

# The "Half-Baked" Concept of "Raw" Data in Ethnographic Observation

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In this article I argue that, when researchers record fieldnotes, they also create worldviews based on a priori perceptions and interpretations. To be culturally respectful, researchers in the field need to be concerned with both the cultural artifacts they create and with their inability to "accurately" record everything they see. It may not be necessary, or even desirable, for researchers to purge fieldnotes of their colourful, descriptive, and connotative language. Rather, they need to become self-conscious about word and text choices when writing fieldnotes.

Keywords: qualitative research, fieldnotes, discourse analysis, educational ethnography

Dans cet article, je fais valoir que, lorsque des chercheurs prennent des notes sur le terrain, ils créent aussi des visions du monde basées sur des perceptions et des interprétations a priori. Pour respecter la culture, les chercheurs sur le terrain doivent tenir compte des artefacts culturels qu'ils créent et de leur inaptitude à noter « avec précision » tout ce qu'ils voient. Il n'est peut-être pas nécessaire, ni même indiqué, que les chercheurs expurgent les notes prises sur le terrain de tout langage coloré, descriptif et connotatif. Ils doivent plutôt prendre conscience de leur choix de mots et de textes lorsqu'ils rédigent de telles notes.

Mots clés : recherche qualitative, notes sur le terrain, analyse du discours, ethnographie de l'éducation

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The idea that word choice and narrative structure are important considerations in the writing of ethnographic fieldnotes is not new (e.g., Davies, 1999; Lather, 1991, 1995; Wolcott, 2001). Especially since the publication of Sanjek's (1990b) book on fieldnotes, field researchers and theorists have argued that such choices reflect a priori assumptions. Yet few, if any, authors have followed this argument to its logical conclusion by examining fieldnotes.

In this article, I have contributed to the ongoing conversation about how researchers might be respectful for those about whom they write. It is not my intention to simplify respect by reducing respectful representation to literary and linguistic choices, but rather to complicate one aspect of respectful representation by suggesting that researchers become self-conscious about word and text choices when writing fieldnotes.

## A REVIEW OF FIELDNOTE TEXT-CREATION ADVICE

Sanjek (1990b) reported an address by James Clifford during the 1984 American Anthropological Association meeting. Sanjek noted Clifford's comment: "in all the recent discussion about writing ethnography and about ethnographies as writing, no one [has] addressed what anthropologists write *before* they write ethnographies — fieldnotes" (p. xi). This comment eventually led to a panel on that topic at the 1985 annual meeting, and the subsequent publication of Sanjek's (1990b) aptly titled book *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*.

Perhaps reflective of the absence of earlier fieldnote discussions, many contributors to Sanjek's volume seemed more concerned with how researchers use fieldnotes, in what anthropological state(s) they create them, and what items qualify as fieldnotes, than with the textual properties of fieldnotes (e.g., Clifford, 1990; Jackson, 1990; Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Obbo, 1990; Sanjek, 1990c, 1990a; see also Geertz, 1973; Rose, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolf 1992). Most distinctions in fieldnote definition are essentially researcher-bound: fieldnotes are field memories, written down<sup>1</sup> or otherwise recorded, produced or commissioned by the ethnographer, arranged chronologically rather than thematically, representing the cultural maturation of the anthropologist in a given setting (Ottenberg, 1990; Plath, 1990), and therefore heavily imbued with personal meaning.

Although recent scholars have written several volumes (e.g., Amit, 2000; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), and articles (e.g., Davies, 1999; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Rapport, 2000; Spencer, 2001) dedicated to understanding how personal meaning is made manifest in fieldnotes, researchers have made little or no mention of how to describe events, people or objects; how to use language(s) in description; how to use or avoid rhetorical strategies; or how to use or avoid linguistic strategies, and why. Exceptions are normally such easily missed and un-elaborated bits of advice as "we should always try to note concrete instances of what people have said or done, using verbatim quotations and 'flat' (or unadorned) descriptions" (Silverman, 2001, pp. 68). Little recognition of the importance of language in fieldnotes occurs, and no warning that linguistic choices will ultimately be of paramount importance (e.g., Delamont, 2002; Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

In a manner similar to verbatim transcriptions, fieldnotes are interpretations or representations that follow from the purposes and working theories of the researchers, as well as from general assumptions about the transparency of language (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). After several years, memory fades and only fieldnote records remain of actions,

events, and conversations. Yet texts are, for the most part, mute on the subject of fieldnote language, and do not demonstrate how, exactly, fieldnotes go about endowing behaviour with significance.

One exception is Spradley's (1980) caution that

the moment you begin writing down what you see and hear, you automatically encode things in language. This may seem a rather straightforward matter, but the language used in fieldnotes has numerous long-range consequences for your research. (p. 64–65)

Spradley, however, was talking about language (parole and dialect) rather than about language choice.<sup>2</sup> To facilitate description, he argued that field workers can generate lists of concrete verbs and nouns that might be appropriate in the field situation. He suggested that, if researchers intended to observe people standing in a line-up, they might list in advance such words as shifting, searching, wagging, nodding, glaring, or beelining, alone or in combination with other words, to aid concrete description. Spradley implies that these words are value-neutral.

In contrast, I contend that these words are completely value-laden. When using such words, researchers reflect personal and subjective judgments about the state of mind of the people they describe. In this sense, such lists of words can lead to less rather than more concrete description; they lead rather to "thick description" (Ryle, 1971, p. 482), a more interpretive than descriptive act (Geertz, 1973, pp. 5–30).

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) advocated the use of concrete description and verbatim transcription to minimize inference. According to Hammersley and Atkinson, fieldnotes become interpretive as a result of what researchers omit or because of the partiality of an account, rather than as a result of the language used to describe a place, event, or situation. Hammersley and Atkinson appeared to be more concerned with how phenomena are distorted by fieldnotes than about how interpretations of phenomena are created in fieldnotes. It is, perhaps, more productive to accept that researchers "are still subjective people doing a subjective job" (Ely et al. 1991, p. 54).

#### FIELDNOTE EXTRACTS

In the following discussion, I have looked at several examples from fieldnotes taken from three sources: my own observations in public areas, and Wolf's (1992) and Spradley's (1980) published sources. In this discussion, I have explained how simply choosing words and forms when writing fieldnotes constitutes the active creation of cultural artifacts.

The first extract is an observation assignment that I completed as a student in an educational research class. We were instructed to write everything we saw, felt, and thought.<sup>3</sup>

SALVATION ARMY RESIDENCE FOR MEN, LOBBY, NOVEMBER 27, 1992 (THE FRIDAY NIGHT BEFORE WELFARE CHEQUES), 9:37 P.M.

As I enter the lobby, a very tanned-looking, but yet not tanned really, but weathered, man with bulging eyes like a baby bird looks at me. He is wearing a navy blue jacket and pants. *I don't want to seem to be looking at him.* I walk past him and sit on the heater at the back of the room where he is just out of view. *Something about him makes me feel very uncomfortable - a feeling I don't get from anyone else in the room. I have visions of him peeing on the street, and aggressively shouting on street corners about the coming of Jesus.* There's a no-smoking sign on the wall to my left. Suddenly a bell rings. Instinctively I know that it belongs to the locked door that goes into the residence, and I look up in time to see a new blond entrant wearing jeans and a light blue jacket approach the front desk. He receives a key attached to a small brown plywood board and walks to the back of the room to a small room I assume is the bathroom. In the background, from behind the front desk I can hear the sound of money in a dispenser, perhaps a vending machine, but it's clicking without stopping, regularly. The front desk is like a glassed-in cage, but its walls do not go all the way to the ceiling. I realize that I can hear because of this. The new entrant leaves the bathroom quickly and is buzzed into the residence hall. There is a small portable T.V. sitting on top of a large old cabinet T.V. playing in the front corner of the room with something violent on the screen. There's lots of excitement on the T.V., but the people in the room, except for one man, are not watching it. There is a man sitting on the third chair from the passage into this room. This man catches my eye. He has a long nose and is wearing an English tam, a dark blue blazer, blue shirt, blue sweater, grey slacks, and high-top runners, which look incongruous. *For some reason, visions of veterans in the November 11th Memorial Services come to me.* He has perfectly correct posture, and he looks around alertly while everyone else is sleeping. The man at the registration window looks vacantly out into the room and rubs the baby finger and ring finger on his right hand with his right thumb. If I listen carefully, I think I can hear a dry rasping sound from this motion....A short man leading with his nose in a way that reminds me of a hunting dog, and strutting with that peculiar turkey walk, in which the head pushes forward at every step, ploughs through. He is wearing a black trench coat. *I think "Mafioso".* He is followed by a tall unsteady Native man, who seems to be a drunk in need of a drink. The odd couple. Wendy suddenly appears and says "do you wanna go?" I do. I stand up to zip my jacket, and catch the eye of the man in the overcoat and beard seated on the heater. He is wearing a knitted cap. His eyes are sunken and hunted-looking. . . . [class assignment, 1992]

I composed the next extract for another class assignment over a year later. I was instructed to conduct a patronizing and orientalist observation in a public place and then to reflect on the process. My analysis of this observation sequence radically altered my orientation to participant-observation and my own role in it. Being patronizing was disturbingly easy for me.<sup>4</sup> There are many instances in this passage in which I have

consciously employed patronizing language and deliberately abused insider knowledge, but I have focused instead on those descriptive passages that unconsciously created culture.

CHINATOWN, NOVEMBER 26, 1993, 2:30 P.M.

I decided to perch on a rock in the sunshine opposite a fish and vegetable market. From my rock I had an excellent view of the bins containing live lobster, live crab, live eels, and live prawns. These were located next to bins of fresh tomatoes, spinach, Chinese cabbage, peppers, and other containers filled with different varieties of dried shrimps, mushrooms, and other oddly aromatic edibles. I also had an extraordinarily good angle on the people scooping this live bait into plastic bags but neglecting to pour in any water so that I could think only of the prawns slowly choking, gasping, thrashing their little prawn legs, and dying.

Directly in my line of vision was a middle-aged man with the average Chinese middle-aged male haircut (parted on the side, straight, cut rounded into the head as if someone had put a Chinese soup bowl over his head and cut around it). He was dressed in a white laboratory coat and white pants with a large rubber yellow body apron, elbow length yellow rubber gloves with gladiator cuffs, and, the *piece de resistance*, huge yellow rubber galoshes. . . . [His] job is running cold water and spooning ice over live seafood, handling slimy sea creatures, gutting fish, and scooping their entrails into a garbage basin, and running around shouting in a great and glorious panic. The bright colours give the impression that the food, standing in open containers on the street next to a Smithrite disposal unit, where people can easily breathe on, paw, and soil what others will put in their mouths, is clean.

As I settle onto my rock, I hear a sudden outburst behind me. I turn to look and see a man in a blue (not navy, not indigo, but crayon blue) business suit walking across the lawn in front of a high-rise apartment building. His companion is a shorter, older man in a brown business suit whose appearance strikes me as resembling an aged land turtle craning its neck out of its shell. Trying to look very official they succeed only in looking pompous and bombastic. The man in blue begins yelling at an old woman dressed in a black windbreaker, navy blue stretch pants, and a flowered shirt who helps her grandson out of a Japanese-make car parked in a "permit parking only" space, and then walks down the sidewalk toward the markets with her grandson in tow. . . . The man in blue appears to be very angry and continues harassing the old woman who seems to make smart remarks back to him. The man in the brown suit stands beneath the apartment building and looks up at it. He has disassociated himself from the scene. The man in blue spreads his arms in an angry gesture and the old woman begins laughing uproariously at the spectacle of him standing there, arms akimbo. . . .

[Back] at the fish market, several women are crowding and pushing near the live seafood. They are all clutching plastic bags and are using tongs to pick up, inspect, and choose each piece. Two old men are standing detached from the group with their hands behind their backs, watching. One of them is rolling back and forth on his feet. One younger man with a child on his shoulders is hovering near a young woman while she is picking out prawns. Another couple comes into view and stops. They look into the bins. They exchange a few words. They continue to walk along the sidewalk. A large family crosses the street in front of me. When they near the fish market, the grandfather, father

and young children stand back while the mother and a daughter who appears to be about twelve go to look at the fish. The mother motions to the daughter. She fetches a plastic bag. They begin to pick through the crabs. The mother uses the tongs to fish them out while the daughter holds the bag. The father stands silently with his hands behind his back. [class assignment, 1994]

I have taken the third extract from Wolf's (1992) fieldnotes published in *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism and Ethnographic Responsibility*. I chose this extract because it was significant in her book. Wolf cited the events in this extract three times in her book: as fieldnotes, as story, and as evidence in an academic journal article.<sup>5</sup>

#### WOLF IN CHINA [approximately 1960<sup>6</sup>]

After a little, 128 again tried to leave, and 48 suddenly jumped up and pointed at 85 (F 32) and told her to approach. 85 had been chatting with some other women about some medicine that she had put on her eyes which appeared to be infected. . . .

Wu Chieh was speechless with fear. 48's mother told her to answer, and Wu Chieh managed to blurt out, "Yes." 48 hugged her very close and put her face against Wu Chieh's. Her mother said: "She wants to kiss you." 48 said, "No! No! No!" and her mother said quickly, "No, I am wrong. I am wrong. I am just an old lady who doesn't understand." . . . 48 began to make wide sweeping *bai-bai* gestures, and said, "People should not be judgmental, saying this person is good and that person is bad." Then she began to "jump" again, and 94 (M 31) hissed at Wu Chieh, "Stupid child, aren't you going to run away?" Some little boys were giggling. . . . 48 turned on the boys and shouted, "Go away if you don't believe. Go away." She waved them off as if they were curious chickens, and they scattered like chickens. . . .

As she talked, she continued to make *bai-bai* motions, to jump about, and finally fell over backward on the ground. She lay on the ground for some time, and Wu Chieh said that when she opened her eyelids, all she could see were the whites of her eyes. . . .

People moved off to the edge of the yard, some of them whispering, some of them laughing, but after a bit, the crowd slowly began to edge toward the house. . . . [A]fter a while, 48 got to her feet and staggered after her into the house like she was drunk, feeling along the wall for the door to the bedroom. She kept right on doing *bai-bai* gestures, however. Wu Chieh led her to the bedroom and got her to lie down. She did, but without pausing in her gestures, counting, calculating, and doing *bai-bai* Wu Chieh ran out. (pp. 72-75)

In the final fieldnote extract, I have used Spradley's (1980) observations of his first day in Marshall County Criminal Court as a grand jury member.

#### SPRADLEY IN CRIMINAL COURT [approximately 1975<sup>7</sup>]

I parked near the county courthouse and walked the short distance to the new building. Streams of people flowed into the lobby and scrambled into the waiting doors of elevators. "Going up sir?" a young man called to me from one of the eight elevators. I nodded, stepped in, and waited until he stopped at the eighth floor where I knew the Marshall County Criminal Court was located.

I followed the hallway until I saw a sign over two large doors: CRIMINAL COURT. I decided to go in even though there was still five minutes before the appointed hour of 9:00 A.M. I pushed open one of the swinging doors and found myself in a large courtroom.

There were rows of spectator benches, all made of heavy dark wood, oak, or walnut, to match the paneled walls. The rows of benches went for more than twenty-five feet until they met a railing that seemed to neatly mark off a large area for "official business." I went in, sat down in the last row of spectators' benches, and looked around at the few other people seated at various places in the courtroom. The high ceiling and heavy dark wood made me feel as if I were in a sacred, almost religious place. Two people sitting in front of me were talking in hushed tones and I could not hear what they said. As newcomers came in, they would stop, look around, and then move very slowly to find a place to sit. At the right of the area behind the railing were twelve high-back leather chairs behind another railing. A large oak table with massive chairs all faced toward a high lectern which I took to be the judge's bench. All this area was empty. I waited.

A few minutes after nine a man walked in with a brisk manner. He looked at the people scattered around the large courtroom, all of us in the spectators' area, and said, "Hello. I assume you are all here for the prospective grand jury. Judge Fred Adams is going to be on the bench and it would be better if you all sat in the jury box." Slowly people got up and I joined them as we moved together toward the front. . . . I took out a tablet and began making fieldnotes. I wondered if the people around me thought I was writing a letter or what. I was conscious of standing out in my casual clothes and beard. All the others were dressed neatly; the men in suits and ties, some in sport coats. Many dark business suits. They all looked professional. The women were well dressed in suits, dresses, high heels, make-up. All looked older than myself. It was as if they had all dressed for some formal occasion. I felt a little out of place, but decided that didn't matter. . . .

The man who was reading our names was joined by a sheriff's officer in full uniform, gun mounted on his left hip. He walked across the courtroom and stood near a door near the high judge's bench. The man and the police officer kept looking at each other, one glanced at his watch, there was an air of expectancy in the jury box also. (pp. 74-75)

Even though I conducted my two observations above relatively recently, I do not remember these images at all. Because Wolf and Spradley conducted their observations long ago, I would find it difficult to believe that they could remember the incidents in their fieldnotes with any more clarity than I do (for confirmation: Sanjek, 1990d, p. 334; Smith, 1990, pp. 367-369; Van Maanen, 1988, p. 124; Wolf, 1990, p. 346). These fieldnote extracts, then, are very likely the only records that remain of the activities and actions on those days, unless other researchers were conducting observations at the same time.

To the best of my knowledge, no one could refute anything written in these fieldnote extracts. They are therefore authoritative, in whatever form they have been written. This authority is created and reinforced not only by the uniqueness of the documents, but also by the overarching narrative and rhetorical strategies, and by the linguistic devices employed by each researcher (word choice, verb form, and syntactic style).

*Narrative Structures and Rhetorical Strategies*

The overarching structure of my 1994 extract and Spradley's extract is that of a journey — a common motif, given the relationship of ethnography to travel writing (Pratt, 1986). In addition to signaling travel in an experiential and physical sense (e.g., Rapport, 2000), the journey motif contains two narrative possibilities. The first possibility, found in my 1994 extract, features me as a sophisticated urbanite, roaming through a society to which I feel superior; the second possibility, found in Spradley's extract, features a less sophisticated, more confused, person, unable to understand the civilization into which he has been cast. These two narratives are not just journeys; they illustrate a kind of literary quest-romance, an adventure in search of the Holy Grail, a search for something sacred but visible only to those who are morally and spiritually worthy. In both instances, the researcher journeys through a dark and dangerous place,<sup>8</sup> then finds a place to sit and observe from a fixed position, outside the central action, seeing everything but remaining unobserved. In both instances, during the prolonged fieldnote sequence the researcher is forced to move from this position of comfort to another place by an intrusive male authority.<sup>9</sup>

Despite differences in time, geography, and social position, Spradley and I actually wrote similar narratives, conforming to familiar genres, and using "I" as the protagonist. The effect of the journey narratives is twofold. First, the familiar genre and first-person narration privilege unity over disunity and univocality over polyvocality. Second, the genre makes the observation locales seem remote and somewhat dangerous, "wild," and away from the normal patterns of our lives. Said (1979) has described this practice as "designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' [as] a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary" (p. 54). The geographical distinctions in these fieldnote extracts, although they are recognizable boundaries, are arbitrary and artificial.

Rhetorically, all four of these extracts have a finished feel to them, though the passage written by Wolf is more polyphonic and less polished than the others. Some of the sentences in each observation are labyrinthine, filled with dependent clauses, participial phrases, and co-ordination, woven into complex sentences. The effect of this kind of writing makes fieldnotes feel like literature, indirect and removed from the scene, and meant to be read by an audience. If fieldnotes can be read as literature, then literary conventions hold — that is, the narrator is not the same person as the writer; the writer is behind, authoritative, in touch with the "truth," the objective creator of the narrator who is telling the story.



The complex sentences likewise imply that there has been time to reflect on these experiences, to craft sentences, time to enhance the reliability of the descriptions. Emerson et al. (2001) suggested that ethnographers choose between writing "from some known 'end-point' of more or less complete knowledge" that includes incorporating subsequent knowledge into the fieldnotes, and "represent[ing] events unfolding 'in real time' from a perspective of incomplete or partial knowledge" (p. 359). They later suggested that

fieldnote tales tend to be episodic, a string of action chunks put down on the page, one after another. Thus, both in structure and content, fieldnote tales generally differ from constructed, dramatic narratives. The highly crafted narratives of published writers not only describe actions chronologically, but they also 'make something happen' by building suspense into the unfolding action and by creating motivated characters whose consequential actions lead to instructive, often dramatic outcomes. But, most of everyday life does not happen like dramatic stories. (p. 359)

While I would not discount their argument, I do not think it "pushes" far enough. As a researcher who frequently engages in fieldnote writing, I am a writer, and I am self-conscious about fieldnote writing, even while doing it (see Amit, 2000). If I were not comfortable with writing highly descriptive, ongoing accounts of my world, I would not choose forms of research that demanded this of me. I would have more empathy for a question asked by one of my colleagues: "How do you know what to write when you don't know what you're looking at?"

Writers, like all human beings, impose order on the everyday phenomena they observe. Like many writers of academic text, I write my way into understanding, working through my ideas on paper. Richardson (2000) describes my practice well; when I am able to write into knowing, as opposed to writing about what I know, I become liberated from traditional forms of science writing, and my "writing is validated as a method of knowing" (p. 929). Because I cannot observe and record everything, I choose what to focus on, when an episode begins, when it ends, and I make literary choices that reflect those decisions. Even while writing as quickly as I can to record as much as I can, I often block out something that is happening to finish recording something I just observed. I do not merely impose interpretation on the text after I have created it; the choices I make regarding what to write about, and how to write it, are themselves interpretation. Thinking in complete sentences is interpretation. Choosing between two short sentences or one long one is interpretation. Choosing to write a dependent clause is interpretation. Some forms of interpretation are merely more conscious than others.

A second and related rhetorical structure that is used in these fieldnote selections is the list, particularly lists of parallel grammatical forms. In my 1992 extract, I list items of clothing and adjectives; in my 1994 extract, I list food items and action words; in her extract, Wolf listed actions; in his extract, Spradley listed actions and objects. Lists serve two purposes. The first is that lists impose a scientific notion of order on perceived disorder; they create categorizations and classifications. The second function of lists is that they can give a sense of immediacy to what the researcher is describing, lending more ethnographic authority to the text. For example, in the 1994 Chinatown extract I wrote that one man's job is "*running* cold water and *spooning* ice over live seafood, *handling* slimy sea creatures, *gutting* fish and *scooping* their entrails into a garbage basin, and *running* around *shouting*," thereby giving a sense that these activities were going on simultaneously. I created the perception of disorder and systematized the activities into a repetitive refrain, giving order but reducing a man's work to a list of gerunds.

In the extract, Spradley created a similar effect: "As newcomers came in, they would stop, look around, and then move very slowly to find a place to sit." Spradley has given the readers the sense that each person coming into the courthouse behaved in a highly regularized manner, a manner probably created by the unfamiliar situation. It is likely, however, that the activity was not quite so systematic or repetitive; some newcomers may have hesitated, others stopped, still others may have simply focused on a place to sit and walked to it. Spradley imposed a systematic order on what may well have been disorder; the effect for the reader is an understanding that the newcomers find themselves in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable location.

Use of familiar genres like the journey motif, or creating disorder from order through the use of lists is not, in itself, bad fieldnote practice. The journey is a chronological organizing framework, in many ways intellectually honest in that it helps to structure the fieldnotes around how things happened to the fieldworker. The list, likewise, is not inherently evil. Lists, in fact, structure description or sequence to show that the researcher saw items or activities to be of equal importance, and that the researcher can only record the perspective of the researcher. Neither lists nor the journey undertaken by the researcher distort experience to a greater or lesser degree than any other organizing framework. The danger is in assuming that the order imposed by these frameworks exists "out there" rather than being an arbitrary system that the researcher, consciously or unconsciously, has chosen.

*Linguistic Devices*

The number and intensity of animal images in all of these extracts is striking. In the Salvation Army sequence, I describe one man as having "bulging eyes like a baby bird," and another as "leading with his nose . . . [like] a hunting dog," and "strutting with that peculiar turkey walk." The people in my Chinatown observation do not select fish, but "scoop" it, nor do they touch food, but "paw" it. A man in a business suit is described as "an aged land turtle craning its neck out of its shell," while later women "clutch" plastic bags as if in their talons, or send their daughters to "fetch" empty bags. Wolf described a group of young boys as having "scattered like chickens," while Spradley referred to "streams of people" who "flow" through the lobby and "scramble" onto the elevator. All these images, while certainly descriptive and evocative, also reinforce the otherness and inferiority of those observed.

Researchers may also make the verbs describing some actions somehow morally superior to those describing others. Wolf's sequence provides an example. Her fieldnotes stated that "48 got to her feet and staggered after her into the house like she was drunk." First, the verb "staggered" has connotations not only of drunkenness but also of disorderliness. Synonyms for "staggered" such as "swayed" or "wavered" have different connotations; "swayed", for example, often reminds me of southern belles or cruise ships. Second, stating "like she was drunk" implies that this woman could very well be under the influence, when a phrase like "as if she were disoriented" would be less suggestive. Given the negative feelings toward public drunkenness (particularly for women) in Western society, it may be better not to use such strong imagery at all.

I will cite an example of the misuse of imagery from an educational setting. A teacher sends several students to the office for undetermined reasons and walks there with them. In the observation fieldnotes this could be written as "the students were escorted to the office," "the teacher marched the students to the office," or "the teacher accompanied the students to the office." Writing in the passive voice, as in the first example, the researcher removes dignity and agency from the students. They are not to be trusted and must be escorted to the office by someone; it is not important who. In the second example, the researcher suggests that the teacher is angry and acting as a drill sergeant. It depicts soldiers on a forced march. In the third example, the researcher puts the teacher on an equal footing with the students, "accompanying" being less invested with power relationships than "escorting." None of these descriptions is

inherently “better” or “worse” than the others if researchers are aware of the connotations of their word choices, and if the words reflect the feel of the lived experience.

Linguistic choices reflect the intended audience(s) for fieldnotes. In two extracts, those from Wolf and Spradley, the authors used formal language, displaying not only complex sentences and passive voice, but also translation from the present to the past tense. The exceptions to such formality in the above extracts therefore are rendered more striking. For example, Wolf used the Taiwanese word *bai-bai*, meaning “the entire ritual associated with offerings of food, incense, and paper money to various gods, as well as the feasting that follows major festivals” or “the slight bowing over hands that are palm on palm, much like the Western Protestant prayer position” (Wolf, 1992, p. 64, fn), instead of “worship” or “pray.”<sup>10</sup> In Wolf’s fieldnotes, the word did not appear only in this form; she sometimes conjugated it like an English verb, so that it appeared also as “*bai-bai-ing*” (e.g., pp. 76; 78) or “*bai-bai-ed*” (e.g., p. 83). Wolf’s use of this word implies that researchers cannot use the formal English word “worship” for indigenous Taiwanese religious beliefs because this use reduces the activity to an informal, colourful native custom. Although this usage could, in other cases, be indicative of heightened respect for indigenous religion, Wolf’s use does not come across as respectful because the Taiwanese forms are subjected to Anglicization.

Again in Wolf’s fieldnotes, she demonstrated a lack of formality in her use of verbatim quotations. Because she translated the quotations from the Taiwanese dialect, her citations are not actually verbatim but filtered through translation. Within quotation marks are such sentences as “I am wrong. I am wrong. I am just an old lady who doesn’t understand,” and “people should not be judgmental, saying this person is good and that person is bad.” Only once in the quotations does Wolf use the contractions that would normally be present in speech. She has translated the words into simplified and stilted English, giving the reader the feeling that the speech is not fluent, and that the Taiwanese have an interest in more immediate concerns than in intellectual challenge. In Taiwanese, the sentences could well have been graceful and poetic, but in Wolf’s translation they come across as awkward and uneducated.

Wolf further demonstrated her attitude toward the townspeople’s lack of education near the beginning of her extract: “85 had been chatting with some other women about some medicine that she had put on her eyes which appeared to be infected.” “Chatting” is a word usually reserved for inconsequential or gossipy speech, rather than for a discussion of medicinal

remedies. This word can be seen to reduce not only the importance of the conversational activity, but also the level of respect accorded to local medical practice. It is saying, in effect, "it may be important to them, but it is only chatting to me."

Second, the audience for all these fieldnote extracts must be familiar with the cultural assumptions in the texts. For example, in the Chinatown sequence, the audience must know what "laboratory coat," "gladiator cuffs," and "Smithrite disposal units" are, and how culturally incongruous is their juxtaposition. In his extract, Spradley assumed other cultural expectations, such as what it means to be a "well dressed" woman, what a "sacred, almost religious place" might be like, or why the researcher may debate whether or not to enter the room before the appointed hour. Both Spradley and I (and Wolf) grouped the people in our observations in terms of where they are located in time and space. Both of us described clothing but do not describe faces, seemingly a cultural norm in the West, one that could reflect a cultural preoccupation with the external indicators of an individual's social position. These shared cultural assumptions can foster a patronizing attitude toward the people being observed. In the Chinatown sequence, for example, I used a Western standard to measure the people, while Spradley used norms that are both androcentric and cultural. In all of these instances, we were playing with a priori, culturally formulated stereotypes, and writing for audiences that know them.

#### IS THERE A SOLUTION?

These few examples have described how the rhetorical, narrative, and linguistic choices researchers make during the recording of fieldnotes can structure an interpretation or analysis. Although the examples I have given illustrate moments when the researcher positions him or herself as culturally superior to those being observed, it is possible for fieldnote writers to endow people, actions, or events with mythic or exalted qualities as well.

In fact, it may not be necessary, nor even preferable, to try to purge fieldnotes of their colourful, descriptive, and connotative language. As Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) pointed out with regard to transcription, researchers require flexible approaches to suit differing purposes and contexts; therefore, "a quest for one standard set of conventions is not likely to satisfy all, and it is not theoretically tenable" (p. 81). Moreover, as Rabinow (1986) suggested, "the insight that anthropologists write employing literary conventions, although interesting, is not inherently

crisis-provoking" (p. 243); nor should it prompt cries for the literary reform of fieldnotes. There is no objective manner in which to write, no innocent place from which to view (Haraway, 1991), and therefore no way in which, ultimately, to sterilize our fieldnotes. More recent forms of representation, have introduced

a formularized version of post-modern ethnography, alternating between stock passages of ethnographic self-consciousness and (carefully edited and positioned) "voices," [which] is in danger of becoming the disciplinary norm, while students have to be constantly warned that sometimes the people they are talking to are more interesting than the people asking the questions. (Spencer, 2001, p. 450)

If fieldnotes cannot be rendered less judgmental, and researchers' ego-ethnographies more suited to confessionals, is that licence to write as they please? Not exactly.

Naively writing in any fashion is not, I believe, the correct option. Nor do I believe that my own first reaction to the postmodern problem of representation — not to describe anything (particularly people) at all, concentrating instead on transcribing conversations and mapping out movements — was, in any way, superior. By simply transcribing conversations, I allowed the initiation, response, feedback, and evaluative practices typical of classroom conversations to become episodic. Similarly, teachers' or children's movements from their desks, to another location, and back, would delineate an episode. By imposing these forms of order, I was less holistic in my orientation to the classroom, actually creating pre-categorized data sets. The result was not a less researcher-constructed culture, but a differently researcher-constructed one.

Taking my consternation to the literature, I found Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) questions for analyzing documents. Perhaps researchers could consider fieldnotes a kind of document and query them with the following:

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 is taken for granted? 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? (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 173)

Hammersley and Atkinson claimed these questions will eventually enable researchers to question all aspects of everyday life under study. In fact, these questions could well have prompted most, if not all, of the contributions to the oft-cited book on ethnographic writing, *Writing culture:*

*The poetics and politics of ethnography* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). In that volume, most contributors focused on the published ethnographic writing of other people. There is no reason to believe that the literary deconstruction of ethnographic writing could not begin with the analysis of fieldnotes, prior to publication, nor to believe that researchers are unable to analyze their own documents.

Such questions, if reworked a bit, and augmented, provide a good starting point for analysis. By asking such questions researchers can begin to unravel the interpretations that they have created: How is this written? What narrative and rhetorical strategies have been used? What linguistic choices have been made? What is the effect? How do other people read these fieldnotes? Who is the intended audience? Where is the researcher situated? What is recorded? What is omitted? What is taken for granted? How do the fieldnotes reinforce assumptions? How do the fieldnotes challenge assumptions? What purposes could these fieldnotes serve? The answers, then, can be added to the analytic process, adding another layer of reflection and insight to the research cycle.

#### CONCLUSION

In short, observation reveals as much or more about the observer as it does about the observed, that is, fieldnotes are "selective, purposed, angled, voiced, because they are authored" (Emerson et al, 1995, p. 106). Every time researchers choose a word, or a sentence structure, every time they use active or passive voice, or direct or indirect reporting of speech, every time they use a known narrative structure, researchers create the very evidence they will later use as "proof" of their interpretations. The concept of "raw data" is therefore "half-baked."

Moreover, researchers should not assume that because they have examined and critiqued their assumptions, they have purged these sentiments. Only continuous re-examination and reflection can lead to recognition of prejudices; only understanding of linguistic and rhetorical practices can gesture towards humility in the research process.

In a final turn, I will now look at this manuscript from a literary perspective. I have used rhetoric in order to convince you, as I have been convinced. I have rearranged the words of others into classifications of knowledge. I have described their understandings and quoted from their texts to authenticate my own. I have produced academic formal writing, albeit in the first person, lending more authority to my words. I have chosen those words carefully, hoping to convince you and to make an impact, but not so strong an impact that you, the reader, feel threatened or accused. In

short, I have written a conventionalized argument, challenging the orthodoxies in texts by not challenging them at all. I have written primarily to those who have not yet begun to question their fieldnote-writing practice, yet I have written *to* you, but not *for* you, an invitation to dialogue.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Wolcott (2001) began by challenging the reader to think about why he chose “writing up” rather than “writing down” or merely “writing” for his book title. Almost invariably, when discussing fieldnote practice authors refer to “writing down” fieldnotes, but “writing up” research (e.g., Plath, 1990, p. 376; Sanjek, 1990d). Only Sanjek (1990b) appeared to break with this dichotomy by including academic articles and reports written in the field as fieldnotes. This, in itself, illustrates how choice of language can influence views and interpretations.
- 2 Spradley (1980) explained that, while making his notes, he used (a) his native language, (b) the language of social science, (c) the language of tramps, (d) courtroom language, and (e) the languages of the alcohol treatment centre. Spradley’s description is a divergent, though related, understanding of language choice.
- 3 It is apparent, even during this first attempt at ethnographic observation, that I was aware of the importance of language and linguistic choices. In that assignment, I commented that: “low-inference descriptors need to be considered. Reporting verbatim conversation and concrete descriptions of objects is relatively objective, but trying to find a word that accurately describes a look in the person’s eyes, a gesture, a tone of voice, anything human at all, is very subjective. Describing human qualities requires inferential descriptors.” (personal files, 1992)
- 4 After completing this assignment, I wrote in my journal that: “I thought this was going to be difficult, but it was easy. . . . Because I was attuned to trying to think these thoughts, it came as pretty much of a shock that so many came naturally. I have a set of beliefs, but these are not the same as my gut reactions. I am the antithesis of what I believe in. . . . Most of all I want to go back to a week ago when I could be self-righteous in my belief that I couldn’t be a racist because I married a Ryukyu (Japanese Aboriginal) man.” (personal files, 1993–1994)



- 5 Because this extract was used to support an argument in an academic text, it is a very good illustration of how researchers create the very evidence later used as "proof" of their interpretations.
- 6 Excerpts from Margery Wolf, *A thrice-told tale: Feminism, postmodernism and ethnographic responsibility* (© 1992 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University; all rights reserved). Reprinted with permission.
- 7 From Spradley (1980), *Participant Observation* (1st ed.) (© 1980; reprinted with permission of Wadsworth, a division of Thomson Learning; www.thomsonrights.com). Reprinted with permission.
- 8 Researchers seem often attracted to the unclean, the bad, the ugly or the quaint. They tend to notice what is interesting, or different, or inconvenient, rather than what is mundane (see Kouritzin, 2000, for explication). This tendency heightens the sense of strangeness and danger in researchers' positions.
- 9 The intrusion of a male authority in my 1994 class assignment is not quoted in the extract; it occurs at the end of the observation sequence.
- 10 Wolf (1992) also used the Taiwanese words that refer to all religious matters and spiritual leaders. The description of *tang-ki*, for example, is that it refers to a shaman. Western audiences do not consider shaman to be of the same order as priests or other religious leaders.

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