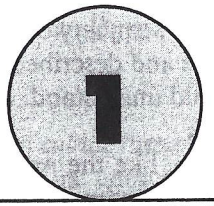

Culture and Ethnography

In 1961, an anthropologist, accompanied by an Indian assistant, drove his jeep over a rough dirt road to reach a village located in the hill country of southern Rajasthan, India. When he arrived there he saw a valley with scattered mud- and dung-plastered stone houses, a few dogs, and several men sitting and drinking from ceramic cups on the mud-plastered verandah of a small house by the road. He spoke few words of the local language. He did not know how to greet people, who the men were, or even how to ask questions.

Nevertheless, with the help of his associate and several visits, he received permission to build a bamboo house with the villagers' aid and to live in the community for a year and a half. By the end of that time, he learned the language well enough to manage daily conversation and greet people properly. He discovered that the house by the road was a *hotel* (tea stall) and that the men were drinking *chai*, a hot mixture of tea, milk, sugar, and several spices. He learned that the *gaon* (village) was divided into *phalla* (wards), that it had a *gameti* (headman), an informal but effective political and legal structure, and people who believed in a bewildering variety of gods, goddesses, and other supernatural beings. He discovered in detail the complex structure of kin identities and groups that organized people's social lives, and the many strategies villagers used to make a living. He learned how people conceived of the world and their place in it, and how to act in the little ways that guided day-to-day life in the community. In short, he was a typical anthropologist conducting an ethnographic field study. His goal was to learn the culture of the commu-

nity, to discover what one needed to know in order to act and react like the people who lived there, to see the world as they conceived of it. His final goal was to return home and describe what he had learned in a way that his U.S. compatriots could understand. In short, he was doing *ethnography*, the subject of this book.

The authors of this book, like the anthropologist described above, conducted (and continue to do) ethnographic research as part of their professional training and careers. All three of us have learned to see the world from the viewpoint of people with cultures different from our own. Significantly, all of us have found our ethnographic experience to be personally transforming and immensely useful, and as we began to teach undergraduate students, we became convinced that the perspective of cultural anthropology is best learned through ethnographic fieldwork and that undergraduate students are fully capable of doing this kind of research.

This book, now in its second edition and informed by experience gained from guiding over 6,000 undergraduate students through ethnographic field research over 33 years, is the result. It is designed to help undergraduates share in this cultural experience, once limited to graduate students and professional anthropologists, by detailing a way to do shorter, but significant, ethnographic studies in the context of North American society. It describes an ethnographic technique, ***ethnosemantics***, which is based on interviewing, and discusses strategies for setting up and carrying out an ethnographic field study.

To help you produce a successful ethnography, the pages that follow are organized around several important questions. What is culture? What is ethnographic research and how does it differ from other social research strategies? What is *a* culture and how can you identify one inside a complex society? How do you set up an ethnographic study, choose a microculture, and find and approach an informant? How do you explain your research to cultural informants and obtain their informed consent? What are your ethical responsibilities during the ethnographic process? What are ethnographic questions and how do you ask them and why? How do you record your data? How do you organize and analyze what you have learned? How do you write an ethnography? What good is ethnographic research and how is it used in the world of work? What are some examples of student ethnographies? To get started, let's look first at the concept of culture, since the discovery and description of culture are the objects of ethnography.

Culture

What Is Culture?

It is hard to avoid the term *culture* these days. (Interestingly, the public rarely used the term when the first edition of this book was published in 1972 and only started to do so in popular discourse within the past 25 years.) For example, we talk about "corporate culture." We hear that continents are rich in culture. We have offices of "multicultural affairs" and we participate in cultural sensitivity programs. We are told that a particular social disagreement is caused by a cultural problem. Although we are pleased that the concept has made it into the everyday thinking of the general public, it is important for beginning ethnographers to understand how *anthropologists,* who first invented the term, use it today.

Culture was first defined by British anthropologist E. B. Tylor in 1871. He wrote:

> Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (1871:1)

Tylor, as well as other social thinkers of his day, was impressed by accounts of strikingly different human groups living in other parts of the world. These reports were usually sent back to Europe by missionaries, travelers, and colonial officials, and Tylor often asked them to do fieldwork for him. Tylor used the term culture to name the system of knowledge, behavior, and material goods associated with such groups. In essence, he argued that groups of people were different and unique because they created different learned and shared ways of life. Tylor's characterization of culture is often called the *omnibus definition*, because he included in it everything he could think of (except biological ancestry) that might distinguish a group.

Because it best fits the kind of research we describe in this book, we use a more focused definition of culture. We define *culture* as: *knowledge* that is learned and shared and that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience.

This definition has consequences for research because you can't actually see knowledge; it is located in people's heads. As a result, a group's culture has to be inferred from its members' behavior and objects people have produced. We call these two sources of evidence, *cultural behavior* and *cultural artifacts*. The method used in this book seeks largely to deduce cultural knowledge from people's speech (a kind of behavior), so it emphasizes interviewing

Attributes of Culture

Culture is a kind of knowledge, but we need to distinguish it from at least one other kind of knowledge, *personal knowledge.* To separate cultural knowledge from personal knowledge we need to identify its key attributes.

Culture Is Learned. The first attribute has to do with how we acquire cultural knowledge. Culture is *learned*, not biologically inherited. Children learn their culture from their parents and group members. They imitate what they see going on around them and are often corrected by others when they make mistakes. The same goes for adults when they find themselves part of a new group or unfamiliar situation. For example, when you first arrived at your college or university, you probably had no idea what the buildings were named, where they were located, or what their functions were. This information is part of inside college culture and is usually unknown to outsiders. Although second nature to college community participants, this inside knowledge must be learned by new members if they are to become part of the group.

The idea that culture is learned knowledge counteracts the notion that members of groups (think of race here) biologically inherit shared behavior. Anthropologists reject this notion. They argue that groups are organized and their members act according to knowledge they have learned.

Culture Is Shared. A second attribute of culture distinguishes it from personal knowledge. Culture is *shared*; it is social knowledge, not knowledge unique to an individual. This becomes painfully apparent when you try to join a group of people who are speaking a foreign, and to you, unintelligible, language. The members of the group seem to understand one another. They should, since they *share* the part of culture, language, that produces the speech sounds and symbolic meanings.

The distinction between shared and unshared (personal) knowledge is not as neat as it seems, however. We believe personal knowledge is mentally organized in a way similar to cultural knowledge; it simply is not shared with other group members. For example, one of the authors once owned a 1964 Volkswagen microbus. Its brand and model name are culturally shared categories as are many of its attributes—lack of engine power, instability in a crosswind, opposed four-cylinder engine, constant need of valve adjustment. But for its owner, it had several attributes that gave it meaning that only he knew (or cared) about—the time it ran out of gas rolling down a hill into Kansas City and the little oil leak behind number-four cylinder, for example. In this sense, all the categories that make up cultural knowledge probably have a dimension of personal meaning, but it's the shared meaning that ethnographers seek to discover.

A constant problem for ethnographers is the need to separate informants' personal knowledge (and their opinions) from their cultural

knowledge. In short, the study of culture tells us something about how *groups* are organized and why one group can be distinguished from another. The study of personal knowledge will tell about an *individual's* characteristics and why one person behaves differently from another within a cultural group.

Culture Generates Behavior. In the past, many anthropologists defined culture as a kind of behavior or at least a system of behavioral patterns. Here we treat behavior as an outcome of culture. We argue that people use their cultural knowledge to *generate behavior.* For example, most people in the United States greet each other by shaking hands, saying "Hi," or both. Depending on which region of the country we are from, what ethnic group we belong to, and our relationship to the person we meet, we might hug, kiss, or use a series of phrases such as, "How are you?" or "What's up?" In rural Rajasthan, India, people also greet one another, but they use a different system of cultural knowledge to generate the greeting behavior. They may put their palms together and say "*Ram, Ram ji.*" Or they may clasp each other's hands using the same prayer-like hand position and say the same phrase or just intone a nonword, "*vah,*" two or three times. Their culture also defines three other ways to greet depending on the formality of the situation.

We are not arguing here that cultural knowledge regularly requires people to act in only one way, although that may be true in a few situations. Instead we are saying that culture defines a range of behavioral possibilities from which people can choose. Take dress for example. A look at most crowds of people in the United States and Canada reveals a variety of clothing styles and colors. But the culture sets limits. It's against the cultural rules for students to attend class naked, for example, a behavior that would be the normal, culturally approved "dress" for some groups of Amazonian Indians. One way to think about this is to view culture as a road map. If you want to drive to a particular location there are usually a large number of ways to get there. The map permits variety. But it also limits your options since you can't drive through buildings, forests, or other barriers.

Culture Interprets Experience. A fourth attribute of culture is that people use culture to interpret experience. If an instructor walked into one of your classes wearing a scuba diving suit complete with flippers, you would most likely be startled if not amazed because our culture says instructors don't dress that way for class. (This does not mean that people don't do "off the wall" things occasionally. It simply means that we judge such actions as culturally inappropriate, as outside the rules.) When we enter any kind of social situation, we use our cultural knowledge to identify where we are and what is going on so that we will know how to behave.

Kinds of Culture

Finally, we believe there are two kinds of culture to be concerned about when we do ethnographic research: tacit culture and explicit culture.

Tacit culture is the cultural knowledge people don't put into words. The classic example of tacit culture used by many anthropologists when they teach the concept is speaking distance. Years ago anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1959) noted that North Americans observed four kinds of speaking distances—intimate, personal, social, and public—without knowing it. Although Hall gave them names, North Americans have no words for these distances. Your parents never admonished you to "use the personal speaking distance" when you were growing up.

Language, itself, also serves as an excellent example of tacit culture. We keep utterances apart by using what linguists call phonemes (the minimal speech sounds such as /t/ and /e/ that keep utterances apart). There are cultural rules about the order in which phonemes can appear. One is that we never use the sound /ng/ to begin a word in English. This rule is tacit. We don't have a word for this arrangement nor are we conscious of it. Speaking distances and rules for arranging phonemes are tacit cultural categories and can only be inferred by watching and listening to people.

Explicit culture consists of cultural categories that are coded in language. We speak of "cars," "presidents," "toenails," and any number of things, real or imagined, using words. Indeed, much of culture is explicit and coded in language.

We emphasize the distinction between tacit culture and explicit culture here because it highlights different research approaches for ethnographers. Since they are not named, tacit cultural categories must be inferred from observation. Hall didn't ask people about their speaking distances, they had no words for what they were doing. He and his students patiently observed interaction between North Americans to infer what the tacit cultural distance rules are.

People can talk about explicit culture so interviewing or simply listening to them speak is an important way to discover their cultural knowledge. Consequently, the interviewing method presented in this book is best suited for the discovery of explicit culture. (Note that anthropologists often do both observation and interviewing simultaneously. Participant observation is a hallmark of ethnographic research, but time consuming and usually less structured.)

Ethnography

What Is Ethnography?

The goal of this book is to introduce you to ethnographic fieldwork. We define ***ethnography*** as the process of discovering and describing a culture. As we noted above, culture is the knowledge a group of people uses to generate behavior and interpret experience. Ethnography is the formal research approach used to acquire the cultural knowledge of a social group. It also includes the description, often written but sometimes visually or orally presented, used to convey information about the group's culture to a larger audience.

Although this book presents a systematic way to do ethnography, all of us, without knowing it, engage informally in a kind of ethnographic process every day. As soon as we are born, we begin to acquire culture much as anthropologists do. We learn a culturally generated language by listening to people talk and trying to speak ourselves. By watching, listening, and asking questions we learn the cultural rules for how to dress and thousands of details about how to behave. We learn to expect people to behave in certain ways and what their motivations to act are likely to be. As we grow older and encounter different groups, we must learn the cultural knowledge that organizes these smaller social entities. The process of learning culture never really stops, since culture changes rapidly along with our association with new and different people and groups. Our aim as anthropologists is to make this informal ethnography into a more conscious, highly structured, and efficient process.

Naive Realism

We have argued that culture is the system of knowledge that structures our day-to-day world. But the fact that we personally live by a culture we have learned and internalized presents a problem when we try to do ethnographic research. Culture causes us to see the world in a particular way, one we come to believe is real. Blue is a color, we think. So is green. These are real colors for most of us living in North America. An avocado is a vegetable. The letter "d" is a sound. Our culture gives us an endless list of ways to see the world and we learn to believe that these categories reflect the *real* nature of the world.

Anthropologists call this cultural perspective, ***naive realism***, the unconscious belief that the way we culturally see the world is actually the way it is. But members of other cultural groups, who have learned another culture, often see the same world in a different way. For example, Bhil tribal people living in central India name the colors we call blue

and green by a single term. For them it is one color, not two. They are just as sure that their category reflects the real world as we are about ours. In Latin America, avocados are a fruit, not a vegetable. Hindi speakers in India have four sound categories, /d/, /dh/, /D/, and /Dh/ where we have only /d/. These are distinct sounds for them but we can hardly hear the difference.

Naive realism often inhibits the ethnographic process since if you think you already know how the world really is it is easy to unconsciously *assume* that other people, even if they seem foreign, see it the same way. Because of this, it is easy to miss cultural differences and to use your own cultural perspective to interpret the actions of others.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism also gets in the way of learning someone else's culture. Ethnocentrism is defined as the belief and feeling that one's culture is best. It causes us to judge the actions of culturally different people. When Bhil mothers are shocked to learn that American infants and children sleep by themselves, not in the same bed as their parents or siblings, which is the rule in their culture, they are being ethnocentric. So are Americans when they are horrified by the way Indian villagers throw rocks at and kick their dogs. Ethnocentrism makes us judge other people's cultural knowledge, and inhibits our ability to learn it.

To manage ethnocentrism, it is important for anthropologists to be consciously aware of their assumptions and biases during the ethnographic process. Awareness means that ethnographers try to control for their naive realism and ethnocentrism and see other people's cultures as different but reasonable systems of knowledge.

Subjects, Respondents, and Informants

To understand the nature of ethnographic research better, it is helpful to compare it to other forms of research on human beings. One way to do this is to look at what researchers call the people they study. Psychologists usually refer to those they study as *subjects*. (The term is now also used more broadly as in "human subjects research.") The term stems from a kind of psychological behaviorist research where individuals are "subjects" of experiments. The goal of behaviorist research is not to discover what people consciously think they are doing, but to see how people will behave under certain conditions. Researchers use *detached observation* to collect data (observation of subject's behavior through one-way mirrors is a common technique). Such research is usually theory driven in the sense that the experiments are designed to test a theory. Observed behaviors are categorized by the observer, not the subjects.

Sociologists (also political scientists and others) traditionally call the people they study *respondents*. The term reflects a common sociological method, ***survey research***, in which large numbers of people are asked the same series of questions on a questionnaire and "respond" by choosing among a limited number of answers. Survey research is often associated with theory testing although it is also used to discover individual preferences and opinions. Survey researchers assume they know the culture and language of their respondents and use surveys to generate statistical data that confirm or disconfirm hypotheses. Most people you approach for an interview in the United States will expect you to ask them survey-style questions, a problem we will discuss later.

Anthropologists call the people they study ***informants*** because they inform us about their cultural knowledge. The term has more recently become a problem because it resembles the word "informer," someone who is a snitch, or someone who shares information, and in so doing causes harm to others. Since many anthropologists continue to use the term informant, we carry on that convention here for lack of a better alternative. (Cultural informants is the topic of chapter 3.)

Instead of starting with a theory to test, anthropologists usually seek to *discover* their informants' views of what they are doing. The challenge for ethnographers is to help their informants remember and express their cultural knowledge. The goal is to encourage informants to teach anthropologists their culture. That is why we said earlier in this chapter that the method described in this book is discovery oriented. Because of this, you don't need to know anthropological theory or choose a social problem in order to guide your ethnographic fieldwork.

In short, the kind of ethnography we suggest you do here seeks to find out what other people know. It does not ask you to classify a subject's behavior based on observation or test theories by asking hundreds of people the same set of directed questions. Think of the ethnographic process like this: Informants are our teachers; we are their students. We are trying to learn how to view the world the way they do. We hope to learn the "inside information" that guides their actions and conveys meaning. To do this we need a field method to help them teach us systematically without imposing our views and interests on what they tell us. Learning their culture and later writing about it is our ethnographic goal.

2

Microcultures

In the last chapter we defined culture as knowledge shared by a social group. We noted that ethnography was the research approach used by anthropologists to discover cultural knowledge and produce an ethnographic account with the help of group members. In this chapter we will discuss how to identify individual cultures and choose one that will be both convenient and easy to study.

What Are Microcultures?

In the early days of anthropology, identifying a particular culture to study seemed easy. Most groups were named (although the names were often given to them by outsiders) and thought to be culturally distinct. Many groups lived in discernable territories. When anthropologists proposed to do an ethnographic study, they normally identified a named group they sought to learn about, traveled to the area where it was located, found a community willing to put up with them, settled in, and began to learn the culture. By the time they left the field one or two years later, they had information about the whole way of life of the people. When they wrote the ethnographies (descriptive books) that resulted from their research, they tended to ascribe the people's cultural knowledge they had discovered to the group as a whole. As a result, it is usual to see anthropologists writing about such groups as the Yanomamo, Burmese,

Tikopia, and Santal. The authors of this book, for example, have published accounts of the Kwakiutl, Bhils, and Nuer, among others.

You face a different set of challenges as you prepare to conduct a study in complex North American society. You can't really choose to interview just anyone who was born and brought up there. The U.S. and Canadian national culture is so broad and society so complex, that the task would be impossible given the short time you have to do the study.

In the 1800s and first half of the 1900s, anthropologists pursued research in North American Indian societies. Later, when a few anthropologists first tried to do research on other groups within U.S. society, they usually chose cultures belonging to ethnic groups, people who had immigrated to the United States but still maintained some of their original culture. Although this option reduces the scope of study within the researcher's native country (the United States in this example), it still requires major time commitments, possible language learning, coping with identity politics, and other challenges and complications. We advise our students not to do this kind of study for these and several other reasons.

This leaves a third option: the study of still smaller groups that exist inside society. We call such groups and their cultural knowledge ***microcultures.*** To understand what we mean by this classification and later, how to spot one, it is useful to place the term in a set of three kinds of cultures based on size and scope. For purposes of the research described here, we reserve the noun *culture* to refer to national cultures, such as U.S. culture or French culture, or to culturally distinctive groups that are politically independent or at least are not well integrated into a larger society. Such cultures define a whole way of life for their members and are consequently large and complex.

We use the term ***subculture*** to refer to a whole way of life culture found within a larger society. (Note that many social scientists use the term subculture to refer to any culture found inside a national culture. We are defining a third-level kind of cultural group here.) Often such groups are ethnic groups made up of people from other parts of the world. Their cultures may have been autonomous at one time but now define people's lives within the group as it exists inside the national group. The Nuer who have emigrated from Africa to the United States still maintain a subculture. So, in the past, did German, Italian, Finnish, and a host of other immigrants to the U.S. A nonethnic group that can be called a subculture are the tramps studied by one of the authors (Spradley 1970). Although not an ethnic group, tramps have created a large and complex culture that guides their lives 24 hours a day inside U.S. culture.

In this book, we focus on microcultures. Microcultures are similar to subcultures in that they exist inside larger, complex societies. They differ in one major respect, however: they do not define a whole way of life.

They are the cultures associated with groups that form for a variety of reasons but do not consume every hour of their members' time. All of us participate in several microcultures at any time in our lives. All of us must learn the cultural knowledge specific to such groups when we interact with other members belonging to them.

If, for example, you are a server at a local restaurant, you will discover that there is a server culture there. It is a good example of a microculture. So is almost any occupational group. Recreational groups—sports teams, motorcycle clubs, gaming societies—are also examples of microcultures. Church groups are microcultures. Residential groups such as families, and dormitory and nursing home residents, often display an inside culture.

To complicate matters, microcultures can be found inside microcultures. For example, take a bank. There is a bank culture that everyone who works there shares. They know what the jobs in the bank are called. They know about the times for working, eating, and taking breaks. They have a common sense of how to dress. Before the advent of automatic deposits, everyone in the bank knew about such events as "social security day" when retirees lined up to deposit or cash their government checks. But there are groups of bank employees who form subgroups with their own microcultures. There is *teller culture*, for example. It is somewhat different from *guard culture* and *personal banker culture.* This is because each employee group has its own goals, requirements, and problems. Tellers, for example, share special inside knowledge about how to handle particular managers or what to do when their accounts don't balance at the end of the day. They may share ways to stretch breaks or find time to eat on busy days.

All of us are surrounded by microcultures. We change our participation from one to another as we interact during the day. For example, if you live in a dorm at your college or university, you may get up in the morning and participate in *floor culture* (or even *roommate culture*). If a parent visits you, you may switch to *family culture.* If you play on the soccer team in the afternoon, you begin to use *soccer team culture.*

But what about the cultural knowledge shared by microcultural group members that is also shared with the national or at least a wider microculture? If you are brought up in the United States, much of your interaction will be guided by national culture. Doesn't this make it difficult to identify a boundary that marks off one microculture from another?

It is true that whether or not you are talking to a parent, dormitory mate, or fellow soccer player, you most likely speak English, which is part of your national culture. Your speaking distances and many other ways to interact will also be generated by the larger culture. But there is still a unique microculture that characterizes these groups. When we study

ter to study the microculture of an assembly-line worker than the culture of a community organizer (where the latter never seems to do the same thing twice).

- Choose social microcultures, not individualistic ones. It is easier to study the culture of flight attendants than it is of beekeepers. It is usually more interesting too.
- Choose an accessible microculture, not one that takes three hours to get to. Your time and your informants' availability are variables to consider when you choose a microculture.
- Choose old and stable microcultures, not new and changing ones. It is easier to investigate the routine of tellers in a bank where things have been the same for years than it is to study tellers in a newly opened bank where the culture is still forming.
- Choose current microcultures, not defunct ones. It is better to study server culture in a restaurant that still exists than server culture in a restaurant that no longer is in operation. This way, you can actually visit the cultural setting and your informants can observe and correct information. However, many students have found they can do a kind of cultural oral history successfully on microcultures that no longer exist, so this rule is probably broken more than any other.
- Choose microcultures marked by explicit culture, not ones characterized by tacit culture. It is better to study nursing home attendant culture, which is mostly coded in language and thus explicit, than it is to investigate the culture of an artist or jazz musician where categories and meanings are learned by doing but difficult to talk about.
- Choose open cultures, not closed ones. Any culture designed to hide information from a public is difficult to study. For example, studying "up" in an organization can be more difficult than studying down because people in authority have more to lose if they reveal their inside cultural meanings and strategies. Thus it is more difficult to study bank president culture because bank presidents must manage other people and have the most to lose if they tell about it. Bank tellers, on the other hand, are easier to study because they have less to lose. It is more difficult to study mortician culture, which is designed to hide the grim facts of death, than it is to learn railroad switching culture, which is organized to switch railroad cars.
- Choose nonideological cultures, not ones with strong beliefs. It is more difficult to study microcultures that have a mission to teach an ideology such as religions, ethnic identity groups, and political movements. Informants tend to give you an ideal version of their culture rather than the day-to-day information you must know if you are to discover how to act appropriately in the group.

- Choose nontranslational cultures, not ones designed to manage impressions. It is more difficult to study cultures that are designed to relate to a public (teachers, priests, and public relations people) than it is to study ones without such missions. Informants will seek to control the impression they give you just as they do for the public.
- Choose microcultures whose folk language is English, not cultures encoded in some other language. It is better to study almost any English-speaking microculture than one coded in another language. If you speak another language and choose a microculture whose members also routinely speak it, your field notes will have to be transcribed in that language and your paper will have the added task of translating concepts into English. Note that anthropologists do this all the time but we believe it is better to avoid this complication when you first start ethnographic training.
- Choose unfamiliar microcultures, not familiar ones. A problem with ethnographic research in your own society is the tendency to miss interesting differences and contrasts because you are so used to what goes on around you. Anthropologists working in very different societies find it much easier to see differences and remain naive, because the culture they seek to learn is so different. A problem you will face from the start is to maintain naiveté, to imagine you are a stranger to the world and that you must ask basic questions about everything. It is easier to do this if you choose a microculture that you know nothing about.
- Choose microcultures outside your own social world, not ones in it. It is better to study the culture of a sewing shop owner than it is the culture of your college financial aid director. The latter individual must deal with you personally, thus may hide the strategies for doing so. It is tempting to evade this rule. For example, if you have a work-study job or are a volunteer working with a neighborhood group, you are already in a different microculture and it is tempting to interview coworkers about it. But since you also have a role (social identity) inside the group, members are likely to wonder why you are asking basic questions about their behavior when you already should know about them.
- Avoid dangerous and illegal microcultures. Although they may look exciting and exotic, illegal microcultures—drug dealers, pimps, theft rings—should be avoided. (We declare illegal microcultures off limits to our students.) Members of illegal scenes are naturally suspicious of the motives of anyone looking into their affairs and can pose a real danger to ethnographers. Authorities can try to force you to testify against your informants if the latter are arrested

and brought to trial. Protecting cultural informants is an essential part of an ethnographer's ethical responsibility.

When you choose a microculture, we think it is a good idea to evaluate it against this list. (We have our students write and present such an evaluation in class.) That way you can prepare yourself for disadvantages you might face and think about ways to deal with them.

As we noted at the beginning of this section, no microculture meets all these requirements. Furthermore, many students have managed to overcome microcultural liabilities by choosing the right informants or in some other way inventing ways around them. Ethnographic research is a personal business, and although we stress rules for doing this kind of research here, we recognize the need to break them will often occur. But we urge you to try to follow the steps we have outlined here as you choose a microculture. Once you do so, the next step is to find one or a few people from the scene to become your cultural informants.