

Data Collection in the Natural Setting: Studying People, Studying Settings

In a famous quotation, Urie Bronfenbrenner, the noted child psychologist, stated that the overemphasis on laboratory studies in developmental psychology has unfortunately led to 'the science of strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time' (1979: 19). In this statement Bronfenbrenner points to the importance of the alternate paradigm and qualitative research methodology in coming to an understanding of human experience. In order to understand any human phenomenon we must investigate it as part of the context within which it lies (see Table 2.1). The postulates that define the alternate paradigm lead quite directly to the methods available to the qualitative researcher to use in real or natural settings. In this and succeeding chapters we will direct our attention to three major qualitative data collection methods: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and group interviews. We will also briefly discuss documents and other sources of qualitative data. Each method attempts to capture people's words and actions, the data of qualitative research. But whatever methods of data collection are chosen, the researcher will benefit by maintaining a researcher's journal.

The Researcher's Journal

In several books about qualitative research methods, experienced researchers discuss their practice of writing notes to themselves as an integral part of the research process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). These notes are variously referred to as a diary, a journal, or as memos, and contain the researcher's personal record of insights, beginning understandings, working hunches, recurring words or phrases, ideas, questions, thoughts, concerns and decisions made during the research process. We encourage beginning researchers to maintain a research journal from the beginning to the end of their research project. A richly detailed research

journal becomes a useful part of the data collection and analysis process.

Participant Observation

Historically it has been the cultural anthropologist who has developed and refined the method of qualitative data collection called *participant observation*. Famous cultural anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict have sought to understand the lives of people *in their own terms* by spending extended amounts of time with people in the natural settings they inhabit. Anthropologists' efforts at describing culture or aspects of culture is called ethnography, and there are numerous ethnographic accounts of the lives of people in diverse settings, climates, and stages of development (Boas, 1911; Malinowski, 1932; Mead, 1960). Participant observation also has a rich tradition in sociology and education. More recently Robert Coles (1989) John Holt (1964, 1967), and Jonathon Kozol (1986) have provided illuminating accounts of students' school experiences and pointed the way to important educational reforms. It is from these early ethnographers that we have learned about being a participant observer.

The participant observer attempts to enter the lives of others, to indwell, in Polanyi's term, suspending as much as possible his or her own ways of viewing the world. In the broadest sense, the participant observer asks the questions: What is happening here? What is important in the lives of people here? How would they describe their lives and what is the language they would use to do it? The task is one of listening hard and keenly observing what is going on among people in a given situation or organization or culture in an effort to more deeply understand it and them. Relying again on emergent research design, the participant observer begins with a broad focus of inquiry and through the ongoing process of observing and participating in the setting, recording what she sees and hears, and analyzing the data, salient aspects of the setting emerge. Subsequent observations are guided by initial discoveries.

Using participant observation for qualitative research is for many the method of choice (Patton, 1990). It is also the method of data collection which draws most heavily upon the various skills of the qualitative researcher. As Norman Denzin (1978) notes, participant observation 'simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection' (p. 183). In addition, gaining access to the setting we

want to begin studying often requires tact and persistence. Being in and of the setting while also observing it, stretches our interpersonal and information-processing skills. And the prolonged engagement, over weeks or months, necessary to understand others-in-context taxes the energies of even the most experienced researchers. It is possible, however, to draw on many of the skills you probably already possess to develop your skills as a participant observer.

Gaining Access

In anthropology, psychology, and other fields debate continues about the use of *overt* as compared to *covert* means of gaining access to research participants and settings. We, along with other qualitative researchers, have adopted the view that deceptive and covert practices are not in keeping with ethical practice or postulates of the alternative paradigm (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shils, 1959). We view the participants in the research study as essentially collaborators who together with us mutually shape and determine what we come to understand about them and their situation (Postulate II).

A study conducted by Edwin Farrell and his associates exemplifies the participant-as-collaborator approach to research (Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey and White, 1988). Farrell was involved in the development of a drop-out prevention program, jointly begun by The City College of New York and several high schools in the city of New York. But prior to setting up the prevention program, the research group focused on the need to more deeply understand the students at risk for dropping out. In their words,

To set up a viable program, it was necessary to gain some understanding of the population we were dealing with that went beyond attendance records, test scores, promotion records, and guidance referrals. First, we needed to know what the lives of the students were like and how school fitted into those lives.

(Farrell *et al.*, 1988: 489)

Finding the traditional quantitative approaches ill-matched and inappropriate to conducting an 'inquiry into the lives of the students' (p. 490), Farrell turned to qualitative research methods, initially interested in becoming a participant observer in school. But his ability to 'become invisible' was compromised, in his view, by being 'a white, middle-class, middle-aged academic entering a social setting made up, for the

most part, of low-income black and Hispanic adolescents' (p. 490). Farrell also believed his sociocultural differences from the sample would limit his ability to fully analyze the data.

The solution Farrell arrived at illuminates the possibilities of collaborative qualitative research. From a pool of several students who met the criteria for being at risk for dropping out of high school, seven students were recruited as collaborators in the research effort, and three of these students were involved for the duration of the study (see the last three names in the reference citation). Farrell's high school collaborators tape recorded informal interviews with other students and analyzed interview transcripts in conjunction with Farrell. The outcomes of the study revealed the depth of students' overwhelming experience of competing social pressures and the experience of school as yet another source of pressure. Boredom was also an important theme, and interpreted by the first author to be perhaps 'a way of internally dropping out of school' (Farrell *et al.*, 1988).

In his writings, Elliot Mishler (1986), a social psychologist and qualitative researcher emphasizes the importance of reducing the power differential between the researcher and the research participants by involving the participants as collaborators. The study by Farrell and his research team exemplifies the possibilities for collaboration. However, researchers who view participants as partners rather than subjects in the research process may be seen by traditional researchers as running the risk of revealing the purpose of the study, thus influencing the validity of the results. This concern reflects a basic difference between the traditional and alternative paradigms that guide our modes of inquiry. Proponents of the alternative qualitative paradigm assume that rapport established with study participants through open and honest exchange is essential to indwelling and to achieving useful study outcomes. While many other books on qualitative research present the overt-to-covert continuum and leave it to the researcher to decide, we clearly choose to err on the side of disclosure.

Adoption of an overt approach to gaining access mean that the researcher approaches the key individuals or gatekeepers (Becker, 1970) of the setting willing to share her or his focus of inquiry. As the study proceeds the researcher may involve study participants by asking for assistance in locating certain other individuals or settings that are emerging as important aspects of the phenomenon under study. Participants might also be asked to respond to preliminary patterns and themes that have developed out of the data analysis. Finally, the research participants are invited to review the outcomes of the study to determine whether the researcher has captured the reality of their experiences.

Several researchers 'negotiate the outcomes' of their study with the research participants, and will not report outcomes that have not been agreed to by the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This ongoing involvement with study participants highlights the importance of overt approaches to gaining access from the very beginning of the study.

Being There

Participant observation, by definition, requires the researcher to be in the field or present in the natural settings where the phenomenon under study takes place. We can get a glimpse of a kind of participant observer from a popular film in the 1970s entitled *Being There*. The actor Peter Sellers poignantly portrays Chance Gardener, a man who is mentally retarded. In essence, Chance takes literally what other characters say and responds with an endearing *naïveté* to their statements and requests, a *naïveté* which endears him to the other characters. Chance also is a keen observer, who speaks rarely but deliberately. We might think of Chance as a kind of participant observer who is by all accounts 'being there', functioning without interpretation, taking in through sight and sound what is unfolding.

The challenge to the qualitative researcher of being there is complicated by the task of also becoming invisible, as a researcher (Berg, 1989; Stoddart, 1986). The qualitative researcher assumes that his or her presence will be reacted to by the participants in the setting to some extent, but by assuming an unobtrusive presence the researcher minimizes this reactivity. Primarily through the process of prolonged engagement that the participant observer's researcher status becomes less prominent, as evidenced in the participants' conversation and behavior. Stoddart (1986) notes that becoming invisible is facilitated by participating in the ongoing activities of the participants, without calling particular attention to oneself, rather than adopting the posture of a detached researcher seeking objectivity.

But how much should one participate or try to fit into the setting and with the participants one is studying? This is not a simple decision, nor one that necessarily remains constant throughout the study. Once again we are guided by Polanyi's concept of indwelling. What will dictate how much we are a participant and how much we are an observer at any given moment is our judgment of what it takes to understand the situation from the inside out. In Patton's words, 'The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the program [setting, participants] as an insider while

describing the program for outsiders' (1990: 128). This is often a delicate balance, one that becomes easier to achieve with experience.

Field Notes

The keen observations and important conversations one has in the field cannot be fully utilized in a rigorous analysis of the data unless they are written down. *The qualitative researcher's field notes contain what has been seen and heard by the researcher, without interpretation.* In other words, the participant observer's primary task is to record what happened without inferring feelings to the participants (e.g., 'Patty looked bored'.) and without inferring why or how something happened (e.g., 'I think Jeff is trying to impress Patty'.). These hunches are important to take note of, but the researcher's interpretation of events must be clearly set off from observations. This can be done quite easily by using brackets or parentheses to indicate commentary by the participant observer. Some researchers also use the initials *OC* to indicate observer's comments in their field notes (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). The student researcher who provided the field notes example shown in Figure 7.1 used brackets to distinguish her commentary from what she observed in the field.

How does one go about being invisible and take copious notes about what one is experiencing? In many situations it means being exceptionally alert in the field, knowing that you will need to write down what you have seen and heard in great detail after you leave the setting. Sometimes it is possible to unobtrusively excuse yourself from the setting and privately jot down some of the observations you want to be able to recall later. Additionally, it has been our experience that people are usually quite willing to have informal interviews with participant observers, when it is clearly communicated that what they have to say is important and that writing their words down will help the researcher remember. This possibility is likely to be enhanced when people perceive themselves as collaborators in the research effort.

Preparing useful field notes is a challenging task, one which is facilitated by taking considerable time to write immediately after one leaves the field. Many researchers begin their field notes by jotting down bits of information they want to recall, such as interesting terms and ideas they have heard or read, behaviors that were particularly unusual, and noteworthy objects in the environment. These bits of information can then be organized into a kind of narrative of what was observed, usually approximating a chronological ordering.

It is often useful to draw a diagram of the physical layout of the

setting in as much detail as possible, noting such things as where people stood or sat, important objects, unused spaces, traffic patterns, etc. This type of diagram can also aid one's recall of events and conversations at the time of preparing field notes and possibly later on. Note also that the map itself, as part of the field notes, is data and will be used in data analysis. One such map from the study of adolescents' experiences in a middle school cafeteria is shown in Figure 7.2.

As much as possible, the researcher tries to capture people's exact words in the field notes. This is particularly important because the qualitative researcher is specifically trying to understand and describe what is going on in the terms used by the people in the setting she or he is studying. In addition, the researcher cannot assume that the terms used by the people in the setting mean the same to them as they do to the researcher. In the study described above, Farrell and his young collaborators (1988) discovered that *boredom* was a term used to describe classes that had a boring routine, that the *process* of handing back assignments, giving assignments, quizzes, etc. defined whether a class was boring. In discussing this finding, Farrell noted that he related boredom to the *content* of academic classes. Uncovering the students' meaning of boredom was pivotal in this study.

The researcher attempts to provide the clearest and most complete narrative of what went on in the field. People's actions and interactions are described. Outside intrusions, such as an alarm going off or phone call are noted. Verbatim words or statements are recorded using quotation marks. Statements that are a reconstruction or paraphrasing of a person's words are written down without using quotation marks. Observer's comments are added in a way that sets them off from the descriptive narrative. An example of field notes prepared after being in the field are shown in Figure 7.3.

Figure 7.3: Excerpt from the field notes of a student researcher who recorded her notes after an observation in the middle school cafeteria

Field Notes for Lincoln Middle School Feb. 12, 1992

I walked toward the school looking for the door to go into. Everything outside was quiet. I grasped the handle of the nearest door that I came to, but it was locked. Through the glass of this door, I could see the area that the students would be eating in, set up with tables, chairs, and food being put out in the serving areas.

I proceeded to the 9th Street door, and entered the school. The hall that I walked into was very noisy from the students that filled its halls as they were going to or were by their lockers. I looked to the left and saw a sign on a door that said main office, so I entered this room. Here there were about three grown-ups behind desks or in offices and one child sitting in a chair just inside the door. One woman was using the photocopier machine and was talking to the child who then took the completed copies and left the room.

I looked for someone to ask for guidance, but there was no one behind the main desk. To the left there was a large office with a rather large-framed man walking toward me. He was talking, but not to me. I then saw my classmate, Mike Premo, and understood that the man was talking to Mike, who had arrived just before I did. [OC: I assume that the man in the office is probably a principal or vice-principal, although I was not introduced.] Mike pointed to the folder that we signed up in, and I proceeded to check-in.

When I was finished with this procedure, I joined in the conversation that Mike was having with the man. The man was asking about exactly what we would be doing, although he also said that he had read the information sent to the school regarding the project. He then informed us that we were more than welcome to purchase a hot lunch or ala carte meal from the cafeteria. Finally, he explained to us that one of the classes was on a skiing trip, so today we would be able to interact with only two classes, the 7th and 8th grades. We thanked him for his help and were on our way.

We left the office and turned left, following a group of students down the hall. As we neared the end of the hall, we could hear the loudness of the children talking. We entered the lunchroom, took a few seconds to scan the room, and separated, each taking seats at different areas of the room. I went up to a girl at a table and asked if she minded if I sat with her. She very quietly said 'no', so I sat next to her. There were two girls at my end of the table, and there were about six at the other end.

The two girls said nothing to me at this point, so I looked around the room. I noticed that the tables were set in an order, and that once a student had his/her food, they did not seem to scan the room for a friend, but went directly to a table [OC as if predetermined or assigned]. There were tables to my right that had ala carte type food such as chips, rolls, and juice.

Sometimes it is possible to take notes in the field as things are happening. In some situations, taking notes is the normal thing to be doing. For example, being a participant observer in a college classroom where the professor is lecturing — and students are implicitly or explicitly directed to take notes — it is possible to develop an ongoing record of what is happening. The field notes from one such experience are provided in Figure 7.1. Notice that in the field notes example it was possible for the participant observer to note the time when things actually occurred, allowing for estimates of the duration of activities to be drawn from the field notes. Of course, not all classrooms lend themselves to on-the-spot recording of sights and sounds. A classroom session devoted primarily to discussion is likely to make the fervent recordings of the researcher quite visible.

Research exercise #8: Observing without interpreting

The purpose of Research exercises #8 and #9 is to help you begin to hone your skills as a participant observer. The skill emphasized in this exercise is observing without interpreting.

You will need a substantial amount of paper, and pens that allow you to write easily to carry out this exercise.

- 1 Arrange to sit in on a class at a local college, university, or technical school. If you are currently in one of these places, try to conduct your participant observation in a course in which you are not currently enrolled. It is also helpful for this exercise to observe in a class where students are likely to be taking notes, and where your note-taking would not be unusual. Gaining access to classes is often

- quite easy. You may be able to go with a friend or simply ask the instructor if you can sit in on a class 'to understand what it is like to be in this class' (focus of inquiry).
- 2 Go to the class equipped with paper and pens. If students can sit anywhere, try to sit in a place that is in the middle of things, rather than on the far outside edge or in the back of the room. Seating yourself outside the place where most students sit emphasizes your outsider status. On the other hand you may find that you have taken someone's seat, as it often happens that without any formal designation, students label a chair as theirs. In any case, notice what happens.
 - 3 As you sit in the class, you will probably be more of an observer than a participant. Focus on what is going on and not on what you think about what is going on. Write down behavioural descriptions: No one raises their hand in response to the instructor asking, 'Anybody have any ideas about Sternberg's theory of intelligence?' Make a diagram of the classroom, including where students sit, where the instructor sits or stands, where the clock is, etc. Note the time you are taking notes and keep a running log of the time on your field notes (see Figure 7.1). Record what happens in the class in as much detail as possible. Use your diagram to locate students who talk or otherwise come to your attention. Chart the movement of the teacher throughout the class period. Capture in as much detail as possible what is going on. While it is not necessary to take precise notes about the course content, it would be helpful to note the progression of topics being presented and discussed.
 - 4 You are likely to get ideas and wonder about what is happening in the setting, and your field notes can accommodate your thinking. For example, you may find yourself wondering why the instructor stands on the left side of the classroom while almost everyone else sits on the right. Or you may notice that a few people have their heads down, pen poised, but are actually asleep, and wonder whether the early hour of the class is an important factor in understanding what goes on. These types of observer comments can and should be entered into your field notes as you think of them by using parentheses, brackets, or O.C.: observer's comment (see Figure 7.1).
 - 5 After completing the field observation, take some time to review your notes. Add any observations you have omitted. Study your notes. Then on a separate page respond to the following questions: What is important here? What is it that I need to find out more about? What would I want to focus on more closely if I returned to this setting?
 - 6 Finally, evaluate your experience of being a participant observer and preparing on-the-spot fieldnotes. Were you able to separate description from interpretation? Could someone reading your notes (typed) gain some understanding of what was happening in the class? Positive responses to these questions reflect the skilled use of participant observation.

One female student who completed this exercise had an unusual and funny experience. While she was sitting in a large lecture hall, another student unknown to her, turned to her, addressing her correctly as 'Sue'. The student then proceeded to ask the research student researcher about the last lecture, which she had missed, and whether she could borrow her notes. This exchange went on for awhile (as the lecturer talked on), until the research student corrected the case of mistaken identity. The advice this student gave to the rest of us will serve any participant observer well: Be prepared for the unexpected!

Research exercise #9: Reconstructing observations from the field

Rather than being able to take notes as one observes, the participant observer is more often required to recall the setting, participants, events, and conversations in

detail after leaving the field. The purpose of this exercise is to practice this important skill.

- 1 Think about some settings or places you would like to know more about by being in that setting. A medical clinic? Backstage at a theater? A day care center? A senior citizen's community center? Make a list of these places.
- 2 Examine your list and identify a setting to which you have some reasonable chance of gaining access. Prepare a focus of inquiry statement that you can communicate to the gatekeepers of the setting. For example, 'I would like to know more about what it's like backstage while a performance is going on.' Or, 'I would like to understand what a senior center is like.'
- 3 Try to make the necessary arrangements to visit the setting for one hour. In some situations you will only need to ask; people will be delighted — flattered — at your interest in them. In other cases, it may be more difficult to gain entry into the setting. If you are unable to access the setting you are interested in through honest disclosure of your focus of inquiry, do not resort to covert or deceptive practices. Return to your list and find a setting that you can observe.
- 4 Spend one hour in the setting as a participant observer. Take a small note pad with you but do not take notes in the setting in which you are observing. If possible you can briefly excuse yourself from the setting and find a bathroom or other private location to jot down a few of your observations. Be alert and aware of what is going on there, trying to take in the whole situation, rather than arbitrarily picking some smaller corner, person or group to observe. Be aware of when you feel you need to be an observer and when you feel you need to participate, in order to gain an insider's view of this setting.
- 5 Immediately after leaving the setting and preferably before driving home or talking to anyone, reconstruct your observations. Begin by jotting down bits of what you heard and saw. Write down as closely as possible what people said. Record exact words and statements that you remember. Draw a detailed diagram of the setting. Then go back through your notes and develop a descriptive account of what happened in the setting while you were there, including such things as a description of the people you saw and heard, where you were, what happened and when, etc. Add observer's comments [OC]: your own musings, questions, and hunches about the place. Write clearly enough so that if you were lucky you could have someone else type up your field notes.
- 6 Carefully reread your field notes, guided by these questions: What is important here? What is it that I need to find out more about? What would I want to focus on more closely if I returned to this setting? Your responses to these questions would allow you to refine your focus on your next visit to the setting or in interviewing some of the people you saw there. In essence, you would be sampling from the possible settings, such as the day and time you observe and participants (people who seem to know what is going on) in order to understand what is important to know in the particular place you are studying.
- 7 Finally, evaluate your experience as a participant observer preparing field notes afterwards. How accurately were you able to recall the physical setting, events, and conversations? What strategies aided your recall? What will you do differently the next time you are in the field?

In-depth Interviewing

As we noted in an earlier chapter, an interview is a conversation with a purpose (Berg, 1989; Dexter, 1970; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In qualitative studies, interviews often take place while one is a participant observer, although people in the setting may not realize that the informal conversations they have been engaged in are interviews. In the field it is sometimes possible to arrange interviews with people whom