Preface

Doing Ethnography is a primer on what ethnography looks like in practice. In this text, we offer clear, simple methodological guidance aimed at students and other researchers who are new to the field and interested in conducting ethnographic research.

We have both used ethnography throughout our careers. Ethnography has opened us up to great learning and great joy, and at times has broken our hearts. Our relationships with ethnography have been like those between the closest of lovers, or sometimes adversaries, and we have at times had to get to know each other again. In many ways, we came of age alongside ethnography, as we weathered the crisis of representation, grappled with the postmodern critique, and came to grips with the colonial legacy of our beloved method. We have watched as ethnography and our own personal scholarship began to transcend disciplinary boundaries.

Ethnography has been a constant in our lives since we were undergraduates, when we were captivated by tales of anthropologists visiting unexplored lands and people and sociologists reporting about deviant subcultures. Since then, of course, our own ethics and approaches have grown and changed, as has the method itself. Together we have grown and changed beyond those early monographs, but we are still captivated by people and their lives.

We believe that it is an ethical imperative that social scientists understand the lifeworlds of the people they research. It is not enough to research people from a calculated distance. Rather, we believe that ethnography is the best way to understand social life.

We are excited to be invited to write this volume because, as seasoned ethnographers trained in the classic "ethnographic" disciplines—anthropology and sociology—we have deep and varied experience with

ethnography as a method for doing inquiry and creating knowledge. We also share a belief that ethnography can be used outside the bounds of the social sciences and, even more, as a tool for critical inquiry, social change, and social justice.

Writing this book is a chance for us to create the introduction to ethnography we both wish we had had as students and as teachers of aspiring ethnographers. We are eager to bring our own experiences and exploration of ethnography into the conversation, and to offer up a solid primer to doing ethnography that could be used across disciplines.

A "how-to" methods book can be difficult because there are so many different ways to approach research, and things happen in the field that books didn't touch on. And any research, but especially qualitative research, is nonlinear. While a book proceeds chapter by chapter, research is usually messy.

To be sure, our book is not the last word on ethnography. Instead, we offer a lot of advice. We draw on both our own experiences and the experiences of other ethnographers. What went right? What went wrong?

The study of ethnography is lifelong—it is a living, ever-evolving method, after all. But there are some concepts and techniques that we build on every time we create an ethnographic study, no matter how many we've done in the past. In this book, we will present these techniques in a readable, straightforward format. This book is intended for students and others interested in ethnographic research who are new to the field. It is appropriate for both advanced undergraduate and graduate courses on ethnography, in any discipline.

Our vision is that this book can serve as a practical manual on how to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. We touch on many issues that entire books could be (and indeed have been) written about. While we see this book as a main text in a course on qualitative inquiry or ethnography, we want to note the importance of reading broadly.

Becoming Ethnographers

Jessica's Story

As a sociologist, I have always been interested in what I call parallel worlds. I love finding a new one—to find a slice of social life that I was not aware of and to learn about it. Qualitative methodologists talk about truths and Truth. Most of us reject the positivist notion that a single Truth

exists. Rather, we prefer to imagine multiplicities of truth—reality as filtered through people's unique standpoints. In other words, I believe that an individual's experiences and identities shape how they experience the world. This means that different people experience the world differently.

Parallel worlds are truths clustered in a way such that the denizens of particular worlds share common experiences and a common culture. They have cultural knowledge and currencies that non-denizens do not have. People who are not part of their world may not know that world exists, or if they do, they may hold stereotypes about it or their knowledge may come from TV and other media, rather than truly knowing the lived reality of that world. These parallel worlds intersect sometimes, but their bulk remains separate.

This is not the same thing as an identity construct. Ascripted or assigned identities describe the individual in shorthand. Horse girl is an identity. Horse world is parallel to other worlds. Cheerleader is an identity. Cheer culture is its own world.

My research into parallel worlds began in graduate school when I was a member of a disaster research team. The first fieldwork I did was in Oklahoma following a major tornado disaster. Alongside normal daily life, there was a group of people who had lost their homes, who were fighting to regain some sense of normalcy, and who were navigating governmental and nongovernmental organizations for assistance. I could step into that world by showing up at a disaster shelter, talking to people, and observing what it was like to be part of it. I could then get in my car and drive myself out of that zone. I was an interloper. But it was interesting to me how these worlds could exist in tandem and how people outside of the disaster world really had no conceptualization of what was happening to the people within it.

To me, the subject of the world I am studying is less interesting than the fact that the world exists at all. Because of this, my ethnographic work has followed a number of tangents. I have explored infectious disease, the culture of public health, and how people responded to health threats in their communities. I conducted a large study of fracking activists. I immersed myself in the world of cheerleading and later synchronized swimming. My current interest is in horse culture, which also moves me into farming and agriculture (I grew up in the suburbs, so these worlds are new to me). When I entered the horse world, I walked into a horse and ranch supply store not five miles from my home, which I never knew existed. I discovered this entire world right alongside the one I normally inhabit.

Ethnography is the best way for a social scientist to learn about a parallel world. It allows the researcher to immerse themselves in unique worlds, to observe and participate in the things that happen there, over a long enough period of time that they are able to see how the world evolves, how change, growth, and decay happens. I refer to this as foldings and unfoldings, the parallel world as an origami of movement.

I hold a bachelor's degree in English with a focus on creative writing and an MA and PhD in sociology. After finishing my PhD, I served for eight years as the chief epidemiologist of one of the largest health departments in Texas. It was there that I realized the importance of qualitative research. While I had dabbled in it prior to taking that position, I found that in order to put interventions into practice, one needed to understand how people lived their lives. People's stories were crucial in infectious disease work. I then transitioned to academia, taking a position at Texas Woman's University, where I am now a professor with tenure. I teach courses on qualitative research methods, and my own research is either ethnographic or autoethnographic in nature (while we do not discuss it much in this text, autoethnographers use their own life experiences as data).

Susan's Story

If you would have told 18-year-old me, fresh off to college with dreams of returning to her hometown with an English degree and a teaching certificate in four years, that I'd be writing this book, she would have laughed at you. Not because she didn't think Future Susan would be writing books, but because she assumed those books would be novels. She didn't even know what ethnography was, and if you'd have told her, she probably would have rolled her eyes. Just a few months later, in her second semester of college, though, she would take an Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course (to fill a social science elective, naturally), when she would decide that maybe writing nonfiction wouldn't be so bad.

I have always been interested in people—why we do what we do, what makes us tick, how we believe the world operates, and how we form communities. As a kid, I was steeped in *National Geographic* and public television, and grew up in what early childhood educators call a "print-rich environment." I read widely, devoured novels and historical stories, and from early on showed a curiosity about religion, spirituality, and what could be broadly called "the occult"—tarot, witchcraft, and mysticism.

All this set me up to be an ideal candidate for that English degree and a career teaching in a public high school, but a chance enrollment in that Intro to Cultural Anthropology course put my life on a different trajectory. I learned that there were people who systematically studied the types of things I was interested in, that there were frameworks we could use to help us understand the varied and fascinating things that humans were doing. I began signing up for any anthropology course I could, filling my elective slots rapidly until my advisor mentioned, "You know, if you take one more course, you can have a double major in English and Anthropology." I took the course. As a first-generation student, I was also learning about graduate school at that point and knew I wanted to become an anthropologist. More specifically, I wanted to become an ethnographer.

While it was not a totally accepted practice in the discipline at the time—we were in the midst of the postmodern reckoning of the late 1990s—I went to graduate school with hopes of studying my own Contemporary Pagan religious community. I had heard so many stories from people about their religious journeys, and I wanted to document them. I wanted to understand why, in the big middle of the Satanic Panic, there was a large and open community of witches in the U.S. Bible Belt. I probably wanted to make sense of my own journey to that community as well, though that is indeed a story for another day.

When I think about it, the leap from prospective English teacher to ethnographer was not that great. The thing that has fascinated me my whole life is stories—stories in books, family stories told around the table (both my parents and all my siblings are gifted storytellers), Bible stories, and more. The human urge to tell stories is something that guides my work still. I view storytelling and storylistening, to borrow Ruth Behar's (1996) term, as acts of social justice and, perhaps more importantly, of love. One of my best friends calls me "story-catcher" because people seem to feel compelled to tell me their stories at the oddest times. A birthworker, this friend says that just as they make it safer for babies to come into the world, I make it safer for stories to come into the world; I catch them as the midwife catches the newborn.

All humans tell stories—it is one of the few true human universals—and when people trust us with their stories, it is a gesture of supreme trust and connection. As an ethnographer, I get to collect stories and put them in dialogue with one another, and I get to tell my own story, too.

The more I worked with ethnography—spending time in what my first anthropology professor termed "an ethnographic mood"—the more I began to see how this amazingly flexible methodology can be used beyond accounts of a single culture. While it has been a bit since I conducted a "traditional" ethnography, I find myself using my ethnographer skills in a wide variety of settings. I am a scholar-practitioner in student affairs, and my ethnographer's lens and toolkit prove immensely valuable as I work with students and campus partners. I use participant observation and informal interviewing, two key ethnographic methods, in constructing and assessing the many programs and trainings I offer each year. My current research, which lies outside of my job duties, incorporates ethnography in a number of ways, from collecting and analyzing cultural artifacts and conducting participant observation in local metaphysical shops as I continue my exploration of Contemporary Paganism, to using ethnographic interviewing and life history techniques in my research on Contemporary Pagans' ethical understandings of abortion. I find I'm most interested in questions where the answers involve collecting stories, and everything I've learned about ethnography and how to use an ethnographic perspective has allowed me to listen to more stories than I can count.

I hold a BA in English and anthropology from the University of North Texas, an MA and a PhD in cultural anthropology from Southern Methodist University, and an MA in multicultural women's and gender studies from Texas Woman's University. In between my PhD work and my second master's degree, and then after, I spent many years as adjunct and contingent faculty while the tenure-track faculty market bottomed out around me. I got to teach in various settings and across various disciplines (anthropology, sociology, women's studies, gender studies), which put me in touch with thousands of students. I shifted to the Student Services side of the university after it became clear that tenure-track faculty was not in my future, and after a few years as a graduate reader, I moved into Student Affairs, where I make my career today. I currently serve as Director of Co-Curricular Student Development at Iowa State University, where I get to be an anthropologist and ethnographer a little bit each day as I plan and evaluate programs, conduct research and assessment, and—most importantly of all—listen to the stories of the students who come into my office.

And I still write, a lot.

(Past Susan, if you are reading this, we did it! We wrote a book!)

Overview of the Book

Each chapter in *Doing Ethnography* begins with a vignette from our own research. We will follow Susan's work on Contemporary Paganism and Jessica's work on fracking. We do this so you can see not only our processes but also the problems and solutions we worked through in the course of doing our ethnographies.

GENERAL STEPS IN AN ETHNOGRAPHY

1. Come up with a research question.
2. Review the literature.
3. Identify the field and get permissions to work there.
4. Consult your IRB and get any other ethics approvals you need.
5. Enter the field, build rapport.
6. Spend time in the field, and write field notes and memos.
7. Exit the field.
8. Write up and publish your findings.

The book is organized alongside the steps a researcher takes to conduct an ethnography and should be read (and taught) in order. The first chapter of the book is an invitation. We start by answering the question, what is ethnography? We then discuss insider and outsider perspectives on social worlds (this is also referred to as etic and emic ways of knowing). After that, we spend some time on the origins of ethnography, including some of the history from anthropology and sociology. We follow this with some of the key methodological concerns about ethnography. This includes topics such as feminism in ethnography; the colonial roots of ethnography; ethnography, espionage, and war; understanding culture; and issues surrounding sacred knowledge. We conclude with issues of voice and representation, asking the question, who has the right to tell others' stories? We spend time reviewing these issues because we believe it is important to understand both the present state of the discipline and its history. We also want you to know the criticisms, critiques, and trends in this realm of methodology.

Chapter 2 is about research design and ethics, two important issues we must attend to before we begin collecting any data and that we continue to attend to throughout the research process. We begin with

a discussion about writing research questions and how to find an overarching theme for your research. We then delve into ethical considerations. We spend a lot of time on ethics because they are so important. The first part of this discussion focuses on the history of ethics in social science research, including overviews of the Nuremberg Code and the Belmont Report. We include some procedural concerns and then turn to the issue of deception in research. We end this chapter with a discussion of situational and relational ethics, noting that concern for ethics is not just a one-time affair—one must consider ethics from the very beginning through the completion of the ethnography.

To support you as you begin your actual fieldwork, in Chapter 3, we focus on practical considerations for fieldwork and data collection. This includes things like safety in the field, international fieldwork, travel and other expenses, equipment, and preservation of the data. We also discuss keeping field notes and memos. Some other concerns addressed in the chapter include culture shock and the politics of fieldwork.

Chapter 4 moves into data organization and analysis. Ethnographers amass a tremendous amount of data, and we need to have ways to keep the data organized. We also need ways to analyze what we've gathered. We talk about different analytic techniques, such as coding and mapping the data, and conducting grounded analysis. We then turn to some emergent techniques for data analysis, including poetic analysis and collage work.

While we tend to focus on fieldwork, half of ethnography is the writings of what we found in the field. We give ideas for how to go about that in Chapter 5. This chapter is about representation and writing. We explore thick description and voice, maintaining the confidentiality of our participants in our writing, doing member checks, and writing co-constructed narratives. We also look at some techniques for polishing your writing and then turn to the practicalities of writing peer-reviewed journal articles and books (which most methods textbooks do not cover). We end this chapter with a discussion of ethnographic tropes.

How do you know if an ethnography has been done well? Chapter 6 deals with the evaluation of ethnographies. We focus on the works of Alice Goffman and Margaret Mead, and the public criticisms of their work. This is followed by practical tips for evaluating ethnographic research.

It's important to note that ethnographies typically do not unfold linearly, even as we go through the various steps in conducting an ethnography in this book. As you conduct your research, you will likely find

yourself moving back and forth between steps. It is the nature of textbook writing that research seems to be stepwise rather than nonlinear.

We must also point out that there are ongoing debates in the field about much of the material we present in this book. New ideas about how to do research and new questions about how and why we do the things we do are constantly being asked.

Pedagogical Features

We've included a number of features to help with teaching and learning.

Each chapter begins with a vignette from our own work that is relevant to the stage of research discussed in the chapter. The purpose of this is to give students insights into the types of things that *really* happen during research.

We include boxes of a variety of different ethnographic studies to demonstrate techniques the researchers used and to expose students to a wide range of ethnographies. We also hope the highlights encourage students to read these works in full.

At the end of each chapter, we provide a list of discussion questions, active learning exercises, and prompts for contemplative learning. These can be used both in and out of the classroom and encourage students not only to think critically about research but to reflect on their own assumptions and standpoints about research. The active learning exercises can be used as assignments to give students the feel of doing various techniques we discuss in the chapters. These can also be used for self-study for researchers using this book outside of a course.

Throughout the book, we've italicized key terms and included them in a glossary at the end of the book.

Audience

As we wrote, we envisioned our audience as upper-level undergraduates and graduate students. We wanted it to be accessible to a wide audience. This book may be used as the primary or secondary text in any course about ethnography or qualitative methods, in any discipline. Ethnography has moved well beyond the bounds of anthropology and sociology. While we necessarily reference those disciplines, this book is not targeted to any specific discipline.

Conclusion

This book was written specifically for students wishing to learn more about and to do ethnography, as well as for more seasoned researchers who would like to try an ethnographic project. We hope that our excitement about and love for ethnography comes through the pages and inspires you to conduct your own ethnographic research.