

## Strategies & Tips for Writing Ethnographic Field Notes\*

\*Adapted from Emerson et.al.'s *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes* & class discussion

### Record RICH DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS!

- write “thickly” using adjectives and adverbs
- draw on your SENSES
  - visual
  - olfactory
  - aural (sounds, noises, music, etc.)
  - kinetic (motions, action)
- record details related to the PHYSICAL SETTING (as well as the social)
  - layout/arrangement of the room
  - objects, decorations, materials, etc.
  - might begin here and return to this description as your period of observation unfolds

### Characterization (describing the people in a given social setting)

- avoid stereotypes and ‘stock characters’ (i.e. the cop with the donut)
- avoid evaluative language (i.e. crazy, stuck-up, clueless, obnoxious, etc.)
- describe the person’s physical appearance and actions in great detail
  - clothes, accessories, hair, skin, eyes, age, etc.
- focus on depicting the person (or people) as part of a social setting
  - how does the person interact with others? how do others respond to the person?

NO – donut-eating cop gets a call from dispatch, scares kid on the way out the door

YES – a man (mid 30’s) wearing a blue polyester uniform with a badge – city police force, lieutenant – eating a powdered sugar donut and drinking coffee while reading the New York Times; radio squawks and he steps outside to talk to his dispatcher, on the way out he nods to a boy (6?) who stares at him from behind his mother’s legs as they wait in line at the register)

NO – a ‘crazy bag lady’ intimidates ‘stuck-up’ customers

YES – an older woman (70’s?, gray hair, aged face) at the rear of the room, wears dark jeans with caked dirt on knees, red sweater (faded, torn in places); carries two large paper shopping bags with clothing inside, talks quietly to herself (inaudible) and does not interact with other people, she scratches at her arms repeatedly and moves frequently between two chairs; two middle-aged women sitting next to her relocate to another table, one says to the other “why don’t they do something? she’s been here all day.”

NO – stressed out graduate student destroys laptop in a fit of rage

YES – woman in her late 20’s (?), wearing khaki pants and leather shoes with doc martin-style soles, wooden necklace on faux leather string, black button-down shirt with thin red and white stripes, blue sports watch, black plastic-framed glasses, brown hair (short, above the shoulder, not styled); alone at a table with a laptop computer (blue, Toshiba), curses (“&\*\$”) as the screen collapses backwards (broken, does not stay up), uses a pencil to prop the screen upright; hits keys hard enough that sound is audible from my position; curses again and turns red in the face, looks around the coffee shop, screen collapses again; knocks coffee (tall drip with cream)

onto keyboard as she stands to fix the screen; curses again and sweeps the laptop to the floor in a swift motion; pauses for a moment, crying now, “no, no, no, my dissertation, my dissertation!;” woman at the neighboring table stands up slowly, begins to pick up pieces of the computer, places hand on back of woman with glasses, “when is the last time you slept?”

### **Recording Dialogue**

- exact language is critical in anthropology (interested not just in what people say but HOW they say it – the terms, metaphors, etc. that they use to communicate their ideas)
- record expressions, body language, etc. that accompany speech (communication is not just verbal)
- 3 main techniques for recording speech:
  - *Direct Quotation* – FULL transcription of dialogue; difficult/impossible without a tape recorder
  - *Indirect Quotation* – snippets of exact language embedded in a generalized description of the gist of the conversation
    - i.e. 2 women discussing their weekend plans, going to a “show” at the Tractor; one is from Tennessee, “Tractor is OK, but everything in Seattle is so slick. Even the cowboy bars.” Other laughs, suggests another venue, maybe dancing to a live band, “If you want a dingy honky tonk, let’s go to the Hen. Now there’s a slice of life. That authentic enough for you?” First one changes her mind, prefers the Tractor, “it’s the only place to hear good music in Seattle;” she’s “not up for a honky tonk” tonight
  - *Paraphrasing* – generalized report of the gist of a conversation; ‘flavor’ of the original language and many/most of the underlying concepts are lost
    - i.e. Two women talked about their weekend plans. One woman, who was from Tennessee, said she didn’t want to go to the Tractor Tavern because it seemed too nice and clean. The other one suggested the Little Red Hen so they could maybe dance. The first woman changed her mind and decided to go to the Tractor because she didn’t feel like dancing. (What is lost in this rendering of the conversation?)