

## Ethnographic Designs

The term ethnography literally means "writing about groups of people." Using this qualitative design, you can identify a group of people; study them in their homes or workplaces; note how they behave, think, and talk; and develop a general portrait of the group. This chapter defines ethnographic research, identifies when you use it, assesses the key characteristics of it, reviews key ethical issues, and advances the steps in conducting and evaluating this design.

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define ethnographic research and describe when to use it and how it developed.
- Identify three types of ethnographic designs.
- List the key characteristics of ethnographic research.
- Identify potential ethical issues in conducting an ethnography.
- Describe the steps in conducting an ethnography.
- List criteria useful for evaluating an ethnographic research study.

Maria chooses to conduct a qualitative ethnography study for her graduate research project. Her school committee has been meeting throughout the year, and it has set ways in which it operates. As a member of this committee, Maria has a natural vantage point for observing how the committee works. She observes how people act, how they speak, and how they engage in practices such as starting promptly on time. Maria conducts an ethnography. She asks this question: "What are the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes of the school committee on weapon possession in the school?" By answering this question, Maria will gain a deep understanding about how a school committee wrestles with the problem of weapons in the schools.

## WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH, WHEN SHOULD YOU USE IT, AND HOW DID IT DEVELOP?

**Ethnographic designs** are qualitative research procedures for describing, analyzing, and interpreting a culture-sharing group's shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time. Central to this definition is culture. A culture is "everything that has to do with human behavior and belief" (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993, p. 5). It can include language, rituals, economic and political structures, life stages, interactions, and communication styles. To understand the patterns of a culture-sharing group, an ethnographer typically spends considerable time "in the field" interviewing, observing, and gathering documents about the group to understand their culture-sharing behaviors, beliefs, and language.

### When Do You Conduct an Ethnography?

You conduct an ethnography when the study of a group provides understanding of a larger issue. You also conduct an ethnography when you have a culture-sharing group to study—one that has been together for some time and has developed shared values, beliefs, and language. You capture the "rules" of behavior, such as the culture of students who use Twitter in their educational studies (Chretien, Tuck, Simon, Singh, & Kind, 2015). The culture-sharing group may be narrowly framed (e.g., teachers, students, or staff members) or broadly framed (e.g., entire schools and their success, innovation, or violence). The culture-sharing group may be a family, as in the ethnographic study of a 12-year-old child with Down syndrome and his family (Harry, Day, & Quist, 1996). The culture-sharing group may be representative or illustrative of some larger processes, events, or activities (e.g., participating in a graduate program). Fraternity settings are sites where men often exploit and victimize women. In a critical ethnography, Rhoads (1995) studied the culture of one fraternity and its practices that rendered women powerless and marginalized.

Ethnography can provide a detailed day-to-day picture of events, such as the thoughts and activities of a search committee hiring a new principal (Wolcott, 1974, 1994). You conduct an ethnography when you have long-term access to a culture-sharing group so that you can build a detailed record of their behaviors and beliefs over time. You may be a participant in the group or simply an observer, but you gather extensive field notes, interview many people, and collect letters and documents to establish the record of the culture-sharing group.

### How Did Ethnographic Research Develop?

Ethnography as practiced in education has been shaped by cultural anthropology, by an emphasis on the issues of writing about culture, and by how ethnographic reports need to be read and understood today. These factors lie at the heart of understanding current practices in ethnography (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin, 1997; LeCompte et al., 1993; Wolcott, 2008).

The roots of educational ethnography lie in cultural anthropology. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, anthropologists explored "primitive" cultures by visiting other countries and becoming immersed in their societies for extensive periods of time. They refrained from "going native" and identifying too closely with the people they were studying so that they could write an "objective" account of what they saw and heard. At times, these accounts compared distant cultures on other continents with the American

way of life. For example, Margaret Mead's study of adolescence and the influence of culture on behavior in Samoa, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), is a classic example of ethnography. Observations and interviews in the field.

In addition, under social conditions through the 1950s, research focused on whether that case was an individual unit. For example, Chicago sociologists and public documents to control delinquency (Bogdan & Biklen, 1999). With an "insider" perspective, the Jewish ghetto, the delinquent (Bogdan & Biklen, 1999) provided "insider" perspectives on often marginalized in our society.

The infant interdisciplinary during the 1950s and 1960s, Jules Henry depicted elements of culture, and social scientists focused on decision making, curriculum, and anthropology focused on

- Career and life history
- Microethnography
- Studies of single individuals
- Studies of school communities (LeCompte, 1993)

In studies such as those borrowed from anthropologists and educational researchers, Fetterman (2001) argued that

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way of life. For example, Margaret Mead, a well-known anthropologist, studied child rearing, adolescence, and the influence of culture on personality in Samoa (Mead, 1928).

Observations and interviews became standard procedures for collecting data "in the field." In addition, under sociologists at the University of Chicago in the 1920s through the 1950s, research focused on the importance of studying a single case—whether that case was an individual, a group, a neighborhood, or a larger cultural unit. For example, Chicago sociologists conducted qualitative analyses of personal and public documents to construct a view of the life of Polish immigrants (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927). With an emphasis on city life, they depicted ordinary life in U.S. cities: the Jewish ghetto, the taxi-dance hall, the professional thief, the hobo, and the delinquent (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In highlighting the lives of these individuals, they provided "insider" perspectives by reporting detailed accounts of individuals who are often marginalized in our society.

The infant interdisciplinary area of educational anthropology began to crystallize during the 1950s and continued to develop through the 1980s (LeCompte et al., 1993). Jules Henry depicted elementary school classrooms and high schools as tribes with rituals, culture, and social structure, and George and Louise Spindler examined educational decision making, curriculum content, and teaching (LeCompte et al., 1993). Educational anthropologists focused on subculture groups such as the following:

- Career and life histories or role analyses of individuals
- Microethnographies of small work and leisure groups within classrooms or schools
- Studies of single classrooms abstracted as small societies
- Studies of school facilities or school districts that approach these units as discrete communities (LeCompte et al., 1993)

In studies such as these, educational ethnographers developed and refined procedures borrowed from anthropology and sociology. From the 1980s to the present, anthropologists and educational anthropologists have identified techniques for focusing on a cultural group, conducting observations, analyzing data, and writing up the research (e.g., Fetterman, 2010; Wolcott, 1992, 1994, 2008).

A watershed event in ethnography, according to Denzin (1997), was the publication of the book *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Ethnographers have been "writing their way out" (Denzin, 1997, p. xvii) of this book ever since. Clifford and Marcus raised two issues that have commanded much attention in ethnography in general and within educational research. The first is the crisis of representation. This crisis consists of a reassessment of how ethnographers interpret the groups they are studying. Denzin argued that we can no longer view the researcher as an objective reporter who makes omniscient pronouncements about the individuals being studied. Instead, the researcher is only one voice among many—individuals such as the reader, the participants, and the gatekeepers—who need to be heard. This has led to a second crisis: legitimacy. No longer do "canons" of validity, reliability, and objectivity of "normal science" represent the standards. Researchers need to evaluate each ethnographic study in terms of flexible standards embedded within the participants' lives, historical and cultural influences, and the interactive forces of race, gender, and class.

Viewed this way, ethnographies need to include perspectives drawn from feminist thought, racial views, sexual orientation, and critical theory, and they need to be sensitive to race, class, and gender. Ethnographies today are now "messy" and find presentation in many forms, such as a performance, poem, play, novel, or a personal narrative (Denzin, 1997).

## WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF ETHNOGRAPHIC DESIGNS?

With this development, eclecticism pervades educational ethnographies today. Table 14.1 illustrates the various types of ethnographies. For a researcher new to ethnography, the long list is less important than a focus on primary forms published in educational reports. Unquestionably, ethnographic research does not always fit cleanly into categories, but three forms are apparent:

- The realist ethnography
- The case study
- The critical ethnography

### Realist Ethnographies

A realist ethnography is a popular approach used by cultural anthropologists. Characterized by Van Maanen (2011), it reflects a particular stance taken by the researcher toward the individuals being studied. A **realist ethnography** is an objective account of the situation, typically written in the third-person point of view, reporting objectively on the information learned from participants at a field site. The following occur in this ethnographic design:

- The realist ethnographer narrates the study in a third-person dispassionate voice and reports on observations of participants and their views. The ethnographer does not offer personal reflections in the research report and remains in the background as an omniscient reporter of the “facts.”
- The researcher reports objective data in a measured style uncontaminated by personal bias, political goals, and judgment. The researcher may provide mundane details of everyday life among the people studied. The ethnographer also uses standard categories for cultural description (e.g., family life, work life, social networks, and status systems).
- The ethnographer produces the participants’ views through closely edited quotations and has the final word on the interpretation and presentation of the culture (Van Maanen, 2011).

This type of ethnography has a long tradition in cultural anthropology and education. For example, Wolcott (1974, 1994) used a realist approach to ethnography to study the activities

TABLE 14.1

### Types of Ethnographies

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realist ethnography—an objective, scientifically written ethnography</li> <li>• Confessional ethnography—a report of the ethnographer’s fieldwork experiences</li> <li>• Life history—a study of one individual situated within the cultural context of his or her life</li> <li>• Autoethnography—a reflective self-examination by an individual set within his or her cultural context</li> <li>• Microethnography—a study focused on a specific aspect of a cultural group and setting</li> <li>• Ethnographic case study—a case analysis of a person, event, activity, or process set within a cultural perspective</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical ethnography—a study of the shared patterns of a marginalized group with the aim of advocacy about issues of power and authority</li> <li>• Feminist ethnography—a study of women and the cultural practices that serve to disempower and oppress them</li> <li>• Postmodern ethnography—an ethnography written to challenge the problems in our society that have emerged from a modern emphasis on progress and marginalizing individuals</li> <li>• Ethnographic novels—a fictional work focused on cultural aspects of a group</li> </ul> |
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Sources: Denzin (1997), LeCompte et al. (1993), Madison (2005), and Van Maanen (2011).

of a committee appointed to select a principal. This study addressed the process a school selection committee experienced as they interviewed candidates. Wolcott started with Candidate Number 7 and discussed the committee's deliberation for each candidate (except one) until the final individual was identified. Following this description of the interviewing process, Wolcott interpreted the committee's actions in terms of a lack of professional knowledge, their "variety reducing" behavior, and the reluctance of schools to change.

As a realist ethnographer, Wolcott provided an account of committee deliberations as if he were looking in from the outside, reporting the procedures objectively, and including participants' views. The interpretation at the end presented Wolcott's view of the patterns he saw in the selection committee cultural group.

## Case Studies

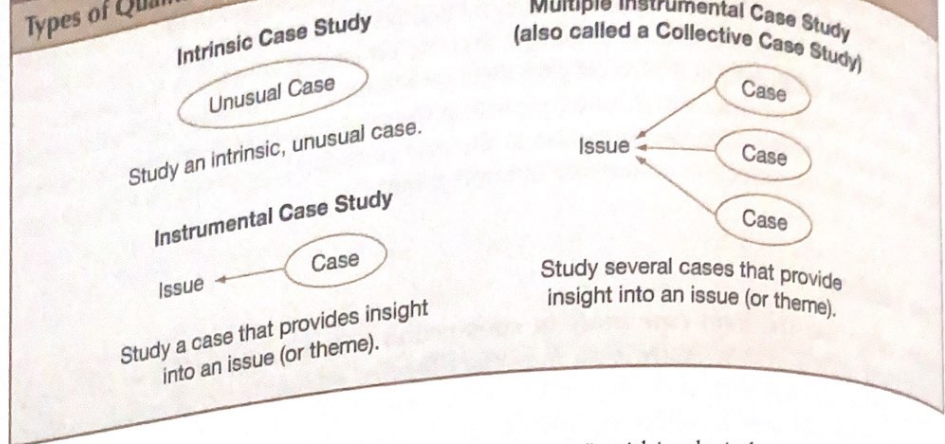
Writers often use the term *case study* in conjunction with ethnography (see LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). A case study is an important type of ethnography, although it differs from an ethnography in several important ways. Case study researchers may focus on a program, event, or activity involving individuals rather than a group per se (Stake, 1995). In addition, when case study writers research a group, they may be more interested in describing the activities of the group than identifying shared patterns of behavior exhibited by the group. The ethnographer searches for the shared patterns that develop as a group interacts over time. Finally, case study researchers are less likely to identify a cultural theme to examine at the beginning of a study, especially one from anthropology; instead, they focus on an in-depth exploration of the actual "case" (Yin, 2014).

Although some researchers identify "case" as an object of study (Stake, 1995), others consider it to be a procedure of inquiry (e.g., Merriam, 1998). A **case study** is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). *Bounded* means that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries.

It is useful to consider the types of cases that qualitative researchers often study:

- The "case" may be a single individual, several individuals separately or in a group, a program, events, or activities (e.g., a teacher, several teachers, or the implementation of a new math program).
- The "case" may represent a process consisting of a series of steps (e.g., a college curriculum process) that form a sequence of activities.
- As shown in Figure 14.1, a "case" may be selected for study because it is unusual and has merit in and of itself. When the case itself is of interest, it is called an **intrinsic case**. The study of a bilingual school illustrates this form of a case study (Stake, 2000). Alternatively, the focus of a qualitative study may be a specific issue, with a case (or cases) used to illustrate the issue. This type of case is called an **instrumental case** because it serves the purpose of illuminating a particular issue. For example, the issue of language learning might be studied in a case study of a bilingual school. Case studies may also include multiple cases, called a **collective case study** (Stake, 1995), in which multiple cases are described and compared to provide insight into an issue. A case study researcher might examine several schools to illustrate alternative approaches to school choice for students.
- The researcher seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the case by collecting multiple forms of data (e.g., pictures, scrapbooks, videotapes, and e-mails). Providing this in-depth understanding requires that only a few cases be studied because for each case examined, the researcher has less time to devote to exploring the depths of any one case.

**FIGURE 14.1**  
Types of Qualitative Case Studies



- The researcher also locates the “case” or “cases” within their larger context, such as geographical, political, social, or economic settings (e.g., the family constellation consisting of grandparents, siblings, and “adopted” family members).

An example of a case study is the research by Boaler and Staples (2008) of three high schools and their approach to mathematics teaching. The study focused on equitable teaching whereby students of mixed ability levels are in the same class, rather than tracked into different courses. The researchers examined student achievement, attitudes, teaching practices, and student practices for all cases. Through the comparison of the three high school cases, a major finding was the success of one of the high schools that experienced better learning outcomes, more student progress to higher math levels, and better student attitudes about math. The school, however, used an equitable approach to mathematics teaching. Boaler and Staples (2008) provided rich contextual details about the students, the math curriculum, and the successes.

This case study illustrates a study of three bounded systems—specific high schools—and an assessment of patterns of teaching and student practices for all three schools and across schools. The researchers focused on the issue of math teaching and conducted a cross-case comparison of equitable and tracked approaches to understand key differences. Multiple forms of data were collected, and the analysis consisted of both identifying descriptive trends and themes.

Another example is the case study by Padula and Miller (1999) of four women who had re-entered the university as full-time doctoral students. In this case study, the authors questioned the students’ decision to return to school, how they described their re-entry experiences, and how the graduate experience changed their lives. Through interviewing and observing these women, the researchers found several themes about beliefs that these women held. For example, the women believed that their graduate experiences did not meet their needs, they compared themselves with younger students, and they felt a general need to finish their programs as quickly as possible.

### Critical Ethnographies

When Denzin (1997) spoke of the twin crises of representation and legitimation, he was responding to profound changes in our society, such as becoming more multinational, joining a world economy, and changing demographics to include more racial

groups. These factors have created a system of power, prestige, privilege, and authority that serves to marginalize individuals of different classes, races, and gender in our society. With roots in German thinking of the 1920s, the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggle are now playing out within educational and social science research.

Ethnography now incorporates a "critical" approach (Carspecken, 1995; Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993) to include an advocacy perspective to ethnography. **Critical ethnographies** are a type of ethnographic research in which the author is interested in advocating for the emancipation of groups marginalized in our society (Thomas, 1993). Critical researchers are typically politically minded individuals who seek, through their research, to advocate against inequality and domination (Carspecken & Apple, 1992). For example, critical ethnographers might study schools that provide privileges to certain types of students, create inequitable situations among members of different social classes, and perpetuate boys "speaking up" and girls being silent participants in class.

The major components of a critical ethnography are factors such as a value-laden orientation, empowering people by giving them more authority, challenging the status quo, and a concern about power and control (Madison, 2005). These factors play out in an ethnography in specific procedural characteristics, listed below:

- The critical ethnographer studies social issues of power, empowerment, inequality, inequity, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization.
- Researchers conduct critical ethnographies so that their studies do not further marginalize the individuals being studied. Thus, the inquirers collaborate, actively participate, negotiate the final written report, use care in entering and leaving a site, and reciprocate by giving back to study participants.
- The critical ethnographer is self-conscious about his or her interpretation, recognizing that interpretations reflect our own history and culture. Interpretations can be only tentative and are concerned how participants will view them.
- Critical researchers position themselves in the text to be reflexive and self-aware of their role and to be up front in the written research report. This means identifying biases and values, acknowledging views, and distinguishing among textual representations by the author, the participants, and the reader. No longer is the ethnographer an "objective" observer, as in the realist approach.
- This nonneutral position for the critical researcher also means that he or she will be an advocate for change to help transform our society so that people are less oppressed and marginalized.
- In the end, the critical ethnographic report will be a "messy, multilevel, multimethod" approach to inquiry, full of contradictions, imponderables, and tensions (Denzin, 1997).

The critical ethnographic study of one principal in an "inclusive" elementary school (Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999) illustrated many of these features. The overall purpose was to describe and define the role of administrative leadership in an inclusive school for students with a high incidence of disability classifications (e.g., cognitive, emotional, learning, speech, and language). With the objective of generating a new theory that would empower individuals in the school, the authors began with a framework for empowering leadership: support, facilitation, and possibility.

Based on extensive fieldwork consisting of shadowing the principal (Marta), observing classrooms, conducting individual and focus group interviews, and reviewing weekly announcements, the researchers compiled a picture of Marta's leadership that included a personal belief system of spirituality. Marta's spirituality led him to value personal struggle, espouse the dignity of individuals, merge the professional and the personal, believe

that people were doing their best, and emphasize the importance of listening and dreams. In the end, Keyes et al. (1999) provided a "vision for equity nourished by mutual beliefs" (p. 233) and posed the concluding questions: "School reform for whom?" (p. 234). "Empowering leadership for whom?" (p. 234).

In this ethnography of a school that embraced a critical perspective, the principal focused on the issue of empowerment felt by marginalized students and teachers in the school. The principal sought active collaborative participation through a shared dialogue with teachers and students. The researchers advocated for a change and highlighted the tensions that opened up new questions, rather than closing down the conversation. Although the authors' views were not made explicit in the text, their interest in change and a new vision for leadership in schools for individuals with disabilities were clear.

MyLab Education Self-Check 14.2

MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.1: Thinking Like a Researcher: Applying an Ethnographic Design

## WHAT ARE THE KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH?

With the diverse approaches to ethnography identified in the realist, case study, and critical approaches, it is not easy to identify characteristics they have in common. However, for those learning about ethnographies, the following characteristics typically illustrate an ethnographic study:

- Cultural themes
- A culture-sharing group
- Shared patterns of behavior, belief, and language
- Fieldwork
- Description, themes, and interpretation
- Context or setting
- Researcher reflexivity

### Cultural Themes

Ethnographers typically study cultural themes drawn from cultural anthropology. Ethnographers do not venture into the field looking haphazardly for anything they might see. Instead, they are interested in adding to the knowledge about culture and studying specific cultural themes. A **cultural theme** in ethnography is a general position declared or implied, that is openly approved or promoted in a society or group (see Spradley [1980] for a discussion about cultural themes). As with all qualitative studies, this theme does not serve to narrow the study; instead, it becomes a broad lens that researchers use when they initially enter a field to study a group, and they look for manifestations of it.

What are these cultural themes? They can be found in introductory texts in cultural anthropology. Wolcott (2008) mentioned introductory texts that discuss themes in cultural anthropology, such as those by Kessing (1958), Haviland (1993), or Howard (1996). They can also be found in dictionaries of concepts in cultural anthropology, such as in Wittrop (1991). Another approach is to locate the cultural theme in ethnographic studies in education. Authors announce them in titles or at the beginning of the study. You can see

them in purpose statements in ethnographies. For example, here are some examples:

- Middle school teachers exploring knowledge diffusion in an elementary classroom
- Pathways of becoming an ethnographer in an early career (Bauermeister, 1998)

### A Culture-Sharing Group

Ethnographers learn from fieldwork. Frequently, authors examine the experiences of a principal. In the study of an elementary classroom, the researcher focuses on the group (e.g., a classroom) rather than groups of individuals who have been studied in these ethnographies.

- Three middle school teachers (Comber & ...)
- Twenty-one teachers (Fields & ...)
- Undergraduate students (Bauermeister, 1998)
- Individuals (Bauermeister, 1998)

Groups such as those listed in Table 14.2. A group of individuals on a local basis and develop shared patterns of behavior and language.

### TABLE 14.2

#### Study of Cultural Themes

#### Characteristics

The group is a culture-sharing group.

The group is a culture-sharing group.

The group is a culture-sharing group.

them in purpose statements in ethnographies or in research questions as a "central phenomenon." For example, here are several cultural themes explored by authors:

- Middle school teachers *experiences with accountability reform* (Comber & Nixon, 2009)
- Knowledge diffusion in an *online virtual world* (Fields & Kafai, 2009)
- Pathways of *becoming an engineer* (Stevens, O'Connor, Garrison, Jocuns, & Amos, 2008)
- *Enculturation* in an early childhood program among the Maori in New Zealand (Bauermeister, 1998)

### A Culture-Sharing Group

Ethnographers learn from studying a culture-sharing group at a single site. Less frequently, authors examine single individuals, as in Wolcott's (1974, 1994) single case study of a principal. In the study of a group, ethnographers identify a single site (e.g., an elementary classroom), locate a group within it (e.g., a reading group), and gather data about the group (e.g., observe a reading period). This distinguishes ethnography from other forms of qualitative research (e.g., narrative research) that focus on individuals rather than groups of people. A **culture-sharing group** in ethnography is two or more individuals who have shared behaviors, beliefs, and language. For example, groups were studied in these ethnographies:

- Three middle school teachers from each of ten schools in a project in South Australia (Comber & Nixon, 2009)
- Twenty-one youth aged 9 to 12 who participated in a virtual world called Whyville.net (Fields & Kafai, 2009)
- Undergraduate engineering students at four schools (Stevens et al., 2008)
- Individuals who use street drugs in New York City (Davis & Johnson, 2008)

Groups such as these typically possess certain characteristics, which are listed in Table 14.2. A group may vary in size, but the individuals in the group need to meet on a regular basis and interact over a period of time (e.g., more than 2 weeks up to 4 months) to develop shared patterns of behaving, thinking, or talking. The group is often representative of a larger group, such as a reading group within a third-grade classroom.

TABLE 14.2

#### Study of a Culture-Sharing Group in a Third-Grade Elementary Classroom

Characteristics of a Culture-Sharing Group	An Example
The group consists of two or more individuals, and it may be small or large.	A small group—two readers in a classroom. A larger group—6 to 10 readers in a classroom.
The group interacts on a regular basis.	For a period three times a week, the group meets to discuss a reading.
The group has interacted for some time.	Since the beginning of September, the reading group has met three times a week for three periods.
The group is representative of some larger group.	The small reading group is representative of third-grade readers.
The group has adopted some shared patterns of behaving, thinking, or talking.	The group has certain rituals they perform as they begin to read, such as sitting on the floor, opening their book to the assigned page, and waiting to speak until the teacher calls on them to answer a question.

Often, ethnographers study groups unfamiliar to them to be able to look at them in a "fresh and different way, as if they were exceptional and unique" (LeCompte et al., 1993, p. 3). Individuals sometimes mistake a cultural group with an ethnic group. Ethnic groups are self-identified individuals in a sociopolitical grouping that have a recognized public identity, such as Hispanics, Asian Pacific Islanders, and Arab Americans (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Using these ethnic labels can cause problems in an ethnography because the labels may not be terms used by the individuals themselves.

### Shared Patterns of Behavior, Belief, and Language

Ethnographic researchers look for shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that the culture-sharing group adopts over time. This characteristic has several elements to it. First, the culture-sharing group needs to have adopted shared patterns that the ethnographer can discern. A **shared pattern** in ethnography is a common social interaction that stabilizes as tacit rules and expectations of the group (Spindler & Spindler, 1992). Second, the group shares any one or a combination of behaviors, beliefs, and language:

- A **behavior** in an ethnography is an action taken by an individual in a cultural setting. For example, Wolcott (1974, 1994) studied how a principal's selection committee acted as they deliberated about selecting a candidate.
- A **belief** in an ethnography is how an individual thinks about or perceives things in a cultural setting. For example, Padula and Miller (1999) found that women doctoral students in psychology shared the concern that they were not able to invest much energy in their families.
- **Language** in an ethnography is how an individual talks to others in a cultural setting. In a study of life history narratives of two African American women, Nelson (1990) analyzed code switching (changing from Standard English to Black English vernacular). Sara, for example, used the repetitive, parallel clause structure found in Black church tradition when she said, "It is pain, suffering, determination, perseverance" (p. 147).

These shared patterns raise several practical questions that ethnographers need to address in a study. How long does the group need to stay together to "share"? To answer this question, a specific study would have to be examined. Unquestionably, the longer the group is together, the more the individuals will adopt shared behaviors and ways of thinking and the easier it will be for an ethnographer to discern patterns. However, assessment techniques are available for gathering data quickly from a group that may be shared for a short period of time (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Fraternity members may form shared beliefs with new pledges quickly, or school boards may develop common understandings through "board retreats" that allow an ethnographer to quickly assess patterns.

Another issue is whether the patterns are ideal (what *should* occur), actual (what *did* occur), or projective (what *might have* occurred). As an ethnographer observes or interviews, examples of all three patterns may emerge from the data. An ethnographer visiting a third-grade classroom might observe the reading group to see what did occur, interview the teacher to identify what might have occurred, and consult with the curriculum coordinator as to what the school district hoped should have occurred.

### Fieldwork

Ethnographers collect data through spending time at participants' sites where they live, work, or play. To understand best the patterns of a cultural group, an ethnographer spends considerable time with the group. The patterns cannot be easily discerned through questionnaires or brief encounters. Instead, the ethnographer goes "to the field" lives with or frequently visits the people being studied, and slowly learns the cultural

ways in which the group behaves or thinks. **Fieldwork** in ethnography means that the researcher gathers data in the setting where the participants are located and where their shared patterns can be studied. This data collection involves the following.

- **Emic data** consist of information supplied by participants in a study. *Emic* often refers to first-order concepts, such as local language and ways of expression used by members in a cultural-sharing group (Schwandt, 2015). In an ethnographic study of a soup kitchen for the homeless, Miller, Creswell, and Olander (1998) interviewed and recorded "stories" supplied by Michael, Dan, Sarah, and Robert and used quotes from these individuals to construct their perspectives.
- **Etic data** consist of information representing the ethnographer's interpretation of the participants' perspectives. *Etic* typically refers to second-order concepts, such as the language used by the social scientist or educator to refer to the same phenomena mentioned by the participants (Schwandt, 2007). In the soup kitchen study (Miller et al., 1998), the authors formed themes as their interpretation of participants' data that represented how the soup kitchen worked.
- **Negotiation data** consist of information that the participant and the researcher agree to use in a study. Negotiation occurs at different stages in research, such as agreeing to entry procedures for a research site, mutually respecting individuals at the site, and developing a plan for giving back or reciprocating with the individuals. Again in the soup kitchen study (Miller et al., 1998), the authors sought out a gatekeeper to gain entry, helped advocate for the homeless with funding agencies, and participated in serving lunches on a regular basis.

During fieldwork, the ethnographer uses a variety of research techniques to gather data. Table 14.3, which is a composite list from LeCompte and Schensul (2010) and Wolcott (2008), displays mainly qualitative and a few quantitative forms of data collection. The ethnographer typically collects multiple forms of data in a study. Of these possibilities, observation and unstructured interviewing are popular among ethnographers. To see the range of data collection that ethnographers gather in a single study, examine the following forms used by Rhoads (1995) in his ethnographic study of fraternity life:

- Twelve formal, structured interviews that lasted from 1 to 2 hours
- Eighteen less formal interviews recorded in handwritten notes
- Participation in both open fraternity parties and private rituals that were open to only a few outsiders

TABLE 14.3

## Popular Forms of Data Collected by Ethnographers

• Casual conversation	• Tests
• Life history, life cycle interview	• Content analysis of secondary text or visual material
• Key informant (participant) interview	• Focus group interview
• Semistructured interview	• Elicitation techniques (e.g., looking at a scrapbook and talking about memories)
• Structured interview	• Audiovisual material (e.g., audio or visual recordings)
• Survey	• Spatial mapping (e.g., recording the ways in which data vary across units, such as group and institution)
• Household census, ethnogenealogy	• Network analysis (e.g., describing networks in time and space)
• Questionnaire (written and/or oral)	
• Projective techniques	
• Observations (nonparticipant to participant)	

Source: Le Compte and Schensul (1999) and Wolcott (2008).

- Ongoing discussions with several key participants who explained the significance of various fraternity practices
- A review of numerous documents, including the university Greek handbook, minutes from chapter meetings, class papers, and the fraternity liability policy

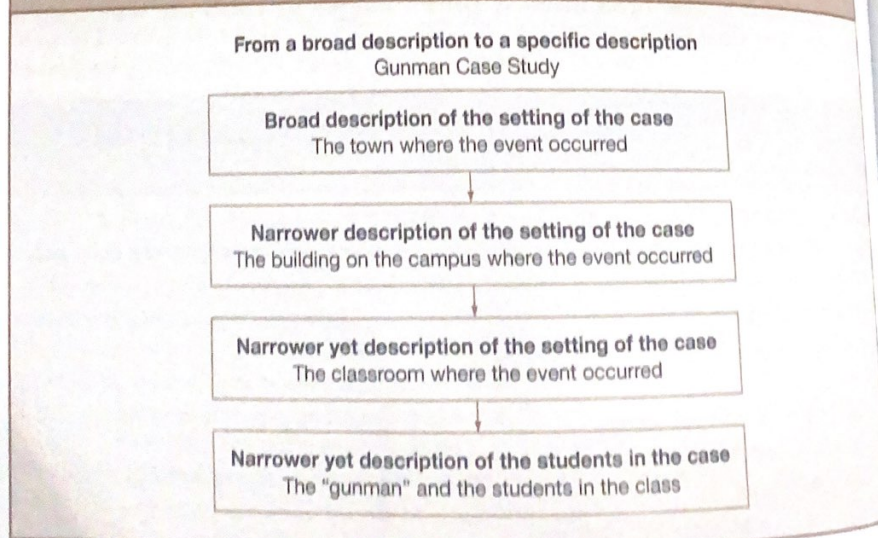
### Description, Themes, and Interpretation

Ethnographic researchers describe and analyze the culture-sharing group and make an interpretation about the patterns seen and heard. During data collection, the ethnographer begins to forge a study. This consists of analyzing the data for a description of both the individuals and the sites of the culture-sharing group; analyzing patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language; and reaching some conclusions about the meaning learned from studying the people and the site (Wolcott, 1994).

A **description** in ethnography is a detailed rendering of individuals and scenes to depict what is happening in the culture-sharing group. This description needs to be detailed and thick, and it needs to identify specifics. It serves to place the reader figuratively in the setting, to transport the reader to the actual scene, and to make it real. This involves awakening the reader's senses through adjectives, nouns, and verbs that elicit sounds, sights, feelings, and smells. To do this, the researcher must single out some details to include while excluding others. It means describing events, activities, and places without veering too far from the actual scene of attention and the people whose shared patterns need to be discerned. Passages from ethnographies that "describe" are long and detailed. Sometimes, ethnographers or case study writers provide a description from a general picture to the specific setting in which an event or events take place. For example, examine Figure 14.2, which maps the descriptive passage in the study of a gunman on a university campus (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995). The researchers began with describing the town, then narrowing the description to the campus, and finally focusing on the classroom in which the incident occurred.

FIGURE 14.2

#### Broad-to-Narrow Description in the Gunman Incident Case Study



Source: Adapted from Asmussen and Creswell (1995).

In another example, Wolcott who ended up "Mr. Fifth" in the Committee members were

Mr. Fifth appeared for his in comfortable chairs in the n "It won't be this comfortab tary education asked, "Wh involved?" (p. 129)

In this short descriptive pass shares the appearance of the a sense of the feelings of the The distinction between

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- In an ethnographic s dren and children w (1996) found several the teacher's role.
- A case study exami education across fo themes that arose w and handling, com

After description ar rapher draws inference analysis is the most sub back to a larger portra the researcher making theme, and raising fur problems that arose d ical at best. In the et/ brothers, family, and reflecting on the diffe acceptance in a famil

### Context or Setting

Ethnographers pres setting of the cultur ation, or environm and interrelated, o the environment (l description of the

In another example, Wolcott (1994) described a candidate for a principal's position who ended up "Mr. Fifth" in the competition:

Committee members were cordial in their greetings and introductions when Mr. Fifth appeared for his interview. He was directed to choose one of the (few) comfortable chairs in the meeting room, prompting the personnel director to joke, "It won't be this comfortable again." After a folksy prelude, the director of elementary education asked, "What things have you been doing and how have you been involved?" (p. 129)

In this short descriptive passage, Wolcott conveys the feelings of propriety and anxiety, shares the appearance of the room, relates the language of the committee, and provides a sense of the feelings of the committee toward candidates.

The distinction between description and theme analysis is not always clear. Theme analysis moves away from reporting the "facts" to making an interpretation of people and activities. As part of making sense of the information, **thematic data analysis** in ethnography consists of distilling how things work and naming the essential features in themes within the cultural setting. Consistent with the process about describing and developing themes from data, the ethnographer segments the text (or images), codes them, and formulates a small set of non-overlapping themes. In an ethnography, however, these themes map the shared patterns of behavior, thinking, or talking. The difficulty is in reducing the themes to a small set and providing adequate evidence for each. The themes are evident in the ethnographies described here:

- In an ethnographic study of conflict resolution between "typically developing" children and children with disabilities in an integrated preschool, Malloy and McMurray (1996) found several conflicts related to goals, oppositions, strategies, outcomes, and the teacher's role.
- A case study examined students' use and experiences with technology in higher education across four disciplines (Conole, De Laat, Dillon, & Darby, 2008). The major themes that arose were that students were using technology for information seeking and handling, communication, assignment preparation, and integrated learning.

After description and analysis comes interpretation. In **interpretation**, the ethnographer draws inferences and forms conclusions about what was learned. This phase of analysis is the most subjective. The researcher relates both the description and the themes back to a larger portrait of what was learned, which often reflects some combination of the researcher making a personal assessment, returning to the literature on the cultural theme, and raising further questions based on the data. It might also include addressing problems that arose during the fieldwork that render the account tentative and hypothetical at best. In the ethnography of Raul, the 12-year-old child with disabilities, and his brothers, family, and friends (Harry et al., 1998), interpretation consisted of the authors' reflecting on the differences between exclusion in a nonfamily setting and unconditional acceptance in a family.

## Context or Setting

Ethnographers present the description, themes, and interpretation within the context or setting of the culture-sharing group. The **context** for an ethnography is the setting, situation, or environment that surrounds the cultural group being studied. It is multilayered and interrelated, consisting of such factors as history, religion, politics, economy, and the environment (Fetterman, 2010). This context may be a physical location, such as a description of the school, the state of the building, the color of the classroom walls, or

the sounds coming down the hall. It may also be the historical context of individuals in the group, whether they have experienced suppression or domination or are an emerging people who have arrived excited about their new land. It may be the social condition of the individuals, their longtime reunions to build kinship, their status as a profession, or their earnings and geographic mobility. The economic conditions may also include income levels, working-class or blue-collar background, or the systems of finance that keep the individuals below the poverty level.

### Researcher Reflexivity

Ethnographic researchers make interpretations and write their report reflexively. **Reflexivity in ethnography** refers to the researcher being aware of and openly discussing his or her role in the study in a way that honors and respects the site and participants. Because ethnographic research involves a prolonged stay at a site, researchers are concerned about their impact on the site and the people. They negotiate entry with key individuals and plan to leave the site as undisturbed as they found it. As individuals who have a history and a cultural background themselves, they realize that their interpretation is only one possibility and that their report does not have any privileged authority over additional interpretations made by readers, participants, and other researchers. It is important, therefore, for ethnographers to position themselves within their report and identify their standpoint or point of view (Denzin, 1997). They do this by talking about themselves, sharing their experiences, and mentioning how their interpretations shape their discussions about the sites and culture-sharing groups. One researcher who studied the identity development of adolescent females through reading teen magazines (Finders, 1996) documented her role as follows:

I did not want to be viewed as a teacher or someone in authority. (p. 73)

I gained their trust slowly and negotiated a relationship that did not fit their established patterns with significant adults. (p. 73)

On several occasions, a girl would not allow me to see a note that she deemed "too obscene." I did not report such incidents as writing on a restroom wall or faking illness to avoid an exam. (p. 74)

Being reflexive also means that authors' conclusions are often tentative or inconclusive, leading to new questions to answer. The study might end with questions that beg for answers or multiple perspectives or viewpoints for the reader to consider.

MyLab Education Self-Check 14.3

MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.2: Thinking Like a Researcher: Designing an Ethnography

## ETHICAL ISSUES IN CONDUCTING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Ethical issues in ethnography come up primarily when doing fieldwork because it is there that issues arise in collecting data. As Madison (2005) reminds us, "An ethics of ethnography probes the question, 'What are the moral and ethical implications of conducting fieldwork?'" (p. 81). These challenges of fieldwork involve negotiating how to get access to the people and sites being studied, how long to stay in the field, whether to tape natural talk or talk that we collect through interviews, and how to interact with participants respectfully (Ryen, 2009). Madison (2005) devotes considerable attention to ethics in ethnography and

## Ethical Dilemma

### Can We Speak for the Homeless?

We spent 6 months working in a soup kitchen for the homeless in our city and writing up our ethnographic account (Miller et al., 1998). In our write-up of the results, we told the detailed stories of individuals who had come through the soup line. They described their lives and their living conditions and what brought them to the soup kitchen each day for a free meal. Some of these individuals were high on drugs, some were mentally unstable and largely incoherent, and some were clear and articulate. The stories in our final report reproduced their thoughts largely in the language and tone in which we heard them. Later, we presented these stories and read some of them to an international conference group of social justice researchers. Many comments from the audience indicated that they felt that we were being unethical in reporting this research. Did we have permission to use the stories? Did we stereotype the individuals by reporting their exact words? Did we, in effect, have a negative influence on the very population we sought to study? How would you have responded to these ethical questions related to the reporting of our research?

summarizes several areas of concern. Ethnographers should be open and transparent about gathering data. This means that they need to convey to all individuals involved in a study the purpose of the study, the general impact it will likely have, and the sources of support and funding for the project. Ethnographers also need to study people and places with respect in regard to causing them no harm, preserving their dignity, and ensuring privacy. Researchers and participants need to negotiate limits related to these factors. Ethnographers also have a responsibility to the scholarly community. This responsibility entails not deceiving or misrepresenting participants or readers (e.g., fabricate evidence, falsify, or plagiarize) or failing to report misconduct. Work in an ethnographic setting should be conducted respectfully so that other researchers might not be barred from entering the site in the future. Ethnographers need to “give back” and provide remuneration to those being studied. This means casting remuneration in terms of what is fair and what the community being studied might require. Another way to compensate is to provide material assistance (e.g., advocating for a group to a funding agency) in a way that reciprocates based on the needs of the participants. Finally, ethnographers need to be aware of the potential negative influence their presentations and publications may have on the population they study. This last point is illustrated in a specific example in “Ethical Dilemma: Can We Speak for the Homeless?”

MyLab Education Self-Check 14.4

MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.3: Thinking Like a Researcher: Ethics and Ethnography

## WHAT ARE THE STEPS IN CONDUCTING AN ETHNOGRAPHY?

There are probably as many procedures for conducting an ethnography as there are ethnographers. From the early days in cultural anthropology when researchers were “sent” without guidance to remote islands or countries to conduct their ethnography, today we have procedures, albeit general procedures, to guide the conduct of an ethnography.

A highly structured approach can be found in Spradley (1980), who has advanced a 12-stage "developmental research sequence" for conducting an ethnography. This sequence begins with the researchers locating an informant (today we would call this person a "participant"). Then the ethnographer cycles between collecting data and making analyses of various types, such as a taxonomy or a comparison table to explore relationships among ideas (see Spradley's componential analysis). Other authors besides Spradley have also suggested guidelines, such as Fetterman (2010), LeCompte and Schensul (2010), and Wolcott (2008).

Instead of Spradley's highly structured approach, we will consider a series of steps that represents a general template, rather than a definitive procedure for conducting an ethnography. Moreover, the considerations of ethnographers and case study writers differ procedurally, and we will consider both similarities and differences among our three forms of ethnography: realist, case study, and critical. An overview of the steps used in each type of design is shown in Table 14.4.

### **Step 1. Identify Intent and the Type of Design and Relate Intent to Your Research Problem**

The first and most important steps in conducting research are to identify why you are undertaking a study, which form of design you plan to use, and how your intent relates to your research problem. These factors need to be identified in all three forms of ethnographies and case studies. The intent of your research and the type of problem you seek to study will differ significantly depending on your plan to conduct a realist, case study, or critical ethnography.

For a realist ethnography, the focus is on understanding a culture-sharing group and using the group to develop a deeper understanding of a cultural theme. The culture-sharing group may be an entire school or a single classroom. The themes may include such topics as enculturation, acculturation, socialization, institutionalized education, learning and cognition, and child and adult development (LeCompte et al., 1993).

For a case study, the focus is on developing an in-depth understanding of a case, such as an event, an activity, or a process. In education, this often includes the study of an individual or several individuals, such as students or teachers. The important consideration is how you will use the case, such as to assess its intrinsic merit, to understand an issue, or to provide information to compare several cases.

In a critical ethnography, the intent changes dramatically from those used in a realist or case study project. A critical ethnographer seeks to address an inequity in society or schools, plans to use the research to advocate and call for changes, and typically identifies a specific issue (e.g., inequality, dominance, oppression, or empowerment) to study.

### **Step 2. Discuss Approval and Access Considerations**

In this step, all three types of designs follow a similar procedure. You need to receive approval from the institutional review board. You also need to identify the type of purposeful sampling that is available and that best answers your research questions. In this process, locate a site for your research and then identify a gatekeeper who can provide access to the site and participants for study. In all research, you need to guarantee provisions for respecting the site and actively design into the study how to reciprocate to the individuals at the site. This means that you will guarantee to disturb

TABLE 14.4

## Procedures for Conducting a Realist Ethnography, a Case Study, and a Critical Ethnography

Procedures	Realist Ethnography	Case Study	Critical Ethnography
Identify your intent, the appropriate design, and how intent relates to your research problem.	<p>The problem relates to a culture-sharing group and how it works.</p> <p>The problem requires a detailed description of the daily lives of people.</p> <p>The problem relates to understanding a cultural theme.</p> <p>Identify your cultural theme.</p>	<p>The problem relates to developing an in-depth understanding of a "case" or bounded system.</p> <p>The problem relates to understanding an event, activity, process, or one or more individuals.</p> <p>Identify the type of "case," such as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective.</p>	<p>The problem relates to a need to address inequities in our society or schools.</p> <p>The problem calls for action and advocacy. Identify the "critical" issue (e.g., inequality) that you wish to explore.</p>
Discuss how you plan to receive approval and gain access to study sites and participants.	<p>Receive approval from institutional review board.</p> <p>Locate a research site using purposeful sampling procedures.</p> <p>Identify a gatekeeper to provide access.</p> <p>Guarantee provisions for respecting the site.</p>	<p>Receive approval from institutional review board.</p> <p>Locate a research site using purposeful sampling procedures.</p> <p>Identify how many cases you plan to study.</p> <p>Identify a gatekeeper to provide access.</p> <p>Guarantee provisions for respecting the site.</p>	<p>Receive approval from institutional review board.</p> <p>Locate a research site using purposeful sampling procedures.</p> <p>Identify a gatekeeper to provide access.</p> <p>Guarantee provisions for respecting the site.</p>
Collect appropriate data, emphasizing time in the field, multiple sources of information, and collaboration.	<p>Spend extensive time at the site and with the culture-sharing group.</p> <p>Enter the site slowly and build rapport.</p> <p>Plan to reciprocate for data provided.</p> <p>Emphasize observations and record field notes.</p>	<p>Collect extensive data using multiple forms of data collection (observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials).</p>	<p>Collaborate with participants by actively involving them in data collection.</p> <p>Collect multiple forms of data that individuals are willing to provide.</p>
Analyze and interpret your data within a design.	<p>Read through data to develop an overall understanding of it.</p> <p>Develop a detailed description of the cultural setting to establish a context for the group being studied.</p> <p>Develop themes about the culture-sharing group.</p> <p>Make interpretations in view of the cultural theme you are studying.</p>	<p>Read through data to develop an overall understanding of it.</p> <p>Describe the case(s) in detail and establish a context for it.</p> <p>Develop issues or themes about the case(s).</p> <p>If more than one case is studied, consider a within-case analysis followed by a cross-case analysis.</p>	<p>Read through data to develop an overall understanding of it.</p> <p>Develop a detailed description of the cultural setting to establish a context for the group being studied.</p> <p>Develop themes that relate to the "critical" issues being explored in the ethnography.</p> <p>Identify changes that need to occur, advocate for specific changes, and advance a plan for change.</p>
Write and report your research so it is consistent with your design.	<p>Report it as an objective study.</p> <p>As a researcher, remain in the background within the written report.</p> <p>Keep your biases out.</p> <p>Identify how your exploration of the cultural theme advances knowledge.</p>	<p>Report it based primarily on a description of the case, or weigh the description, analysis, and interpretation differently or equally.</p> <p>Choose to be objective or subjective in your reporting.</p> <p>Include your biases. Generalize to other cases.</p>	<p>Report it as a call to action to address the "critical" issue that you are studying.</p> <p>Include a specific plan of action for change based on your findings.</p> <p>Discuss how you, as well as those you studied, changed (be reflexive).</p>

the site as little as possible and to follow good ethical practices, such as guaranteeing privacy and anonymity, not deceiving individuals, and informing all participants of the purposes of your research.

### Step 3. Use Appropriate Data Collection Procedures

We can see from Table 14.4 that the three designs have several common features, with an emphasis on extensive data collection, using multiple procedures for gathering data, and the active involvement of participants in the process.

In a realist ethnography, because you will likely spend considerable time with individuals in the field (e.g., up to 4 months or more), you need to enter the site slowly and as unobtrusively as possible. Building rapport with gatekeepers and key participants is essential for your long-term contacts. In many realist accounts, an emphasis is placed on taking field notes and observing the "cultural scene." Interviews and artifacts, such as drawings, relics, and symbols, are also important forms of data. Any data that can help you develop an in-depth understanding of the shared patterns of the cultural group would be useful.

For a case study, the intent is to develop an in-depth understanding of a case or an issue, and researchers collect as many types of data as possible to develop this understanding. For example, in the gunman incident (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995), the authors provided a table that showed 13 sources of information, including interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials. The provision of a table specifically focused on data collection sources emphasized the extent of data collection.

In a critical ethnography, the data collection is less focused on time in the field or on the extent of data and more on the active collaboration between the researcher and the participants during the study. Because the intent of a critical ethnography is to help bring about change that affects the lives of participants, the participants need to be involved in learning about themselves, and steps must be taken to improve their equity, to provide empowerment, or to lessen their oppression. This collaboration may involve participants in the design of the study, the formulation of research questions, the collection of data, or the analysis of the data collected. It may also include having participants actively write the final research report with you.

### Step 4. Analyze and Interpret Data within a Design

In all ethnographic designs, you will engage in the general process of developing a description, analyzing your data for themes, and providing an interpretation of the meaning of your information. These are typical data analysis and interpretation procedures found in all qualitative studies. However, the different types of ethnographic designs vary in their approach to such procedures.

In a critical ethnography, you need to consider a balance among description, analysis, and interpretation so that each becomes an important element of your overall analysis. Moreover, you can discuss in your interpretation how you learned about the cultural theme, actively reflect back on what information existed in the literature, and advance how your study added to the understanding of the cultural theme. In a case study, overall analysis also involves description, analysis, and interpretation, but the analysis procedures will vary depending on whether you are studying a single case or multiple cases. A typical case study procedure for multiple cases is to first analyze each case separately and then conduct a cross-case analysis (see Stake, 1995) to identify common and different themes among all the cases.

In a critical ethnography, you should focus on the "critical" issue in your study of changes that need to occur and participants. Often, critical ethnography that need to occur. For example, in the case of hockey teams in Canada, Theodorson and colleagues (1995) conducted a study that is called for "a more fully transparent in a setting that rejects violence" (p. 85).

### Step 5. Write the Report

A realist ethnography is written about a sharing group. Your person or group is the focus of the discussion at the end of the study about the cultural theme (e.g., language of the culture) or language of the culture. A detailed description of the culture is rather than a thematic (e.g., "Harper School." Other case studies that sets case studies discuss generalizing the case studies. Although the use of multiple cases is common to all cases, the results suggest that their direction.

In a critical ethnography, you should focus on the "critical" issue that initiated the study and how it changed or brought about change. Critical ethnography is often conducted by experienced ethnographers.

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In a critical ethnography, you shape the description, analysis, and interpretation to focus on the “critical” issue in your study. Specifically, you interpret your findings in view of changes that need to occur and advocate for improvements in the lives of your participants. Often, critical ethnographers will advance a plan for change with specific steps that need to occur. For example, in a study about improving the conditions for women’s ice hockey teams in Canada, Theberge (1997) ended her study with an appeal for action. She called for “a more fully transformative vision of hockey that would offer empowerment in a setting that rejects violence and the normalization of injury in favor of an ethic of care” (p. 85).

### Step 5. Write the Report Consistent with Your Design

A realist ethnography is written as an objective report of information about the culture-sharing group. Your personal views and biases will be kept in the background, and a discussion at the end of the study should indicate how the research contributes to knowledge about the cultural theme based on understanding the shared patterns of behavior, thinking, or language of the culture-sharing group. However, a case study may emphasize the detailed description of the case. You can write entire case studies to focus on description rather than a thematic development, such as Stake’s (1995) descriptive case study of the “Harper School.” Other case studies will balance description with themes, such as the gunman incident case study by Asmussen and Creswell (1995). One additional factor that sets case studies apart from other ethnographic designs is that the author may discuss generalizing the findings to other cases, especially if researchers examine multiple case studies. Although qualitative researchers are reluctant to generalize their findings, the use of multiple case studies provides some ability to identify findings that are common to all cases using cross-case analysis. When this occurs, case study writers may suggest that their findings are generalizable, but they make only modest claims in this direction.

In a critical ethnography, the researchers conclude their reports with the “critical” issue that initiated the study and discuss how they as well as the participants have changed or benefited from the research. Included within a “call for action” by the critical ethnographer may be a reflection about changes he or she and the participants have experienced. Undoubtedly, in all forms of research, the investigators change. Critical ethnographers give special emphasis to this as reflexive, self-conscious researchers.

**MyLab Education Self-Check 14.5**

**MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.4: Reading Research: An Ethnographic Study**

## HOW DO YOU EVALUATE AN ETHNOGRAPHY?

The criteria for evaluating an ethnography begin with applying the standards used in qualitative research. Then specific factors need to be considered properly within ethnography. Building on Fetterman (2010) and Wolcott (2008), a good ethnography can be evaluated using the criteria given in Table 14.5.

**MyLab Education Self-Check 14.6**

**MyLab Education Application Exercise 14.5: Reading Research: Evaluating an Ethnographic Study**

**TABLE 14.5**  
Evaluating the Quality of an Ethnographic Study

Quality Criteria	Indicators of Higher Quality	Indicators of Lower Quality
<p><b>The Key Elements</b></p> <p>The researcher identifies a culture-sharing group or case for study.</p> <p>The ethnographer focuses on understanding a cultural concept.</p> <p>The researcher seeks to learn how the culture-sharing group establishes patterns of behavior, language, and beliefs over time.</p> <p>The ethnographer analyzes multiple sources of data, including interviews and observations for patterns.</p> <p>The ethnographer presents an analysis of the data through description, theme development, and interpretations as to how the culture-sharing group works.</p> <p>The researcher reflects on his or her role in the study and how it shapes his or her interpretation.</p>	<p>The researcher clearly identifies the culture-sharing group and establishes why they are important to study.</p> <p>The researcher draws from the anthropology literature on "culture" and identifies one or more concepts that become the focus of understanding how the culture-sharing group works.</p> <p>The researcher collects data in the setting for the culture-sharing group over an extended period of time (e.g., 6 months) and records information about behaviors, language, and beliefs.</p> <p>The researcher visits the "field" on numerous occasions collecting extensive data, especially through conducting detailed interviews, taking field notes in observations, and recording notes about documents collected.</p> <p>The researcher first describes the workings of the culture-sharing group, then identifies 5 to 7 themes that characterize the group, and finally makes an interpretation "as to how the group works" through possibly advancing rules that seem to govern the group over time.</p> <p>The researcher, possibly through the methods discussion or elsewhere in the ethnography, discusses his or her own personal experiences with the culture-sharing group and how those experiences may have shaped his or her description, themes, and interpretation of the group.</p>	<p>The researcher never clearly identifies the culture-sharing group of interest in the study, and the reader is left to guess as to the group being studied.</p> <p>The researcher either states too many diverse concepts being explored with the cultural group or does not identify the cultural concept being explored in the study.</p> <p>The researcher spends little time in the setting of the culture-sharing group (e.g., under 6 months) so that the patterns of behavior, language, and beliefs are not clearly detailed in the study.</p> <p>The researcher limits the data collection to one form of data, such as interviews, and does not stay in the "field" long enough to also observe and collect documents.</p> <p>The researcher skips over describing the group and immediately begins to analyze the findings in terms of themes that appeared over time. In the end, the researcher does not convey clearly in a summary statement how the culture-sharing group works.</p> <p>The researcher remains in the background and does not position him- or herself in the ethnographic story. Thus, the reader does not learn about the researcher and how his or her personal experiences might have shaped the ethnography.</p>

## KEY IDEAS IN THE CHAPTER

### Defining Ethnographic Research, Its Use, and Its Development

An ethnography is a useful design for studying groups in education; their behaviors, beliefs, and language; and how they develop shared patterns of interacting over time. Ethnographic research is a qualitative design for describing, analyzing, and interpreting the patterns of a culture-sharing group. Culture is a broad term used to encompass all human behavior and beliefs. Typically, it includes a study of language, rituals, structures, life stages, interactions, and communication. Ethnographers visit the "field" collect

extensive data through such procedures as a cultural portrait of the group within its set of concepts and study of individuals at patterns of behaviors, beliefs, and language in fieldwork, such as observing and analyzing their patterns with describing and interpreting patterns within the context of culture a reflexive inquiry style of being self-conscious, being respectful of participants. The origins of ethnography include sociology, education, and postmodern, writing reports.

### Three Types of Ethnographic Design

These historical factors have led to descriptive and critical studies. A realist approach to ethnography is a third-person portrait from participants, and places the researcher's interpretation and presentation of the data collection and provide a detailed description of data collection. A critical ethnography advocates for groups marginality and authority.

### Potential Ethical Issues in Ethnography

Ethical issues in ethnography revolve around such topics as gaining access to the field and the interactions of being in the field.

### Steps in Conducting an Ethnography

The steps in conducting these studies include: identifying a cultural theme, identifying a group, posing general questions about beliefs, or language and also developing a portrait of how the culture-sharing group works, and interpretation. The researcher, and varied forms of data collection.

Conducting an ethnography involves an appropriate design, and related needs to seek approval to participate. Once this is accomplished, the researcher spends time in the analysis of data collection when conducting a critical ethnography will actively advocate at ethnographers and case studies as being objective or advocating for participants changed data.

extensive data through such procedures as observation and interviewing, and write up a cultural portrait of the group within its setting. Thus, ethnographers stress cultural concepts and study a group of individuals at a single site. The researcher examines shared patterns of behaviors, beliefs, and language that have developed over time by engaging in fieldwork, such as observing and interviewing people where they live and work. The analysis begins with describing and analyzing the culture-sharing group and interpreting their patterns within the context of culture at work. Overall, the ethnographer employs a reflexive inquiry style of being self-conscious about the research and the writing and being respectful of participants. The origins of this approach are found in anthropology, sociology, education, and postmodern, reflexive concerns about interpreting data and writing reports.

### **Three Types of Ethnographic Designs**

These historical factors have led to three types of ethnographies: realist, case studies, and critical studies. A realist account is an objective account of a culture-sharing group. It is written in a third-person point of view, reports on the information learned from participants, and places the researcher in the role of providing the final interpretation and presentation of the culture. Case studies focus on a program, event, or activities and provide a detailed description and analysis of a case based on extensive data collection. A critical ethnography is a type of ethnography in which the researchers advocate for groups marginalized in our society and focus on issues such as power and authority.

### **Potential Ethical Issues in Ethnographic Research**

Ethical issues in ethnography relate to fieldwork concerns. These ethical issues involve such topics as gaining access to the field, staying in the field, gathering data in the field, and the interactions of being in the field of research.

### **Steps in Conducting an Ethnography**

The steps in conducting these ethnographies involve starting with an interest in studying a cultural theme, identifying a bounded site, and examining shared patterns for a group. The researcher poses general research questions to identify shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, or language and also collects extensive fieldwork data. From these data, a general portrait of how the culture-sharing group works is developed through description, analysis, and interpretation. The interpretation and writing are sensitive to the reflexivity of the researcher, and varied forms of writing structures are used.

Conducting an ethnography involves clarifying the intent of the study, selecting an appropriate design, and relating the design to the research problem. Then the researcher needs to seek approval to conduct the study and obtain access to study sites and participants. Once this is accomplished, the ethnographer collects data using multiple sources of information and spends considerable time in the field. After gathering information, the analysis of data consists of describing, analyzing, and interpreting. Some researchers, when conducting a critical ethnography, will identify changes that need to occur and will actively advocate and plan for them. When writing the final research report, ethnographers and case study writers employ practices consistent with their designs, such as being objective or advocative, generalizing findings, and discussing how they and the participants changed during the research process.

### Criteria for Evaluating an Ethnography Study

In conducting a good ethnography, a researcher should pay attention to identifying a cultural issue to study, selecting a group to observe or interview over time and noting shared patterns of behavior, language, and beliefs that the group has developed over time. The account needs to both describe the group and identify themes. Moreover, researchers need to provide evidence of being reflexive about their role in the study.

### USEFUL INFORMATION FOR PRODUCERS OF RESEARCH

- Clarify the intent you have for your ethnographic research. Consider whether you plan to develop patterns and a portrait of a culture-sharing group, provide an in-depth description and analysis of a "case," or advocate for an issue based on studying a culture-sharing group.
- Recognize that many ethnographies today are written using a critical perspective. Read about these forms of ethnographies by consulting books by Thomas (1993), Carspecken (1995), Denzin (1997), or Madison (2005).
- If you conduct a case study, determine whether the issue (instrumental) or the case itself (intrinsic) is of primary interest for addressing your research problem.
- When conducting a realist ethnography, identify a cultural theme that you wish to explore. This cultural theme is the central phenomenon of your study.
- As you collect data in the field for a realist ethnography, look for shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, or language that develop over time.
- Engaging in fieldwork and collecting data involve negotiating relationships with participants and key gatekeepers at research sites. Be respectful of sites and individuals as you conduct your study.
- Consider in your ethnography how you will balance description of the culture-sharing group or case, analysis of themes about the group or case, and interpretation of the meaning of the description and analysis. Ideally, you should give them equal weight, but this would depend on the purposes and the research questions you plan to address in your study.
- Context is important in ethnographies and case studies. Include it in your description as well as in your themes.
- Interpret the "text," or written report, in ethnographic research. Recognize and discuss in your report your own position that affects your interpretation and acknowledge that multiple interpretations exist in any report, such as those of readers and participants in the study.
- Consider the steps in the process of conducting an ethnography and make adjustments in them to reflect the type of design you use. See Table 14.4 as a guide.

### USEFUL INFORMATION FOR CONSUMERS OF RESEARCH

- To identify the cultural theme in a realist ethnography, look at the purpose statement and the research question for the central phenomenon being examined.
- Recognize that the final ethnographic report or case study will vary in structure because of the differences among a realist ethnography, a case study, and a critical ethnography.

- Among several factors to use in evaluating a study, consider whether the author has spent a considerable time in the field gathering information that researchers can use to be insights from examining a particular understanding of cultural themes examined before, or a plan for the future and in our society.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A number of books, listed below, are additional ethnographic research resources. Harry Wolcott (1992), *Understanding Ethnography*, taken as a series of chapters, serves as an accessible and perhaps the best overview of ethnography. Wolcott's books:

- Wolcott, H. F. (1992). *Understanding Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Learning to Live with Ethnography: The Emergence of Multiple Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1999). *Learning to Live with Ethnography: The Emergence of Multiple Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Learning to Live with Ethnography: The Emergence of Multiple Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Margaret LeCompte (2005), *Handbook of Ethnography*, provides a guide to the field.

LeCompte, M. (2005). *Handbook of Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Practical books. David G. White (2005), *Handbook of Ethnography*, provides a guide to the field. Rachel M. Adams (2005), *Handbook of Ethnography*, provides a guide to the field.

Emerging

Field

Method

## phy Study

Researcher should pay attention to identifying a culture-sharing group, provide an issue based on your research. Consider whether you should observe or interview over time, and noting beliefs that the group has developed over time. Moreover, the researcher should be reflexive about their role in the study.

## OF RESEARCH

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- Among several factors to use in evaluating an ethnography or case report, especially consider whether the author collects multiple forms of data and spends considerable time in the field gathering information.
- The information that researchers may report in an ethnography or case study may be insights from examining a portrait of a culture-sharing group, contributions to understanding cultural themes, an in-depth exploration of a case that has not been examined before, or a plan for action to change or remedy inequities in education and in our society.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES YOU MIGHT EXAMINE

A number of books, listed below, are available to expand your understanding of educational ethnographic research.

Harry Wolcott (1992, 1994, 1995, 2008) has authored several books on ethnography that, taken as a series, introduce you to all facets of understanding and conducting ethnographic research. His writing style illustrates scholarly approaches and serves as an accessible means for understanding ethnography. His 2008 book is perhaps the best overview of ethnographic practices and ideas available today. Examine Wolcott's books:

- Wolcott, H. F. (1992). *Writing up qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1995). *The art of fieldwork*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Ethnography: A way of seeing* (2nd ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul (2010) have authored a tool kit of seven short books that provide an excellent introduction to ethnography. See their introductory book as a guide to their tool kit:

- LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (2010). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: AltaMira.

Practical step-by-step approaches to educational ethnography can be found in several books. David Fetterman's (2010) book, now in its third edition, is like a travelogue, identifying and discussing the major landmarks that every ethnographer encounters. For steps and examples in writing field notes in an ethnography, examine the book by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw (1995). For a good understanding of auto-ethnography, see Muncey (2010), and for an understanding of critical ethnography, see Madison (2005).

- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fetterman, D. M. (2010). *Ethnography: Step by step* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Madison, D. S. (2005). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Muncey, T. (2010). *Creating autoethnographies*. London: SAGE.

