1. Entering the field

1.1 A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD

Researchers conduct ethnography in all fields imaginable, including both distant cultures and lands, and our most mundane workplaces and organizations. And yet, some historical and contemporary ethnographic traditions hold a relatively narrow vision of a legitimate ethnographic research field. In this chapter, we start with the presentation of those more orthodox ethnographies and views of what constitutes the ethnographic fields. Learning about the origins of ethnographic research begins with the field and is crucial for understanding the specificity of ethnography in general. And so, we will take our readers on a trip to Siberia, the Polish countryside, Australia, Tikopia Island, and US towns to finally arrive at business organizations in industrialized countries and virtual communities. This journey will show how important it is to consider different notions of how to define the field. It is a question of research design – but also an important theoretical decision. Moreover, when a researcher takes for granted what constitutes a legitimate research field and does not devote much attention to this aspect of research, they do not escape these questions but they remain hidden: there are some implicit ontological assumptions. Such hidden assumptions may weaken the entire research project. Ethnography relies strongly on reflexivity and conscious focus (Goodall 2000). The vignette in Box 1.1 shows how a well-known and quite mundane place becomes an ethnographic field thanks to such a focus on the part of the ethnographer.

BOX 1.1 SAME OLD GROCERY SHOP, EXCITING NEW FIELD (GRADUATE PROJECT), BY LAURA MISZKOWSKA

Examining the grocery shop, I expected the obvious: the energy, the crowds, the organized work, the annoyed people queuing to the counter, perhaps a prevailing confusion. And thinking about the employees, I sensed that I would see fatigue and work in constant motion. Going into the field
proved to me that what I expected was but a narrow part of their world. The world we all seem to know, the world we live in every day. During a pilot study I already realized how little we see when our role is just to be a customer. It’s as if we don’t want to see many things then, and we interpret situations in a quite superficial way. When the aim is just to do the shopping, all the senses are not in focus, they are, is if, relaxed.

A local shop is not only about queues and wandering customers asking for the best product or the location of particular products. It is also a space of neighbourly conversations, words exchanged by shoppers: compliments, enquiries about private life, people chatting about the weather. While walking between the aisles one can hear various conversations, not only those related to the area itself, but gossip and news from mouth to mouth both between customers and from customers to employees. The shop assistant is not just a salesperson. For regular customers he or she is also a listener, a conversation partner and even a neighbour. This is a neighbourhood, after all. The bonds between regular customers and neighbourhood shop employees are quite visible. Even if I would expect such observations in a small neighbourhood shop, the atmosphere really surprised me.

But looking from the perspective of the duties and responsibilities, a shop assistant is also not just a salesperson, either. It’s a job that requires quite wide skills. It is important to organize and communicate, to know the goods, the codes, basic product knowledge: to be able to recommend something, to build up trust. It is important to have a good knowledge of sales to be able to place orders. Shop assistants try to keep the customer satisfied, the shop properly stocked, and the owners not suffering losses. This job also requires physical strength: setting up the shop, moving goods takes strong legs and spine. It is mainly a standing job. The duties of a shop assistant show that he or she is, yes, a salesperson, but also designer, cleaner, and on top of all that, an emotional labourer with a smile on their face.

A shop is hardly an exotic place. It is part of everyone’s everyday life, common and connected with everyday duties. A researcher’s sensitivity makes it possible to see the less obvious aspects of ‘shop life’. It is by studying this mundane field that I realized that ethnography really is an adventure and a journey. Even when it is not very exotic, it is still interesting. It doesn’t matter what kind of field we explore, the inspiring thing is that the deeper we go, the more fascinating and creative the process becomes, observations allow us to have new ideas and ask new questions. Even in this initially rather uninteresting place. After conducting this pilot study, I left the site with more doubts and question marks in my mind than I thought possible.
Some anthropology departments organize the diversity of fields hierarchically. They rarely do this in a formal manner, but in practice they often do: the valuation of fields is visible in academic practices such as hiring, financing research, and general prestige. In addition, some locations seem to be more ethnographic than others. As Gupta and Ferguson write, based on their US experience, it is not unusual to regard ‘Africa more than Europe, southern Europe more than northern Europe, villages more than cities […] according to the degree of Otherness from an archetypal anthropological “home”’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 13). In other communities, such a hierarchy of fields also exists.

While working on my PhD, I, Paweł got a job at the State Ethnographic Museum in Poland. My departmental colleagues were seasoned ethnographers and nationwide experts in folk costumes, farm tools, and traditional crafts. Joining the museum, while finishing my doctorate at the university anthropology department, exposed me, then a young ethnographer, to two ethnographic traditions. First, ethnography is frequently misunderstood by those of us studying folk culture. In many European countries, ethnographic museums focus on describing and preserving folk culture, the culture of peasants and the countryside in general. Second, there also exists a widespread tradition to regard ethnography as a research approach to studying contemporary social phenomena. In the case of my research project it was a cultural aspect of emotions in a multi-level selling organization. Yet my colleagues in the museum did not recognize the PhD project as a legitimate ethnography. For them, the field should be quite specific and this, by itself, clearly defined ‘ethnography’. And so, ethnography was, to them the countryside and an interest in ‘traditional culture’, which is usually divided into three categories: material culture (e.g. tools, architecture), spiritual culture (e.g. religious rituals, art), and social culture (e.g. kinship relations, social norms). Researching business organizations was, to them, a misuse of the term.

The possibility of studying ethnographically contemporary phenomena, for example, business organizations, results from a more than century-long evolving process. Nevertheless, one can still meet ethnographers who adhere to the literal meaning of ethnography according to which it stands for writing ethnos. The Greek ethnos means: folk, people, and nation. For these orthodox researchers, the employees and managers of mundane workplaces are not part of the ethnos.

But even if one takes to heart this traditional, literal meaning of ethnography as describing the ethnos, even here we can see a variety of traditions. After the collapse of the USSR, regions in the post-soviet territories became an intensively studied research field. Researchers outside of Russia got access to areas that were previously quite restricted. The restrictions applied not only to Western scholars but also to ethnographers from socialist countries in central Europe such as Poland. I, Paweł, joined the new wave of studies, and my eth-
nographic skills were forged by studying Belarus and then Siberia. The unique opportunities emerged from observing evolving cultural, national, political, religious and economic processes of an opening country with an enormous diversity of languages, religion, culture, ethnic histories, and complex relations between groups. Academic ethnographers did not discover that field only in 1990s. There existed studies published previously by Western ethnographers, such as an excellent monograph on a Karl Marx Collective Farm in Buryatia by Caroline Humphrey (1983). However, the peoples of Siberia have been almost exclusively covered in many highly detailed and specialized publications by generations of domestic Soviet ethnographers. Doing and writing ethnography in Buryatia, the UK social anthropologist was engaged in different academic activities from soviet ethnographers, which helped to add perspective on the studied field.

In the early days of ethnography, after the First World War, the *ethnos* school predominantly focused on small-scale, isolated groups. Studied groups inhabited Indian reservations or islands such as Tikopia, of Trobriand Islands, studied by famous ethnographers Firth and Malinowski. The field, back then, was defined by easily distinguishable boundaries of a single society and could be characterized by three main features. First, the organization of these groups relied on personal relationships. The small scale allowed researchers to study the whole group. Second, the field was substantially different from the researchers’ society. Third, those groups typically lacked written texts. These three characteristics of the initial field sites are no longer predominant in the academic community of ethnographers but they may help to understand some of the key further developments in ethnography.

Claude Lévi-Strauss points out that studying societies which researchers were drastically unfamiliar with forced ethnographers to abandon their beliefs, prejudices and methods of thinking (Lévi-Strauss 1975: 2). As a result, they could grasp aspects of social life that enriched our understanding of humankind in general. To achieve that unique understanding, they had to go beyond the existing methods of studying societies, as history, literature studies, law and philosophy heavily relied on analysis of written documents, which in fields such as Tikopia were absent. As a result, not only has observational research been developed, but ethnographers started applying a holistic approach, gathering material in various ways and forms. Besides developing new research techniques, early academic ethnographers formed a specific vision of culture as an integrated system based on consensus and shared characteristics. This vision is still shaping popular understanding of culture. In some cases, even academics find it instrumental in their analyses, even if they no longer study encapsulated distinct and relatively coherent social groups.

The vision of an encapsulated culture, which was formed back in the times of the origins of ethnography, became a potent metaphor – and it is oftentimes
still in use. On the one hand, the concept is helpful as it offers a sense of having a manageable unit of analysis:

bounded, coherent, cohesive, and self-standing: social organisms, semiotical crystals, microworlds. Culture was what peoples had and held in common, Greeks or Navajos, Maoris or Puerto Ricans, each its own. (Geertz 2000: 248–249)

On the other hand, the concept of discriminate cultures obscures the complexity of social organization, and blurs the evolving boundaries, frictions, and conflicting values. The early idea of an enclosed culture was handy for academic purposes and political processes because, for those in power, a helpful fallacy is embedded in the concept of culture. While any group’s culture and social organization are dynamic and incoherent, the early conceptualization of culture only identifies culture with the dominant discourse. It was silencing weaker voices. We can also find this narrow vision of culture in management studies, where organizational culture, in many cases, is just a control tool used by those in power (Deal and Kennedy 2000 [1982]). Ethnography is not about such narrowing down of focus. Studying organizations ethnographically, researchers should open up their cultural vocabulary (Martin 2002).

After researching small isolated groups, anthropologists moved their engagement first to bigger and more mixed-up objects such as India, Japan and Brazil. This move happened after the Second World War. The original concept of culture as shared feelings and values could not be maintained when faced with the observed dispersion. As Geertz put it:

What makes Serbs Serbs, Sinhalese Sinhalese, or French Canadians French Canadians, or anybody anybody, is that they and the rest of the world have come, for the moment and to a degree, for certain purposes and in certain contexts, to view them as contrastive to what is around them. (Geertz 2000: 249)

Anthropologists followed the path trailed by Geertz of abandoning reified discrete space-bound objects of studies, even when still doing observational research in one location. Instead, it has been pointed out that collective life ‘takes place on a dozen different levels, on a dozen different scales, and in a dozen different realms at once’ (Geertz 2000: 254), not limited to one studied location.

Currently, many types of field are considered legitimate, including ‘ethnic’ and more mundane studies. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the approach to studying social groups developed by Bronisław Malinowski became a recognizable research method. As a result, some researchers saw an opportunity to use his study method in other settings, such as industrial communities and their own societies. This ‘ethnography at home’ was born during Elton Mayo’s study in the Hawthorne Works factory near Chicago. The
research project was long and complex. The results, however, were inconclusive. Researchers found it hard to make sense of, for example, how diverse variables that researchers were manipulating (e.g. lighting, work time, breaks, providing food) influenced shop floor workers’ productivity. Finally, the study became iconic and founded the influential Human Relations Movement. One can even say we would not have HRM as we have now if not for that project.

Lloyd Warner was an anthropologist who worked under Bronisław Malinowski’s supervision and conducted his research in a traditional ethnographic field, a native Australian tribe. He had the grand idea of applying what he had learned in Australia to study his American society. Elton Mayo invited Warner, believing he could contribute to the study by using his developed observational methods – skilled in fieldwork. Not only did his ethnographic skills impress Mayo, but also his unusual experience in the distant field. In Mayo’s words, his colleagues were interested to hear of Warner’s ‘wild experiences’ with ‘Australian savages’ (Gillespie 1993: 155).

Warner, the ethnographer in the factory, did not feel he was in the right field. First, it was very limiting for him to operate within the factory walls. His anthropological experience made him approach a studied phenomenon as an element of a broader social system. Workers’ productivity, Warner hypothesized, could have been a result of the disintegration of a social system outside the factory. Many of the workers had moved to the town recently, leaving their home towns and countries, family members and friends. They had withdrawn from the social organization that gave them safety. In the small town, which at that time was an Al Capone headquarters, they faced a lack of the social organization they needed for safety and wellbeing. The emerging social organization in the workplace, making friends and forming cliques to support each other, influenced the work. However, this interpretation did not make it into official findings. Lloyd Warner left Hawthorne to start his project in New England, where he could study the whole social organization, including organizations such as societies and factories, but not as separate entities, research fields encircled by factory walls or lists of members. However, he was limited to one town and treated it as a village.

Nowadays it is popular to focus on a single organization and not to treat it as a ‘village’. It is known as organizational ethnography. When applied in organizational studies, ethnography faces problems similar to the historical definition of culture and the object of study. Scholars and practitioners who perceive ethnography just as a research tool are tempted to study organizations as if they were tribes or villages. The version of organizational ethnography we are describing here is different. For many years, organizational ethnographers did not recognize their active role in constructing the field. The fact that organization, as a field, was something given and recognizable was an obstacle in the development of organizational ethnography. The full potential
of ethnography as a holistic approach, not limited to reified boundaries, was not developing fully.

Even some early organizational ethnographers perceived their role as those who see through the factory walls (Baba 2009), not limiting their field to the boundaries of formal organization. However, recent theoretical developments in organization studies lead us to focus on organizing beyond organizations. And this creates an even more favourable climate for ethnography. As a result, ethnographers changed the way they conceptualize the field. Nowadays, we focus on processes: on organizing instead of an organization. This terminological shift results from two processes. The first is a debate about the ontological nature of organizations. There are adherents of both the school of viewing organizations and processes and as solid states. The distinction is not quite crucial for ethnographers, as they can study both. The second is more relevant to them: the changes in the nature of capitalism, emerging new forms of labour and organizing open calls for a new, dynamic approach. Ethnography can now develop its full potential as reified clear boundaries of formal organizations no longer constrain it. But it is the third, methodological, reason that is the most valid: ethnography cannot lead to general theories or laws and it cannot speak for the entire population. However, it can very well represent social processes longitudinally, i.e. as something that develops and gets repeated in patterns – culture.

It was postmodernism that initially destabilized conventional organizational analysis. Postmodern academics privileged a weak ontology emphasizing what is emergent and ephemeral (Chia 1995) instead of organizational grand narrative. Questioning the ontological foundation of societies and organizations, social scientists challenged the previously predominant practice of focusing on the individual organization as an object of study. Instead, they claimed we should study ‘the production of organization rather than organization of production’ (Cooper and Burrell 1988: 106). In this way, researchers started to focus on practices that constitute what is perceived as social settings and organizations. Abandoning the organization as an analytical category, caused some destabilization within the discipline but certainly helped to appreciate the focus on social processes. As Sverre Spoestra (2005: 113) puts it, ‘being occupied with organizations is thus a way to stop thinking about organization’. Organizations started to be regarded as not being ‘social facts’ but ‘ongoing accomplishments’ (Cooren et al. 2011). Nowadays we have a choice, we can focus on process or on facts. But the way we study this phenomenon should reflect that theoretical development. A contemporary ethnographer can – but does not need to – study community organizations as if they were villages or islands, looking for their unique characteristics. She can – but does not have to – uniquely pay attention to what people do, what is happening, what patterns develop.
Some important socio-economic transformations fuelled this shift towards complexity in thinking about social settings. Human life in many parts of the world used to be a series of transitions from one to another closed environment ‘each having its own laws: first, the family, then the school (“you are no longer in your family”); then the barracks (“you are no longer at school”); then the factory; from time to time the hospital’ (Deleuze 1992: 3). Information technologies allowed for the emergence of more open societies than those of disciplinary societies that reached their limit in capital accumulation. The new society, called the ‘society of control’, offers unique opportunities for extracting value within freedom under control. It is a complex society but unaware of its own complexity. In those contemporary societies, people are ‘free’ to do whatever they want, but their behaviour is influenced by new, indirect forms of power. In parallel to the development of the new type of society emerged new forms of organizing and labour, which are also more open, ephemeral and often invisible as they take an immaterial form. In this context, it is not only interesting but truly enlightening and potentially liberating to be able to show how this complexity is organized and how it develops. It is easier and also safer to alter processes than to shift states and eradicate facts.

Communities and social settings are nowadays also changed due to the increased exposure to social media platforms and IT. For example, billions of users perform free immaterial work by posting and interacting digitally on major social media platforms (Beverungen et al. 2015). However, companies owning those platforms formally employ only a tiny part of the total number of people engaged in labour. This change of modes of capitalist production influenced organization theory that included these production processes in its analysis. Because the production of value escapes the walls of the corporation and enters everyday life through ‘immaterial labor’ (Mumby 2016) this leads ethnographers sometimes to include consumers in the research fields we construct, as it is almost impossible to separate consumption from production, as consumption becomes the act of co-production.

The American cultural anthropologist George Marcus observed that the problems which ethnographers study are rarely located conveniently in one place. Marcus calls for abandoning the practice of single-location fieldwork: he suggests that we follow individuals, metaphors, stories, conflicts, ideas and things. His argument derives from the economist Robert Solow’s thought that there is not some glorious theoretical synthesis of capitalism that you can write down in a book and follow. You have to grope your way. (Marcus 1995: 98)

That ‘groping’ for ethnographers means doing, what he calls, ‘multi-sited ethnography’, a research strategy designed around conjunctions, paths, and chains, not inside a single location. This practice is inspired by constructivism
as introduced by the early twentieth century avant-garde. At the outset of
a project, the phenomenon, an organization, is only loosely defined and tenta-
tively outlined. The result of such constructivist-like ethnography is a map of
a cultural phenomenon, which also contains patterns – patterns are important
in most contemporary ethnographies, whatever the espoused ontology.
But not everything is ‘just fluid’. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1975) observed
that the field is changing, either because of changes in native cultures that
became more similar to the researchers’ culture, or because anthropologists
may have moved their interest to their societies. He concluded that research
methods should change as well. However, his prediction has not materialized.
On the contrary, it turned out that the research approach shaped in the unique
circumstances of a small-scale, illiterate and unfamiliar research field offers
a valuable and refreshing quality even when applied to studying contemporary
industrialized societies.
Choosing a research field has not only methodological and theoretical
consequences but also some pragmatic aspects. Mayo presented Warner as
an attractive persona who studied ‘Australian savages’. Our research fields
influence the reception of researchers and their findings, for better or worse.
The anthropological hierarchy of fields does not apply universally to other
disciplines. However, in other disciplinary contexts, the valuation exists but
can be different. For example, the ranking of research fields in management
is a reverse version of the anthropological one. Anthropology’s highly valued
field sites usually have minimal economic power, making them less attrac-
tive to mainstream management. Organizational and workplace researchers
who gain international reach, work in countries with high GDP or economic
growth. Doing ethnography at home does not diminish the attractiveness of
their research. As a result, few organizational ethnographies draw on organiza-
tion studies and management in Africa – which is a serious omission, which,
we hope, will be remedied in the near future.

1.2 THE ETHNOGRAPHIC COMMUNITY

The field also defines the academic community which we, ethnographers,
interact with. The most typical intellectual community embraces ethnogra-
phers from the same or similar fields. Even if their theoretical and research
topics are different, they see the value in meeting and interacting. Someone
doing research in Siberia, Africa, the Mediterranean, the Pacific or Australia,
will probably know and follow other ethnographers working in those regions.
This trend is less visible in workplace and organizational ethnography. This
shows that it is, indeed, not geography that unites researchers. It is experi-
ences. Doing ethnography in organizational settings has integrative power as
it exposes researchers to similar experiences and methodological challenges.
For example, ethnographers studying spirituality and religion in Amazonia have several possible communities to debate. Some are doing the same in the region, others are working in Amazonia, and others are studying religion in different areas. Even when researchers share neither research field nor research interest, they still can enrich each other as they all practice ethnography. It is not uncommon for ethnographers to read ethnographic monographs outside their direct interest just because they are good ethnographies. Motivated by a general interest in culture and social relations, one can find analogies and inspirations from even distant fields that can inform our research (Figure 1.1).

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<tr>
<th>The same research field</th>
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<td>The same research interest</td>
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Figure 1.1 The intensity of intellectual interactions between ethnographers: darker shade means greater intensity

Choosing a field means joining a specific academic community. This may influence the choice of the field. We may want to become members of a particular group because of their proximity or intellectual attractiveness. As the field has a defining power, career choices are also uncommon, especially in circumstances where a clear hierarchy of domains is visible. Specialization in different fields gives different career options.

Not all fields are attractive and ‘nice’. Some are plainly dangerous. One can see a significant discrepancy in the measured level of safety even within the OECD countries. OECD Better Life Index (OECD 2020) takes into account metrics such as homicide rate and subjective ‘feeling safe walking at night’ to state that Norway is the safest country (9.9) and Mexico the least secure (0.2) in the OECD countries. However, ethnographers often chose even more dangerous countries than those least safe in OECD, such as active warzones. Safety considerations should also be considered in countries from the top of the safety rankings. For example, studying drug dealers and street violence in Norway (Sandberg 2008) poses ethnographers more hazards than researching elite schools in South Africa (Kenway and Koh 2013), i.e. the top and bottom countries from the OECD safety index, respectively. The rankings focus mainly on interpersonal violence. We can, however, distinguish other types
of danger that can arise during fieldwork. The nature of activities we would need to engage in to participate can lead to accidents. Ethnographers study workplaces with a high degree of occupational hazards, for instance, fishing boats, construction sites, factories, warehouses, and climbing routes in the Himalayas. Danger can also be derived from natural disasters, harsh climates or epidemiologic situations. Moreover, the limited availability of reliable healthcare may contribute to the severity of the abovementioned dangers.

Challenges may come in other forms than directly threatening our physical health and life. For example, fields could require a researcher’s high emotional labour. Moreover, meeting ethnographically with injustice, poverty, homelessness, illness, and even death may not be for everyone. So we need to ask ourselves, when choosing a field that may expose us to human suffering, whether we have the capabilities to tackle this burden.

Very often, ethnographers choose a field because of the existence of cultural distance. Still, this distance can also be a source of problems that may undermine the project and personal wellbeing. For example, ethnographers can experience discrimination based on age, gender, ethnicity, religion, social status, and political views. If we can expect a high probability of severe adverse reactions, we should assess whether we are able and willing to deal with the consequences.

Preparing to conduct ethnography in distant, unknown or high-risk field sites, novices can learn from more experienced ethnographers by reading their monographs and methodological essays. In ethnography, methodological literature is often devoted to the intricacies of being in the field and not to the correctness of practical material-gathering techniques (Lee 1994). After learning about potential hazards, one can develop safety procedures in cooperation with their university, such as an emergency evacuation plan in case one needs to leave the site quickly. Possibilities of access to medical help should also be explored. It is not true that good health insurance always solves the problem. In some regions, using informal institutions may be more effective. And, finally, one should consider arranging psychological support, including the aid of a professional psychologist.

Bronisław Malinowski’s fieldwork on Trobriand Island offers a prime example of an ethnographer’s psychological challenges. He experienced loneliness and monotony of life far away from home. He was afraid of diseases and felt frustration and anger with the natives. We learned about Malinowski’s struggles from his intimate diary published posthumously (Malinowski 1967). Writing the journal was a coping mechanism for Malinowski, and writing such diaries is still prevalent in the field. Nowadays, we ethnographers use our felt emotions and bodily experiences as a source of knowing the field, and there is a place for those records in published ethnographies (Van Maanen 1988).
It is not just the other academics that form the ethnographic community; so does, of course, the field and its regular inhabitants. In ethnography, the field is truly foundational; as a result, it is the field that often initiates the project. This marks out ethnographic engagement as different even as far as qualitative social studies go. Generally, the research problem is the proper starting point in social research. After that, other elements such as data gathering methods and data sources should achieve the main aim. However, the nature of the research problem and research questions in ethnography explains its field-first approach. Ethnographers approach the field open to surprises, with loosely defined research questions. They know that pre-existing assumptions about the problems may change and probably should change if the research is well-executed. As initially defined by researchers, the problem is less critical than real problems emerging from the field. But this is only one methodological explanation of the centrality of the area in ethnography. Others are pragmatic and identity-based.

Finally, the ethnographer’s private social context is also, in a way, part of the ethnographic community. Personal and family considerations may play a role when choosing a field. Traditional anthropological fieldwork can last a year or longer, which means moving to the area for a year and staying there can have consequences for family members. In addition, the partner’s job, children’s school, friends and family, and safety need to be considered. Among anthropologists doing fieldwork far from home, we can find many spouses involved in the same field, e.g. Edith and Victor Turner, Hildred and Clifford Geertz, and Jean and John Comaroff.

BOX 1.2 ON THE BENEFITS OF BEING A MEMBER OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC COMMUNITY, BY ANNA GAŁĄZKA

When we say that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts’, a phrase attributed to Aristotle, we allude to the power of a collective, an organization, or a community that is greater than ourselves. Feeling part of a greater whole helps us flourish. As a relational sociologist shaped by the writings of Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer (2015) on our relational nature ‘through and through’, I strongly believe that our social life is embedded in our relations with one another, and that we must form positive and enduring connections with what matters to us. Ethnography as a practice for knowing about the world around us matters to me, and ethnographic communities represent the said communal ‘whole’. Ethnographic communities have only begun to be studied systematically very recently (Bieler et al., 2021); they can have many names and take many forms. What unites them is their focus
on ethnographic practice – thinking about, doing, discussing, sharing, supporting, critiquing – the list goes on.

There are great emotional and social benefits of being part of an ethnographic community. As is the case with many academic groups, engaging with like-minded scholars can alleviate the stress and loneliness associated with a lone presence in the foreign land we study and create a sense of accountability for making our internal musings captured in the fieldnotes visible for constructive critique (Hastings et al. 2022). This is important because ethnography is full of tensions. It is at the same time rigorous and improvisational. With its origins in the anthropology of Malinowski, it has, over the years, evolved to include an array of ethnographic field engagements, including ‘quick and dirty’ medical ethnographies (Vindrola-Padros and Vindrola-Padros, 2018), such as the one I completed for my doctorate into clinician–patient relations in wound healing. Without formal training in anthropology, ethnographers from a multitude of backgrounds can easily feel anxious about what they do and what they discover (Yanow 2009); therefore, being part of a community where these feelings can be safely articulated can help us deal with what Yanow (2009) calls ‘methodological performance anxiety and nervousness’ and give us greater confidence in our work.

On an epistemic level, community collaboration across disciplinary divides offers further gains. Communities are a rigorous yet friendly platform for the deconstruction of the often confusing and overwhelming data we collected on our own. As observed by Bieler et al. (2021), our individual ability to reflect on our practice may quickly reach its limits when considered within the bounds of individual mental capacity; community collaboration can strengthen our interpretative authority through a continual scientific review of knowledge production. This can spur (collaborations on) publications for getting our ethnographic voices heard.

Indeed, my ethnographic community has grown over the years around the Annual Ethnography Symposium – an interdisciplinary meeting of ethnographers around the world, which allows those interested in ethnographic practice, regardless of their disciplinary background or the extent of training, to form networks, share ideas, get feedback, and gain social and emotional support. This vignette – one I am extremely flattered to have been invited to provide – is a product of a serendipitous encounter during an annual meeting of my ever-growing ethnographic community. I encourage you, Dear Reader, to keep cultivating yours.
1.3 ACCESS

The final choice of the field results from many forces, sometimes conflicting, such as when an ethnographer, based in a university or business school, has unique access to an intellectually intriguing organization in Malawi. But at the same time, her senior colleagues warn her that Malawi is not an important enough place. Supporting this argument, they share first-hand experiences of how journal editors rejected their articles about Polish family firms because ‘nobody cares about Poland’, as a reviewer wrote. But the researcher may take other aspects into consideration, not only issues related to rational incentives that benefit their career. Ultimately, curiosity and serendipity may tip the balance toward one field over another.

Once chosen, the field, whether it is an organization, a village, or an online community, will guide the research both as to design and empirical findings. The ethnographer leaves her home to find answers to her research questions – and to find new questions, not thought of before. When faced with reality, other, more precise, more important formulation of research problems may emerge. As Evans-Pritchard wrote about his ethnography in Africa:

> I had no interest in witchcraft when I went to Zandeland, but the Azande had; so I had to let myself by guided by them. I had no particular interest in cows when I went to Nuerland, but the Nuer had, so willy-nilly I had to become cattleminded too. (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 242)

When ethnographers approach the field they follow ideas. The preliminary ramifications are no more than a scaffolding which fades away as the followed problem becomes central and initial. But the importance of the field does not disappear. Sites may be multiple but are still sites. Like Douglas Holmes (2000), following the idea of nationalism in European politics led him to Italian villages and the European parliament. The ethnographer has to decide on a starting point: organization, village, neighbourhood. Methodological, practical, and identity considerations still apply.

An ethnographer usually does not seamlessly transfer from choosing a field to being in the field. There is an essential phase of getting access, when we negotiate if we will be allowed to get in. During the fieldwork, we define the access’s ramifications with the gatekeepers. This process influences how we will be perceived or defined by the study group members but is also a source of information about the studied groups. We start our field work before we gain access to the field.

Some fields are hard or near impossible to study because of their closed character or sensitive nature. In the latter case, researchers often decide not to interfere. On the other hand, there are fields where we can determine that the
intensive presence of the researcher could have negative consequences, for which the potential benefits from the study outcomes do not compensate. In such cases, we may limit our research to conducting interviews or using other, less intrusive research methods. Sometimes, however, access could be a factor positively influencing field choice. Maybe there is a unique opportunity to gain access to a particular field. It may be a community or a workplace organization where the researcher has already gained trust which, for an outsider, it would not be possible to get.

In more conventional ethnography of distant societies, getting access had its spatial aspect. ‘Getting there’ required organization of transportation. The trip could take several days or longer. However, the journey already marks an opportunity to start doing an ethnography. It may be worthwhile to talk to the people one is encountering, to experience nature and the travel itself. For ethnography at home or organizational ethnography, the transportation aspect could easily be missed as getting to an office in a skyscraper in the city centre is not as engaging and problematic as getting to a remote village on another continent. However, as commuting is a daily practice of organization members, ethnographers can include this activity in their observations and fieldnotes.

Getting there means also being accepted by the group as a researcher. The initial contact with the field is limited to a single person or a small number of group members who will introduce the researcher and let him in. Who those people are may actually influence how the ethnographer will be perceived and treated by others. In the case of organizational ethnography, there may be no choice but to start with managers, as their formal acceptance may be required. However, this may create a barrier when contacting employees. They may perceive the ethnographer as a management person. These initial contacts with powerful actors helps, in some cases, to build trust. But in many others it creates barriers which may be difficult to eradicate.

Formal organizations are a popular way to get initial contact with any other field. For instance, Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson (2019) studying MS-13 gang in El Salvador, contacted a charitable, church-based organization. Ethnographers are representatives of academic organizations. This allows making semiformal contact with local institutions. The formal function and communication channels (e-mail address, phone numbers) allow for relatively easy initial contact.

It is worth remembering that knowledge sharing cannot be conscripted. That is why gaining access is not about one single moment. Even if formally, after signing an NDA, the researcher is allowed to talk to organization members and participate in their daily life, it is not an ethnography yet. Each research participant will decide how much they would allow them to enter their life, and ethnographic research is all about building of relationships. Getting access is a longer process because gaining trust takes time. One can even regard field-
work as an ongoing getting access exercise, when we build rapport and learn the culture, including language or professional lingo, to be allowed closer to the local perspective.

Language is an important consideration as well as part of the accessibility (if not always directly ‘access’) to a field. Ethnographers try to use the local language or at least learn it on the way while doing their research. Language is crucial for understanding the group under study. Later, when writing up ethnographies, they need to refer to the specific aspects of the language to build a meaningful representation of the other. That is why there are so many monographs terms written in the native language, and not necessarily in ‘global English’ – despite the current pressures on academics to publish in English. When choosing a field, it is important to assess available means to learn the language and our abilities and willingness to acquire a new language. Language is not an important consideration when choosing a field for those doing ethnography at home. However, even if the researcher speaks the local language, he may not be fluent in a specific (for that field) vernacular. It is imperative to also be open to learning a professional subculture’s dialect. The dialect is essential to understand the culture and determine the level of access to the field.

**BOX 1.3 GETTING OUT INTO THE FIELD, BY KATARZYNA KRÓL**

I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork in the Samegrelo region of Georgia at the tea factory. Back then, I was in my mid-twenties, which definitely worked both to my advantage and disadvantage on various occasions.

In my experience, getting access to the field was a process and it was far from linear. Rather, it was an ongoing negotiation to access new layers of the field while not losing the ones already established.

I was lucky enough to identify my potential gatekeeper in the initial phase of my research, still in Tbilisi, who through a mutual acquaintance agreed to meet me at the time of her visit but, in the end, could not make it. I used it as an excuse to visit her in her hometown a few days later with the intention of convincing her to participate in my endeavours. The idea of a foreign girl arriving at the gate of the tea factory seemed to be bizarre enough to convince her to let me observe her work. Also, my age and gender, and the fact that I was alone and far from home played a crucial role in her positive decision to take care of me.

But for several months I could not access the tea plucking team – it was very clear that they were not interested to talk to me or work with me. Partially due to the fact how labour-intensive tea plucking is, partially to
the relationship I had with my gatekeeper – as she was responsible for assessing the quality of the tea leaves they brought each time, communication between the pluckers team leader and my gatekeeper remained tense. I also made a mistake. When I was finally invited to join pluckers in the tea field and work with them, I forgot where my solidarity should be. After several months with my gatekeeper, I knew that I should only collect the best, the most delicate top leaves of each tea bush. But that was the strategy only I could afford – as pluckers are paid per kilogram of collected leaves, they have to be more strategic in the amount and quality of collected leaves. I wanted to impress my gatekeeper so much with my skills that I focused on picking only the best ones. We came back to the factory so the leaves could be weighed and rated. My gatekeeper complained about the quality of the leaves brought by the team and praised me in front of everyone. How proud of myself I was. Until I saw the faces of the rest of the team. No need to say, it took me several more weeks to be able to go back to the tea field again.

This experience taught me that there is no such thing as a single event or person granting access to the field. And even though the factory seemed to me as one unit, within it, there were teams with varying interests. And I failed to identify with whom I should have aligned that particular day. Getting access to the field is not easy, but really challenging is not losing access once it is obtained.

Field access, if any, will be influenced by many factors. Over some factors we do not have influence. Our gender, age, race, and ethnicity may affect the access and the research process. In ethnography, the researchers are not transparent, invisible agents applying previously-designed research tools and techniques. Ethnographers are themselves an instrument of the inquiry. Who we are and what we do would influence the final results. Which is a delicate balance but it can work for good – nothing teaches us about humans as well as experience.