Social and spatial research is essential to planning practice, from the projection of trends and problem analyses to the evaluation of feasible alternatives and social impacts of implementation. In an effort to be recognized as a social science in the 1980s, planning embraced a positivist approach that isolated variables for probabilistic analysis and generalized application to problems (Madsen 1983: 113–116). As the application of knowledge to action in the public domain (Friedmann 1987), planning tries to anticipate or forecast events so that they might be steered, but the future is unpredictable and affected by multiple global and local drivers, institutions, actors, and technologies (Hopkins and Zapata 2007).

A recent meta-analysis of how planning theory uses empirical studies found a diversity of inductive and deductive planning research (Mickey and Wagner 2006). Positivist research approaches supported assumptions of rational comprehensive planning, such as a single public interest and modernization trajectory (Friedmann 1987). An increasingly diverse public cannot be assumed to agree on the most fundamental concepts of quality of life and the public interest (Dandekar 1986; Fainstein 2000). Jane Jacobs’ fine-grained observation of informal urban support systems to demonstrate the unforeseen and destructive impact of federal urban renewal projects (1961), taught planners to recognize the importance of understanding human values, perceptions, institutions, and social dynamics for the development of acceptable, feasible, and beneficial plans for particular places (Contant and Forkenbrock 1986). Planners need social science to understand aesthetic and other associations to these built environments, and to explain interactions and decisions that often vary from recommended plans (Dandekar 1986, 2005). Increasingly influential scholarship is based on theoretically driven case studies (Innes and Booher 2010; Margerum 2011). Planning practice, however, continues to transfer practices from one place to another without sufficient attention to the role of context in outcomes. A survey of planning programmes shows growing but insufficient attention to training planners in qualitative methods — referring to a complex set of research designs, data collection techniques, and non-probability-based analyses such as case study and comparative research, institutional analysis, and the principles of inquiry using interview methods and observational techniques with other methods (Goldstein 2012).
This chapter agrees with Healey (2006: 323) that successful spatial planning practice is contingent on the social relations and opportunity structures of specific situations. Place-based social science research is needed to understand the interplay of economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political/administrative dynamics that affect spatial planning outcomes (Yaro 2007: 104–105). Healey provides a starting point and structure to introduce how and why ethnographic and cultural mapping methods can be applied to typical local and regional planning problems. The defining methods of ethnography are participant observation and fieldwork, supported by interviewing of key informants. Other methods may include free listing, the study of motion in places (proxemics and kinetics), the use of visual images and documents, and many more (Bernard and Ryan 2010). It is the researcher’s proximity to the situation and his or her own process of questioning assumptions that help in the analysis. Ethnographic case studies can explain how a process succeeded in one place and failed to elicit input in another cultural setting (Abott 1999; Hou and Kinoshita 2007).

After a short review of planning problems that call for the use of ethnography, this chapter describes three of the most established ethnographic methods from cultural anthropology and human geography: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and participatory mapping. Two examples from the author’s own work as a planner and researcher in the western US are used to illustrate their application to three planning problems: (1) finding and documenting the values and concerns of stakeholders; (2) evaluating the feasibility and appropriateness of alternative courses of action; and (3) facilitating collaborative spatial planning through understanding various cultural landscapes. The chapter begins with the presentation of these three problems and a short discussion of key concepts regarding culture and the epistemology of research. After presenting the methods and examples, the chapter briefly notes important skills that must be taught for data analysis, review of research validity, and ethical conduct. The premise is that planning must attend to the values and social context in which it is proposed if it is to be beneficial and feasible. Rapid ethnographic and participatory action research approaches are also introduced. The reader should come to appreciate the usefulness and importance of using ethnographic approaches from anthropology and human geography to multiple planning situations and to appreciate the need for further reading and training.

**Planning problems for ethnographic research methods**

**Problem one: public participation and the identification of the stakeholder values, knowledge, and interests**

Planning theory and practice have heavily relied on public participation to ensure justice and legitimacy, as well as to include local knowledge. The discipline has long recognized severe limitations and biases in public planning meetings in terms of attendance and represented concerns. Peattie (1983) applied training as an anthropologist to evaluate or redesign urban planning projects in Latin America to uncover how important civic organizations and actors in community development affect planning outcomes. Tauxe (1995) used participant observation and analysis of word choice to demonstrate how a local public participant process marginalized white rural residents. Agency personnel were inclined to preference input from more educated newcomers who used “professional” wording in their comments. John Forester builds planning theory from interviews with planners (Forester 1989).

Ethnographic methods can be used to identify stakeholders, understand values and interests, uncover local knowledge, and gage the perceived legitimacy of the proposed plan or sponsor. Research methods for transformative, post-structural, postmodern, and critical social and
planning theories attend to gender, structural change, and the power of storytelling (Sandercock 1998, 2004). Ethnography can be used to document underrepresented voices.

**Problem two: evaluation of alternatives and the practical possibilities of alternative planning and governance approaches and geographic scales given social dynamics and context**

A most compelling case for the unjust or unrealistic implementation of plans without sufficient knowledge of cultural and social processes and priorities comes from James C. Scott (1998), who reviews a history of modernization projects based on generalized knowledge and state-endorsed universal indicators of social progress. Why did post-disaster victims in Turkey, for example, not move into provided housing (Ganapati and Ganapati 2009), and what transitional services should the development agency provide? When planners do not understand what Scott refers to as *metis*, locally situated knowledge, plans have unexpected or destructive outcomes.

Healey suggests that collaborative planning can create an additional layer of shared landscape values. One of the problems for regional and collaborative spatial planning is the development of a regional identity for collective political action. Regional governance has been found sustainable where people value a common landscape, such as the Puget Sound, Cape Cod, or Lake Tahoe (Foster 2001). Anthropology and human geography converge in the study of how places give material expression to meaning, and in understanding contested control over power, resources, and definitions of identity and authenticity (Appadurai 1988; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003: 18). Ethnography is particularly compatible with the comprehensive and interconnected nature of public planning because it attends to the dynamic connection of household composition to economic activity, the political system, child rearing, resource use, trade, and more. Basic participatory mapping can be used with interviews to identify human and associative regions at different scales, as well as conflicts between groups.

**Problem three: identifying power relations and dynamic processes in planning episodes and contexts**

Anthropologists Scott (1998) and Escobar (1992) and many planners (e.g., Yiftachel 1999) have illustrated the destructive impact on social and cultural systems when modernization plans were adopted without regard to the historical, cultural, and economic contexts and power relations. Ethnographic methods provide detail on decision-making processes, especially when included in case studies, such as how citizens use a Portland plan to organize land use change (Abott and Margheim 2008). As an addition to other methods, ethnography can make spatial plans more participatory, culturally appropriate, socially feasible, and beneficial to diverse groups across a community or region. Participatory action research methods have also been popularized to empower “beneficiaries” with an understanding of spatial dynamics that could be leveraged in their own communities (Chambers 2008). In addition, with training and attention to ethical concerns, the planner can use participant observation in professional practice, especially when using rapid ethnographic research or participatory research approaches.

**Ethnographic approaches, methods, and applications**

Ethnographic inquiry is the close observation of the people and events being studied and accounting for how the actual context affects those observations (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Fetterman 2010). “Getting close, minimally requires physical and social proximity . . . in
the midst of key sites and scenes in order to observe and understand them” and to better understand the multiple ways that people experience and give meaning to these events (Emerson et al. 1995: 2). First used by anthropologists and geographers to describe unique cultures as bounded and unchanging sets of beliefs and practices (Fetterman 2010; Cloke et al. 2004), ethnographies also describe culture as how people mediate change through symbols, social institutions, and their own agents (Geertz 1983).

Rapid ethnographic research, like rapid rural appraisal (Chambers 2008) shortens the time needed for fieldwork. Research questions and tools are more focused so that a small team of researchers, comparing results from interviews and observations, can understand the populations affected by a plan or event, the common and different associated experiences and meanings and what explains these differences (Handwerker 2001: 5). The risk to accuracy from a lack of participant observation data is addressed by having multiple researchers and methods for comparison. Interviews are focused on three or four variables that are pertinent to the agency project. The benefit is the availability of targeted, cost-effective, timely results that are reported in a form that can be used immediately in plan design, monitoring, or evaluation. Limitations can largely be addressed through cross-checking findings among investigators and qualifying the results, as further explained ahead and in the literature that is referenced herein.

Participatory research connects knowledge to action by involving the “subjects” of the research or planning intervention in defining research questions and collecting data (Argyris, Putnam, Smith 1993). Within a large body of participatory action research from many fields, researchers, planners, and participants work together to examine a problematic situation and to use research to change it for the better (Kindon, Pain, and Kebly 2007). Participatory action research goes one step further by focusing on how the community is empowered towards transformative action. By this participation, community members are engaged as co-researchers who use results to empower the group through a cycle of research and reflections, an approach first developed for ethnography by anthropologist Sol Tax (University of Chicago Chronicle 1995), and practised in many fields. Community and civic organizations or agencies become co-researchers who define the questions, analyse maps and interviews for barriers to progress, and thereby solidify action agendas and roles in community development initiatives. With participatory mapping and other data collection methods, the approach can offer insights into the political practice of negotiating local concerns within wider regional contexts and drivers. Validity, ethics, and writing methods must be addressed within the research design, which may include any or all of the following methods.

**Participant observation**

Participant observation involves collecting data of many kinds (numeric or qualitative) and taking notes in the natural setting of the processes of interest. The researcher accompanies people in their daily activities and establishes rapport while reflecting on the dynamics and meaning of daily events. Beard (2003), for example, provided a detailed account of how Indonesian residents learned radical planning indirectly within an oppressive state. The method can be used as part of planning practice, even when one is not doing official research. Participant observation can provide an understanding of power and influence as an aid in the identification of key stakeholders and underrepresented groups or world views. For example, participant observation of how different groups move through a plaza at different times of the day was used to redesign plazas and a national park (Taplin, Sheld and Low 2002; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003).
The author used participant observation as a planner and programme manager with American Indian tribal governments in the 1980s at a time when federal policy encouraged all tribal governments to embrace business development for tribal economic self-reliance (Pinel 2007). The programme grant to a consortium of five small Pueblo communities required a strategy for economic development, but the Pueblos’ planning committee objected to adopting what they considered to be capitalist values in large businesses that would compete on reservations with their own cultural emphasis on ceremony and egalitarianism. Development strategies were designed accordingly. Historical and cultural context mattered to these decisions and could be understood only through observation over time.

For example, the Clearwater Basin Collaborative in Idaho emerged from twenty-five years of public land management conflicts in north central Idaho among conservation, logging, recreation, and fish and game interests (www.clearwaterbasincollaborative.org). Observations of this group’s monthly meetings since 2009 showed an ability of each member to respect one another’s different values towards wilderness, logging, fish and game, and county revenue through a landscape restoration approach. At the same time, a stalemate over recommended wilderness designations was observed. Words used by participants indicated deep value differences. The logging industry kept using words such as “guarantee” and “getting something in return” when articulating what they needed to offer their support of wilderness, whereas the environmental representatives kept using words like “trust” and “good faith” and commitment to making the counties whole (Pinel 2013). It became clear that the values conflict was not just over conservation or development but also around the concepts of time and risk in making a trade or reaching a deal. When the author reflected that observation back to the co-chairs, they said that the gift-giving analogies and analysis were correct; they used the analysis in their next meeting and achieved an agreement on land designations the following year.

**Interviewing of key informants**

To estimate the parameter or proportion of a population with a certain attitude or attribute, the rules of random sampling for valid statistical analysis apply. However, when one needs to know why and how people think or act, then one wants to find cultural experts to interview. Key informants are those who understand the information, share their knowledge, and help the researcher interpret and test results. Key informants are keen observers of their own culture or organization, rather than being selected to be statistically representative of a segment of the population. Methods have been developed to select key informants. Rather than quantity, key informants are usually selected for the knowledge they have of the topic or question (Bernard 2006: 186–209). Ethnography uncovers which segments of the population participate and whether the most senior and knowledgeable members are able to participate (Elwood 2006: 170–178). A few key informants can provide sufficient depth of information, provided they are selected for their level of cultural knowledge across diverse generations, ethnic groups, or historic layers of settlement or immigration. Interviews can be unstructured, as in the form of a data-rich conversation, or structured as questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews, discussed here, are based on a general interview guide of topics and questions that prod informants to expand freely upon a topic, such as watershed problems, followed by probing for details.

Informant interviews can be especially helpful in addressing the second planning problem, evaluating planning alternatives for their feasibility or impact, as illustrated in the Pueblo economic development example mentioned previously. The five-Pueblo planning committee, we
initiated a tribal agricultural production and marketing cooperative for traditional blue corn in order to enhance a traditional crop and build on family farming systems. We secured a few test participants, a harvest, and a market, but the participating families refused to sell the corn. We interviewed the women of these participating households to find out how they used the corn. Despite efforts to secure a market as an incentive for production, we found there was no “surplus” of corn. Cultural ideas of good citizenship rewarded sharing such corn with other families and ceremonial leaders, and selling it could have detrimental effects on social standing. The project was beneficial for non-income reasons. One of the participating Pueblos took over the project and corn drying equipment and developed its own commercial blue corn enterprise.

Interviews also deepened an understanding of a stalemate within the previously mentioned Clearwater Basin Collaborative by uncovering different non-negotiable principles and historical associations with the forest that worked against collaborative decision making with national interests (Pinel 2013). Informant interviews and focus group notes should be transcribed, coded, and interpreted with an eye to uncovering people’s own concepts and description of events and to explaining diverse and contradictory responses or behaviours, rather than collapsing them into averages (Olson 2011). There are multiple hand methods and types of software to assist in coding interviews, as well as visual and text documents (Saldana 2009). For interviewing, essential skills include probing, active listening, observation of details, learning the way people use language, and having a good memory to supplement one’s tapes and notes. Random samples are neither possible nor desirable in ethnographic research, although mixed-methods designs are often advised. Participatory mapping can enhance the results of interviews for spatial planning.

**Participatory mapping**

Participatory and cognitive mapping have been applied in human geography, landscape architecture, anthropology, and planning to identify places, land uses, relationships, and meanings of places for different groups that might be affected by a plan. Participatory mapping is often used in cultural heritage planning (Valencia-Sandoval, Flanders, and Kozak, 2010; Shipley and Feick 2009), and with geospatial technologies to include people’s perspectives in land use plans. With interviews and other methods, social scientists have long solicited hand-drawn maps to enrich an understanding of spatial relationships, such as land use, how people go to school, or how they perceive the spread of disease (see Figure 3.4.1) (Chambers 2008).

Participatory mapping practice developed from rapid rural appraisal for development and conservation practice (Chambers 2008) to develop: (1) conceptual maps of how events and places are interrelated with meanings and associations; (2) physical maps intended to retrieve local knowledge of those places, boundaries, land uses, trails, and conflicts; and (3) “counter mapping” to document indigenous and other land claims to be recognized by the state. Participatory mapping and boundary drawing are also political acts (Duncan and Ley 1993; Fortmann 2003; Walker and Peters 2001) that express conflicts and rights. Participatory mapping can reveal contested landscapes where different groups define their boundaries and meaning – how knowledge of these places is shared or kept within the group. The value of a landscape may be in the stories transmitted from one generation to another based at or about that place or landmark (Basso 1996). Associative and ethnographic cultural landscapes may have no material evidence. Vernacular landscapes evolve from the everyday practice of people and service functions such as social cohesion (Evans, Roberts, and Nelson 2001; Jackson 1984). For multiple perspectives on how culture is related to place, see Low and Lawrence-Zuniga (2003).
To use participatory mapping in a selected focus group, one could start with a base map that people can recognize (roads, topographic, aerial photo), a blank paper, and markers or objects to place for each use within a zone on a map, and later rank the frequency of existing land uses or their perceived importance (Chambers 2008). This latter approach has been key to creating land use plans that incorporate locals’ current uses and needs (Gavin, Wali, and Vasquez 2007). For example, University of Idaho planning students first gathered historical maps and stories by working with national parks and local historic societies to identify the phases of settlement by miners, farmers, and outdoor recreationally oriented retirees. Next, they created base maps for the basin and for one of the proposed trail plans. They used an interview guide that asked informants from these different heritage groups to locate the places most known or important to them and their families on the map and to tell a story about that place. Informants were also asked how these places had changed and how they felt about these changes as part of interviews with each member of the previously mentioned Clearwater Basin Collaborative. The method uncovered deep value differences and attachments to local or regional scales (Figure 3.4.2).

Technologies, including handheld global positioning devices (GPS) and geographic information systems (GIS), have been used to transfer hand-drawn maps into information that can be used by government planning and policy processes (Rambaldi, Kwatu-Kyem, and McCall 2006; Rambaldi and Callosa-Tarr 2002). As planners become familiar with geographic information systems, they invite citizens to draw spatial relationships, represent “sense of place”, and represent social networks, or neighbourhood boundaries (Hopkins and Zapata 2007; Geertman 2002;
Talen 2000). Description includes not only important places and existing spatial relationships such as walkability, or proximity to one’s neighbourhood, but also how residents conceptualize neighbourhood or community boundaries (Talen 2000; Stephenson 2008). However, planning support system technologies should address issues of representation of local concepts of place and issues of equitable expression (see Slotterback 2011 or Lebeaux 2003 for a review of related GIS technologies). Ethnographic methods outlined earlier can be used with a base map, crayons, and stickers to facilitate interviews and planning sessions.

Participatory mapping is especially relevant to collaborative spatial planning and the identification of feasible regional planning scales. As described by Healey (1999; 2006), such planning should honour diverse cultural associations with the landscape while also building common landscape values. A new layer of values built through social learning may help to cultivate regional identity to support a voluntary regional approach.

**Rigour, ethics, and writing**

As in all social research, analysis is guided by the purpose of the research and the nature of the question and epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and truth (Bernard 2006: 1–108). Statistical analysis of empirical data or surveys can answer questions of frequency, direction, or correlation, but not questions such as how or why to act or respond to plans in particular ways. Ethnographic research can be exploratory and descriptive of social and cultural meanings or explanatory of behaviour, decisions, and social dynamics. Standards of research reliability (consistent results from same methods or measures) and validity (correct interpretation of results) are met differently than in statistical and probability analysis (Baxter and Eyles 1997). Rigour depends on a sound methodological design, whether the research project is a full case study or a smaller scale investigation.
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study, a project specific evaluation by the planner, or a contracted rapid ethnographic assessment. Participatory designs require attention to bias and interaction effects, whereas case study design requires careful selection of a case that represents planning theory (Yin 2002; Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg 1991).

Cross-checking, comparing, and triangulating information from different informants and researchers and from observations and texts is continued until “saturation”, when the story seems to repeat itself (Bernard 2006: 210–250). Ethnographic monographs historically required a year of fieldwork to improve one’s understanding of context and cultural meanings. In applied work, rapid ethnographic assessment and rural appraisal compensate for expediency with more focused questions, use of known variables, and triangulation (comparison) of findings across multiple methods and researchers (Bernard 2006: 343–412; Handwerker 2001).

In ethnographic writing, one creates and illustrates a valid and credible story using the words of the informants. Ethnographic analysis takes care to distinguish meanings and places both from the emic, or concepts used by participants, and the etic viewpoint of planners and researchers, who apply generalized categories to the information, such as pathways or data analysis and social theory. The writing reveals the important concepts and dynamics at play, rather than identifying the most universally important variables. Ethnographic analysis should also explain apparent contradiction between behaviour and stated values using field notes without judgment. Many texts suggest ways of writing up these findings (Emerson et al. 1995; Handwerker 2001; Sanjek 2000).

Research ethics requires making a clear distinction between one’s role as a planner collecting public comments and the use of that information as social research. Planners who work in a community or agency over an extended period of time have been participant observers, but must follow ethical procedures and disclose their positions and biases if using observations in research. A key difference between participatory planning and social science is the importance of information reliability, analytical validity, and the ethics of using people’s information. Informed consent must be obtained to protect the confidentiality of informants, to disclose any risks to their person or reputation, and to ensure they know how their comments will be used. Because informants may be familiar with one another’s communication styles, the researcher cannot ethically promise unanimity. Additional permission should be obtained for the use of quotations, voice recordings, photos, or drawings. In addition to formal human subject research review boards available to university personnel, indigenous communities and different countries may have their own required procedures for review, and to clarify the rights to use the knowledge produced. Participatory action research design may include a partnership agreement between the researcher, community partner, and others that contribute knowledge or plan to use results. The public interest and planning ethics are both normative and situational (Campbell 2006). Ethically implemented ethnographic research can aid in making plans that are feasible, beneficial, and sustainable through a better understanding of social change and collective action by planners and their clients and employers.

Participatory mapping, interviews, and participant observation can all be used to commonly address planning problems and processes by: (1) obtaining more meaningful public input, (2) developing feasible and appropriate alternatives, (3) evaluating social impacts, and (4) understanding spatial relations to landscapes in regional and collaborative spatial planning. In the typical planning process, goals and vision are improved by research into diverse local values and contested concepts or landscapes. Plan alternatives are thereby informed by local knowledge of the situation and by accounting for the interrelationships of an action on more comprehensive aspects of community life. Ethnography is also used as part of planning analysis, and in case study
research for evaluation or theory building. Ethnographic methods can produce several kinds of knowledge: comprehensive descriptions of the interconnectedness in a place of people’s housing, transportation, and other activities; interpretation of expressions and speech; and explanations of behaviour and responses to plans and events.

Conclusion

Defined as the application of knowledge to action in the public domain (Friedmann 1987), planning has always spanned public policy, design, ecological, and social science disciplines. In the past thirty years, social sciences and research have shifted from trying to forecast change with limited variables to understanding multiple forms of knowledge (Sandercock 1998), as well as the role of agency and culture in spatial governance (Healey 1999, 2006). People are actors in these systems, affected by values, culture, and institutions. Planning schools are increasingly teaching qualitative as well as quantitative methods (Goldstein 2012; Dandekar 2005; Kelly, Mahayni, and Sanchez 1999).

Although qualitative and ethnographic approaches have a long history in planning and social impact assessment (Pinel 1994), they are increasingly essential to reflective practice as well as research that rigorously tests the validity of planning assumptions in different contexts. Participant observation, informant interviews, and participatory mapping were briefly explained with illustrations from the literature and the author’s experience. These methods can be used alone or to enhance survey validity and explain other research findings. Several references were included regarding ethical considerations, ensuring validity and reliability of results, and applications to regional and collaborative spatial planning. Participatory and rapid ethnographic research was offered for applied work.

For planning to “operate effectively in a world of many actors and values,” planning must draw on diverse range of methods (Hopkins and Zapata 2007: 1–17). Planning is also reflective (Friedmann 2008; Campbell 2006), requiring research that improves planners’ anticipation of and response to the limited and significant effect that plans and policies have on social, economic, and cultural places. Social science concepts and methods from anthropology and ethnography are essential additions to the social analysis methods used by planners to make plans more acceptable, feasible, and beneficial.

Notes

1 For a full review of ethnographic methods, social science in anthropology, and non-probabilistic sampling methods, see Bernard (2006).

2 The process includes choosing the most inclusive venues and recognizable geographic representations, preparing interactive mapping and drawing tools, and choosing a facilitator to instruct participants in consistent use of spatial reasoning concepts, such as proximity or connectivity. Moving beyond the idea that important places are bounded “sites”, it is also important to represent larger landscapes, pathways, or meanings with shading or directionality (Talen 2000).

References


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