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# SPEAKING OF ETHNOGRAPHY

**MICHAEL H. AGAR**  
*University of Maryland*

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doing. An "act", on the other hand, is a reflectively contemplated action. One can only know one's actions as acts because to contemplate them is to step outside of them. If an action is imagined as it might be done in the future, it is a "projected" act. The first step toward coherence lies in an appreciation of how this projection is accomplished.

The actor, with goal at hand, sketches out a plan of action based on anticipations and expectations in the stock of knowledge available. The knowledge is organized around the goal in terms of the degree of its relevance. Grosz (1978) calls this goal-directed attention to knowledge a matter of *focus*. A goal, then, brings different parts of knowledge into greater or lesser focus. Schutz notes that an intention to bring about the goal (the "in-order-to" motive) will readily focus knowledge if the situation is a familiar one. If it is not, our actor may have to go up a level and solve them before projecting. Schutz also notes that the knowledge must be clear and consistent "enough" given the goal, but with decreasing focus these requirements relax.

The actor's stock of knowledge is primarily organized into typifications; we will use the modern term *frame* instead (Minsky, 1975). Frames develop, according to Schutz, when the experience of one object is transferred to any other similar object (1970: 117). Frames are generalized "knowledge structures" that have "empty places" and "variables" that are "filled in" with the details in particular instances of their use (Schutz, 1970: 130). Many of them are encoded in language. In fact, Schutz characterizes language as a "treasure house" of frames—one that carries the tradition across the biographical situation of different actors. He also notes that frames change with experience; the actual carrying out of a project will "enlarge and restructure them" (1970: 142).

With Schutz's thoughts translated into the modern terminology of knowledge representation, we have a way to talk about coherence. The observer imagines what the in-order-to motive of the actor might have been, given observation of an act, and then projects his or her own "fancied carrying out of such an action as a scheme in which to interpret the other's lived experiences" (Schutz, 1970: 177). For an observer, coherence is achieved when

an actor's expression (performed with or without communicative intent) is seen as part of a larger project, or what we will now call a *plan*. Coherence, in short, is achieved by giving an account of an act in terms of its relations to goals, frames in focus, or both as they interrelate in a plan. And that is simply a summary in contemporary terminology of Schutz's conception, quoted at the beginning of this section.

From Schutz we get an elaborate description of coherence. It requires the reflective examination of action as act, whether distantly observed or shared as lived experience with informants. The act is coherent if it fits into a plan that we imagine it might have been a part of, where plan is a cover term for an organization of goals and frames. Ethnographic coherence, in brief, is achieved when an initial breakdown is resolved by changing the knowledge in the ethnographer's tradition so that the breakdown is now reinterpreted as an expression of some part of a plan.

### Breakdown

From the end of the resolution process we now return to the beginning—the breakdown that initiated it. Anticipating later discussions of the complexities of actual fieldwork, I would like to do some concept splitting. These splits do not precisely sort breakdown experiences. Rather, they help one understand the emergent nature of ethnographic work.

The first distinction separates *occasioned* and *mandated* breakdowns. When I worked in South India, I had no idea that I was going to have to make sense of a lump of charcoal in my lunch pack. It came up, surprised me with its apparent lack of sense, and presented itself as a problem in understanding. It was occasioned. On the other hand, when I heard junkies using the terms "beat" and "burn," I knew that as a linguistic anthropologist one of my key tasks was to put them into the lexicon. The focus on terms, the conscious attention I directed toward them, and the kinds of sense I began to make of them were mandated.

Mandated breakdowns are those that you set out to create. Occasioned breakdowns are those that come up unexpectedly when doing an ethnography. The difference is primarily whether

or not the breakdown was intended by the ethnographer. The two are not independent in actual ethnographic work, but the distinction is a worthy one. It accounts for the common ethnographic experience of setting out with a mandated breakdown and returning with some occasioned ones that prove more interesting.

Mandated breakdowns are also worth distinguishing for two other reasons. First, traditional hypothesis-testing methods of social research are in fact attempts to mandate breakdowns; an ethnographic language should include those methods as well. Second, the idea of mandated breakdowns encourages questioning one's understanding of situations as a general principle, a particularly important stance when working in one's own culture. (Later in the book, the discussion of anticoherence will flesh this out.)

Breakdowns can also be distinguished by whether they are *core* or *derivative*. Core breakdowns are the main focus of an ethnographer's work and eventual report. Derivative breakdowns are less important. They may be seen as such simply because of time limits, or because within the ethnographer's tradition they are so evaluated, or because they are only handled incidentally on the way to resolution of core breakdowns. Some breakdowns are top-level problems for an ethnographer; others come up but are dealt with less thoroughly.

To exemplify the distinctions, let me return to my two examples. The encounter with the charcoal was derivative and occasioned. In South India, the core breakdown that I focused on was the relationship between social groups and leadership in conflict resolution. This was, in turn, occasioned rather than mandated, although in retrospect it obviously responded to my faculty audience, who were interested in that particular theoretical problem.

In the junkie example, the attempt to learn about "burn" and "beat" was mandated and core. My training as a linguistic anthropologist emphasized the careful attention to lexemes as a primary inroad to culture. The process of working out what those

terms meant was derivative, but was both mandated and occasioned. It was mandated because I used ways of forcing breakdowns suggested by then current elicitation methods in ethnosemantics; but it was also occasioned as the use of the terms by myself and others, and observations of referents identified by the terms, created further problems.

Not all breakdowns are the same. At one extreme, an ethnographer may set out to force a breakdown and spend much time resolving it—it is mandated and core. At the other extreme, unexpected breakdowns may come up and receive little attention—they are occasioned and derivative. However, it is one of the special strengths of ethnography that a breakdown that was originally mandated disappears or may become derivative, while something that came up serendipitously as an occasioned breakdown may move to the center and become core.

### Resolution

Now that the beginning and end points are defined, the resolution process that moves from one to another can be dealt with. First we need a general way to talk about the pieces of a tradition in terms of which encounters are or are not understood. In the discussion of coherence, the notions of goals, frames, and plans were introduced. The modern term *schema* serves as a cover term for all three. (All these terms—goal, frame, plan, and schema—are currently in vogue in several academic disciplines. I'm using them because they refine our understanding of how knowledge *changes*, and knowledge change is what resolution is all about. Later in this book, the sources of these terms are more elaborately discussed.)

When a breakdown occurs, we have a schema problem. Now we need a term for the diverse phenomena used as data in ethnographic work. The term *strip*, as introduced by Goffman (1974) and used by Frake (1981), will serve the purpose. A strip might be an observed social act, recognized as a unit by the nature of its characterization in the informants' language. It might also

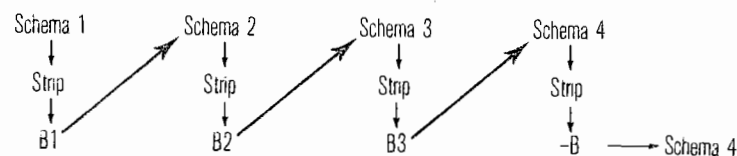


Figure 1 Single-Strip Resolution

be an informal interview conducted by an ethnographer, or a more structured interview or experiment. It could also be a document of some sort. In short, a strip is any bounded phenomenon against which an ethnographer tests his or her understanding.

Resolution, as a process, works through the repeated application of schemas to strips. When strips are understood with available schemas, there is no breakdown (although an ethnographer may try to mandate one, as discussed later in the section on anticoherence). When a strip is *not* understood, a breakdown occurs and resolution is called for.

The simplest type of resolution is summarized in Figure 1. Some schema, labeled "Schema 1" in the figure, applied to some strip, produces a breakdown, labeled "B1." The ethnographer modifies the schema, leading to the new Schema 2. It in turn is applied to the same strip, but another breakdown—B2—occurs. Further modifications in the schema lead to Schema 3. The process iterates through repeated modifications of the schema and applications of the strip until no breakdown occurs. In Figure 1, this is indicated by the "-B," leading the ethnographer to accept Schema 4 as coherent for the strip.

The "single-strip" resolution of Figure 1 is at the heart of ethnographic work. But schemas must work with more than just one strip. Ensuring that they do is called multiple-strip resolution, depicted in Figure 2. For the sake of continuity with Figure 1, Figure 2 begins with the Schema 4 that finished up the earlier resolution. The resolution begins with a second strip, labeled "Strip 2" in the figure.

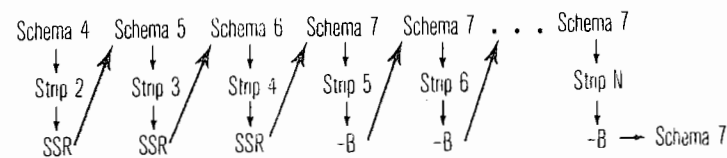


Figure 2 Multiple-Strip Resolution

Figure 2 begins with the straightforward application of Schema 4 to Strip 2. A breakdown occurs, so (just as in Figure 1) the arrow in the diagram moves back up to the schema. But this time the arrow is labeled with an "SSR" rather than with a "B." "SSR" is just an abbreviation for the resolution already described in Figure 1—single-strip resolution. Figure 1 is collapsed into Figure 2. When a breakdown occurs in the application of the schema to a new strip, the single-strip resolution process is used until that breakdown is resolved.

Once that is taken care of, there is a new schema, Schema 5. This in turn is applied to a new strip, Strip 3, and the process continues iteratively just as it did in Figure 1. But there is a difference in how the process terminates. In Figure 2, Schema 7 produces no breakdown when applied to Strip 5. The process does not stop there. Instead, Schema 7 is applied to several more strips, 7 through n, until we are *sure* that no further breakdowns will occur.

How do we know when we are sure? When is n large enough? The general idea is that we stop when no further breakdowns come up in encounters with additional strips. But there are problems here. First, breakdowns can occur later in the research against schemas thought to be coherent. Second, the sampling of strips in ethnography is one of the enduring problems of method. The problem isn't resolved here; the point is that the language highlights it, as it should.

I want to introduce one more type of resolution, one that is central to the ethnographic emphasis on holism (Phillips, 1976). As schemas are modified in single- and multiple-strip resolutions,

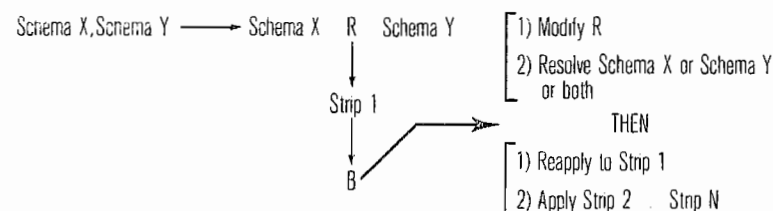


Figure 3 Schema Resolution

ethnographers typically wonder if the modifications form some interesting pattern across schemas. They seek what Gregory Bateson calls "the pattern that connects." Sieber (1973) points out that this emphasis carries with it the danger of the "holistic fallacy." By this he means a tendency to overemphasize integration at the expense of conflict and disharmony. It is for just this reason that a more careful look at what we will call schema resolution is called for.

The process of schema resolution is depicted in Figure 3. The figure begins at the left with two schemas, Schema X and Schema Y. A holistic view leads one to wonder about interconnections between the two. The ways that schemas might be interconnected are numerous. For example, I might have an intuition that two schemas are related because one schema represents an event whose outcome is a prerequisite for the event represented in the second schema. (I used this relationship in my earlier ethnographic work with heroin addicts. One outcome of "copping," or buying, heroin was obviously heroin, which in turn was a prerequisite for "getting off," or injecting it.)

Figure 3 shows that there may be a relationship (like the prerequisite-outcome link) between Schema X and Schema Y. The relation, indicated with the symbol "R," is shown in Figure 3 as "Schema X R Schema Y." Just as in the earlier resolutions the related schemas are applied to a strip; a breakdown occurs. In contrast to the first two processes of resolution, however, a number of remedies are possible.

The holistic fallacy is one possibility, but assume we are not willing to accept that yet. One possible modification lies in the relationship R. Perhaps outcome-prerequisite isn't quite right; maybe the two schemas are related in some other way. (Maybe one event "causes" the other, for example.) Or we might suspect that the resolution of the two schemas together brought out problems in one or both of them that did not appear when they were resolved individually. In that case, we could use single- or multiple-strip resolutions on one or both of them before trying schema resolution again. After modifications are made, the new form of "Schema X R Schema Y" is reapplied to the same strip or applied to new strips, as noted in Figure 3. The resolution would proceed iteratively, just as it did in the simpler forms already discussed.

Schema resolution is critical for ethnography, which emphasizes the development of higher-order schemas that show the relations among several lower-order ones. This push to higher levels represents the continuing effort to come up with an articulate statement of our sense of group concerns that are so pervasive, so fundamental, that they appear in numerous situations and across many social relations. We can't get there with a list of schemas; instead, the list must be transformed into a pattern.

Real fieldwork is not, of course, so easy. Among other things, it is more complicated in the number of strips dealt with, the number of schemas under consideration, and the many levels at which resolution proceeds. This partly explains why fieldwork is so intellectually exhausting. Then, in addition to all this simultaneous iteration of the process, it can also be maddeningly recursive. A breakdown occurs and resolution begins, which in turn produces a derivative breakdown, so the process is put on hold while resolution of that begins; but a new derivative breakdown appears, and so on. To extend the adage, it's easy to get lost in the trees.

Notice also that nothing in this discussion holds that resolution necessarily determines a schema uniquely, nor does it argue that



schema modifications come only from a single source—theory, informant statements, observations, and intuitions can all provide ideas. At the same time, resolution does require that schemas—whatever their source and eventual form—be anchored in the strips we abstract out for study from group life. It is this commitment to strips that gives ethnography its “emic” flavor, and it is in the possibility of applying schemas across a wide range of strips that validation strategies will be developed later in this book. Before dealing with ethnographic evidence, however, a clearer sense of this business of tinkering with schemas is called for. And before schemas are discussed, some background on the concept of inference is also required.

### Inference and Schema

*Inference* is a word that calls to mind elegant formal systems such as Euclidean geometry or first-order predicate calculus. Inference only occurs in those systems if you follow strict rules, but the rules are guaranteed to work. If you start out with some truths and apply the rules of inference, then whatever you wind up with is a truth as well. If you know that “A and B” as a single concept is true, then you automatically know that “A” and “B” are true individually. If you know that “ $A \rightarrow B$ ” is true, and you also know that “A” is true, then “B” must be true as well.

The problem is that neither geometry and logic nor their formal cousins are flexible enough to help with ethnographic resolution. Many who talk about knowledge and reasoning do strive—with good reason—for the simple elegance of traditional formal systems, the mathematical pinnacle of certain knowledge and the goal of “received view” science. But if we stick to traditional logic as the evaluative standard, we are put in the position of dismissing most inferences as deviant, faulty, or not up to the standard (Tyler, 1979).

Why do we need the concept of inference at all? From an ethnographic point of view, inferences are nothing less than the glue of coherence. They link different pieces of knowledge and

connect knowledge with the world. Whenever I assert that if I know or observe one thing then I know another thing, I have made an inference. For the present we need to explore inference, but the exploration does not carry with it an effort to cast ethnography into the formal attire of first-order predicate calculus. Quite the contrary.

First of all, the kinds of knowledge linked by our inferences can be of a variety of sorts. Situations, persons, objects, actions, and goals can be connected in whatever way a particular problem in understanding calls for. The connections are much richer than the traditional ones available in classic formal systems. Besides, inferences can come in bunches; in fact, one reason why the concept of schema was developed in the first place was to articulate the different kinds of bunching that occur. Once one has a sense that a situation is of a certain type, or a person is in pursuit of a particular goal, inferences lead away from that knowledge to a wealth of knowledge connected to it.

Inferences also may be uncertain. In classic formalisms one thing always implies something else, and that's that. In contrast, recent work recognizes “plausible” inferences, as introduced in the work of Polya (1954) and developed by Collins (1975, 1978). Does changing the oil guarantee that your car won't blow up? Well, no, but it tends to prevent it. To further complicate matters, plausibility itself comes in several strengths. From A we may possibly, or sometimes, or usually, or almost always infer B.

Then in addition to the plausibility of the inference, there may be “hedges” on the As and Bs and links that constitute them (Kempton, 1978). If you are polite to the boss, will she give you a raise? Well, maybe you weren't polite enough; or maybe she isn't exactly the boss; or maybe you got a new typewriter, which is “sort of” a raise. Hedges and plausibility further loosen the notion.

We have already come some distance from formal logic, leaving the rarified air of certain truth for a better fit with our

intuitions about the kinds of new schemas an ethnographer constructs to resolve breakdowns. But we are still left with a concept—inference—that forces us to pay attention to what sort of knowledge we are linking up in our work and in what sort of way we do so.

Much recent work in artificial intelligence (Hobbs, 1978; Rieger, 1975), psychology (Collins, 1975, 1978), and anthropology (Colby et al., 1981; Colby and Colby, 1981; Hutchins, 1980) moves toward the identification of looser systems of inference. Typically, a list of distinct inference types is offered. We will not concern ourselves at the moment with evaluating the completeness of the lists, but we will take in the more general points: (1) Making sense is accomplished by linking up some expressed act with a lot of knowledge, which is itself interlinked. (2) Two pieces of knowledge (including knowledge from observation), together with the link that connects them, constitute an inference. (3) Inferences may be both plausible, in the sense of their certainty, and hedged, in the sense of how well they apply to an instance of attempted sense-making. (4) Inferences will have a content that comes from the traditions of understander and act to be understood, but (5) at the same time the form of the inferences may pattern in a way that eventually leads us in the direction of a more general theory.

From an ethnographic point of view, we are interested in inferences as a way to give more systematic shape to the resolutions that we use to make sense of action. The break with traditional formal systems has led to a potpourri of discrete types. To begin to move toward a more coherent view, we first need a better sense of what inferences are.

To begin in one standard way, we can discuss inferences in terms of *nodes* and *links*, where nodes are the things connected and links are the things that do the connecting. Nodes may be states, actions, persons, goals, or objects. The simplest type of inference works by asserting a link of an unspecified nature between one node and any other. Further, the inference may be

constructed on the basis of presence or absence, absolute or hedged, of either node type.

A few examples: (1) "What's he doing pouring whiskey in his tea? He thinks he's W. C. Fields." Sense is made with a simple action-person inference. Or, perhaps, "He has a cold." In this case, we have an action-state inference. Or, "He wants to get drunk"—action-goal. Or, "We always put whiskey in our tea"—action-object. Or, "So he can serve it to his friend"—action-action. These inferences all involve the presence of both nodes; similar examples could be constructed using different mixes of presence and absence. For example, "He's out of rum" would be action-lack of object.

Things get more interesting when the nature of the link is also specified. Two nodes may be tied together because one causes the other, or enables it, or results in it, or evaluates it, or is part of it, or is a token of it, or resembles it, or co-occurs with it in space-time. On the one hand, the link may be expressed in a simple linguistic form—"Whiskey cures colds," "Whiskey gets you drunk," "Whiskey is like rum," "Whiskey is good for you," or "Whoever heard of tea without whiskey?" Again, the links could deal with absence rather than presence—"Whiskey won't hurt you," for example.

More typical will be cases where the inferences come in groups. They group because some inferences will share nodes or links with others. "He's putting whiskey in the tea because he wants to get drunk. Alcohol does that, and whiskey is alcohol. He had a rough day at the office, and he usually gets drunk after a rough day." As mentioned earlier, this bunching of inferences is what the term "schema" is all about. The usual ethnographic case involves schemas rather than single inferences.

To summarize so far, the concept of inference represents the idea of linking up knowledge, whether constituted from memory or from interaction with the world. Inferences are made up of nodes and the link or links that ties them together. They may be asserted with varying degrees of plausibility or hedging, and may

involve either presence or absence of the phenomena to which they are matched. Nodes may be actions, states, persons, goals, or objects. In their simplest form, inferences simply assert a link between any two. In their more complex form, the link itself is specified. Usually an inference used to make sense of some act will be tied together with others, giving rise to a schema.

This discussion of inference and schema gives a sense of what they are and how they work. (There are similar discussions, such as Schank and Abelson's [1977].) It also gives us a handle on the idea of an ethnographic resolution of breakdowns. Breakdowns occur when available schemas, either serendipitously or through forced analytic effort, fail to make sense of action. Resolution is the process of tinkering with inferences and schemas until coherent understanding is achieved.

### Strips

Now that schema and inference are a little more rounded out, the same can be done for strips. Ethnography is experientially rich. Out of all the experiences that an ethnographer has with informants, some portion of them are abstracted out for careful study. Ethnography is notorious for dealing with different kinds of strips—observation, conversation, interview, archive, or literary text might all contribute strips to the resolution of a particular breakdown.

Strips may differ from one another in a variety of ways—on the dimension of *control*, for example. At one extreme, their form and content are primarily under the ethnographer's control; at the other, the strip is under the control of group members. Ethnography is unique in emphasizing the importance of this second kind of strip. It is committed to making sense out of the way the folks naturally talk and act when they are doing ordinary activities. Some argue that the researcher's presence necessarily alters the informants' world, and of course that's often true. But sometimes we overrate our impact. After a period of time, one becomes—sometimes—part of the woodwork. Besides, Becker

(1970) argues that group members live within well-established tradition that constrains their actions. The presence of an ethnographer is a new constraint, but it is in competition with many others that have the weight of tradition behind them.

At the other end of the control scale, an ethnographer might design a strip—a structured interview or experiment, for example. If the folks are willing to participate, they then enter into a situation that unfolds according to the ethnographer's plan. Actual strips will, of course, range all over this scale, but for now the two endpoints help characterize the differences.

A second type of variation among strips lies in the nature of the *record*. At one extreme, an ethnographer may participate in an event just to get the feel of things with no intention of recording it in any way. At the other extreme, an event might be preserved on videotape, enabling repeated viewing of the language and motion that constituted it. Just like the control issue, most strips will fall between these two extremes. For example, an ethnographer might set out to watch for a few things as he or she moves through different situations. Those few things, together with some minimal information about the context, then go into a written record. Such a recording strategy is obviously somewhere between the videotape and nothing at all.

A third type of variation lies in the *level* of the strip. At the first level are strips that are part of the informant's routine accomplishment of daily life. At the second level are strips that are constituted by discourse about those level-1 strips. At the third level are strips that consist of discourse about level-2 strips. While the levels could in principle expand upward forever, ethnographic work in practice seldom goes beyond level 3 (see Bruce, 1979, 1980, for a similar characterization of stories in terms of levels, as well as Goffman's [1974] concept of "lamination"). Notice that any strip at level  $N$  is also a strip at level  $N - X$ , where  $N > X > 0$ . For example, a level-2 strip can also be analyzed as a level-1 strip (e.g., an informant discussion about an event can also be seen as an accomplishment of everyday life).



An ethnographic example is available in the charcoal story. The cook placed a lump of charcoal in a lunch he packed for me when I left to walk to another village. The act occurred as a level 1 strip under group members' control. (In the rest of the discussion, "ethnographer" and "group member" control will be used to indicate a change in degree of control, rather than in the sense of absolute ends of the scale.) Assume that after I left the village, the cook and two other villagers talked about it—that would be level 2 (but also level 1). Then the cook leaves, and the two villagers talk about how excessively worried he was—that would be level 3 (although again it could be analyzed as 2 and 1 as well).

Or consider another version with more ethnographic control. After the charcoal is placed on the food, I initiate a move to level 2 by asking the cook and nearby villagers why the charcoal is there. Later, the cook tells me that what the villagers said was not to be believed; they were putting me on. That would be level 3. There might even be a level-4 strip, if one of the villagers overheard and later talked to me about how the cook told me that because he didn't want me to think villagers were superstitious.

Strip variation in level and degree of control helps characterize a strong ethnographic bias. We consider a large dose of level-1, folk-controlled strips to be the sine qua non of ethnography. Access to such strips is one reason for an ethnographer to be involved for a long period of time in the informant's home territory, not to mention his or her traditional concern with relationships high in rapport.

Experiments are ethnographically suspect because although they are level 1, they are researcher controlled. Surveys are suspect because they are both level 2 and researcher controlled. Ethnographic interviews standing alone are suspect because although they are more informant controlled, they are level 2. Microethnographies (of classrooms, clinics, and courtrooms, for example) are suspect because although they may contain level-1, informant-controlled strips, their range of coverage is too

narrow. Ethnographers draw from strips that differ in level, degree of control, and recording strategy; but the emphasis on level-1 informant-controlled strips is central to our field. In my experience, when those strips are missing or limited, it is occasion for comment. It constitutes a breakdown in our schema for an ethnography.

### 3. BORROWED TERMS IN NEW CONTEXTS

The notions of inference, schema, and strips contribute some clarity to our sense of ethnography as a process of coherently resolving breakdowns. But many of the concepts used in previous sections—plan, goal, and frame as well as schema and inference—draw from fields such as artificial intelligence and cognitive science. In those fields, the concepts work in service of goals distinct from ethnography's. In cognitive science, for example, they are used to model human cognition, to build pictures of the mind that explain memory, problem solving, and decision making. In artificial intelligence, the concepts are used to guide the development of computer programs that enable the machine to do tasks requiring intelligence—tasks ranging from story understanding to advising an exploration geologist.

In ethnographic work, the primary goals are not modeling minds or programming computers. The goal is to resolve breakdowns, to build the new knowledge through which social action in one tradition can be seen as coherent from the point of view of another. Because of the change in goals, the concepts—schema and the others—are used in different ways. In the next few sections, some of the major differences are described.