

Chapter 1

What is ethnography?

In recent decades ethnography has become a popular approach to social research, along with other kinds of qualitative work. This stems in part from disillusionment with the quantitative methods that for long held the dominant position in most of the social sciences, and in most areas of applied social research. Indeed, the popularity of qualitative research is now such that in some areas it has itself become the dominant approach. At the same time, though, this success has brought diversification and disagreement: there is considerable variety in prescription and practice, and along with this some dissensus about the proper nature of qualitative research and its purposes. This diversity in perspective and practice has been formalized in attempts to identify multiple paradigms. Thus, Marshall and Rossman (1989) list six forms of qualitative research, while in the field of education Jacob finds seven or eight distinct qualitative paradigms in the United States (Jacob 1987), and similar diversity is to be found in British work in that field (Atkinson *et al.* 1988).

For the purposes of this book we shall interpret the term 'ethnography' in a liberal way, not worrying much about what does and does not count as examples of it. We see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or set of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. Equally, though, as we shall suggest later, there is a sense in which all social researchers are participant observers;

and, as a result, the boundaries around ethnography are necessarily unclear. In particular, we would not want to make any hard-and-fast distinction between ethnography and other sorts of qualitative inquiry.

In many respects ethnography is the most basic form of social research. Not only does it have a very long history (Wax 1971), it also bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life. Some commentators regard this as its basic strength; others see it as a fundamental weakness. In the past it was more commonly seen as a weakness, but recently it has increasingly come to be regarded more positively. As a result, the case for qualitative work is now more widely accepted than before, and this has led to a growth of interest in the combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques (Bryman 1988; Brannen 1992). However, there has been a countervailing tendency on the part of some ethnographers to distinguish their approach more sharply from quantitative method, and in the process to reject the very notion of a *science* of social life devoted to understanding human behaviour (see, for example, Smith 1989; Guba 1990; Lather 1991).

Social researchers have long felt the tension between conceptions of scientific method modelled on the practices of the natural sciences, on the one hand, and ideas about the distinctiveness of the social world and the implications of this for how it should be studied, on the other. But in recent years this has been exacerbated by increased questioning of the value and character of natural science. It no longer represents the prestigious model it once did. In part this arises from recognition that its fruits are a mixed blessing. In addition, there has been much emphasis on the fact that it is a social product; so stress has been placed on what it shares with other sorts of human activity, and also on parallels with scholarship in the humanities and the arts. Furthermore, such scholarship has itself become an increasingly important influence on social research, especially among ethnographers.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and assess these changes in ideas about ethnographic methodology. We shall begin by looking at the conflict between quantitative and qualitative method as competing models of social research, which raged across many fields in the past and continues in some

even today. This was often seen as a clash between competing philosophical positions. Following much precedent we shall call these 'positivism' and 'naturalism': the former privileging quantitative methods, the latter promoting ethnography as the central, if not the only legitimate, social research method. ('Naturalism' is a term which is used in a variety of different, even contradictory, ways in the literature: see Matza 1969. Here we have simply adopted the conventional meaning within the ethnographic literature.)

POSITIVISM VERSUS NATURALISM

Positivism has a long history in philosophy, but it reached its high point in the 'logical positivism' of the 1930s and 1940s (Kolakowski 1972). This movement had a considerable influence upon social scientists, notably in promoting the status of experimental and survey research and the quantitative forms of analysis associated with them. Before this, in both sociology and social psychology, qualitative and quantitative techniques had generally been used side by side, often by the same researchers. Nineteenth-century investigators, such as Mayhew (1861), LePlay (1879), and Booth (1902-3), treated quantitative and qualitative data as complementary. Even the sociologists of the Chicago School, often represented as exponents of participant observation, employed both 'case-study' and 'statistical' methods. While there were recurrent debates among them regarding the relative advantages and uses of the two approaches, there was general agreement on the value of both (Bulmer, 1984; Harvey 1985; Hammersley 1989b). It was only later, with the rapid development of statistical methods and the growing influence of positivist philosophy, that survey research came to be regarded by some of its practitioners as a self-sufficient methodological tradition. (In social psychology this process started rather earlier, and it was the experiment which became the dominant method.)

Today, the term 'positivism' has become little more than a term of abuse among social scientists, and as a result its meaning has become obscured. For present purposes the major tenets of positivism can be outlined as follows (for more detailed discussions see Keat and Urry 1975; Giddens 1979; Cohen 1980):

- 1 *Physical science, conceived in terms of the logic of the experiment, is the model for social research.* While positivists do not claim that the methods of all the physical sciences are the same, they do argue that these share a common logic. This is the logic of the experiment, where quantitatively measured variables are manipulated in order to identify the relationships among them. This logic is taken to be the defining feature of science.
- 2 *Universal laws.* Positivists adopt a characteristic conception of explanation, usually termed the 'covering law' model. Here events are explained in deductive fashion by appeal to universal laws that state regular relationships between variables which hold across all relevant circumstances. However, it is the statistical version of this model, whereby the relationships have only a high probability of applying across relevant circumstances, that has generally been adopted by social scientists; and this has encouraged great concern with sampling procedures, especially in survey research. Given this model of explanation, a premium is placed on the generalizability of findings.
- 3 *Neutral observation language.* Finally, positivists give priority to phenomena that are directly observable; any appeal to intangibles runs the risk of being dismissed as metaphysical speculation. It is argued that scientific theories must be founded upon, or tested by appeal to, descriptions that simply correspond to the state of the world, involving no theoretical assumptions and thus being beyond doubt. This foundation could be sense data, as in traditional empiricism, or it may be the realm of the 'publicly observable': for example, the movement of physical objects, such as mercury in a thermometer, which can be easily agreed upon by all observers. Great emphasis is therefore given to the standardization of procedures of data collection, which is intended to facilitate the achievement of measurements that are stable across observers. If measurement is reliable in this sense, it is argued, it provides a sound, theoretically neutral base upon which to build.

Central to positivism, then, is a certain conception of scientific method, modelled on the natural sciences, and in particular on physics (Toulmin 1972). Method here is concerned with the

testing of theories. A sharp distinction is drawn between the context of discovery and the context of justification (Reichenbach 1938 and 1951). The question of how theoretical ideas are generated belongs to the former and is outside the realm of scientific method. It is the procedures employed in the context of justification that are held to mark science off from common sense, since they involve the rigorous assessment of alternative theories from an objective point of view.

Thus, for positivists, the most important feature of scientific theories is that they are open to, and are subjected to, test: they can be confirmed, or at least falsified, with certainty. This requires the exercise of control over variables, which can be achieved through physical control, as in experiments, or through statistical analysis of a large number of cases, as in survey research. Without any control over variables, it is argued, one can do no more than speculate about causal relationships, since no basis for testing hypotheses is available. So, the process of testing involves comparing what the theory says should occur under certain circumstances with what actually does occur – in short, comparing it with 'the facts'. These facts are collected by means of methods that, like the facts they collect, are regarded as theory-neutral; otherwise, it is assumed, they could not provide a conclusive test of the theory. In particular, every attempt is made to eliminate the effect of the observer by developing an explicit, standardized set of data elicitation procedures. This allows replication by others so that an assessment of the reliability of the findings can be made. In survey research, for example, the behaviour of interviewers is typically specified down to the wording of questions and the order in which they are asked. In experiments the behaviour of the experimenter and the instructions he or she gives to subjects are closely defined. It is argued that if it can be ensured that each survey respondent or experimental subject in a study and its replications is faced with the same set of stimuli, then their responses will be commensurable. Where such explicit and standardized procedures are not employed, as in participant observation, so the argument goes, it is impossible to know how to interpret the responses since one has no idea what they are responses to. In short, it is only through the exercise of physical or statistical control of variables and their rigorous measurement, positivists argue, that science is able to produce a body of knowledge whose validity

is conclusive, which can replace the myths and dogma of common sense.

Qualitative research does not match these positivist canons, and as a result it came under criticism as lacking scientific rigour. It was sometimes dismissed as quite inappropriate to social science, on the grounds that the data and findings it produces are 'subjective', mere idiosyncratic impressions of one or two cases that cannot provide a solid foundation for rigorous scientific analysis. In reaction, ethnographers developed an alternative view of the proper nature of social research, often termed 'naturalism' (Lofland 1967; Blumer 1969; Matza 1969; Denzin 1971; Schatzman and Strauss 1973; Guba 1978). They too sometimes appealed to natural science as a model, but their conception of its method was different to that of the positivists, and the exemplar was usually nineteenth-century biology rather than twentieth-century physics.

Naturalism proposes that, as far as possible, the social world should be studied in its 'natural' state, undisturbed by the researcher. Hence, 'natural' not 'artificial' settings, like experiments or formal interviews, should be the primary source of data. Furthermore, the research must be carried out in ways that are sensitive to the nature of the setting. The primary aim should be to describe what happens in the setting, how the people involved see their own actions and those of others, and the contexts in which the action takes place.

A key element of naturalism is the demand that the social researcher should adopt an attitude of 'respect' or 'appreciation' towards the social world. In Matza's words, naturalism is 'the philosophical view that remains true to the nature of the phenomenon under study' (1969:5). This is counterposed to the positivists' primary and prior commitment to a conception of scientific method reconstructed from the experience of natural scientists:

Reality exists in the empirical world and not in the methods used to study that world; it is to be discovered in the examination of that world. Methods are mere instruments designed to identify and analyze the obdurate character of the empirical world, and as such their value exists only in their suitability in enabling this task to be done. In this fundamental sense the procedures employed in each part of the act of scientific

inquiry should and must be assessed in terms of whether they respect the nature of the empirical world under study – whether what they signify or imply to be the nature of the empirical world is actually the case.

(Blumer 1969:27–8)

A first requirement of social research according to naturalism, then, is fidelity to the phenomena under study, not to any particular set of methodological principles, however strongly supported by philosophical arguments.

Moreover, naturalists regard social phenomena as quite distinct in character from physical phenomena. In this respect, naturalism drew on a wide range of philosophical and sociological ideas, but especially on symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. From different starting points these traditions all argue that the social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships or by the subsumption of social events under universal laws. This is because human actions are based upon, or infused by, social meanings: that is, by intentions, motives, beliefs, rules, and values. Thus, for example, at the heart of symbolic interactionism is a rejection of the stimulus-response model of human behaviour which is built into the methodological arguments of positivism. In the view of interactionists, people interpret stimuli, and these interpretations, continually under revision as events unfold, shape their actions. As a result, the same physical stimulus can mean different things to different people – and, indeed, to the same person at different times. Mehan provides a striking example that relates directly to the sort of data collection method supported by positivism:

A question from [a] language development test instructs the child to choose 'the animal that can fly' from a bird, an elephant, and a dog. The correct answer (obviously) is the bird. Many first grade children, though, chose the elephant along with the bird as a response to that question. When I later asked them why they chose that answer they replied: 'That's Dumbo'. Dumbo (of course) is Walt Disney's flying elephant, well known to children who watch television and read children's books as an animal that flies.

(Mehan 1974:249)

Such indeterminacy of interpretation undermines attempts to develop standard measures of human behaviour. Interpretations of the same set of experimental instructions or interview questions will undoubtedly vary among people and across occasions.

Equally important, naturalists argue that because people's behaviour is not caused in a mechanical way, it is not amenable to the sort of causal analysis and manipulation of variables that are characteristic of the quantitative research inspired by positivism. Any hope of discovering 'laws' of human behaviour is misplaced, it is suggested, since human behaviour is continually constructed, and reconstructed, on the basis of people's interpretations of the situations they are in.

According to naturalism, in order to understand people's behaviour we must use an approach that gives us access to the meanings that guide that behaviour. Fortunately, the capacities we have developed as social actors can give us such access. As participant observers we can learn the culture or subculture of the people we are studying. We can come to interpret the world in the same way as they do, and thereby learn to understand their behaviour in a different way to that in which natural scientists set about understanding the behaviour of physical phenomena. (This form of understanding social phenomena is often referred to as *Verstehen*. See Truzzi 1974 for a discussion and illustrations of the history of this concept.)

The need to learn the culture of those we are studying is most obvious in the case of societies other than our own. Here, not only may we not know *why* people do what they do, often we do not even know *what* they are doing. We are in much the same position as Schutz's (1964) stranger. Schutz notes how in the weeks and months following an immigrant's arrival in the host society, what he or she previously took for granted as knowledge about that society turns out to be unreliable, if not obviously false. In addition, areas of ignorance previously of no importance come to take on great significance; and overcoming them is necessary for the pursuit of important goals, perhaps even for the stranger's very survival in the new environment. In the process of learning how to participate in the host society, the stranger gradually acquires an inside knowledge of it, which supplants his or her previous 'external' knowledge. Schutz argues that by virtue of being forced to come to understand a culture in this way, the stranger acquires a certain objectivity

not normally available to culture members. The latter live inside the culture, and tend to see it as simply a reflection of 'how the world is'. They are often not conscious of the fundamental presuppositions that shape their vision, many of which are distinctive to their culture.

Schutz's account of the experience of the stranger matches most closely the work of anthropologists, who typically study societies very different to their own. However, the experience of the stranger is not restricted to those moving to live in a different society. Movement among groups within a single society can produce the same effects, though generally in a milder form. There are many different layers or circles of cultural knowledge within any society. Indeed, this is particularly true of modern industrial societies with their complex divisions of labour, multifarious life-styles, ethnic diversity, and deviant communities – and the subcultures and perspectives that maintain, and are generated by, these social divisions. This was, of course, one of the major rationales for the research of the Chicago School sociologists. Drawing on the analogy of plant and animal ecology, they set out to document the very different patterns of life to be found in different parts of the city of Chicago, from the 'high society' of the so-called 'gold coast' to slum ghettos such as Little Sicily. Later, the same kind of approach came to be applied to the cultures of occupations, organizations, and deviant groups, as well as to even more diffuse 'social worlds' (Strauss 1978 and 1993) such as those of art (Becker 1974), racing (Scott 1968), or organized drug dealing (Adler 1993).

According to the naturalist account, the value of ethnography as a social research method is founded upon the existence of such variations in cultural patterns across and within societies, and their significance for understanding social processes. Ethnography exploits the capacity that any social actor possesses for learning new cultures, and the objectivity to which this process gives rise. Even where he or she is researching a familiar group or setting, the participant observer is required to treat this as 'anthropologically strange', in an effort to make explicit the presuppositions he or she takes for granted as a culture member. In this way, it is hoped, the culture is turned into an object available for study. Naturalism proposes that through marginality, in social position and perspective, it is possible to construct an account of the culture under investigation that both

understands it from within and captures it as external to, and independent of, the researcher: in other words, as a natural phenomenon. Thus, the description of cultures becomes the primary goal. The search for universal laws is downplayed in favour of detailed accounts of the concrete experience of life within a particular culture and of the beliefs and social rules that are used as resources within it. Indeed, attempts to go beyond this, for instance to explain particular cultural forms, are sometimes discouraged. Certainly, as Denzin (1971:168) notes, 'the naturalist resists schemes or models which over-simplify the complexity of everyday life'; though some forms of theory, those which are believed to be capable of capturing social complexity, are often recommended, most notably the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss 1968; Strauss and Corbin 1990; but see also Williams 1976).

In recent years, the influence of positivism has waned and with it, in many areas, the dominance of quantitative method. However, at the same time naturalism has come under attack from within the ranks of qualitative researchers. In the next section we shall explore these more recent developments.

ANTI-REALIST AND POLITICAL CRITIQUES OF NATURALISM

As we noted earlier, in the past decade or so there have been conflicting trends of development in social research methodology. On the one hand, there has been growing acceptance of ethnography and qualitative method, and attempts to combine them with quantitative techniques. On the other hand, there have been criticisms of such moves for neglecting the conflicting philosophical and political presuppositions built into qualitative and quantitative approaches (Smith and Heshusius 1986; Smith 1989; Guba 1990). There has also been criticism of older forms of ethnographic work and thinking on the grounds that they still betray the influence of positivism and scientism. What is pointed to here is that, despite their differences, positivism and naturalism share much in common. They each appeal to the model of natural science, albeit interpreting it in different ways. As a result, they are both committed to the attempt to understand social phenomena as objects existing independently of the researcher. Similarly, they both regard practical and political

commitments on the part of the researcher as, for the most part, extraneous to the research process – indeed, as a source of distortion whose effects have to be guarded against to preserve objectivity. Many ethnographers have begun to question the commitment of qualitative research to naturalism, challenging one or both of these assumptions. Doubts have been raised about the capacity of ethnography to portray the social world in the way that naturalism claims it does. Equally, the commitment of the older kinds of ethnography to some sort of value neutrality has been questioned, and politically interventionist forms of ethnography have been recommended. We shall look at these aspects of the critique of naturalism separately, though they are often closely related.

Questioning realism

Realism ↔ constructivism

Many critics of positivism and naturalism today reject them on the grounds that they both assume that the task of social research is to represent social phenomena in some literal fashion: to document their features and explain their occurrence. What is being questioned here is sometimes referred to as realism. In part, criticism of realism stems from a tension within ethnography between the naturalism characteristic of ethnographers' methodological thinking and the constructivism and cultural relativism that shape their understanding of the perspectives and behaviour of the people they study. As we saw, ethnographers portray people as constructing the social world, both through their interpretations of it and through actions based on those interpretations. Furthermore, those interpretations sometimes reflect different cultures, so that there is a sense in which through their actions people create different social worlds (Blumer 1969:11). But constructivism and relativism are compatible with naturalism only so long as they are not applied to ethnographic research itself. Once we come to see ethnographers as themselves constructing the social world through their interpretations of it, there is a conflict with the naturalistic realism built into ethnographic methodology.

This internal source of doubts about realism was reinforced by the impact of various external developments. One of these was changes in the field of the philosophy of science. Whereas until the early 1950s positivism had dominated this field, at

that time its dominance began to be undermined, eventually producing a range of alternative positions, some of which rejected realism. A sign of this change was the enormous impact of Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1970; first published in 1962). Kuhn argued against views of the history of science that portray it as a process of cumulative development towards the truth, achieved by rational investigation founded on evidence. He, and others, showed that the work of the scientists involved in the major developments of scientific knowledge in the past was shaped by theoretical presuppositions about the world that were not themselves based on empirical research, and many of which are now judged to be false. Kuhn further claimed that the history of science, rather than displaying the gradual build-up of knowledge, is punctuated by periods of revolution when the theoretical presuppositions forming the 'paradigm' in terms of which scientists in a particular field have previously operated are challenged and replaced. An example is the shift from Newtonian physics to relativity theory and quantum mechanics in the early part of the twentieth century. The replacement of one paradigm by another, according to Kuhn, does not occur on the basis simply of the rational assessment of evidence. Paradigms are incommensurable, they picture the world in incompatible ways, so that the data themselves are interpreted differently by those working in different paradigms. This implies that the validity of scientific claims is always relative to the paradigm within which they are judged; they are never simply a reflection of some independent domain of reality.

Kuhn's work embodied most of the arguments against positivism that had become influential: that there is no theory-neutral observational foundation against which theories can be tested, and that judgments about the validity of theories are never fully determined by any evidence. He also proposed an alternative conception of science that contrasted sharply with the positivist model. However, his critique counted as much against naturalism, against the idea of the researcher getting into direct contact with reality, as it did against positivism: on his account all knowledge of the world is mediated by paradigmatic presuppositions. Furthermore, the alternative view he offered made even natural scientists look very much like the people constructing their social worlds that ethnographers had long portrayed in

their accounts. And sociologists of science have subsequently produced ethnographies of the work of natural scientists along these lines (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Knorr-Cetina 1981). In this way, natural science moved from being primarily a methodological model for social research to being an object of sociological investigation; and for ethnographers this brought the conflict between naturalism and constructivism to a head.

As important as developments within the philosophy of science for the generation of doubts about realism was the influence of various continental European philosophical trends. Naturalism had been influenced by nineteenth-century ideas about hermeneutics, about the interpretation of historical texts, notably the work of Dilthey. This was the source of the idea, mentioned earlier, that socio-cultural understanding takes a different form to the understanding of physical phenomena. In the twentieth century, however, this earlier hermeneutic tradition came to be challenged by a new form of 'philosophical hermeneutics'. Where previously understanding human texts had been presented as a rigorous process of recovering the meaning intended by the author and locating it within relevant cultural settings, philosophical hermeneutics viewed the process of understanding as inevitably reflecting the 'prejudices', the pre-understandings, of the interpreter. Interpretation of texts, and by extension understanding of the social world too, could no longer be seen as a matter of capturing social meanings in their own terms; the accounts produced were regarded as inevitably reflecting the socio-historical position of the researcher (Warnke 1987).

Another powerful influence on ethnography in recent years has been post-structuralism. This is a diverse movement, but we shall mention just two of its most influential strands: Derrida's 'deconstruction' and the work of Foucault. Like philosophical hermeneutics, deconstruction also led to questioning of the idea that ethnographers can capture the meanings on the basis of which people act, and it did this on related grounds: that meanings are not stable; nor are they properties of individuals, but rather reflect the constitution of subjectivities through language. Also important has been deconstruction's undermining of the distinctions between different genres of writing: between those of 'writers' and critics, between fiction and non-fiction, indeed between literary and technical writing generally. This has led to recognition of the fact that the language used by ethnographers

in their writing is not a transparent medium allowing us to see reality through it, but rather a construction that draws on many of the rhetorical strategies used by journalists or even novelists. Some have drawn the conclusion from this that the phenomena described in ethnographic accounts are created through the rhetorical strategies employed, rather than being external to the text; in short, this concern with rhetoric has often been associated with forms of anti-realism (see, for example, Tyler 1986).

Foucault's work is also based on a rejection of realism. He stresses the fact that social research is a socio-historical phenomenon, one which functions as part of the process of surveillance and control, which he sees as the central feature of modern society. Its products reflect its social character, rather than *representing* some world that is independent of it. Foucault argues that different 'regimes of truth' are established in different contexts, reflecting the play of diverse sources of power and resistance. Thus, what is treated as true and false, in social research as elsewhere, is constituted through the exercise of power. (For a discussion of the implications of Foucault's work for ethnography, see Gubrium and Silverman 1989.)

While realism has not been completely abandoned by most ethnographers, the idea that ethnographic accounts can represent social reality in a relatively unproblematic way has been rejected; and doubt has been thrown on the claims to scientific authority associated with realism. Moreover, in the work of Foucault we have a direct link with the second criticism of naturalism: its neglect of the politics of social research.

The politics of ethnography

Naturalists shared with positivists a commitment to producing accounts of factual matters that reflected the nature of the phenomena studied rather than the values or political commitments of the researcher. Of course, both recognized that in practice research is affected by the researcher's values, but the naturalist's aim was to limit the influence of those values as far as possible, so as to produce findings that were true independently of any particular value stance. In recent years, any such striving after value neutrality and objectivity has been questioned, sometimes being replaced by advocacy of 'openly ideological' research (Lather 1986).

In part this has resulted from the continuing influence of Marxism and 'critical' theory, but equally important has been the impact of feminism. From a traditional Marxist point of view the very distinction between facts and values is a historical product, and one that can be overcome through the future development of society. Values refer to the human potential that is built into the unfolding of history. In this sense values are facts even though they may not yet have been *realized* in the social world. Moreover, they provide the key to any understanding of the nature of current social conditions, their past and their future. The science of society thus provides not just abstract knowledge but the basis for action to transform the world to achieve human self-realization. From this point of view ethnography, like other forms of social research, cannot but be concerned simultaneously with factual and value matters, and its role inevitably involves political intervention (whether researchers are aware of this or not).

A similar conclusion about the political character of social research has been reached in other ways, for example by those arguing that the fact that research is always affected by values, and always has political consequences, means that researchers ought to take responsibility for their value commitments and for the effects of their work. It has also been suggested that ethnography and other forms of social research have had too little impact, that their products simply lie on library shelves gathering dust, and that as a result they are worthless. To be of value, it is suggested, ethnographic research should be concerned not simply with understanding the world but with applying its findings to bring about change.

There are differences in view about the nature of the change that should be aimed at. Sometimes the concern is with rendering research more relevant to national policy-making or to one or another form of professional practice, as with some versions of the teacher-as-researcher movement (see, for example, Hustler *et al.* 1986). Alternatively, it may be argued that research should be emancipatory. This has been proposed by feminists, where the goal is the emancipation of women (and men) from patriarchy (Lather 1991; Fonow and Cook 1991); but it is also to be found in the writings of critical ethnographers and advocates of emancipatory action research, where the goal of research is taken to be the transformation of Western societies so as to realize the

ideals of freedom, equality, and justice (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis 1988; Gitlin *et al.* 1989).

Of course, to the extent that the very possibility of producing knowledge is undermined by the sort of anti-realist arguments we outlined earlier, a concern with the effects of research may come to seem an appropriate alternative goal to the traditional concern with truth. This too has led to the growth of more interventionist conceptions of ethnography. In this way post-structuralism has contributed to the politicization of social research, despite the fact that it seems simultaneously to undermine all political ideals (Dews 1987).

REFLEXIVITY

The criticisms of naturalism we have outlined are sometimes seen as arising from the reflexive character of social research. It is argued that what both positivism and naturalism fail to take into account is the fact that social researchers are part of the social world they study. The distinction between science and common sense, between the activities and knowledge of the researcher and those of the researched, lies at the heart of both these positions. It is this that leads to their joint concern with eliminating the effects of the researcher on the data. For one, the solution is the standardization of research procedures; for the other, it is direct experience of the social world, in extreme form the requirement that ethnographers 'surrender' themselves to the cultures they wish to study (Wolff 1964; Jules-Rosette 1978a and b). Both positions assume that it is possible, in principle at least, to isolate a body of data uncontaminated by the researcher, by turning him or her either into an automaton or into a neutral vessel of cultural experience. However, searches for empirical bedrock of this kind are futile; all data involve theoretical pre-suppositions (Hanson 1958).

Reflexivity thus implies that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them. What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics. Also, it is

emphasized that the production of knowledge by researchers has consequences. At the very least, the publication of research findings can shape the climate in which political and practical decisions are made, and it may even directly stimulate particular sorts of action. Nor are the consequences of research neutral or necessarily desirable. Indeed, some commentators see social research as playing an undesirable role in supporting one or another aspect of the political status quo in Western societies.

There is no doubt that reflexivity is a significant feature of social research. Indeed, there is a sense in which all social research takes the form of participant observation: it involves participating in the social world, in whatever role, and reflecting on the products of that participation. However, we do not draw the same conclusions from the reflexivity of social research as many of the critics of naturalism. For us, recognition of reflexivity implies that there are elements of positivism and naturalism which must be abandoned; but it does not require rejection of all of the ideas associated with those two lines of thinking. Thus, we do not see reflexivity as undermining researchers' commitment to realism. In our view it only undermines naive forms of realism which assume that knowledge must be based on some absolutely secure foundation. Similarly, we do not believe that reflexivity implies that research is necessarily political, or that it should be political, in the sense of serving particular political causes or practical ends. For us, the primary goal of research is, and must remain, the production of knowledge.

Reflexivity and realism

It is true that we cannot avoid relying on 'common-sense' knowledge nor, often, can we avoid having an effect on the social phenomena we study. In other words, there is no way in which we can escape the social world in order to study it. Fortunately, though, this is not necessary even from a realist point of view. There is as little justification for rejecting all common-sense knowledge out of hand as there is for treating it as all 'valid in its own terms': we have no external, absolutely conclusive standard by which to judge it. But we can work with what 'knowledge' we have, while recognizing that it may be erroneous and engaging in systematic inquiry where doubt seems justified; and in so doing we can still make the reasonable

assumption that we are trying to describe phenomena as they are, and not merely how we perceive them or how we would like them to be (Hammersley 1992:ch.3). In our everyday activities we rely on presuppositions about the world, few of which we have subjected to test, and none of which we could fully test. Most of the time this does not and should not trouble us, and social research is no different from other activities in this respect. We need to reflect only on what seems problematic, while leaving open the possibility that what currently is not problematic may in the future become so.

It is also important to recognize that research is an active process, in which accounts of the world are produced through selective observation and theoretical interpretation of what is seen, through asking particular questions and interpreting what is said in reply, through writing fieldnotes and transcribing audio- and video-recordings, as well as through writing research reports. And it is true that some aspects of this process have not been given the attention they deserve until recently. However, to say that our findings, and even our data, are constructed does not automatically imply that they do not or cannot represent social phenomena. To believe that they do is to assume that the only true form of representation would involve the world imprinting its characteristics on our senses, a highly implausible account of the process of perception (Gregory 1970).

Similarly, the fact that as researchers we are likely to have an effect on the people we study does not mean that the validity of our findings is restricted to the data elicitation situations on which we relied. We can minimize reactivity and/or monitor it. But we can also exploit it: how people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they react to other situations. Indeed, rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher completely, we should set about understanding them, a point that Schuman has made in relation to social surveys:

The basic position I will take is simple: artifacts are in the mind of the beholder. Barring one or two exceptions, the problems that occur in surveys are opportunities for understanding once we take them seriously as facts of life. Let us distinguish here between the simple survey and the scientific survey.... The simple approach to survey research takes

responses literally, ignores interviewers as sources of influence, and treats sampling as unproblematic. A person who proceeds in this way is quite likely to trip and fall right on his artifact. The scientific survey, on the other hand, treats survey research as a search for meaning, and ambiguities of language and of interviewing, discrepancies between attitude and behaviour, even problems of non-response, provide an important part of the data, rather than being ignored or simply regarded as obstacles to efficient research.

(Schuman 1982:23)

In short, 'what is an artifact if treated naively reflects a fact of life if taken seriously' (1982:24). In order to understand the effects of the research and of research procedures, we need to compare data in which the level and direction of reactivity vary. Once we abandon the idea that the social character of research can be standardized out or avoided by becoming a 'fly on the wall' or a 'full participant', the role of the researcher as active participant in the research process becomes clear. He or she is the research instrument *par excellence*. The fact that behaviour and attitudes are often not stable across contexts and that the researcher may influence the context becomes central to the analysis. Indeed, it can be exploited for all it is worth. Data should not be taken at face value, but treated as a field of inferences in which hypothetical patterns can be identified and their validity tested. Different research strategies can be explored and their effects compared with a view to drawing theoretical conclusions. Interpretations need to be made explicit and full advantage should be taken of any opportunities to test their limits and to assess alternatives. Such a view contrasts sharply with the image of social research projected by naturalism, though it is closer to other models of ethnographic research such as 'grounded theorizing' (Glaser and Strauss 1967), 'analytic induction' (Cressey 1950; Denzin 1978), and the strategy model to be found alongside naturalism in the work of Schatzman and Strauss (1973). And in this way the image of the researcher is brought into parallel with that of the people studied, as actively making sense of the world, yet without undermining the commitment of research to realism.

Reflexivity and the political character of research

Positivism and naturalism, in the forms we have discussed them, tend to present research as an activity that is done for its own sake and in its own terms. By contrast, as we have seen, some critics insist that research has a social function, for instance serving to legitimate and preserve the status quo. And on this basis they argue that researchers must try to make their research serve a different function, such as challenging the status quo. Often, this point of view is organized around the question: whose side is the researcher on? (Becker 1967a; Troyna and Carrington 1989).

As we saw earlier, others argue that what is wrong with ethnography is its lack of impact on policy-making and practice, its limited payoff in the everyday worlds of politics and work. Here it is dismissed as an idle pastime, a case of fiddling while the world burns, or one engaged in by intellectual dilettantes who live off the taxes paid by hard-working citizens.

These criticisms of naturalist ethnography seem to us to involve an overestimation of the actual and potential contribution of research to policy and practice, and an associated failure to value the more modest contributions it offers. It is also worth pointing out that one may believe that the only justification for research is its contribution to policy and practice, and recognize that it inevitably has effects on these, without concluding that it should be directed towards the achievement of particular political or practical goals. Indeed, there are good reasons for research not being directed towards such goals. The most important is that this would increase the chances of the findings being distorted by ideas about how the world ought to be, or by what it would be politic for others to believe. When we are engaged in political or practical action, the truth of what we say is often not our principal concern, even though we may prefer to be honest. We are more concerned with the practical effects of our actions, and sometimes this may lead us to be 'economical' with the truth, at the very least. Moreover, even where the truth of our beliefs is the main issue, in practical activities judgment of factual and value claims as more or less reliable will be based on somewhat different considerations than in research directed towards producing knowledge: we will probably be concerned above all with whether the information

is sufficiently reliable for our current purposes. Of course, if one believes, as Marx and others did and do, that (ultimately at least) the true and the good are identical, one might deny the significance of this difference in orientation between research and other practical activities. But this view relies on an elaborate and unconvincing philosophical infrastructure (Hammersley 1992:ch.6 and 1993).

It is worth emphasizing that to deny that research should be directed towards political goals is not to suggest that researchers could, or should, abandon their political convictions. It is to insist that as researchers their primary goal must always be to produce knowledge, and that they should try to minimize any distortion of their findings by their political convictions or practical interests. Nor are we suggesting that researchers should be unconcerned about the effects of their work on the world. The point is that acknowledging the reflexivity of research does not imply that it must be primarily directed towards changing (or for that matter preserving) the world in some way or other. And, as we have indicated, there are good reasons why it should not be so directed.

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CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by examining two contrasting reconstructions of the logic of social research and their implications for ethnography. Neither positivism nor naturalism provides an adequate framework. Both neglect its fundamental reflexivity: the fact that we are part of the social world we study, and that there is no escape from reliance on common-sense knowledge and methods of investigation. All social research is founded on the human capacity for participant observation. We act in the social world and yet are able to reflect upon ourselves and our actions as objects in that world. However, rather than leading to doubts about whether social research can produce knowledge, or to its transformation into a political enterprise, for us this reflexivity provides the basis for a reconstructed logic of inquiry that shares much with positivism and naturalism but goes beyond them in important respects. By including our own role within the research focus, and perhaps even systematically exploiting our participation in the settings under study as researchers, we can produce accounts of the social world and

justify them without placing reliance on futile appeals to empiricism, of either positivist or naturalist varieties.

Reconstructing our understanding of social research in line with the implications of its reflexivity also throws light on the relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Certainly there is little justification for the view, associated with naturalism, that ethnography represents a superior, alternative paradigm to quantitative research. On the other hand, it has a much more powerful contribution to make to social science than positivism allows.

Reflexivity is an aspect of all social research. It is one that has been given increasing attention by ethnographers and others in recent years, notably in the production of 'natural histories' of their research. (For examples of such natural histories, see Hammond 1964; Freilich 1970b; Bell and Newby 1977; Shaffir *et al.* 1980; Hammersley 1983a; Bell and Roberts 1984; Burgess 1984b, 1985a and b, 1988a, 1989, 1990 and 1992; Golde 1986; Whitehead and Conaway 1986; McKeganey and Cunningham-Burley 1987; Walford 1987 and 1991b; Shaffir and Stebbins 1991; Okely and Gallaway 1992.) The remainder of this book is devoted to spelling out what we take to be the implications of reflexivity for ethnographic practice.

Chapter 2

Research design: problems, cases, and samples

At first blush, the conduct of ethnography can seem deceptively simple. Indeed, some authors have reported being given little or no research advice before they set out on their fieldwork. Nader, for example, relates how at one time this had become a tradition among North American anthropologists:

Before leaving Harvard I went to see Kluckhohn. In spite of the confidence I had gained from some of my training at Harvard, this last session left me frustrated. When I asked Kluckhohn if he had any advice, he told the story of a graduate student who had asked Kroeber the same question. In response Kroeber was said to have taken the largest, fattest ethnography book off his shelf, and said, 'Go forth and do likewise.'

(Nader 1986:98)

Such non-advice seems to rest on the assumption that the conduct of ethnography is unproblematic, and requires little preparation and no special expertise.

One of the reasons for this reluctance to give advice about how to do ethnographic research is awareness of the fact that such research cannot be programmed, that its practice is replete with the unexpected, as any reading of the many published research biographies now available will confirm. More than this, all research is a practical activity requiring the exercise of judgment in context; it is not a matter of simply following methodological rules.

There is, however, another, less legitimate reason why the advice given to those about to embark upon ethnography is often simply to 'go and do it'. This is the idea, associated with