CEHC
Cultural Ecology of
Health and Change

Ethnographically Informed Community and Cultural Assessment Research Systems (EICCARS) Workbooks

Workbook for Descriptive Observations of <u>Social Settings</u>, <u>Acts</u>, <u>Activities</u> & <u>Events</u>

By

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Background: Introduction to the EICCARS and the CEHC

This workbook is a component of the Ethnographically Informed Community and Cultural Assessment Systems, (the EICCARS—A Glossary of Abbreviations is found at the end of this document), a subsystem of the Cultural Ecology of Health and Change (the CEHC, pronounced "*Check*"). The CEHC is a system that I developed to facilitate the planning, implementation, and evaluation of community based initiatives (CBIs). The CEHC consists of four subsystems:

(1) The Ethnographically Informed Community and Cultural Assessment Research Systems (EICCARS)

(2) The CEHC System in Project Design and Implementation Plan (PDIP).

(3) The CEHC Project Implementation Programs (PIPs); and

(4) Ethnographic Assessment & Evaluation Systems (EAES)[1]

The EICCARS is the CEHC subsystem for collecting data to inform the development and implementation of effective, or culturally and community appropriate CBIs. The various methods used in carrying an EICCARS research effort are: (1) Selecting Social or Community Profiles; (2) The Analysis of Pertinent Documents, Archives, Statistical, and other Secondary Data; (3) Instrument Design for Primary Data Collection; (4) Descriptive Observations of Social Settings, Acts, Activities, and Events; (5) Key Social Settings Expert (KSSE) Interviews; (6) Community Windshield Tours, Descriptive Observations, and Descriptive Key Community/Culture Expert (KCCEs) Interviews[2]; (7) Windshield Tours, Focused Observations, and Iterative Ethnographic Interviews; (8) Walking Tours, Focused Observations, and Informal Interviews; (9) Physical Mapping Using Geographical Informational Systems; (10) Photography, Audio taping, and other Audio-Visual methods where possible; (11) Select Observations; Semi-structured, In-Depth Structured Interviews; (12) Focus and Other Groups Interviews; (13) Survey Research; (14) The Management and Analysis of EICCARS Data Sets; and (15) Training Community Members, Organizational Personnel, and Others in EICCARS methods. This Workbook was developed to assist the EICCARS team in conducting the third of these EICCARS methods, Observing Situated Social Settings.

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[1] See TL. Whitehead, (2002), "Introduction to the Cultural Ecology of Health and Change," (*CEHC Working Paper Series.*CUSAG, College Park: The University of Maryland) for a full discussion of these subsystems.
[2] "Windshield tours " are so named because in urban areas, they consist of riding around in a car, or some other type of vehicle, and through "the windshield," getting acquainted with the study community's characteristic and resources. The researchers may carry out this activity by themselves, and use their powers of observations while conducting such tours, or preferably with someone familiar with the study community (a resident, someone who has worked in the community for a long period of time), to whom informal interviews may be carried out. (There are several EICCARS Interview Guides to help with this process). These windshield tours are usually followed by "walking tours" of specific areas that have been selected as a consequence of the windshield tour, or because of a particular interest of the researchers, their sponsors, or the agency interested in having the community assessment research conducted. The windshield tour may not be necessary in smaller settings, such as rural villages, and the researcher(s) go straight to "walking tours" to serve for the same purpose.

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Observing Social Settings, Acts, Activities, and Events

Of the range of methods to which an ethnographer has access, the methods selected for a particular ethnographic study, and the way those methods are used, are dependent on the purpose of the research of course, as well as on the particular social settings upon which the research focuses. Usually when people think of carrying out ethnographic research, they think of studying a specific human community, or cultural group. Ethnographic studies have, however, been carried out among families or domestic units, kinship and other social networks, groups characterized by a common trait (e.g., a disease conditions such as mental illness), institutional and organizational structures, local communities and neighborhoods, full societies, and extra-societal relationships. Ethnographic methods have also been used in the study of dyads (two people) and of single individuals. Ethnographic methods have also been used to study social events (e.g. a festival), as well as the activities included in such events (e.g., a parade), as well as specific acts associated with such activities (specific steps of parade participants). In other words, as Spradley suggested more than 20 years ago (1979), ethnographic methods can be used to study a range of social or cultural settings. Or as I like to say, ethnographic methods can be used, and should be the methods of choice, in any setting in which humans are interacting. **The focus of the present workbook is to conduct** , borrowing from Spradley (1980), **descriptive observations of <u>specific social settings, social scenes, <u>behavioral acts</u>, <u>activities and events</u>,**</u>

The social setting is a reference to the various attributes of the scene which is being observed or studied. For example, an ethnographic scene could be a street corner, an organizational or institutional setting such as a church, school (or classroom), work, or some other organizational or institutional setting, a playground, sports arena, barbershop, dance hall, barber shop, court room, cafeteria, swimming pool, etc. In providing descriptive attributes of a setting, one would be interested in citing its exact location, structural or other characteristics, the space utilized by the section, and how it is organized, and so on. The ethnographer is then interested in the specific behavioral acts that are carried out in the social settings, while activities are sets of related acts.

I go beyond this simple definition of **acts and activities** by Spradley by suggesting that these behavioral patterns **may be planned or unplanned**. For example, a groom putting the ring on the finger of the bride is a planned act, of a planned activity (the wedding ritual), which along with other planned activities (e.g., the rehearsal dinner, the post ritual reception, etc) make up the planned even of a wedding. In less elaborate planned actions, the distinction between planned activities and events may blur. For example a planned office meeting may be a planned activity that is also the event, because it is not related to any other activities into a larger event.

On the other hand, much of what ethnographers observe are unplanned acts, activities and even events. For example, even in such a larger complex event such as a wedding, there are numerous unplanned acts and activities that bring ethnographic observation or curiosity. Such acts may be such simple thing as the reactions of certain members at the wedding ritual. Similarly, an activity, such as friends of the groom deciding to take him to a bar one last time as a single male (beyond the earlier bachelor party), could be impromptu, outside of the planned activities of the long wedding event. Then, of course, outside of such ritualized events, such as observations of people gathered on an urban neighborhood street corner, have numerous acts and activities that may be important to the topic of study.

In most of the categories discussed above, there is some sense of institutionalization, or socially recognized events that a human group is conscious of and may want to continue. However, there are also social settings in which people gather and interact without this same sense of consciousness or institutionalization (even though there may be some interest or process in institutionalizing the setting. In other words the setting is occurring because of some type of

situation, although it may occur in institutionalized setting. Included among such situated settings are such categories as non-institutionalized meetings, unplanned street scenes, a make-out scene in a bar, a food event (feast, dinner, lunch), children playing on a playground, a party or dance, and so on.

Recording Field Notes in Ethnographic Research and General Ethnographic Worksheets.

Observation and participant-observation in ethnography work as viable research methods through the daily recording of field notes. The question always comes up as to whether to record field notes should be recorded on the spot as observations are taking place, or should the ethnographer wait until leaving the setting to record their notes. Generally, if the ethnographer is the sole researcher in the setting, it can be quite difficult to observe, and take notes simultaneously, and sometimes it can be distracting to those who are being observed. However, when the opportunity presents itself, the ethnographer should attempt to record their observations while carrying out their observations. This is possible in some team ethnographic approaches (usually in simultaneous observation and interview formats), as one team member focuses on carrying interviews, another on observations, and others on recording notes. However, if the ethnographic setting does not allow for notes to be taken while observations are being made, then the ethnographer is advised to make sharp mental notes, and to record their field notes immediately upon departing the setting observed.

The recording of field notes in the classical ethnographic field journal was usually unstructured (except for labeling), simply detailing accounts of observations and experiences as the ethnographer experienced them. The EICCARS system also employs unstructured and unfettered methods of note taking, particularly in the descriptive observations carried out while in the setting being observed. As such Appendix 1 accompanying this document is a sheet that can be used to just record general field notes, and is referred to as a General Ethnographic Recording Sheet (GERS). However, the GERS provides a little more structure to each observational field visit, which helps in planning such visits, and in facilitating the iterative approach for which ethnography is known[3]. **The ethnographer/team should make multiple copies of the GERS, because one GERS is needed for every field contact made, and multiple contacts will be made.**

First, the GERS asks the ethnographer/team to record the title of the project for which the observation is being made. Prior to a field contact or visit the ethnographer/team should write in the title of the project, and if the project has phases, the number or title of the phase (items 1 and 2 on the GERS). Also prior to is making the contact or visit the team should prepare for the visit by considering whether there are specific things that he/she/they would like to learn or accomplish from the field visit, and if going as a team[4], to establish who will be the primary observer, and who will be primarily responsible for recording field notes (items 3 and 4 of the GERS). If there are no recording of notes at the site, then each member of the team should record their recollection of the observations/informal interviews within 24 hours after leaving the site.

Once at the observation site, the ethnographer/team should note the date of the observation and the exact time the observations begin (items 5 and 6 of the GERS). If the setting being observed

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[3] The GERS primarily builds on the work of James Spradely (1979, 1980) and Miles and Huberman's suggestion of the use of a Contact Summary Form.

[4] Where possible, ethnographic observations should be carried out in teams of two or more persons. This then makes it possible to have a division of labor. For example, the team may have one member focus on observations and informal/conversational interviews, and another team member may focus on recording what is observed and being talked about.

has a name (e.g., a church), that name should be noted, as well as various characteristics of that setting such as the broader environmental context, the material culture (e.g., furniture and other objects) in the setting, and the organization or situation of these objects (items 7 and 8 of the GERS). Similarly, the name of the event or activity being observed (e.g. a wedding) should be noted, as well as various characteristics of the actors, such as an estimate of the number, sex, age, physical features, dress, etc, and whether they can be grouped in any way (e.g., by kinship or occupation) (items 9 and 10 of the GERS). If necessary, e.g., if the activity or event is a small gathering such as a meeting, provide real names or pseudonyms if necessary for the actors, their affiliation(s), and title(s). If it helps, the recorder might draw a map to show the characteristics of the setting, to include the location of material culture and the actors.

Item 11 of the GERS is provides sheets for recording general observations of the setting and the event/activity as the dynamics of the event/activity evolve. Such data emerges not only from what the team observes, but also from what is picked up from the ethnographer(s) other senses, discussions, and informal interviews and conversations in which the ethnographer(s) become engaged. Two pages are provided for such recordings, but the ethnographer(s) should use the back of these sheets, and additional sheets as necessary. When the observation session ends, the ethnographer(s) should record the exact time (item 12 of the GERS). Then later, the ethnographer/team should reflect on what were the main issues or themes gained from observations or informal/conversational interviews, what specific issues or themes that should be explored at the next or future contacts, and what new or (remaining) questions should be pursued at next visit[5].

Using Generalized Ethnographic Domains in the Interpretation and Analysis of Descriptive Observational Data

Over the past 25 years of teaching ethnographic methods, observations and participant observation usually create problems for students as they enter a field setting to carry out these methods. The primary problem that emerges is that students are not sure of **what to observe**, and **how should they be observing** whatever they should be observing. Once students have some idea of what to look for, and they have collected descriptive ethnographic data, then there are perhaps even more relevant questions. Now that I have all of these data, what do I do with it?

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[5] The recording of field notes in the EICCARS system, however, does not end with the recording of general notes during the observation. As the ethnographic process continues, particularly in the use of ethnographic teams, in the training of students, and with community residents to assist in data collection, increasingly I found the need to develop semi-structured and structured ethnographic guides to inform data collection, and to record and begin the analysis and interpretation process of the ethnographic data collected. This is particular true in order to take full advantage of the **iterative** attribute of ethnography. The present workbook is one of a number of such EICCARS data recording guides, of which the selection of any one for use is dependent on the purpose of the method used. These guides not only provide direction in the training of and guidance for the ethnographic novice, but also a level of inter-observer reliability. The data recorded using the various EICCARS guides and workbooks also provide the material for team discussions regarding both the meaning of what is observed, as well as the validity of the research. Moreover, the data recorded in these guides inform team discussions regarding findings, new questions that emerge from a field encounter, and reasons for returning to the field setting for more exploration and validation of findings. Because of the positive experiences that I have had with the various EICCARS data collection and recording guides and workbooks, that even when ethnographic teams working with me begin their observations recording their notes in the most general format, I expect them to begin using the various EICCARS guides for the recording of their data, and eventually they will become comfortable enough to collect various types of data using these guides. I also expect them to type their notes before sharing them with other members of their team, or anyone else to review, and that such submissions be provided in the format of the guide(s) provided for the specific type of data collection, including the workbook presented here for the collection of descriptive observational data. And finally, while providing these strengths to the collection of ethnographic data, however, these guides should never exclude or suppress the insights and interpretations of individual members on the ethnographic team. In fact such individual insights and interpretations are encouraged so as to maintain one of the strengths and reasons for doing ethnography, the discovery of new insights.

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How do I make sense of that can then be reported? These are questions are issues of interpretation and analysis. All of these questions point to the fact that ethnography, when it is done properly, is more than just being there and writing things down. It is also associated with the context of the setting, the repetition of behaviors as patterns, and whether what is present in these settings, or what is happening there, seem to carry some sort of meaning for those interacting in this setting.

I have long tried to help students with these questions by providing them with categories or **generalized ethnographic domains** that one might find in any socio-cultural setting. The **setting**, **acts, activities,** and **events** discussed earlier are four such domains, but just 4 of 10 such domains that Spradley (1980) suggested ethnographers might look for in any social setting. The other 6 ethnographic domains according to Spradley (1980) are:

> the **actors** in the setting
> The **space** occupied by these actors, and how these actors are situated in the space.
> The **objects** in that space, and how these objects are situated or arranged.
> The **time** of observations (hours of the day, days of week, specific months or seasons of the year)
> Whether there seems to be any **goals** associated with the behavior of the actors?
> Do behaviors seem to be carried out with any level of **emotions,** or feelings?

Over the years, because of the range of ethnographic research that I have carried out in a number of different settings, I have found the need to add several additional categories to Spradley's nine, and those are:

> The **languag**e used by the actors in the setting.
>
> Other Forms of **Expressive Culture** found in the social setting beyond general language (e.g., music, song, dance, art, etc.).
> The **interactive patterns** between the actors in the setting.
> The presence of **Actor Group** differentiation in the setting, or persons that can be differentiated by some shared similarity, such as by sex (e.g., male and female), age (e.g., young and old), family or kinship (e.g., two different kinship groups), vocational or some other type of affiliation (such as persons in a hospital setting differentiated by administration, doctors, nurses, non-medical staff, patients, etc.).
>
> **Ideational Elements** (Beliefs, Attitudes, Values, or any other cognitive constructs that might suggest various socio-cultural meanings that might be present in or attached to any of the other ethnographic domains in the setting
>
> **Broader Social Systems** (e.g., family, community, workplace, wider society and social policies, or extra-societal factors) that might influence the actors, behaviors, and ideations found in the socio-cultural scene being studied.
> **Physical Environmental** elements present within or surrounding a specific social scene.
> **Human Need** fulfillment that is attempted or met within the social setting or the interactions taking place there.
> **Other Domains** not included above.

Worksheets for beginning Generalized Descriptive Domain Analysis

Appendix 2 of this Workbook provides a worksheet for beginning an analysis using the domains briefly introduced above. On the first page of the worksheet, the ethnographer(s) are asked to fill

in the following information: (1) the title of the project; (2) the date of the observation; (3) the name of the observe; (4) the name of the recorder, if different from the observer; (5) the beginning time of the observation; (6) the ending time of the observation; and (7) the project phase, if the project is broken into phases, and the number and/or title of the phase. The next line asks the recorder to select an ethnographic domain for his or her field notes. Following is a more detailed description of the general domains discussed above, with a place for "other domains" for the analysis of data that the ethnographer/team does not feel are covered in the 17 General Descriptive Domain categories provided. Following the further descriptions of these domain categories is a final section detailing human needs domain category. The ethnographic team should make many copies of this worksheet, because one sheet or more is needed for every domain revealed in their data, and data will be provided on multiple domains. The data that will be entered into these Generalized Domain Worksheets (GDWs) will come primarily from the notes taken from the GRS, particularly from items 5 through 15.

(1)   **The Social Setting,** which, as described earlier, includes the various attributes of the scene which is being observed or studied. For, example if the setting is a building (e.g., a church), one may want to record size, physical features, the internal organization of the church (i.e., where various rooms are situated), and the location of the room in which the particular room that the scene being observed takes place. If the setting is an outside venue (e.g., a street corner, a park, a playground, etc), the ethnographer may want to record how the area looks, what is inside the setting, and what surrounds it, or is found in the immediate vicinity or proximity.

(2)   **The Physical Environment.** This particular domain is highly related to social setting, and in some instance may overlap to the extent that they are not treated as two separate domains, in terms of what surrounds the setting, or is found in the immediate vicinity. For example in the observation of an urban setting, one may describe the features of the neighborhood in which that setting is located.

(3)   **Space and the Objects in the Setting.** Here we are returning to the inside of the setting being observed, and observing the layout of the space in which the act, activity, or event that is being observed, including specific objects. The ethnographer may also want to assess whether the objects might have any specific meaning. For example, within a religious setting, there may be numerous objects that have powerful symbolic meanings. But meanings may be also be found in the way the room in the church in which the act, activity, or event being observed is situated, such as the elevation of the pulpit, where the choir sits, etc.

(4)   **Actors in the Setting** Record the number of people in the setting. Then describe those people, in terms of such characteristics as sex, age, ethnicity, height, weight, skin color, and other general features that might have some significance in understanding behavioral interactions. You should give each actor a pseudonym or a five digit ID number (beginning with 00001), as this maybe someone you may have future opportunities to observe or interview.

(5)   **Events.** If the scene being observed is a planned activity, get as much information on the purpose of the event. If this is not written or explicit, look for possible tacit reasons that this event is taking place.

(6)   **Time.** What is the time of day, day of the week, time of the month, and month or season of the year that this setting is being observed.

(7)   **Individual Behavior.** Observe and record specific behavioral acts that are taking place at the event. If possible include characteristics of behavior that might have meaning. For example, did the behavior appear animated, tense, stiff, lackadaisical, etc.

(8)   **Activities.** Record whether there are groups of behavioral acts that seem to be related. Here, the various activities of an event may be recorded, and then broken down into specific acts, or the reverse may be done, in which acts are noted, and then patterns are looked for in terms of the relationships between acts.

(9)   **Actor Groups.** Are there ways that the actors in the setting are related, linked or differentiated?

(10)   **Interactive Patterns** between the actors in the setting, including patterns of dominant and subordinate personality, i.e., do certain actors seem to defer to or be controlled by other actors? Or are there compatible behaviors or opposing behaviors between one or more set of actors? Are there actors who seem to facilitate or instigate a particular type of behavior between the set of actors?

(11)   **Language.**   Is the event, and activities and/or acts being carried out in a particular language? Do communication breakdowns seem to be occurring because of language differences? In general record comment from participants that strikes observer as interesting, curious, etc. Please remember to give attention to the following in writing your notes: content (what is said); participation (who said what for what audience); method (how something is said, i.e., low/high volume and clarity); location (where it is said); time and routinization (when said and whether there is a pattern?); and rationale (what seems be the purpose or reason behind what is being said.

(12)   **Non-Verbal Behavior and Metalingual Properties in Conversation.** Observe and record any gestures or other forms of non-verbal behavior that might have some relevance to interactions in the setting.

(13)   **Expressive Culture.** Are there other forms of expressive culture found in the social setting beyond general language (e.g., music, song, dance, art, etc.). If there are, note and later discuss whether you think they have any meaning to the interactive patterns in the setting.

(14)   **Ideational Elements.**   Do you think that the contents of any of the other domains (behaviors, characteristics of actors, space, objects, interactive patterns, expressive culture, etc.) reflect beliefs, attitudes, values, or any other cognitive constructs that might suggest various socio-cultural meanings that might be present in or attached to any of the other ethnographic domains in the setting

(15)   **Goals, Motivations, or Agendas.**   Note whether you think various individual actors or groups of actors seem to have specific goals, motivations, or agendas with regards to the event or activity being observe.

(16)   **Broader Social Systems.** Note whether you think broader social systems (such as family, community, workplace, wider society and social policies, or extra-societal factors) seem to have some influence on individual behaviors or interactive patterns in the setting.

(17)   **Human Needs.** Note whether you think there are there any human needs that seemed to

be carried out within the setting, event, activity, or act being observe?

(18) **Other Domains** not included above.

More on Human Needs

The category of human needs requires further discussion because such needs can be a major motivator in patterns of behavior. Moreover, need related motivations are not always apparent, but may reveal themselves as tacit patterns that one may not become aware of except through observations or an assessment of the language used by the person(s) expressing such needs. And finally, we need to further discuss needs because there are several different types of needs. Most pertinent are what Maslov has called "basic," which is a reference to the fact that the very organic survival of the human individuals and populations is dependent on adequately meeting such needs. Because my conceptualization of human needs extend beyond those suggested by Maslov, I refer to his concept of basic needs as **organic** or **biological**. Included among such needs are:

> **A Level of Physical and Mental Health** to achieve adequate physical and social
> Access to **Water, Food** and **other energy sources**
> **Housing** and other protection from hazardous climate conditions
> Access to **adequate health and medical care**, including environmental protections to prevent diseases, and mental health services
> **Safety and protection against life threatening occurrences** such as natural disasters, violence, fire, and other hazards
> **Sex and Reproductive Needs** found in adult human individuals, and the need for human groups to reproduce themselves
> Adequate **Physical Space**

Because humans are social animals, there is a second group of needs that I refer to as social or instrumental. I refer to them as instrumental because they are crucial to meeting the biological and mental health needs necessary to organic survival, or social because they are quite dependent on individuals interacting with others. Included among social needs are:

> **Economic Needs** that in contemporary societies are met through adequate employment and earnings, and that enables one to adequately meet organic needs.
> **Educational Needs** in reference to adequate access to the training and socializing structures necessary to taking advantage of economic opportunities and to better meet biological survival needs.
> **Civil Needs** are related to adequate harmonious interaction with others.
> **Political Needs** are related to having some access to those power structures that make the decisions about factors related to meeting the full range of human needs, and protection from being victimized by such structures (e.g., violence induced by the state)/
> **Legal, Policing**, and **Military Needs** require adequate access to protection from criminal offenses, fair adjudications of grievances, and from groups threatening the fabric of the society responsible for meeting one's physical and social needs.
> **Communal Needs** are met through social opportunities for opportunities humans to get together to reconfirm their social bonding, support, and identity (e.g., rituals, celebrations, and less formal gatherings).

Finally because humans are not simply social animals, but are also highly dependent on culture which facilitates their biological and social survival, there is a third set of human needs that I also consider crucial, and refer to as **"cultural"** or **"expressive,"** I further divide these needs into three subcategories:

> **Cosmological Needs** which refer to the human need for attaching and finding meaning in the physical, social, and metaphysical worlds, and for orderly constructs of these worlds (world view). Included here are cognitive, philosophical (ontological and epistemological), and religious constructs.
> **Affective Needs** which refer to such human needs as social status and acceptance, being loved or liked, self and group identity. Etc.
> **Communicative Needs** to explain, communicate, etc.

I have found that when students and other that I train to use EICCARS methods learn the domains, discussed above. This domain approach helps them to bring focus to their observations, gives them a greater sense of the behavioral and cultural patterns of social settings, and starts them in the direction of data interpretation, where to go in the next steps of their inquiry, and in producing reports.

Glossary

CBI	**Community Based Initiative**
CEHC	**Cultural Ecology of Health and Change**
CSF	**Contact Summary Form**
CuSAG	**Cultural Systems Analysis Group**
EAES	**Ethnographic Assessment & Evaluation Systems**
EICCARS	**Ethnographically Informed Community & Cultural Assessments Research Systems**
GERS	**General Ethnographic Recording Sheet**
KSSE	**Key Social Settings Expert**
KCCE	**Key Community/Culture Expert**
PIPs	**The CEHC System in Project Implementation Programs**
PDIP	**The CEHC System in Project Design and Implementation Plan**

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