



## Ethnographic Research Strategy

The technology, in terms of an equipment list to undertake an ethnographic investigation, can be as simple as a pad and pencil, or as complex as digital cameras and special effects. In selecting equipment, it is important to keep the following guidelines in mind when you are in the field:

1. Reliability
2. Portability
3. Power source
4. Ease of use
5. Storage of ethnographic material
6. Comfort level of ethnographer with technology
7. Comfort level of subject with technology

In terms of these seven points, we will consider the following technology:

1. Laptop computer
2. Pad and pencil
3. Tape recorder
4. Digital still camera
5. Digital video camera

### Tools for Data Collection

**The laptop computer** is the most valuable tool that has become available to the ethnographer since the portable typewriter. It allows the ethnographer to not only transcribe their hand-written or tape-recorded notes quickly while in the field setting; but it is also a critical component when using the other more sophisticated technology such as video and still photography. Given this, the laptop computer is essential to fieldwork. One model that is small, portable, and highly flexible in terms of technology is the Averatec 3200 series. In addition to its other attributes, the Averatec is generally available for under one thousand dollars, while still offering many of the same features of more expensive models. The drawback of the laptop computer is a power source when operating in environments where electricity is unavailable, given the rapid drain on the computer's battery if being used for downloading photographs, or editing videos. One way to overcome this is to have extra batteries available, or to use a solar battery charger with a special adapter for use with laptop computers. These solar adapters will not only power the computer but also recharge the battery, although this takes a considerable amount of time. Such units are readily available for between one and two hundred dollars online. The laptop should not be used for directly documenting ethnographic encounters as it places a technological barrier between investigator and subject. However, in terms of transcribing and coding data, as well as storing video and still photography, including field-editing capability, the laptop computer is an absolute must. It is however an expensive tool and in area where poverty is rampant, you are also a target if you are perceived as being rich. Don't carry it in a computer

bag slung around your shoulder. Bury it in a bag or backpack that is carried on the front of your body. The villages are safe but you still need to not use your laptop in clear view of gatherings of people.

**Pencil and paper** are the simplest technology available for use in ethnography, and in many ways are the best. They are portable, require no outside power source, and both ethnographers and subjects are generally comfortable with this technology. As such, while a camera or tape recorder may engender mistrust or confusion in a subject, the pad and pencil represent less of a threat, and hence subjects are more likely to be relaxed and spontaneous around such. One problem with pad and pencil is that it can be difficult to quickly record a situation including accurate direct quotes. However, for non-intrusive observation, such as daily events, ceremonies and so forth, it allows the ethnographer great freedom without being obtrusive. In addition, it is essential when using pad and pencil that notes be transcribed, generally with a laptop computer, on the same day as the encounter, usually in the evening, so that interpretation of difficult to read handwriting is not lost with time. In addition, by transcribing the same day, one is able to pass along the nuance of the day without having to recall things later. There are several methods, which can be easily taught, for taking quality field notes, including the system designed by Emerson, et al.<sup>1</sup>

**The tape recorder** is probably the second most common technology used in ethnographic investigations. Both investigators and subjects are generally familiar with the tape recorder. It is very similar to the pad and pencil in that it is less intrusive and highly portable, yet it lessens some of the pad and pencils drawbacks, particularly accuracy in quoting material, as well as allowing the ethnographer the freedom to participate in activities related to the ethnography while still ensuring that events are recorded and described. However, there are drawbacks, including reliance on batteries, and poor recording quality depending upon the equipment, location of the recorder and so forth. Still these can be overcome by bearing in mind the following a few guidelines. First, use a quality tape recorder. Many ethnographers use micro cassette recorders because they are more portable and less intrusive. However, the quality of recording of such often leaves much to be desired over full-size cassette recorders. The ethnographer must always use new cassette tapes, and not simply record over previous material, as well as the use of an external microphone on both full-size and micro cassette recorders, to ensure better quality for later transcription. In addition to this, the ethnographer should use long-play cassettes and have batteries with an adequate life, as well as backup batteries and cassettes, to ensure that they do not have to interrupt a session to change tapes or batteries. Finally, the recorder should have a headset jack for ease in later transcription. Transcription is an essential point, just as in handwritten notes, in that transcription should occur as soon as possible. Many excellent models are available for under one hundred dollars. The tape recorder is a valuable tool that meets the seven listed criteria, and ameliorates many problems found in handwriting, although it is not appropriate for all situations.

**Digital still photography**, like laptop computers, has greatly added to the tool bag of the ethnographer. Digital still cameras hold large numbers of pictures that can be quickly downloaded to a laptop computer, immediately viewed, and easily incorporated into field reports, presentations and so forth. There is no longer the need to carry large amounts of film, and provide for its proper transportation, storage and development. In addition to this, it allows the ethnographer the ability to document what they have recorded visually, as well as in writing.

<sup>1</sup> Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 1995 *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

It places text in context, and gives another layer of understanding to the written word. In this way, it is an adjunct to written reports in that it is useful for conveying the message or story, but it is not necessary, nor can it stand on its own without interpretation. One model that meets the above seven criteria is the Fuji Finepix 2800 Zoom, which takes a variety of data card sizes, has a zoom capability, is relatively small and rugged, as well as providing excellent digital photographs of sufficient pixels to allow for publication. There are also some drawbacks to digital still photography, including that it consumes batteries rapidly. Rechargeable batteries are available, yet in areas of the world where electricity is not readily available this can be a problem, yet one that can be overcome in ways similar to those with the laptop computer, namely having backup batteries available, or being able to recharge batteries with a solar powered unit. Most units rely on AA batteries, and given that such are relatively inexpensive, the best solution may simply be to have a large stock of these available. In addition to this, indigenous peoples as a pad and pencil, as well as tape recorders may not as readily accept digital still photography. Ethnographers should bear in mind the culture in which they are working, and whether or not such technology is culturally appropriate. In cases where such would be intrusive not only methodologically as well as culturally, digital still photography should not be used.

**Digital video cameras** are not a new technology, although they have become increasingly sophisticated over the past several years. With this increase in technology, the price of digital video cameras has dropped, and many models suitable for use in ethnographies can be obtained for between one and two thousand dollars. Given this, it is natural that they have become adopted into the evolving field of visual ethnography. Digital video cameras allow the ethnographer to capture real-life events as they happen, and hence allow the ethnographer to present these events to their intended audience with vitality and without the filter of writing or even still photography. Given this, it can be a valuable tool; however, one that as events in the media have shown, can be abused.

One drawback of a video representation is that the sophistication of the equipment tends to allow the ethnographer to over-edit the footage, including the addition of special effects, lighting and so forth, that tend to take away from the subject and their story. This is something that is generally not a problem with pad and pencil, as well as still photography to a lesser extent. While it is still possible to misrepresent the facts with a purely written record, or with still photography, such does not lead to an inherent overuse of technology as has been found in video representations. This is not to say that video is not a useful tool, but rather it brings up two points: first, video should not be used alone, but if used should be part of an ethnographic investigation that is multi-dimensional and includes other methods as well; and second, there should not be an over-reliance upon the technological tricks available in even the most basic digital video camera and laptop computer combination. Bear in mind that editing is a must in video presentations, and this has become an increasingly simple thing to do as technology has developed; however, lighting, camera angles, montage pieces, background music and so forth should be left to Hollywood and not the ethnographer. This advice of course is limited to ethnographic inquiry in terms of academia and presenting findings in an academically acceptable manner. Other representations, such as those for public relations, fund raising, and so forth, may in fact call for more sophisticated presentations, including the use of music and so forth.

Video cameras are also less reliable than other technologies, and more prone to failure in the often difficult environment of the field, given their sophistication, as well as being relatively unfamiliar to many indigenous peoples. This can be a problem, as many individuals, regardless of their culture, will either consciously perform to the camera, or emotionally close down and not

give pertinent information in a natural and spontaneous manner, thus defeating the purpose of the ethnography. This is also true of still photography as well as tape recorders; however, given the intrusive nature of the video camera it is more of an important factor of consideration. Also, as in the case of still photography, many cultures may not be open to such, and the ethnographer must be sensitive to this. The video camera is not useful to the village and only to academics who may study the material or to be used as a fund raising tool for continued research.

In conclusion, no one particular technology is best for ethnography; rather, a combination of the above would provide the best overall representation of individual situations and cultural patterns. One must simply recognize the benefits and drawbacks of each, and turn to the most appropriate one depending upon the particular situation. In this way, one is able to present a well-rounded, academically strong snapshot of life in a particular culture, which is the goal of ethnography.

**Please note:** It is dangerous to be traveling with expensive items in cities since muggings of rich tourists are common. Always conceal your equipment and bury it in a well-worn backpack. While in cities, carry your backpack in the front to avoid having the contents of your bag rifled unknowingly. While the villages are generally safe, your expensive equipment will trigger people asking you for help. When a woman is trying to feed her children, it is natural to at least try to ask when they see obvious wealth and compassion.

### **Brian P. Mangum, MS**

After receiving his MS in Medical Anthropology from Idaho State University, Brian became an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Anthropology, where he focused his teaching and research on international healthcare and sustainable development. During this time, Brian developed a post-baccalaureate certificate program in medical anthropology that includes a significant international healthcare experience in the Caribbean Basin, where Brian currently resides as the core international faculty for this program, while also conducting fieldwork for his joint MPH/PhD in Public Health Epidemiology. In addition to this, Brian is also pursuing his MD from the Medical University of the Americas, with plans to pursue post-graduate training in family and preventive medicine.

Using his varied background in medical anthropology, public health, and medicine, Brian hopes to develop integrated healthcare systems in the developing world, and currently works with Village Volunteers as an ethnography consultant to preserve and record the cultures of Village Volunteers Consortium members. Some of the projects include documenting the lives of parents who are HIV+, working with traditional healers, and helping to capture language that is being lost. Brian is married to Tami Mangum, who is also pursuing her PhD in Public Health, and has two young boys.

*Brian P. Magnum is Village Volunteers medical anthropologist and can assist you directly at [bucherwurm@ureach.com](mailto:bucherwurm@ureach.com)*