QUICK ETHNOGRAPHY:
Methods for Understanding Cultural Diversity in the 21st Century

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements
Preface

PART I. FOUNDATIONS

1. Introduction
   Why Quick Ethnography (QE)?
   QE Basics
   False Assumption #1: Don’t Confuse Culture with Cultures
   False Assumption #2: Don’t Confuse Ethnography with Qualitative Methods
   False Assumption #3: Don’t Confuse Cultures with Social Identities
   This Book

PART II. BEFORE YOU GO

2. Research Design Follows from an Explicit Question
   Study Topics You Feel Passionate About
   Organize Your Passion Around No More than 5 Focus Variables
   Vignette 1: Pesticide Use
   Vignette 2: Prostitution
   Vignette 3: Stress
   Vignette 4: Violence
   How to Organize Explicit Research Questions
   Needs Assessment Research
   Vignette 5: An Aging Population
   Vignette 6: A Mammography Clinic
   Vignette 7: Product Design
   Outcome Evaluation Research
   Vignette 8: Student Identity
   Vignette 9: Math Education in Bilingual Classrooms
   Build From Your Focus Variables
   Don’t Lose Sight of the Forest
   Vignette 10: Just Ask Why?
   Contextualize with Regional and Global Histories and Ever-More-Encompassing Generalizations
   Use Ethnography to Correct Your Mistakes

3. Management Begins Now!
   Organize With Focus Variables
   Select Different Methods for Different Goals
   Your 1st Priority
   But All Data Contain Error
   Introduce Rigor
   How to Find Informants
   Sample Cultural Experts
   Samples Aren’t Populations
   When to Draw a Random Sample
   When to Conduct a Power Analysis
   How to Coordinate Fieldwork Iterations

4. How to Build a Foundation
   Use Informal Interviews to Introduce, Explore, and Confirm
   Look for the Assumptions
Integrate Fieldnotes with Historical Events and Trends
Prepare for a Transition
Use Semi-Structured Interviews to Find the Limits of Variation

5. How to Build Your Database By Using Structured Interviews to Make Comparisons
Remember that Structured Interview Respondents, like Key Informants, Are Your Teachers
Keep it Short ‘n Sweet
Ask Questions For Which Informal Interviews Already Gave You Answers
Use Binary Responses to Identify the Properties of People & Phenomena
Use Rating Scales to Assess Relative Importance
Use Pile Sorts to Assess Relative Similarity
Use Likert Scales for Multidimensional Variables
Collect Time Series (Historical) Data

6. How to Build Your Database By Making Basic Comparisons Early
Employ 6 Norming and Standardizing Operations
Use Pictures to Understand the Properties of Frequency Distributions
Look for Relationships Between Variables
For Ethnography, Look for Relationships Between Informants
Beware of Random Error
Test Hypotheses
Use the Regularity of Sampling Distributions to Find Probabilities
Inform Your Interpretation with Knowledge of Sampling Distributions

7. How to Fine-Tune By Evaluating the Construct Validity of Cultures
Is Your Construct Imaginary?
Use Factor Analysis to Identify the Intersection Among Sets of Variables
For Ethnography, Use Factor Analysis to Identify the Intersection(s) Among Sets of Informants
Successive Pile Sort Data
Evidence of a Single Culture
Evidence of Multiple Cultures
Evidence of 2 Cultures: An Outcome Evaluation of a Student Identity Intervention
Evidence of Cultures of Violence and Affection, With Significant Intracultural Variation.
Evidence of 6 Cultures of Substance Use and Abuse

8. How to Fine-Tune By Explaining Intra- and Inter-Cultural Variation and Cultural Change
Examine Sources of Intracultural and Intercultural Variation
Think About Relationships with Regression Models
Model Intercultural Variation or Cultural Change Like This
Model Intracultural Variation Like This
Use OLS Regression for Intracultural Variation
Check Your Findings
Use Logistic Regression for Intercultural Variation
Check Your Findings
Be Prepared to See Cultures You Didn’t Expect
QE Procedures Automatically Build Method Triangulation

PART III. WHILE YOU’RE THERE

9. Friends Provide the Best Assistance; They Also Make the Best Assistants
Find Research Assistants Everywhere
Match Team Dimensions and Characteristics to Research Goals
Like Your Research Assistants, or Learn To
The Operational Word is Team
Pay Team Members Well
10. Pulling It All Together
   This Is Where QE Pays Off
   Don't Get Lost and Don't Waste Time!
   Remember the Basics
   Pay Attention to Historical Origins, Migration, and Ethnicity
   But I Have to Complete This Project in 3 Days!!!
   Focus on What's Important

References
About the Author
Index
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PREFACE

This book addresses the needs of ethnographers grappling with a world in which a successful rap group comes out of Japan, you can watch the movie “Out of Africa” in an African bush village, and Russians play jazz, compose country music, and turn capitalist – as well as the ongoing dynamics of social interaction and cultural change in any contemporary community. I will show you how to collect systematic ethnographic data that can be subjected to systematic (numerical and statistical) analysis. Other books lay out many of the methods I talk about. But this book will walk you through actually using the methods to do ethnography very quickly.

The challenges of understanding and working with cultural diversity in the 21st century require more subtle approaches to ethnography than we've applied in the past. This need for subtlety requires that we put aside conceptual blinders which guarantee failure. These blinders come in the form of a set of related, and false, assumptions -- that ethnography means “qualitative” research, that any statistics included in an ethnography should focus on similarities and differences among variables, and that social identities like Nuer, Navaho, and African American constitute cultural groups.

A need for speed complicates matters. Whether the issue is human rights, violence prevention, or effective community outreach for health promotion/disease prevention, practitioners of ethnography need results quickly. Ethnographers who contribute to product design teams need results yesterday, but no later than 3 days, or 3 weeks, from the start date. Growing costs of field research mean a demand for greater research efficiency and productivity. Ethnographers working in education, public health, nursing, business, and development faced these demands initially. Today, however, even graduate student anthropologists appreciate the need for research efficiency and productivity.

Achieving the required subtlety means additions to our ethnographic toolkit that allow us to focus more closely on the domains of cognition, emotion, and behavior pertinent to individual lives and to establish which aspects of these domains one person shares with which specific others. This means questions bearing on the details of the social distribution of cognition, emotion, and behavior, and about the patterns, networks, and character of social interaction through which culture evolves, locally, regionally, and globally. This requires attention to the design of ethnographic research and the application of methods that both increase research productivity and the precision of ethnographic descriptions and explanations.

Some of these methods entail specific forms of research management. Others follow from a more sophisticated understanding of culture. A theory of culture as cognitive elements and structure now dominates ethnographic research. Despite the difference between cognition and behavior, especially the troublesome and ambiguous relationship between the two, there exist demonstrable patterns of behavior that correspond with specific cognitive domains. I define culture as a mental phenomenon. But, following Tylor, I recognize the existence of both mental and behavioral cultures. The methods I talk about in this book apply to cultures, however one wishes to define them. Explicit establishment of the construct validity of cultures -- cognitive, behavioral, or both -- allows us to clearly differentiate one culture from another and thus warrants generalizations about specific cultures. But it does so in a way that allows us to identify both intercultural and intracultural variability very precisely. This method thus helps us produce precise as well as nuanced interpretations of cultural variation.

This book thus consists of a relatively short, easy-to-read guide to the rapid collection of lots of high quality ethnographic data. I write primarily for graduate student and professional social and behavioral scientists in both academic and applied settings. I ground a step-by-step layout with the theoretical foundations of ethnography. In the process, I introduce the new ways to collect and analyze cultural data which allow greater precision and subtlety of ethnographic description and explanation.

I illustrate largely with my own experiences and data. As an anthropologist, I’ve enjoyed the freedom to engage in research on an extraordinarily wide range of topics. My studies of
entrepreneurship, agriculture, and food distribution through market places applied ethnography to topics also addressed by agricultural and development economists and geographers; I undertook some of this work for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), through the Institute of Development Anthropology (IDA), and another portion for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). My study of culture and management, and public sector corruption, applied ethnography to topics also addressed by sociologists, political scientists and development economists; this work, too, resulted in reports for USAID and IDA. My studies of parental involvement in their child’s education and parental, teacher, and children’s experiences of violence in schools, and my thinking about problems in math education in bilingual classrooms applied ethnography to topics also addressed by educators; I undertook this work as part of my involvement with UConn’s doctoral program in bilingual/bicultural education. My studies of sexual and reproductive behavior, prostitution, sexually-transmitted disease epidemiology, substance use and abuse, suicide and other forms of violent death, depression, and the sources and forms and consequences of traumatic stress (emotional, physical, and sexual abuse) and social support applied ethnography to topics also addressed by nurses, physicians, and public health practitioners; various parts of this work resulted in reports to Family Health International and the Ministry of Health, Government of Barbados, and a presentation on the longterm effects of hurtful words to a national conference of officials who oversee teacher education and certification.

Cohorts of former students proded me to clarify my thinking and simplify my presentation. Russ Bernard produced singularly helpful suggestions for this final draft of something which evolved over the last decade from a short paper to the current book. During the evolution, editor Mitch Allen, who asked me to write this book, remained patient and enthusiastic. Several colleagues gave me an opportunity to address issues I would have missed otherwise: Rose Jones (mammography needs assessment), Robin Harwood and Mary Gannotti (child development), and Robin Harwood and Michele Shedlin (the contributions that migrants make to cultural evolution in host countries). Rose Jones and Robin Harwood also contributed significantly to the evolution of my thinking about the nature of culture. Bryan Byrne let me peek into the real world of business consulting and thus provoked rethinking of the fundamentals of needs assessment research. Jami Liebowitz provided a fine-tuned reading just before this manuscript left my hands for AltaMira. All added significantly to the quality of this book, and I am very grateful.