Processing Fieldnotes: Coding and Memoing

At some point —after weeks or perhaps months of writing notes— the ethnographer needs to draw back from the field and to cease actively writing notes. He must shift gears and turn to the written record he has produced with an eye to transforming this collection of materials into writings that speak to wider, outside audiences. Efforts to analyze now become intense, concentrated, and comprehensive. The fieldworker begins to sift systematically through the many pages of fieldnote accounts and initial in-process memos, looking to identify threads that can be woven together to tell a story (or a number of stories) about the observed social world. The ultimate goal is to produce coherent, focused analyses of aspects of the social life that have been observed and recorded, analyses that are comprehensible to readers who are not directly acquainted with the social world at issue.

The prospect of creating coherent, focused analyses from a mass of materials (fieldnotes now several hundred pages and in-process memos several dozen) overwhelms many students. But fieldworkers have found that the task can be handled effectively by recognizing several distinct practices involved in carrying out analysis.

Initially, writing fieldnotes gives way to reading them. First, the ethnographer reads through all fieldnotes as a complete corpus, taking in the entire record of the field experience as it has evolved over time. She begins to
elaborate and refine earlier insights and lines of analysis by subjecting the broader collection of fieldnotes to close, intensive reflection and analysis.

Second, the researcher combines this close reading with procedures for analytically coding fieldnotes. Ethnographic coding involves line-by-line categorization of specific notes. In this process, the researcher's stance toward the notes changes: The notes, and the persons and events they recount, become textual objects (although linked to personal memories and intuitions) to be considered and examined with a series of analytic and presentational possibilities in mind.

Qualitative analytic coding usually proceeds in two different phases. In open coding, the ethnographer reads fieldnotes line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate. In focused coding, the fieldworker subjects fieldnotes to fine-grained, line-by-line analysis on the basis of topics that have been identified as being of particular interest. Here, the ethnographer uses a smaller set of promising ideas and categories to provide the major topic and themes for the final ethnography.

Reading through and coding fieldnotes on a line-by-line basis immunes the ethnographer with new ideas, insights, and connections. While continuing to code and review initial memos, she elaborates these insights by writing more systemic theoretical code memos (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These memos are generated by, and are closely tied to, phenomena, topics, and categories created by rereading and closely coding fieldnotes. Later, as the fieldworker develops a clearer sense of the ideas or themes she wants to pursue, memos take on a more focused character; they relate or integrate what were previously separate pieces of data and analytic points. These integrative memos seek to clarify and link analytic themes and categories.

We present analytic practices that parallel methods developed by sociologists taking the grounded theory approach to analyzing qualitative data. Grounded theorists give priority to deriving "analytic categories directly from the data, not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses" (Charmaz 2000:356–357). They maintain that if the researcher minimizes commitment to received and preconceived theory, he is more likely to develop new analytic categories and original theories from his data. By making frequent comparisons across the data, the researcher can formulate, modify, and extend theoretical propositions so that they fit the data. At the actual working level, the researcher begins by coding data in close, systematic ways so that he can generate analytic categories. He further elaborates, extends, and integrates the properties and dimensions of these categories by writing theoretical memos.

The earliest versions of the grounded theory approach depicted analysis as a clear cut, almost autonomous activity with the researcher "discovering" theory in fieldnotes and other qualitative data. This approach seemed to imply that concepts and analytic categories lurked in fieldnote data, waiting to emerge and be discovered by the field researcher. But contemporary grounded theory practitioners, while remaining strongly committed to inductive procedures, no longer emphasize the "discovery" of theory (Charmaz 2001:335); rather, they recognize that analysis pervades all phases of the research enterprise—as the researcher makes observations, writes fieldnotes, codes these notes in analytic categories, and finally develops explicit theoretical propositions. In this sense, then, analysis is more accurately described as both inductive and deductive, and what she has termed "retroduction" (Baltes 1979; Katz 1980b). The process is like someone who is simultaneously creating and solving a puzzle or like a carpenter alternately changing the shape of a door and then the shape of the door frame to obtain a better fit (Baldamus 1972:205).

In this chapter, we develop an approach to analyzing fieldnotes based on these ideas. Initially, we suggest ways to begin the analysis of fieldnotes: close reading, open coding, and writing memos that formulate and clarify the ideas and insights that such coding produces. We then consider procedures that are helpful in carrying out more specific, fine-grained analyses: focused coding and writing integrative memos. While we discuss reading, coding, and memoing as discrete steps in analytically processing fieldnotes, we want to emphasize that the researcher is not rigidly confined to one procedure at a time or to undertaking them in any particular order. Rather, she moves from a general reading to a close coding to writing intensive analyses and then back again. Said another way, from reading comes coding and written memos that direct and disorder attention to issues and possibilities that require further reading of the same or additional fieldnotes.

**READING FIELDNOTES AS A DATA SET**

The ethnographer begins concentrated analysis and writing by reading his fieldnotes in a new manner, looking closely and systematically at what has been observed and recorded. In so doing, he treats the fieldnotes as a data set, reviewing, reexperiencing, and reexamining everything that has been
OPEN CODING

While subjecting fieldnotes to a careful, minute reading, the ethnographer begins to sift through and categorize small segments of the fieldnote record by writing words and phrases that identify and name specific analytic dimensions and categories. Such codings can be written in the margin next to the pertinent fieldnote, on a separate sheet of paper (with some marking of the location of the relevant fieldnote), or in a “comment” field in a word-processing program or a keyword field in a text database. In such line-by-line coding, the ethnographer entertains all analytic possibilities; the attempts to capture as many ideas and themes as time allows but always stays close to what has been written down in the fieldnote. She does so without regard for how or whether ideas and categories will ultimately be used, whether other relevant observations have been made, or how they will fit together.

Coding fieldnotes in this way differs fundamentally from coding in quantitative research. In quantitative coding, the researcher proceeds deductively by constructing questionnaires with categories derived from theory. He fits people’s responses to the questionnaire into the already established categories in order to determine the frequencies of events within those categories. By contrast, qualitative coding does not start from preestablished or fixed analytic categories but, rather, proceeds inductively by creating analytic categories that reflect the significance of events and experiences to those in the setting. Qualitative coding is a way of opening up avenues of inquiry: The researcher identifies and develops concepts and analytic insights through close examination of, and reflection on, fieldnote data. Such coding is not fundamentally directed at putting labels on bits and pieces of data so that what “goes together” can be collected in a single category; rather, the ethnographer is indeed interested in categories but less as a way to sort data than as a way to name, distinguish, and identify the conceptual import and significance of particular observations. In contrast to quantitative coding, then, in qualitative coding we ask questions of data in order to develop, identify, elaborate, and refine analytic categories and insights.
In some situations, ethnographers may benefit from using one of the increasingly sophisticated computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) programs as a tool to help manage, code, and analyze their data. If the ethnographer has accumulated hundreds of pages of fieldnotes and interview transcripts, code-and-retrieve software provides useful and efficient ways to organize and manage field data. With such a program, the field researcher categorizes or labels "passages of the data according to what they are about or other content of interest in them (coding or indexing)" and can then collect or retrieve passages labeled in the same way (Richards and Richards 1994:446).

Sorting field data into general, coherent categories is essential when working with large, qualitative data sets. Field researchers can also use more elaborate theory-building programs (Fielding 2001; Kelle 2004; Weitzman and Miles 1995) that do not simply sort categorized data but also facilitate the logic and application of actual analytic coding. These programs enable the fieldworker to place very specific and detailed codes on particular segments of fieldnotes and interviews, to link these codes to other codes and categories, and to retrieve all data recorded under any code. Theory-building programs also allow the field researcher to assemble and integrate all data, codes, memos, and more finished analyses in one file.

Despite their attractions and potential advantages (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Fielding 2001; Kelle 2004), computer-assisted qualitative analysis programs also have a number of limitations. First, there are often heavy start-up costs as time and effort is required to put field data into appropriate formats and to develop and review emerging code categories. Hence, these programs are not usually helpful to students collecting limited amounts of data for research classes. In these cases, it is easier to use a standard word processing program to sort data by simply creating new files using highlight and copy functions and to enter code categories as marginal comments. Second, it is difficult, even in theory-building programs, to modify codes once applied to specific pieces of data, even though such modification is an important process. Third, these programs may entice the researcher into a superficial, "fit-it-in-a-category" sorting-oriented coding procedure; this facile categorizing shifts the ethnographer's attention away from the essential task of creating new codes and categories that requires actively reading and rereading notes on a sentence-by-sentence basis and repeatedly rethinking and refining prior codes and categories. Corbin warns against this danger in the following terms, "Computers can be used to do coding, but the analyst must be very careful not to fall into the trap of justfixing labels on a piece of paper, then putting pile of "raw" data under that label. If a researcher does just this, he or she will end up with a series of concepts with nothing reflective said about what the data are indicating. Even with computers, the researcher must take the time to reflect on data and write memos" (Corbin and Strauss 2008:163). Despite the power of the computer, only the ethnographer creates, changes, and reconceptualizes interpretations and analyses.

Whether carried out by hand or by computer entries, open coding begins with the ethnographer mentally asking questions of specific pieces of fieldnote data. In asking such questions, the ethnographer draws on a wide variety of resources, including direct experience of life and events in the setting; sensitivity toward the concerns and orientations of members; memory of other specific incidents described elsewhere in one's notes; the leads and insights developed in in-process commentaries and memos; one's own prior experience and insights gained in other settings; and the concepts and orientation provided by one's profession or discipline. Nothing is out of bounds!

But the secret of coding lies in turning the answers to these questions into a distinct kind of writing—a word or short phrase that captures what is going on in a piece of data in a way that links it to some more general analytic issue. Such writing is integrally linked to the processes of thinking and interpreting, whereby the ethnographer "comes up with" a code to write down. In turn, writing down codes—putting an idea or intuition into a concrete, relatively concise word or phrase—helps stimulate, shape, and constrain the fieldworker's thinking and reflection. This mutually necessary relationship between reflection and writing is expressed in John Forester's (n.d.) apt phrase, "thinking with your fingers."

We have found the following sorts of questions useful in beginning to examine specific fieldnotes:

- What are people doing? What are they trying to accomplish?
- How, exactly, do they do this? What specific means and/or strategies do they use?
- How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on? What assumptions are they making?
- How do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes? Why did I include them?
- How is what is going on here similar to, or different from, other incidents or events recorded elsewhere in the fieldnotes?
- What is the broader import or significance of this incident or event? What is it a case of?
Such questions reflect and advance several specific concerns linked to an approach to ethnography and writing fieldnotes. First, these questions give priority to processes rather than to “causes” or internal psychological “motives.” Specifically, this priority means asking questions that identify what is occurring and in what order, rather than “why” questions that ask what is causing or producing some outcomes. In this sense, we view open coding as a means of developing interpretations or analytic themes rather than specific causal explanations.

Second, these questions reflect a sensitivity to the practical concerns, conditions, and constraints that actors confront and deal with in their everyday lives and actions. This concern with the practical or the pragmatic requires paying attention to mundane, ordinary, and taken-for-granted routines and ways of life, rather than looking only, or primarily, at the dramatic or exceptional action or event.

Third, these questions can help specify the meanings and points of view of those under study. We try to frame questions that get at how members see and experience events, at what they view as important and significant, and at how they describe, classify, analyze, and evaluate their own and others’ situations and activities. Yet, to get at these matters, it is initially crucial to clarify what the ethnographer felt was significant about what occurred by asking: “Why did I include this item in my fieldnotes?” It is then important to ask whether or not, and on what basis, members seem to attribute this same significance to events or incidents. These procedures keep the ethnographer aware of the complexities involved in pursuing members’ meanings; in other words, they remind the ethnographer that she always writes her interpretation of what she feels is meaningful and important to members.

Finally, these questions provide ways of moving beyond a particular event or situation recounted in the fieldnotes to identify more general theoretical dimensions or issues. As noted earlier, such analysis is not a matter of trying to fit observations into preestablished analytic categories. Rather, the ethnographer engages in an active analytic process in which he seeks to identify general patterns or categories suggested by events described in the notes themselves. One useful way of proceeding here is by asking how some current observation or incident relates to other observations and incidents. Close comparison of such incidents and processes, attending to both similarities and variations, can often suggest key features or dimensions in detailed, specific ways. This process leads to identifying or naming broader categories within which this specific instance stands as a “case,” in this way helping to build more generalized analyses.

This student ethnographer focused on the practical situation of ushers, implicitly asking how ushers understood and made sense of behavior and events and how they interacted with one another and with customers to manage difficult situations. Specifically, the codes “holding out audience members” and “calming latecomers” identify specific processes for dealing with and managing latecomers as practical work problems. The ethnographer then asked herself how these activities were actually done by ushers which led to a series of more specific codes for “calming,” for example, “keeping occupied,” “distracting,” “smiling,” and “minimizing the wait.” These codes begin to identify and elaborate a variety of analytic distinct.
tions. For example, the code "late arrivals" names a particular "type of customer" in framing "late arrivals" as a "type." She asserts that coming late is a normal, routine event in this setting and that "late arrivals" are one among a range of customer types. In identifying one customer type, this code raises the possibility that other customer types exist and, hence, opens the question of just what these other "customer types" might be. That is, the process here is a dialectical one that consists of asking, "What is this a case of?" or "Of what more general category is this an instance?" In answering this question, the field researcher may draw upon a wide variety of experiences and different sorts of knowledge: her own experience as an usher, her awareness that dealing with people who come late is a practical matter that ushers must routinely confront, her experiences as someone who has come late to a performance, and her familiarity with sociological thinking about waiting as a key to power differences (e.g., Schwartz 1975).

While latecomers are expected at dance performances, the code "irate waiters" distinguishes a particular audience type, a latecomer who is a source of trouble and special concern. The code "latecomer claims exemption" identifies both the responses with which ushers have to deal and the categories and distinctions advanced by this particular latecomer. The next codes—"injuring intervention," "passing the buck," "keeping occupied," and "distracting"—identify additional forms of "backup" responses. These responses include the manager's efforts to placate the disgruntled patron and the writer's attempts to take waiting audience members' minds off the delay.

Codes, then, take a specific event, incident, or feature and relate it to other events, incidents, or features, implicitly comparing and distinguishing this one from others. By comparing this event with "like" others, one can begin to identify more general analytic dimensions or categories. One can do this by asking what more general category this event belongs to or by thinking about specific contexts to the current event. For example, the response of "holding out" customers would stimulate a concern with the reverse situation (e.g., "taking latecomers in during a performance") and, hence, would suggest looking for observations describing how this would have to be managed.

While many of the codes used here involve members' concerns and terms, we also see attention to members' meanings in the code "latecomer claims exemption." This code tries to capture the actual distinction that this audience member advances in trying to get back in to see the performance—that some people arrived after the show had begun, but he had arrived before, had left temporarily, and was now trying to reenter, and, therefore, was "not late" and should be treated differently than those in the first category. In the staff response, we see the practical irrelevance of this distinction; to the staff, what presumably matters are not considerations of justice and fairness (such that "real latecomers" should be treated differently from those who had to leave momentarily and, hence, were retuming) but the disruption that would be caused by anyone entering at this time.

Through an initial line by line reading of her fieldnotes, this student began to classify the socially ordered work activities of an usher for dance audiences. As she continues through her notes, asking the question, "What are the processes by which the ushers accomplish their work?" she will generate more codes; some will be further instances or elaborations of earlier codes, while others will suggest entirely different themes and lines of analysis. Having a code "waiters: irate," for example, implies that becoming irate is only one response in the general category of audience responses and suggests the possibility of looking for others. She could also wonder: This goes on here, but does it always to on? What are the conditions under which it occurs?

Similarly, the student may identify an order or natural sequence of events or stages that make up the larger activity. She can further develop themes along these lines by continuing to look for expected or routine events that are problematic at each stage and the kinds of skills and practices used to respond to them. For example, the strategies noted in the codes—"keeping customers occupied," "distracting," and "smiling"—suggest that she look for further instances to illustrate the general issue of ways that ushers manage, respond, control, or cope with different types of audience members.

In conclusion, this illustration reveals some of the distinctive qualities of open coding. While quantitative coding aims for reliability—different coders should categorize the same data in the same ways—different ethnographers will code the same set of fieldnotes differently. Disciplinary background and interests, in particular, will exert a deep influence on analytic coding. Anthropologists working with the concept of culture, for example, might formulate different analytic categories than folklorists interested in performance and the dynamics of performer audience interaction. Theoretical differences within a discipline may produce almost as marked variations in coding. For example, two sociological researchers studying households might well write and code their fieldnotes quite differently (even, we would argue, were they to carry out their studies in the same setting); one might focus her coding on household relations and the division of labor occurring in the context of particular economic policies, while the other might examine women's invisible work in families. In sum, there is no
single, correct way to code fieldnotes as much as ethnographers ultimately decide which, among a number of possible patterns and ideas, including member concerns and interests, to choose as a focus.

**Open Coding as Process**

While it is often useful to begin coding by focusing on a term in the notes—whether the fieldworker’s or a member’s—the fieldworker seeks to transform that term so that it references a more general category. Yet, at the other extreme, it is not useful to use overly general categories as codes. For example, it would not be helpful to code as “social control” staff procedures for searching residents’ rooms for “buzzes” and other contraband in a reform school. This category is too general and without specific connection to the events and practices described in the notes. But, a code like “staff control—room searches” would categorize these staff activities as a specific kind of control and perhaps stimulate the field researcher to think about and identify other forms of “staff control.”

In open coding, the ethnographer also seeks to generate as many codes as possible, at least initially, without considering possible relevance to established concepts in one’s discipline or to a primary theoretical focus for analyzing and organizing them. In particular, code categories should not be avoided because they do not fit with other code categories; if a code is useful, the focus will change as he moves through the notes. Rather, all ideas and concepts that can be linked to, or generated from, specific fieldnotes should be treated as being of possible interest and should be framed and expressed as clearly and explicitly as possible. Hence, any particular code category need not necessarily connect with other codings or with other field data; integrating categories can come later, and one should not ignore or disregard codings because they suggest no obvious prospects for integration within a major focus or with other emerging categories.

To illustrate these processes, consider the following open coding of an incident from a support group for those taking care of family members afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease:

**trouble** memory loss; bad driving 
*dr does not *help* *ask advice, Lucie says her husband is in good health, but his symptoms include memory loss and poor and dangerous driving. The doctor does nothing to step him from driving. She asks, “What does everyone else think?” Some other members say, “Change

**open coding**

Through these marginal codes, the fieldworker has identified a variety of loosely related (or even unrelated) issues:

- driving by Alzheimer’s patients may be dangerous; family caregivers may have to actively manage those who insist on continuing to drive;
- medical diagnoses may play a critical role in caregivers’ efforts to manage patient activities;
- caregivers may experience frustration with doctors who fail to be sensitive to and support family concerns;
- support group members may suggest ways of getting around obstacles presented by doctors; and
- support group members may recommend various practical responses that will prevent the person with Alzheimer’s from driving.
Some of these codes reflect issues that the field researcher was interested in from the start: practical "troubles" and how people respond to or "remediate" such troubles (see Emerson 2008; Emerson and Messinger 1977). But many of these codes elaborate or specify a prior concept in original and unanticipated ways, for example, "hiding the keys" as a practical response to prevent dangerous driving. Other codes identify issues that are entirely unexpected, for example, doctors as both barriers and possible allies in handling drivers.

By the time the ethnographer finishes reading the complete set of fieldnotes, her categories and themes will have fundamentally changed, and many of those initial categories will be dropped, in turn, as the researcher becomes more focused and aware of other, more interesting and recurrent issues. Furthermore, the process of generating codes may help to clarify the meaning or import of previous as well as upcoming notes, for coding shapes and may alter the fieldworker's sense of what the notes "contained" in the first place. As one student commented: "You feel you know your notes because you wrote them, but the thing is, you wrote them so long ago that it doesn't click."

Many students report that the evolving, seemingly unending character of coding initially proved discouraging and upsetting:

"The coding process, it happened once, and then it happened again. I ended up coding again and again and again... I had to get over the fear that I would do it the wrong way, or that I wouldn't really find any good categories or things wouldn't relate to one another. I had to get over the fear of thinking that there was nothing there."

Coding is indeed uncertain, since it is a matter, not simply of "discovering" what is in the data, but, more creatively, of linking up specific events and observations to more general analytic categories and issues. Although researchers inevitably draw on concepts from their particular disciplines to develop linkages, coding keeps them focused on, and anchored in, their data. This often means that the researcher is already familiar with the key concepts and interests of her discipline and quickly sees how a given piece of data is relevant to them; but at other times, the researcher may have to turn to specific writings that she has not previously read to find pertinent concepts. With time, practice, and wider exposure within a discipline, the researcher gains confidence that she can make analytic connections, and coding becomes less threatening and uncertain.

This open-ended approach can lead to anxiety on several different levels, and some students fear they may never come up with a specific focus for a paper. Others, finding line by line coding time consuming and tedious, want to focus on a smaller number of themes in order to move ahead quickly without a lot of "wasted" effort. Still others express concern over a procedure that, in seeking to generate so many different codes, contradicts what they have been taught about "logical" (i.e., carefully planned in advance) thinking and writing. Consider the comments of two students:

"I didn't have any categories before I began. I just was looking at the notes and jotting down codes, but it didn't seem that I was going about it in a very logical way."

"I went through two or three sets of notes and there were so many random recurring themes and not anything that was organized."

But the fact that fieldnotes seem unwieldy, with codings leading in many different directions, is actually a good thing at this stage; such codings will suggest a myriad of possible issues and directions. Especially early on in the process of open coding, we recommend resisting these inclinations to focus only on specific themes and topics while continuing to go through the fieldnote record and generating additional codes.

Yet, we have also found that continuous open coding can generate a great deal of frustration as ideas begin to coalesce; continuous open coding may actually discourage developing a specific focus when it would be possible and useful to do so. Thus, a strategy of selective open coding, in which the fieldworker uses these procedures at different times and with discrete sets of fieldnotes, may therefore be advisable. For example, one may begin with systematic open coding but then, after going through a significant portion of their fieldnotes, code remaining notes and recode previously coded notes selectively, focusing on "key," "rich," or "revealing" incidents.

WRITING CODE MEMOS

INSPIRED BY CODING FIELDNOTES and by rereading in-process memos, the fieldworker begins to develop, preserve, and elaborate these ideas by writing theoretical code memos (Strauss and Corbin 1990). While the fieldworker should try to read and code all fieldnotes, he may turn from the coding to writing memos at any time, seeking to get ideas and insights down on paper when they occur. He may also reread in-process memos, abandoning some,
While revising and elaborating others in light of subsequent observations and the insights generated by coding, we encourage writing memos about as many ideas, issues, and leads as possible. While some of these ideas reflect concerns and insights that the fieldworker brings to the reading, often grow out of reengaging the scenes and events described in the fieldnotes. Any use of a code memo is to identify and write about core processes that characterize talk and interaction in a particular setting. In the following memo, a fieldworker in a residential treatment program for ex-prostitutes gradually realized that the women involved usually characterized their problem, not as prostitution, but, rather, as drug addiction. She then organized this memo around talk by one resident that illustrated the typical problem, not as prostitution, but, rather, as drug addiction. She states: "I used to work to get high so bad that I'd make excuses to my pimp."

We see here how Melinda expresses her gratitude for the program by expressing a positive opinion of sobriety, and indirectly proposes that her role as a prostitute was secondary to her desire to acquire and use drugs. Melinda places the primacy of the drug problem over prostitution when she says, "I used to want to get high so bad that I'd make excuses to my pimp." We see here how Melinda positions prostitution as a behavior secondary to her desire to use. This way, Melinda situates her identity as an addict, or that drugs are problematic, before she stopped hooking (which we will find out had ceased a month earlier than her drug dependency); rather, it is based on her "days sober." The second reason to be" she is in her second month of "recovery" and is therefore emphasizing that her addiction to drugs is a continuing struggle. Therefore, we see that the identity of an addict is built and presented as the most important and problematic character "defect." The women in the house are struggling with.

Note the limited intent of this analytic memo. It looks in detail at one piece of talk to establish the various ways in which a resident emphasizes her identity as an addict rather than as a prostitute. Although the ethnographer presents this as a common pattern among residents of the program, she makes no effort here to provide evidence for this general claim, to examine exceptions, namely, women who do identify as having been prostitutes, or circumstances in which women will emphasize prostitution rather than drug use, and so on. Furthermore, she makes no effort to locate either general reasons for why this preference for addict rather than hooker identity occurs, or its broader implications for outcomes and resident fates in this or other programs.

Ethnographers also write initial memos to try to identify and explore general patterns or themes that cut across a number of disparate incidents or events. Along these lines, consider the following memo from a study of support and interaction among courtroom personnel (clerk, recorder, bailiff) that explores patterns of "sustaining community and insideness" in courtroom proceedings.

Examples of "sustaining community and insideness" tend to occur during dead time (recess) on easy days with little business and also after session ends for the day. For example, after today's session, all of the participants except the judge, who always leaves, were actively looking for interactions. Their methods included making eye contact, making eye contact, making eye contact, making jokes, and interrupting conversations. This way, interaction could be shared, and opinions could be aired.

This category can be distinguished from idle chatter during recess by the involvement of the participants in the events. High involvement equals community and insideness; low involvement, which is evidenced by breathless of interaction and lack of emotion and eye contact, equals idle chatter.
Here, the field researcher identifies a regular pattern of more intense, animated talk and action between courtroom workers that she contrasts with other occasions of less engaging interaction (“idle chatter”). In her memo, she offers some initial observations on when this pattern of relating occurs (during recesses, on slow court days, etc.) as well as on what it involves (actively seeking out others, joking, etc.).

In sum, initial coding and memoing require the ethnographer to step back from the field setting to identify, develop, and modify broader analytic themes and arguments. Early on, these efforts should remain flexible and open as the ethnographer reads, codes, and analyzes fieldnotes to foster a wide range of new ideas, linkages, and connections. Eventually, however, the ethnographer will move beyond these open, inclusive procedures to pursue focused, analytic themes more intensively. Initially, this narrowing and focusing process involves selecting a small number of core themes that the researcher will subsequently pursue through focused coding and integrative memoing.

SELECTING THEMES

Through initial coding and memoing, the ethnographer identifies many more ideas and themes than he will actually be able to pursue in one paper or monograph. Hence, he must decide which ideas to explore further and which to put on the back burner, at least for the moment. Field researchers have different ways of selecting core themes. The ethnographer might begin by coding fieldnotes for themes and topics that she has already identified and begun to develop in writing in-process memos. During open coding, the ethnographer can elaborate, deepen, and refine or discard themes developed at earlier points in time. But, because she is not bound by previous preliminary analysis, open coding provides the opportunity for developing new themes and insights as she views the entire corpus of her notes through fresh eyes. One consideration is to give priority to topics for which a substantial amount of data has been collected and which reflect recurrent or underlying patterns of activities in the setting under study. Fieldworkers might also give priority to what seems significant to members, whether it is what they think is key, what looks to be practically important, or what engages a lot of their time and energy. For example, one student who wrote fieldnotes while an intern at a county probation office described the following process:

I was going through the notes and kept thinking of things like we have all this paperwork to do, and people have to sign this, and I started to get the sense of this larger issue—how is the department dealing with so much paperwork? And as I went through it, I found, “Oh, well, a lot of times we help each other out.” One probation officer will say, “I saw your client yesterday on the Common; that will count as collateral contact (a kind of contact that must be noted in the paperwork).” How do you keep that on your notes? There are shortcuts that way. There are summary reports called “quarterlies,” that summarize basically three or four months’ worth of work into one sheet. So three or four things like that are subtopics of this larger issue.

In going through her notes, this student began to notice the different tasks that probation officers must accomplish with a sensitivity to the conditions and constraints that accompany the work. Looking at what probation officers actually did amid the practical constraints and opportunities offered by other agencies—police, clinics, and so on—provided a frame for drawing together what had initially seemed like discrete tasks. Discovering additional themes of this sort provided a guide to reading and coding the rest of her notes.

The fieldworker must also consider how a selected theme can be related to other apparent themes. A theme that allows the researcher to make linkages to other issues noted in the data is particularly promising. Finding new ways of linking themes together allows for the possibility that some of the themes that might have been seen as unrelated and possibly dropped can, in fact, be reincorporated as “subthemes” under more general thematic categories.

In the process of identifying promising themes and trying to work out possible linkages, the fieldworker might, for the moment, lose a sense of focus and have to rework ideas until she can redetermine matters. A student who studied the band at a public high school started coding with a good sense of what her paper would be about only to find her direction changed. She reflected on these processes in an interview:

I first thought I would explain how, in the face of budget cuts, somebody could keep a program an extracurricular program like this going. And then in justing the ways that the teacher does that. I came across the idea that he has to do things to get all of these kids to be friends together. And then I thought, wait a minute, that could be a whole topic of its own. There’s so many things going on. How do I explain in my paper the different social cliques with too kids—there’s so many social cliques? And then I just started looking at the relationships that students have with each other inside band and outside. It...
was just the weirdest thing—l lost my paper! The more I coded, the more I lost my paper.

Eventually, this student shifted her focus from the many differences between social cliques to how the teacher kept the program going, both in the face of budgetary cuts and the divisive tendencies of these different cliques. What she initially reported negatively as "having lost her paper" really indicates an openness to new issues and ways of putting things together.

Students engaged in this process often talk about a particular theme "jumping out at them" or, alternatively, of the "focus" for the ethnography "disappearing." This experience is so strong and pervasive that it is important to recall two closely related issues that were touched on previously. First, while the ethnographer often experiences "something going on in the notes," neither the fieldnotes nor their meanings are something "out there" to be engaged after they are written. Rather, as creator of the notes in the first place, the ethnographer has been creating and discovering the meaning of and in the notes all along. Particular sensitivities led to writing about some topics rather than others; these sensitivities may derive from personal commitments and feelings as well as from insights gained from one's discipline and its literature and/or the course instructor. Second, when an ethnographer thinks he has "a substantial amount of data" on a topic, it is not so much because of something inherent in the data, rather, it is because the ethnographer has interpreted, organized, and brought a significant body of data to bear on the topic in particular ways.

Once the ethnographer has identified a set of core themes for further analysis, he might find it useful to sort fieldnotes on the basis of these themes. Here, the fieldworker breaks down the corpus of fieldnotes into smaller, more manageable sets, collecting together, in one place, all those pieces that bear on each core issue. This sorting or retrieving procedure involves physically grouping segments of the data on a theme in order to more easily explore their meanings. Sorting into one place or pile facilitates analysis of concentrating fieldnotes relevant to an emerging issue.

In sorting fieldnotes, it is advisable to use themes that are inclusive, allowing for notes that may have been identified with different but related codes to be grouped together. For example, in the study of family caregiving for persons with Alzheimer's disease, the researcher decided upon management practices as a core theme based on her extensive open coding. Management practices included any actions that caregivers took to manage and control the patients' circumstances and behaviors. This category was intentionally inclusive, and it allowed the researcher to incorporate fieldnotes given widely varying codes, including incessant monitoring of the patient, warning or "talking to the patient," and deliberately deceiving the patient in order to manage troublesome behavior. The analysis at this stage is still preliminary, and the meaning and significance of any fieldnote is open to further specification and even fundamental reinterpretation. For this reason, the ethnographer should feel free to include any particular fieldnote excerpt in multiple categories.

Sorting requires physical movement of data excerpts in ways that alter the narrative sequence of the fieldnotes. In the past, fieldworkers often cut up a copy of their fieldnotes and sorted the pieces into piles that would then be repeatedly rearranged as the analysis proceeded. Word processing and programs specifically designed for processing qualitative data can now perform the sort function very quickly and efficiently, although some fieldworkers still prefer the flexibility that an overview of fieldnotes spread out on a table or the floor affords. We strongly recommend that in using either method, the ethnographer keep a computer copy (with a backup) and possibly an intact, hand copy, of the original notes for later reference.

**FOCUSED CODING**

Having decided on core themes, and perhaps having sorted the fieldnotes accordingly, the ethnographer next turns to focused coding that is a fine-grained, line-by-line analysis of selected notes. This involves building up and, in some cases, further elaborating analytically interesting themes, both by connecting data that initially may not have appeared to go together and by further delineating subthemes and subtopics that distinguish differences and variations within the broader topic.

As an example, the fieldworker whose research focused on caregivers looking after family members with Alzheimer's disease became aware of the stigma frequently attached to the latter's condition and behavior. Sorting all fieldnotes on stigma (broadly conceived) into one long document, she then reread and recoded all these materials, and, in the process developed a series of subthemes of stigma. For example, she distinguished "passing" (efforts to prevent the stigma from becoming publicly visible) from "covering" (efforts to cover up, normalize, or distract attention from visible stigmatizing behavior). She also reorganized and coded for situations in which the caregiver cooperated with the person with Alzheimer's to manage stigma and for situations in which the caregiver entered into some kind of "collusion" with
others to apologize for or manage the stigmatizing incident and its social effects. In focused coding, the researcher constantly makes comparisons between incidents, identifying examples that are comparable on one dimension or that differ on some dimension and, hence, constitute contrasting cases or variations. When the ethnographer identifies such variation, he asks how the instances differ and attempts to identify the conditions under which these variations occur.

By breaking down fieldnotes even more finely into subcodes, the ethnographer discovers new themes and topics and new relationships between them. The openness to new ways to understand and fit pieces of data together that we encouraged earlier applies to focused coding as well. In some cases, this process generates new issues or opens up new topics that carry the analysis in an entirely different direction and may even require a restructuring and regrouping of the fieldnotes. One student ethnographer engaged in this process reported:

You're both discovering and creating the pattern as you create the pieces—the initial codes—and these begin to structure and frame what the other pieces are going to be and how they will fit together. You have one note and you say to yourself, "Oh, this note seems to fit and be similar to the first note, but it's slightly different, and that's what I mean by variation. But somehow, they seem to follow one another." Then you continue and read, and maybe a few pages later, there's something that seems like it follows or fits. You begin to find pieces that fit together in some kind of way. Don't worry how they all fit in the final paper; just keep putting them together even if you don't have the connections between them. The aim is to identify what is going on irrespective of whether you will use it later on.

Another student, initially overwhelmed by the number of preliminary codes, said, "I felt that there were so many codes that it wasn't very logical." But she persevered until she could begin to see that there was more to discover in the notes. "I did see that within the more general codes I could see how that once I cut them up, I could separate them out into smaller subgroups. What I need to do is to ask myself: What is going on irrespective of whether you will use it later on..."

The same openness to new ways to understand and fit pieces of data together as we encouraged earlier applies to focused coding as well. In some cases, this process generates new issues or opens up new topics that carry the analysis in an entirely different direction and may even require a restructuring and regrouping of the fieldnotes. One student ethnographer engaged in this process reported:

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While the researcher delights in numerous examples of a theme or topic, the goal in ethnographic analysis is not representativeness. Rather, the ethnographer seeks to identify patterns and variations in relationships and in the ways that members understand and respond to conditions and contingencies in the social setting. That there is "only one case" often does not matter. But, when the ethnographer is fortunate enough to find more than one instance, it is important to note how they are the same and how they vary. Useful questions to keep in mind at this point include the following: What are the similarities and differences between these instances? What were the conditions under which differences and variations occurred?

INTEGRATIVE MEMOS

As the ethnographer turns increasingly from data gathering to the analysis of fieldnotes, writing integrative memos that elaborate ideas and begin to link or tie codes and bits of data together becomes absolutely critical. One approach to writing integrative memos is to explore relationships between coded fieldnotes that link together a variety of discrete observations to provide a more sustained examination of a theme or issue. Alternatively, the ethnographer may organize and revise written field notes and code memos, identifying a theme or issue that cuts across a number of these memos and pulling together relevant materials.

At this point, many ethnographers continue to write primarily for themselves, focusing on putting the flow of their thoughts on paper and maintaining the loose, "note this" and "observe that" style characteristic of several of the memos we have considered to this point. Others, however, find it useful to begin to write with future audiences explicitly in mind. For these researchers, integrative memos provide a first occasion to begin to delineate contextual and background information that a reader who is unfamiliar with the setting would need to know in order to follow the key ideas and claims. Imagining this future readership within a particular discipline spurs the ethnographer to write in a more public voice, that is, to word ideas in concepts and language that approximate the analytic writing in a final text. This becomes a first attempt to formulate a cohesive idea in ways that would organize a section of the final ethnography (see the dis-
cussion in chapter 7). Thus, such memos sound more polished than earlier memos.

Substantively, integrative memos may move through a series of field notes, leading to incidents by connecting sentences. We examine the following extended memo on "remedial covering" by family members caring for persons with Alzheimer's disease to illustrate these processes:

Remedial covering involves attempts to convert the troublesome behavior once it has occurred. Caregivers take it upon themselves to watch over the family member and attempt to "smooth over things" in a variety of public places. For example, Laura explains what she does in the presence of friends:

He may take the cup off the saucer and just put it somewhere else on the table. And I'll say, "I think you'd probably get that cup back over here because it'll get tipped over, and it's easier if you have it close to you like that." I try to smooth over these things.

In a similar case, Carol recounts how Ned embarrasses her by removing his dentures in a restaurant and how she handles this:

I got up real quick and stood in front of him and said, "Get your teeth in your mouth." Then she explains to others, "I felt I had to protect him. What if the waitress came?"

In this first segment, the ethnographer links two separate incidents occurring in restaurants through the themes of "watching over" and "smoothing over things." In doing so, differences between the incidents—for example, in the first instance, that something untoward is prevented from happening, while in the second, the untoward action has occurred but is literally "covered" and then corrected—are subordinated to these commonalties.

The researcher then takes up a further dimension of remedial covering, specifying the contrast between covering that relies upon the cooperation of the person with Alzheimer's and covering that is carried out directly by the caregiver:

Remedial covering involves having to negotiate the individual's cooperation when he or she is capable of doing so. For example, Laura describes her husband in a local restaurant, how she instructs and physically maneuvers him through various eating tasks ("puppeteering," Fullmer and McDonald-Waller 1985) and how he responds. Her description of their interaction gives a real flavor of the minute detail to which the caregiver must attend:

I'll say, "Now turn around some more so that your legs are under the table, and then move over so that you're in front of the placemat." Then he would set the beer out very perilously near the edge, and I'd move it back. And then I'd have to arrange things... he picked up the tortilla, and it wasn't appropriate. And if anybody were watching, they'd say, "Oh, bek!

While Laura suggests remedial practices to William in the above example, Tess in her situation, takes over and attempts to remedy the situation on her own. She describes going to a buffet restaurant with some of her coworkers, where she tries to cover her father's mistakes so the coworkers are less likely to notice:

"I'm more ready to be the ultimate authority... This is the way it's going to be done. In other words, take total control."

In writing analytic, integrative memos of this sort, the central task is to develop theoretical connections between fieldnote excerpts and the concept...
utal categories they imply. In so doing, the ethnographer confronts different analytic choices. One major issue is deciding which theme to make the primary focus, which to include as subthemes, and which to exclude entirely.

Let's return to the dilemma of the student who “lost her paper” while focusing and sorting her notes. One strategy was to divide the paper up into different sections, such that the issues of the teacher's strategies for managing the band and of the students' grouping themselves into cliques could be analyzed as topics unto themselves. Another possibility was to see these strategies as different aspects of the more general theme. Here, the paper would have focused on how the teacher managed to keep an extracurricular program going in the face of overwhelming odds—declining resources and a large and heterogeneous group of students. Specific subtopics would have included how he tried to motivate kids to spend extra time on weekends or extra time during the week and how he managed the tensions and different interests between the various student cliques.

Deciding how to frame an analysis often requires taking a step back from the particulars of the analysis in order to answer the question, What is the larger, more encompassing question I am responding to? One student who studied an alternative school, for example, was able, once she clarified the story she wanted to tell, to incorporate themes from the following incident involving negotiations over the use of a chair at an all-school meeting:

The chair was just sitting there, and I was sitting behind a group of guys who were saving chairs, and this girl took this chair and started to put her feet on it, and the guy says, “Hey, someone's sitting there.” She said, “Well, can't I just use it until he comes back?” Then a student teacher comes along, and you can see him eying the chair, and he says, “Can I use your foot rest?” She said, “Someone's sitting there.” He said, “Well, I'll just use it until he comes back,” and then he sits down. But the first guy says, “Excuse me, someone is sitting there.” He says, “Well, I'll give it back when he gets back.” The student [whose chair it is] comes back and the teacher just gets up and left.

The ethnographer saw in this fieldnote ways that the students at the school negotiated with one another and with a student teacher over seating. But, while she found the incident and several like it to be of interest with regard to relations between students and between students and teachers, she struggled with how to link such incidents to a variety of other themes. She found the incident and several like it to be of interest with regard to relations between students and between students and teachers, she
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The ethnographer saw in this fieldnote ways that the students at the school negotiated with one another and with a student teacher over seating. But, while she found the incident and several like it to be of interest with regard to relations between students and between students and teachers, she struggled with how to link such incidents to a variety of other themes. She decided at this point to step back and attempt to relate the incident more broadly to what she knew and found interesting about the school. She thought, for example, about the pride that both students and teachers at the alternative public school took in the ethic of “democratic decision making” and “shared power.” She contrasted this with many more traditional schools where teachers readily exert authority. With the more general issue of this contrast in mind, the student saw that, on some occasions, teachers in the alternative school may not hold or choose to exercise authority but, rather, negotiate or defer to student claims to space. This led the student to see that the incident helped her not to take teacher and student claims to “democracy” and “power sharing” at face value or as givens but, rather, as achievements that were variously honored in the setting.

Again, there is no single, correct way to organize themes and subthemes. Part of the decision about which course to take depends on the kind of data that has been recorded. In the study of the high school band, very rich and detailed notes on types of students in the school would allow focusing on student cliques. But, if such observations are lacking, cliques must move from the center of the picture and become part of the context or background with something else in the foreground. It is usual for ethnographers to try on, modify, discard, and reconsider several possibilities before deciding which tells the best story. As was the case when writing fieldnotes in the first place, organizational decisions will be influenced by factors that range from how inclusive an organizational scheme is to how well it highlights particular theoretical and substantive interests and preferences.

REFLECTIONS: CREATING THEORY FROM FIELDNOTES

This chapter has developed a grounded, open-ended approach to ethnographic analysis, an approach keyed to the close, systematic consideration of fieldnote data aimed at generating as many ideas, issues, topics, and themes as possible. Rather than proceeding deductively with a theory that explains phenomena and attempting to find instances in the data that illustrate or disprove it, this form of ethnographic analysis shifts through and pieces together fieldnotes into a series of themes and more sustained analytic writings, at all times attending "closely to what happens in the empirical world.
he or she studies" (Charmaz 2011:337) and to the everyday meanings, encoun-
tering assumptions, and practical concerns of those who live and act in the
worlds. As analyst, the ethnographer remains open to the varied and some-
times unexpected possibilities, processes, and issues that become apparent
as one immerses oneself in the written data.

But this open-ended process does not mean that the fieldworker com-
pletely ignores existing theory or has no theoretical commitments prior to
reading through the notes. It does suggest, however, that for the ethnograp-
her, theory does not simply await refinement as he tests concepts one
against events in the social world; nor do data stand apart as indepen-
dent measures of theoretical adequacy. Rather, the ethnographer's assump-
tions, interests, and theoretical commitments enter into every phase of
writing an ethnography; these commitments influence decisions rega-
ding what to write about and which member's perspective to pre-
fer. The process is thus one of reflexive or dialectical interplay be-
 tween theory and data, whereby theory enters in at every point, shaping
analysis but also how social events come to be perceived and written up
in the first place.

Indeed, it is misleading to dichotomize data and theory as two separate
and distinct entities, as data are never pure but, rather, are imbued with
and structured by, concepts in the first place. Fieldwork is continuously ana-
lytic in character, as fieldnotes are always products of prior interpretive
and conceptual decisions and, hence, are ripe with meanings and analytic
implications. Thus, the analysis of fieldnotes is not just a matter of finding
what the data contain; rather, the ethnographer further selects out some in-
cidents and events from the corpus of fieldnote materials, gives them pri-
ority, and comes to understand them in relationship to others. Sometimes
these insights seem to "emerge" as the ethnographer reviews her accounts
of local events and actions as part of a larger whole. But often ethnogra-
phers struggle to find meaningful, coherent analytic themes in their data, only
with difficulty coming to see as a more active "ethnographic voice." As one
student reflected on her experience:

At first, I wanted the paper to emerge through the notes in the sense that it had
its own story, and I was supposed to tell its story. But I had to make the shift
from just wanting to tell about what was in the notes to making something
solid out of them—my ideas, instead of thinking that it's hidden somewhere
in the notes.