life, that equips them to cope with the complexity of choice in our rapidly changing society.
9. Work roles and environments that contribute directly to the workers' sense of meaning and purpose in life.
10. Opportunity for alternative career patterns and more flexible life-cycle sequencing with multiple involvement for youth, retired persons, and the elderly.

After identifying a general area such as an adequate health care system, strategic research translates that identification into a specific research project, which can then lead to consultation with informants and a strategic project. For example, anthropologist Oswald Werner, of Northwestern University, has been conducting ethnographic research among the Navaho for many years. In consultation with informants and out of a concern for adequate medical care for the Navaho, he selected a strategic research project: the development of an encyclopedia of Navaho medical knowledge, of which three volumes in a ten-volume cultural description have been completed. The project has many immediate uses both in preserving Navaho medical knowledge and also in adapting Western medicine for the most effective use among the Navaho. As Navaho healers and Western health professionals increasingly work together, there is an urgent need for each to understand the medical knowledge of the other. Ethnographic research, in this case, is serving both the needs of the Navaho in solving pressing health problems and also the accumulation of theoretically important information for understanding human behavior.

Consider the priority identified above for "socially responsible corporations that operate in the public interest as well as in the private interest." This need suggests hundreds of strategic ethnographic research projects. We need to know how decisions are made in corporate board rooms, something that could be discovered through ethnography. We need to know how lobbying efforts of corporations affect every state legislature, in short an ethnography of corporate lobbying. We need to know how corporations bypass laws enacted to control them. As some corporations change to act more and more in the public interest, we need ethnographic descriptions of their efforts to serve as models for others. In short, we need extensive ethnographic research to understand this form of social organization in our own society and to know the extent to which corporations affect all our interests.

Ethnography for what? For understanding the human species but also for serving the needs of humankind. One of the great challenges facing every ethnographer is the synchronization of these two uses of research. If we recognize that ethnography can be done to serve the needs of informants as well

as ethnographer, we come face-to-face with the *ethical* dimension of research. Every ethnographer, whether student or professional, must consider a number of ethical issues in doing fieldwork.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Informants are human beings with problems, concerns, and interests. The values held by any particular ethnographer do not always coincide with those held by informants. In doing fieldwork one is always faced with conflicting values and a wide range of possible choices. Should I tape record what an informant says or merely make a written record? How will I use the data collected and should I tell informants how it will be used? Should I study the kinship terms used by informants or the tactics used by the colonial government to keep them oppressed? If I observe someone who engages in illegal behavior, should I make my field notes inaccessible to the police? If informants are children, should teachers or parents have access to my fieldnotes? Whenever faced by choices such as these, the decision will necessarily involve an appeal to some set of ethical principles based on underlying values.

In 1971, the Council of the American Anthropological Association adopted a set of principles to guide ethnographers when faced with conflicting choices. These *Principles of Professional Responsibility* begin with the following preamble:

Anthropologists work in many parts of the world in close personal association with the peoples and situations they study. Their professional situation is, therefore, uniquely varied and complex. They are involved with their discipline, their colleagues, their students, their sponsors, their subjects, their own and host governments, the particular individuals and groups with whom they do their fieldwork, other populations and interest groups in the nations within which they work, and the study of processes and issues affecting general human welfare. In a field of such complex involvements, misunderstandings, conflicts, and the necessity to make choices among conflicting values are bound to arise and to generate ethical dilemmas. It is a prime responsibility of anthropologists to anticipate these and to plan to resolve them in such a way as to do damage neither to those whom they study nor, in so far as possible, to their scholarly community. Where these conditions cannot be met, the anthropologist would be well-advised not to pursue the particular piece of research.

The great variation and complexity of fieldwork situations make it difficult, if not impossible, to adopt a single set of standards for all ethnographers. However, the following ethical principles, which are based on those adopted by the American Anthropological Association, can serve as a useful guide.

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Consider Informants First

In research, an anthropologist's paramount responsibility is to those he studies. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. The anthropologist must do everything within his power to protect their physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy.

(Principles of Professional Responsibility, 1971; para. 1)

Ethnographic research often involves more than ethnographers and informants. Sponsors may provide funds for the support of research, or gatekeepers may have the power to give or withhold permission to conduct interviews and make observations. In complex societies, informants' lives are frequently intertwined with the lives of other people. For example, in studying cocktail waitresses, Spradley and Mann (1975) discovered that the bartenders, customers, and owners of the bar all had certain interests, often in conflict with those of the waitresses. Tramps were constantly involved with treatment center staff, policemen, and county health officials (Spradley 1970). The ethnographer cannot assume that informants' interests are the same as those of other people. All ethnography must include inquiries to discover the interests and concerns of informants, and when choices are made, these interests must be considered first.

Safeguard Informants' Rights, Interests, and Sensitivities

Where research involves the acquisition of material and information transferred on the assumption of trust between persons, it is axiomatic that the rights, interests, and sensitivities of those studied must be safeguarded.

(Principles of Professional Responsibility, para. 1,a)

This principle suggests that ethnographers go beyond merely *considering* the interests of informants. We have a positive responsibility to *safeguard* their rights, their interests, and even their sensitivities. We must examine the implications of our research from this vantage point, for it may have consequences unseen by informants.

James Sewid, a Kwakiutl Indian in British Columbia, was an excellent informant, and together we recorded his life history about growing up during the early part of this century (Spradley 1969). When it became apparent that the edited transcripts might become a published book, I decided to safeguard Mr. Sewid's rights by making him a full partner who signed the contract with Yale University Press. He shared equally in all royalties and had the right to decide, with me, on crucial matters of content. I also wanted to safeguard his sensitivities, so before we submitted the final manuscript I read the completed version to both him and his wife. They made deletions and changes

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that were in their best interests, changes that reflected their sensitivities, not mine.

No matter how unobtrusive, ethnographic research always pries into the lives of informants. Participant observation represents a powerful tool for invading other people's way of life. It reveals information that can be used to *affirm* their rights, interests, and sensitivities or to *violate* them. All informants must have the protection of saying things "off the record" that never find their way into the ethnographer's fieldnotes.

Communicate Research Objectives

The aims of the investigation should be communicated as well as possible to the informant.

(*Principles of Professional Responsibility*, 1971, para. 1,b)

Informants have a right to know the ethnographer's aims. This does not require a full course on the nature of ethnography. The scholar's aims can often be explained simply: "I want to understand what life at Brady's Bar is like from your perspective as a cocktail waitress. I think this will help us to understand the role of women who work in this type of job. I'll be writing up my study as a description of the role of cocktail waitresses."

Communicating the aims of research must often become a process of unfolding rather than a once-and-for-all declaration. The ethnographer must decide to whom the aims will be explained. Certainly anyone who participates in ethnographic interviews deserves an explanation. In our study of Brady's Bar we explained our goals to the cocktail waitresses; our study focused on their role. We did not talk with all the customers and all the bartenders, although their behavior certainly entered into our study. In this particular study, communicating the aims was made more difficult because one of the researchers assumed the role of cocktail waitress and had difficulty convincing others to take her role as researcher seriously. In a detailed analysis of that role, Mann (1976) has discussed the ethical problems connected with communicating the aims of research.

For the beginning ethnographer, especially those who are students, the primary aim may be to learn how to study another culture. One might communicate this goal quite simply: "I want to find out what it's like to be a student in the fourth grade. As a university student myself, I'm learning how to observe and discover things from your point of view. I'll be writing a paper on what you and other children in this fourth-grade classroom do each day, the things you like best, and just what it's like to be in the fourth grade."

However, as discussed in the last chapter, the aims of research often need to go beyond the mere accumulation of knowledge. Every ethnographic research project should, to some extent, include a dialogue with informants to

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explore ways in which the study can be useful to informants. The *Principles of Professional Responsibility* include a specific statement in this regard (para. 1,h): "Every effort should be exerted to cooperate with members of the host society in the planning and execution of research projects." This means planning not only with teachers and administrators, if one is studying a fourth-grade classroom for instance, but also with the students. In many cases, since informants do not yet understand the nature of ethnography, the aims of research will have to develop during the study. This means the ethnographer, in consultation with informants, must be willing to direct the investigation into paths suggested by informants. I began my research with skid row tramps by explaining, "I want to understand alcoholism from the perspective of men like yourself who are repeatedly arrested for being drunk." But as I progressed, informants' interests led to a change in goals. I communicated my new aims to each informant I interviewed, explaining that my investigation of life in jail could perhaps improve conditions there for incarcerated alcoholics.

The more intimately one works with informants, the more important becomes the task of communicating the aims of research. In doing participant observation without interviewing or intimate contact, however, especially in public places, one may not need to communicate the aims of research. For example, if you decide to study the cultural rules for riding city busses, you can participate in the normal activities of bus riding without asking permissions and without revealing your research goals to anyone. You have chosen a public place; in our society anyone has the right to observe what others are doing in public and to make cultural inferences about patterns of behavior. Furthermore, it would be virtually impossible to inform all the people you see on the busses about your research. However, observing in public places does not eliminate the need to protect the privacy of the people one studies when writing up ethnographic descriptions.

Protect the Privacy of Informants

Informants have a right to remain anonymous. This right should be respected both where it has been promised explicitly and where no clear understanding to the contrary has been reached. These strictures apply to the collection of data by means of cameras, tape recorders, and other data-gathering devices, as well as to data collected in face-to-face interviews or in participant observation. Those being studied should understand the capacities of such devices; they should be free to reject them if they wish; and if they accept them, the results obtained should be consonant with the informant's right to welfare, dignity and privacy. Despite every effort being made to preserve anonymity it should be made clear to informants that such anonymity may be compromised unintentionally.

(*Principles of Professional Responsibility,* 1971, para. 1,c)

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Protecting privacy extends far beyond changing names, places, and other identifying features in a final report. These are minimal requirements of anonymity. However, every ethnographer must realize that fieldnotes can become public knowledge if subpoenaed by a court. In doing research on illicit drug use, one student made lengthy interviews with local drug dealers and observed their purchase of illicit drugs. One day she discovered that her primary informant's "contact" in the illicit marketing system had been arrested, placing her informant in immediate jeopardy. When it became apparent that her fieldnotes and transcribed interviews might become of interest to law enforcement officials, she immediately eliminated all names and initials from the notes. Even so, it probably would have been impossible to protect the identity of her informant unless she had taken the further step of destroying the notes, an act that may well have been an illegal destruction of evidence. In another instance, an ethnographer studying a local school system collected data about a teachers' strike. After a suit between the union and the school board developed, the possibility arose that his fieldnotes would be subpoenaed by the court. Although neither of these cases materialized, each threat placed the ethnographers in an ethical dilemma. One must continually ask, "How can I maintain the anonymity of my informants?" A serious consideration of this ethical principle might, in some cases, lead to the selection of an alternate research project. At a minimum it should mean use of pseudonyms in both fieldnotes and final reports.

Don't Exploit Informants

There should be no exploitation of individual informants for personal gain. Fair return should be given them for all services.

(*Principles of Professional Responsibility*, 1971, para. 1,d)

Personal gain becomes exploitative when the informant gains nothing or actually suffers harm from the research. Every ethnographer bears a responsibility to weigh carefully what might constitute a "fair return" to informants. When conducting lengthy interviews, one might consider payment of an hourly wage, although such an offer would insult some informants. Sometimes an informant will gain directly from the results of the investigation; this possibility increases to the extent that informants have some say in the aims of the research. An ethnography often describes some part of an informant's culture in a way that gives the informant new insight and understanding. A copy of the ethnographic description might be fair return, but there are also less direct ways in which a project can have value to an informant. Students who study the culture of the elderly inevitably find that their informants relish the opportunity to reminisce about the past and talk to a younger, interested listener. An obvious value to many informants is the opportunity to assist a student in learning about another way of life. Even the

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simple gain of participating in a research project can be sufficient for many informants to talk to an ethnographer. Although "fair return" will vary from one informant to the next, the needs of informants for some gain from the project must not be ignored.

Make Reports Available to Informants

In accordance with the Association's general position on clandestine and secret research, no reports should be provided to sponsors that are not also available to the general public and, where practicable, to the population studied.

(Principles of Professional Responsibility, 1971, para. 1,g)

When students in my classes follow the steps in this book to do ethnography, I encourage them to make their papers available to their informants. If they study a public situation anonymously, this becomes unnecessary. For informants who would not understand the report, as in the case of a first-grade class, an oral presentation may be in order. This principle does not mean we should insist that informants read our reports; it does mean that what is written for teachers, colleagues, or the general public should also be available to informants.

This brief list of ethical principles does not exhaust the issues that will arise when doing research. The ethnographer has important responsibilities to the public and to the scholarly community. The full statement of *Principles of Professional Responsibility* adopted by the Council of the American Anthropological Association offers a rich source of additional principles for guiding our decision making. Every ethnographer should study this document as well as those developed by other associations involved in social science research.