

10 QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH



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What You'll Learn in This Chapter

Here you'll see that qualitative field research enables researchers to observe social life in its natural habitat: to go where the action is and watch. This type of research can produce a richer understanding of many social phenomena than can be achieved through other observational methods, provided that the researcher observes in a deliberate, well-planned, and active way.

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AN OPENING QUANDARY

To be sure, there are things to learn about doing experiments or surveys, but why does it take a whole chapter to talk about simply observing social life as it's happening? Don't researchers just show up and take notes?

INTRODUCTION

Several chapters ago, I suggested that you've been doing social research all your life. This idea should become even clearer as we turn to what probably seems like the most obvious method of making observations: qualitative field research. In a sense, we do field research whenever we observe or participate in social behavior and try to understand it, whether in a college classroom, in a doctor's waiting room, or on an airplane. Whenever we report our observations to others, we are reporting our field research efforts.

Such research is at once very old and very new in social science. Many of the techniques discussed in this chapter have been used by social researchers for centuries. Within the social sciences, anthropologists are especially associated with this method and have contributed to its development as a scientific technique. Moreover, something similar to this method is employed by many people who might not, strictly speaking, be regarded as social science researchers. Welfare department case workers are one example; newspaper reporters are another.

To take this last example further, consider that interviewing is a technique common to both journalism and sociology. A journalist uses the data to

report a subject's attitude, belief, or experience—that's usually it. Sociologists, on the other hand, treat an interview as data that need to be analyzed in depth; their ultimate goal is to understand social life in the context of theory, using established analytical techniques. Although sociology and journalism use similar techniques, the two disciplines view and use data differently.

While many of the techniques involved in field research are "natural" activities, they are also skills to be learned and honed. This chapter discusses these skills in some detail, examining some of the major paradigms of field research and describing some specific techniques that make scientific field research more useful than the casual observation we all engage in.

As we'll see, there are many paradigms associated with field research, which comprises a wide range of studies. This range stems in part from differences among paradigms—specifically, the variety of theoretical approaches to basic questions such as "What is data?" "How should we collect data?" and "How should we analyze data?"

I use the term *qualitative field research* to distinguish this type of observation method from methods designed to produce data appropriate for quantitative (statistical) analysis. Thus, surveys provide data from which to calculate the percentage unemployed in a population, mean incomes, and so forth. Field research more typically yields qualitative data: observations not easily reduced to numbers. Thus, for example, a field researcher may note the "paternalistic demeanor" of leaders at a political rally or the "defensive evasions" of a public official at a public hearing without trying to express either the paternalism or the defensiveness as numerical quantities or degrees. Although field research can be used to collect quantitative data—for example, noting the number of interactions of various specified types within a field setting—typically, field research is qualitative.

Field observation also differs from some other models of observation in that it's not just a data-collecting activity. Frequently, perhaps typically, it's a theory-generating activity as well. As a field researcher, you'll seldom approach your task with

precisely defined hypotheses to be tested. More typically, you'll attempt to make sense out of an ongoing process that cannot be predicted in advance—making initial observations, developing tentative general conclusions that suggest particular types of further observations, making those observations and thereby revising your conclusions, and so forth. In short, the alternation of induction and deduction discussed in Part 1 of this book is perhaps nowhere more evident and essential than in good field research. For expository purposes, however, this chapter focuses primarily on some of the theoretical foundations of field research and on techniques of data collection. Chapter 13 discusses how to analyze qualitative data.

Keep in mind that the types of methods researchers use depend in part on the specific research questions they want to answer. For example, a question such as "How do women construct their everyday lives in order to perform their roles as mothers, partners, and breadwinners?" could be addressed by either in-depth interviews or direct observations—or both. The assessment of advertising campaigns might profit from focus group discussions. In most cases, researchers have many field research methods to choose from.

TOPICS APPROPRIATE TO FIELD RESEARCH

One of the key strengths of field research is how comprehensive a perspective it can give researchers. By going directly to the social phenomenon under study and observing it as completely as possible, researchers can develop a deeper and fuller understanding of it. As such, this mode of observation is especially, though not exclusively, appropriate to research topics and social studies that appear to defy simple quantification. Field researchers may recognize several nuances of attitude and behavior that might escape researchers using other methods.

Field research is especially appropriate to the study of those attitudes and behaviors best under-

stood within their natural setting, as opposed to the somewhat artificial settings of experiments and surveys. For example, field research provides a superior method for studying the dynamics of religious conversion at a revival meeting, just as a statistical analysis of membership rolls would be a better way of discovering whether men or women were more likely to convert.

Finally, field research is well suited to the study of social processes over time. Thus, the field researcher might be in a position to examine the rumblings and final explosion of a riot as events actually occur rather than afterward in a reconstruction of the events.

Other good places to apply field research methods include campus demonstrations, courtroom proceedings, labor negotiations, public hearings, or similar events taking place within a relatively limited area and time. Several such observations must be combined in a more comprehensive examination over time and space.

In *Analyzing Social Settings* (1995: 101–13), John and Lyn Lofland discuss several elements of social life appropriate to field research.

1. *Practices*: Various kinds of behavior, such as talking or reading a book
2. *Episodes*: A variety of events such as divorce, crime, and illness
3. *Encounters*: Two or more people meeting and interacting
4. *Roles*: The analysis of the positions people occupy and the behavior associated with those positions: occupations, family roles, ethnic groups
5. *Relationships*: Behavior appropriate to pairs or sets of roles: mother-son relationships, friendships, and the like
6. *Groups*: Small groups, such as friendship cliques, athletic teams, and work groups.
7. *Organizations*: Formal organizations, such as hospitals or schools
8. *Settlements*: Small-scale “societies” such as villages, ghettos, and neighborhoods, as opposed to large societies such as nations, which are difficult to study

9. *Social worlds*: Ambiguous social entities with vague boundaries and populations, such as “the sports world” and “Wall Street”
10. *Lifestyles or subcultures*: How large numbers of people adjust to life in groups such as a “ruling class” or an “urban underclass”

In all these social settings, field research can reveal things that would not otherwise be apparent. Here’s a concrete example.

One issue I’m particularly interested in (Babbie 1985) is the nature of responsibility for public matters: Who is responsible for maintaining the things that we share? Who’s responsible for keeping public spaces—parks, malls, buildings, and so on—clean? Who’s responsible for seeing that broken street signs get fixed? Or, if a strong wind knocks over garbage cans and rolls them around the street, who’s responsible for getting them out of the street?

On the surface, the answer to these questions is pretty clear. We have formal and informal agreements in our society that assign responsibility for these activities. Government custodians are responsible for keeping public places clean. Transportation department employees are responsible for the street signs, and perhaps the police are responsible for the garbage cans rolling around on a windy day. And when these responsibilities are not fulfilled, we tend to look for someone to blame.

What fascinates me is the extent to which the assignment of responsibility for public things to specific individuals not only relieves others of the responsibility but actually prohibits them from taking responsibility. It’s my notion that it has become unacceptable for someone like you or me to take personal responsibility for public matters that haven’t been assigned to us.

Let me illustrate what I mean. If you were walking through a public park and you threw down a bunch of trash, you’d discover that your action was unacceptable to those around you. People would glare at you, grumble to each other; perhaps someone would say something to you about it. Whatever the form, you’d be subjected to definite, negative

sanctions for littering. Now here's the irony. If you were walking through that same park, came across a bunch of trash that someone else had dropped, and cleaned it up, it's likely that your action would also be unacceptable to those around you. You'd probably face negative sanctions for cleaning it up.

When I first began discussing this pattern with students, most felt the notion was absurd. Although we would be negatively sanctioned for littering, cleaning up a public place would obviously bring positive sanctions: People would be pleased with us for doing it. Certainly, all my students said they would be pleased if someone cleaned up a public place. It seemed likely that everyone else would be pleased, too, if we asked them how they would react to someone's cleaning up litter in a public place or otherwise taking personal responsibility for fixing some social problem.

To settle the issue, I suggested that my students start fixing the public problems they came across in the course of their everyday activities. As they did so, I asked them to note the answers to two questions:

1. How did they feel while they were fixing a public problem they had not been assigned responsibility for?
2. How did others around them react?

My students picked up litter, fixed street signs, put knocked-over traffic cones back in place, cleaned and decorated communal lounges in their dorms, trimmed trees that blocked visibility at intersections, repaired public playground equipment, cleaned public restrooms, and took care of a hundred other public problems that weren't "their responsibility."

Most reported feeling very uncomfortable doing whatever they did. They felt foolish, goody-goody, conspicuous, and all the other feelings that usually keep us from performing these activities. In almost every case, their personal feelings of discomfort were increased by the reactions of those around them. One student was removing a damaged and long-unused newspaper box from the bus stop, where it had been a problem for months, when the police arrived, having been summoned by a

neighbor. Another student decided to clean out a clogged storm drain on his street and found himself being yelled at by a neighbor who insisted that the mess should be left for the street cleaners. Everyone who picked up litter was sneered at, laughed at, and generally put down. One young man was picking up litter scattered around a trash can when a passerby sneered, "Clumsy!" It became clear to us that there are only three acceptable explanations for picking up litter in a public place:

1. You did it and got caught—somebody forced you to clean up your mess.
2. You did it and felt guilty.
3. You're stealing litter.

In the normal course of life in the United States, it's simply not acceptable for people to take responsibility for public things.

Clearly, we could not have discovered the nature and strength of agreements about taking personal responsibility for public things except through field research. Social norms suggest that taking responsibility is a good thing, sometimes referred to as good citizenship. Asking people what they thought about taking responsibility would have produced a solid consensus that it was good. Only going out into life, doing it, and watching what happened gave us an accurate picture.

As an interesting footnote to this story, my students and I found that whenever people could get past their initial reactions and discover that the students were simply taking responsibility for fixing things for the sake of having them work, the passersby tended to assist. Although there are some very strong agreements making it "unsafe" to take responsibility for public things, the willingness of one person to rise above those agreements seemed to make it safe for others to do so, and they did.

In summary, then, field research offers the advantage of probing social life in its natural habitat. Although some things can be studied adequately in questionnaires or in the laboratory, others cannot. And direct observation in the field lets researchers observe subtle communications and

other events that might not be anticipated or measured otherwise.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH

There are specific things to take into account in every research method, and qualitative field research is no exception. When you use field research methods, you're confronted with decisions about the role you'll play as an observer and your relations with the people you're observing. Let's examine some of the issues involved in these decisions.

The Various Roles of the Observer

In field research, observers can play any of several roles, including participating in what they want to observe (this was the situation of the students who fixed public things). In this chapter, I've used the term *field research* rather than the frequently used term *participant observation*, because field researchers need not always participate in what they're studying, though they usually will study it directly at the scene of the action. As Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman (1995:60) point out:

The researcher may plan a role that entails varying degrees of "participantness"—that is, the degree of actual participation in daily life. At one extreme is the full participant, who goes about ordinary life in a role or set of roles constructed in the setting. At the other extreme is the complete observer, who engages not at all in social interaction and may even shun involvement in the world being studied. And, of course, all possible complementary mixes along the continuum are available to the researcher.

The complete participant, in this sense, may be a genuine participant in what he or she is studying (for example, a participant in a campus demonstration) or may pretend to be a genuine participant. In any event, if acting as the complete participant, you let people see you only as a participant,

not as a researcher. For instance, if you're studying a group made up of uneducated and inarticulate people, it would not be appropriate for you to talk and act like a university professor or student.

This type of research introduces an ethical issue, one on which social researchers themselves are divided. Is it ethical to deceive the people you're studying in the hope that they will confide in you in ways that they will not confide in an identified researcher? Do the potential benefits to be gained from the research offset such considerations? Although many professional associations have addressed this issue, the norms to be followed remain somewhat ambiguous when applied to specific situations.

Related to this ethical consideration is a scientific one. No researcher deceives his or her subjects solely for the purpose of deception. Rather, it's done in the belief that the data will be more valid and reliable, that the subjects will be more natural and honest if they do not know the researcher is doing a research project. If the people being studied know they're being studied, they might modify their behavior in a variety of ways. First, they might expel the researcher. Second, they might modify their speech and behavior to appear more respectable than would otherwise be the case. Third, the social process itself might be radically changed. Students making plans to burn down the university administration building, for example, might give up the plan altogether once they learn that one of their group is a social scientist conducting a research project.

On the other side of the coin, if you're a complete participant, you may affect what you're studying. To play the role of participant, you must participate. Yet, your participation may importantly affect the social process you're studying. Suppose, for example, that you're asked for your ideas about what the group should do next. No matter what you say, you will affect the process in some fashion. If the group follows your suggestion, your influence on the process is obvious. If the group decides not to follow your suggestion, the process whereby the suggestion is rejected may affect what happens next. Finally, if you indicate that you just don't know what should be done next, you may be

adding to a general feeling of uncertainty and indecisiveness in the group.

Ultimately, anything the participant-observer does or does not do will have some effect on what's being observed; it's simply inevitable. More seriously, what you do or do not do may have an important effect on what happens. There is no complete protection against this effect, though sensitivity to the issue may provide a partial protection. (This influence, called the Hawthorne effect, was discussed more fully in Chapter 8.)

Because of these several considerations, ethical and scientific, the field researcher frequently chooses a different role from that of complete participant. You could participate fully with the group under study but make it clear that you were also undertaking research. As a member of the volleyball team, for example, you might use your position to launch a study in the sociology of sports, letting your teammates know what you're doing. There are dangers in this role also, however. The people being studied may shift much of their attention to the research project rather than focus on the natural social process, making the process being observed no longer typical. Or, conversely, you yourself may come to identify too much with the interests and viewpoints of the participants. You may begin to "go native" and lose much of your scientific detachment.

At the other extreme, the complete observer studies a social process without becoming a part of it in any way. Quite possibly, because of the researcher's unobtrusiveness, the subjects of study might not realize they're being studied. Sitting at a bus stop to observe jaywalking at a nearby intersection is one example. Although the complete observer is less likely to affect what's being studied and less likely to "go native" than the complete participant, she or he is also less likely to develop a full appreciation of what's being studied. Observations may be more sketchy and transitory.

Fred Davis (1973) characterizes the extreme roles that observers might play as "the Martian" and "the Convert." The latter involves delving deeper and deeper into the phenomenon under study, running the risk of "going native." We'll examine this risk further in the next section.

To appreciate the "Martian" approach, imagine that you were sent to observe some newfound life on Mars. Probably you would feel yourself inescapably separate from the Martians. Some social scientists adopt this degree of separation when observing cultures or social classes different from their own.

Marshall and Rossman (1995:60–61) also note that the researcher can vary the amount of time spent in the setting being observed: You can be a full-time presence on the scene or just show up now and then. Moreover, you can focus your attention on a limited aspect of the social setting or seek to observe all of it—framing an appropriate role to match your aims.

Different situations ultimately require different roles for the researcher. Unfortunately, there are no clear guidelines for making this choice—you must rely on your understanding of the situation and your own good judgment. In making your decision, however, you must be guided by both methodological and ethical considerations. Because these often conflict, your decision will frequently be difficult, and you may find sometimes that your role limits your study.

Relations to Subjects

Having introduced the different roles field researchers might play in connection with their observations, we now focus more specifically on how researchers may relate to the subjects of their study and to the subjects' points of view.

We've already noted the possibility of pretending to occupy social statuses we don't really occupy. Consider now how you would think and feel in such a situation.

Suppose you've decided to study a religious cult that has enrolled many people in your neighborhood. You might study the group by joining it or pretending to join it. Take a moment to ask yourself what the difference is between "really" joining and "pretending" to join. The main difference is whether or not you actually take on the beliefs, attitudes, and other points of view shared by the "real" members. If the cult members believe that Jesus will come next Thursday night to destroy the

world and save the members of the cult, do you believe it or do you simply pretend to believe it?

Traditionally, social scientists have tended to emphasize the importance of “objectivity” in such matters. In this example, that injunction would be to avoid getting swept up in the beliefs of the group. Without denying the advantages associated with such objectivity, social scientists today also recognize the benefits gained by immersing themselves in the points of view they’re studying, what Lofland and Lofland (1995:61) refer to as “insider understanding.” Ultimately, you will not be able to fully understand the thoughts and actions of the cult members unless you can adopt their points of view as true—at least temporarily. To fully appreciate the phenomenon you’ve set out to study, you need to believe that Jesus is coming Thursday night.

Adopting an alien point of view is an uncomfortable prospect for most people. It can be hard enough merely to learn about views that seem strange to you; you may sometimes find it hard just to tolerate certain views. But to take them on as your own is ten times worse. Robert Bellah (1970, 1974) has offered the term *symbolic realism* to indicate the need for social researchers to treat the beliefs they study as worthy of respect rather than as objects of ridicule. If you seriously entertain this prospect, you may appreciate why William Shafir and Robert Stebbins (1991:1) concluded that “fieldwork must certainly rank with the more disagreeable activities that humanity has fashioned for itself.”

There is, of course, a danger in adopting the points of view of the people you’re studying. When you abandon your objectivity in favor of adopting such views, you lose the possibility of seeing and understanding the phenomenon within frames of reference unavailable to your subjects. On the one hand, accepting the belief that the world will end Thursday night allows you to appreciate aspects of that belief available only to believers; stepping outside that view, however, makes it possible for you to consider some reasons why people might adopt such a view. You may discover that some did so as a consequence of personal trauma (such as unemployment or divorce) while others were

brought into the fold through their participation in particular social networks (for example, their whole bowling team joined the cult). Notice that the cult members might disagree with those “objective” explanations, and you might not come up with them to the extent that you had operated legitimately within the group’s views.

The apparent dilemma here is that these postures offer important advantages but also seem mutually exclusive. In fact, it is possible to assume both postures. Sometimes you can simply shift viewpoints at will. When appropriate, you can fully assume the beliefs of the cult; later, you can step outside those beliefs (more accurately, you can step inside the viewpoints associated with social science). As you become more adept at this kind of research, you may come to hold contradictory viewpoints simultaneously, rather than switch back and forth.

During my study of trance channelers—people who allow spirits to occupy their bodies and speak through them—I found I could participate fully in channeling sessions without becoming alienated from conventional social science. Rather than “believing” in the reality of channeling, I found it possible to suspend beliefs in that realm: neither believing it to be genuine (like most of the other participants) nor disbelieving it (like most scientists). Put differently, I was open to either possibility. Notice how this differs from our normal need to “know” whether such things are legitimate or not.

Social researchers often refer to the concerns just discussed as a matter of *reflexivity*, in the sense of things acting on themselves. Thus, your own characteristics can affect what you see and how you interpret it. The issue is broader than that, however, and applies to the subjects as well as to the researcher. Imagine yourself interviewing a homeless person (1) on the street, (2) in a homeless shelter, or (3) in a social welfare office. The research setting could affect the person’s responses. In other words, you might get different results because of where you conducted the interview. Moreover, you might act differently as a researcher in those different settings. If you reflect on this issue, you’ll be able to identify other aspects of the re-

search encounter that complicate the task of “simply observing what’s so.”

The problem we’ve just been discussing could be seen as psychological, occurring mostly inside the researchers’ or subjects’ heads. There is a corresponding problem at a social level, however. When you become deeply involved in the lives of the people you’re studying, you’re likely to be moved by their personal problems and crises. Imagine, for example, that one of the cult members becomes ill and needs a ride to the hospital. Should you provide transportation? Sure. Suppose someone wants to borrow money to buy a stereo. Should you loan it? Probably not. Suppose they need the money for food?

There are no black-and-white rules for resolving situations such as these, but you should realize that you will need to deal with them regardless of whether or not you reveal that you’re a researcher. Such problems do not tend to arise in other types of research—surveys and experiments, for example—but they are part and parcel of field research.

This discussion of the field researcher’s relations to subjects flies in the face of the conventional view of “scientific objectivity.” Before concluding this section, let’s take the issue one step further.

In the conventional view of science, there are implicit differences of power and status separating the researcher from the subjects of research. When we discussed experimental designs in Chapter 8, for example, it was obvious who was in charge: the experimenter. The experimenter organized things and told the subjects what to do. Often the experimenter was the only person who even knew what the research was really about. Something similar might be said about survey research. The person running the survey designs the questions, decides who will be selected for questioning, and is responsible for making sense out of the data collected.

Sociologists often look at these sorts of relationships as power or status relationships. In experimental and survey designs, the researcher clearly has more power and a higher status than do the people being studied. The researchers have a

special knowledge that the subjects don’t enjoy. They’re not so crude as to say they’re superior to their subjects, but there’s a sense in which that’s implicitly assumed. (Notice that there is a similar, implicit assumption about the writers and readers of textbooks.)

In field research, such assumptions can be problematic. When the early European anthropologists set out to study what were originally called “primitive” societies, there was no question but that the anthropologists knew best. Whereas the natives “believed” in witchcraft, for example, the anthropologists “knew” it wasn’t really true. While the natives said some of their rituals would appease the gods, the anthropologists explained that the “real” functions of these rituals were the creation of social identity, the establishment of group solidarity, and so on.

The more social researchers have gone into the field to study their fellow humans face-to-face, however, the more they have become conscious of these implicit assumptions about researcher superiority, and the more they have considered alternatives. As we turn now to the various paradigms of field research, we’ll see some of the ways in which that ongoing concern has worked itself out.

SOME QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Although I’ve described field research as simply going where the action is and observing it, there are actually many different approaches to this research method. This section examines several field research paradigms: naturalism, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, case studies and the extended case method, institutional ethnography, and participatory action research. Although this survey won’t exhaust the variations on the method, it should give you a broad appreciation of the possibilities.

There aren’t any specific methods attached to each of these paradigms. You could do ethnomethodology or institutional ethnography by analyzing court hearings or conducting group interviews, for

example. The important distinctions of this section are *epistemological*, that is, having to do with what data mean, regardless of how they were collected.

Naturalism

Naturalism is an old tradition in qualitative research. The earliest field researchers operated on the positivist assumption that social reality was “out there,” ready to be naturally observed and reported by the researcher as it “really is” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). This tradition started in the 1930s and 1940s at the University of Chicago’s sociology department, whose faculty and students fanned out across the city to observe and understand local neighborhoods and communities. The researchers of that era and their research approach are now often referred to as the “Chicago School.”

One of the earliest and best-known studies that illustrates this research tradition is William Foote Whyte’s ethnography of Cornerville, an Italian-American neighborhood, in his book *Street Corner Society* (1943). An **ethnography** is a study that focuses on detailed and accurate description rather than explanation. Like other naturalists, Whyte believed that in order to fully learn about social life on the streets, he needed to become more of an insider. He made contact with “Doc,” his key informant, who appeared to be one of the street-gang leaders. Doc let Whyte enter his world, and Whyte got to participate in the activities of the people of Cornerville. His study offered something that surveys could not: a richly detailed picture of life among the Italian immigrants of Cornerville.

An important feature of Whyte’s study is that he reported the reality of the people of Cornerville on their terms. The naturalist approach is based on telling “their” stories the way they “really are,” not the way the ethnographer understands “them.” The narratives collected by Whyte are taken at face value as the social “truth” of the Cornerville residents.

Forty years later, David A. Snow and Leon Anderson (1987) conducted exploratory field research into the lives of homeless people in Austin, Texas. Their main task was to understand how the homeless construct and negotiate their identity while

knowing that the society they live in attaches a stigma to homelessness. Snow and Anderson believed that, to achieve this goal, the collection of data had to arise naturally. Like Whyte in *Street Corner Society*, they found some key informants whom they followed in their everyday journeys, such as at their day-labor pickup sites or under bridges. Snow and Anderson chose to memorize the conversations they participated in or the “talks” that homeless people had with each other. At the end of the day, the two researchers debriefed and wrote detailed field notes about all the “talks” they encountered. They also taped in-depth interviews with their key informants.

Snow and Anderson reported “hanging out” with homeless people over the course of 12 months for a total of 405 hours in 24 different settings. Out of these rich data, they identified three related patterns in homeless people’s conversations. First, the homeless showed an attempt to “distance” themselves from other homeless people, from the low-status job they currently had, or from the Salvation Army they depended on. Second, they “embraced” their street-life identity, their group membership or a certain belief about why they are homeless. Third, they told “fictive stories” that always contrasted with their everyday life. For example, they would often say that they were making much more money than they really were, or even that they were “going to be rich.”

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology, which I introduced as a research paradigm in Chapter 2, is a very different approach to qualitative field research. It has its roots in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which can explain why ethnomethodologists are skeptical about the way people report their experience of reality (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Alfred Schutz (1967, 1970), who introduced phenomenology, argued that reality was socially constructed rather than being “out there” for us to observe. People describe their world not “as it is” but “as they make sense of it.” Thus, phenomenologists would argue that Whyte’s street-corner men were describing their gang life as it made sense to

them. Their reports, however, would not tell us how and why it made sense to them. For this reason, researchers cannot rely on their subjects' stories to depict social realities accurately.

Whereas traditional ethnographers believe in immersing themselves in a particular culture and reporting their informants' stories as if they represent reality, phenomenologists see a need to "make sense" out of the informants' perceptions of the world. Following in this tradition, some field researchers have tried to devise techniques that reveal how people make sense of their everyday world. As we saw in Chapter 2, the sociologist Harold Garfinkel suggested that researchers *break the rules* so that people's taken-for-granted expectations would become apparent. This is the technique that Garfinkel called "ethnomethodology."

Garfinkel became known for engaging his students to perform a series of what he called "breaching experiments" designed to break away from the ordinary (Heritage 1984). For instance, Garfinkel (1967) asked his students to do a "conversation clarification experiment." Students were told to engage in an ordinary conversation with an acquaintance or a friend and to ask for clarification about any of this person's statements. Through this technique, they uncovered elements of conversation that are normally taken for granted. Here are two examples of what Garfinkel's students reported (1967:42):

Case 1

The subject was telling the experimenter, a member of the subject's car pool, about having had a flat tire while going to work the previous day.

(S) I had a flat tire.

(E) What do you mean, you had a flat tire?

She appeared momentarily stunned. Then she answered in a hostile way: "What do you mean, 'What do you mean?' A flat tire is a flat tire. That is what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question."

Case 6

The victim waved his hand cheerily.

(S) How are you?

(E) How I am in regard of what? My health,

my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my . . . ?

(S) (Red in the face and suddenly out of control.) Look I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are.

By setting aside or "bracketing" their expectations from these everyday conversations, the experimenters made visible the subtleties of mundane interactions. For example, although "How are you?" has many possible meanings, none of us have any trouble knowing what it means in casual interactions, as the unsuspecting subject revealed in his final comment.

Ethnomethodologists, then, are not simply interested in subjects' perceptions of the world. In these cases, we could imagine that the subjects may have thought that the experimenters were rude, stupid, or arrogant. The conversation itself, not the informants, become the object of ethnomethodological studies. In general, in ethnomethodology the focus is on the "underlying patterns" of interactions that regulate our everyday lives.

Ethnomethodologists believe that researchers who use a naturalistic analysis "[lose] the ability to analyze the commonsense world and its culture if [they use] analytical tools and insights that are themselves part of the world or culture being studied" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:43). Laurence Wieder provides an excellent example of how much a naturalistic approach differs from an ethnomethodological approach (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). In his study, *Language and Social Reality: The Case of Telling the Convict Code* (1988), Wieder started to approach convicts in a halfway house in a traditional ethnographic style: He was going to become an insider by befriending the inmates and by conducting participant observations. He took careful notes and recorded interactions among inmates and between inmates and staff. His first concern was to describe the life of the convicts of the halfway house the way it "really was" for them. Wieder's observations allowed him to report on a "convict code" that he thought was the source of the deviant behavior expressed by the inmates toward the staff. This code, which consisted of a series of rules such as "Don't kiss ass," "Don't

snitch,” and “Don’t trust the staff,” was followed by the inmates who interfered with the staff members’ attempts to help them make the transition between prison and the community.

It became obvious to Wieder that the code was more than an explanation for the convicts’ deviant behavior; it was a “method of moral persuasion and justification” (Wieder 1988:175). At this point he changed his naturalistic approach to an ethnomethodological one. Recall that whereas naturalistic field researchers aim to understand social life as the participants understand it, ethnomethodologists are more intent on identifying the methods through which understanding occurs. In the case of the convict code, Wieder came to see that convicts used the code to make sense of their own interactions with other convicts and with the staff. The ethnography of the halfway house thus shifted to an ethnography of the code. For instance, the convicts would say “You know I won’t snitch,” referring to the code as a way to justify their refusal to answer Wieder’s question (p. 168). According to Wieder, the code “operated as a device for stopping or changing the topic of conversation” (p. 175). Even the staff would refer to the code to justify their reluctance to help the convicts. While the code was something that constrained behavior, it also functioned as a tool for the control of interactions.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory originated from the collaboration of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, sociologists who brought together two main traditions of research: positivism and interactionism. Essentially, **grounded theory** is the attempt to derive theories from an analysis of the patterns, themes, and common categories discovered in observational data. The first major presentation of this method can be found in Glaser and Strauss’s book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Grounded theory can be described as an approach that attempts to combine a naturalist approach with a positivist concern for a “systematic set of procedures” in doing qualitative research.

Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990:44–46) have suggested that grounded theory allows the re-

searcher to be scientific and creative at the same time, as long as the researcher follows three guidelines:

Periodically step back and ask: What is going on here? Does what I think I see fit the reality of the data? The data themselves do not lie. . . .

Maintain an attitude of skepticism. All theoretical explanations, categories, hypotheses, and questions about the data, whether they come directly or indirectly from the making of comparisons, the literature, or from experience, should be regarded as provisional. They always need to be checked out against the actual data, and never accepted as a fact. . . .

Follow the research procedures. The data collection and analytical procedures are designed to give rigor to a study. At the same time they help you to break through biases, and lead you to examine at least some of your assumptions that might otherwise affect an unrealistic reading of the data.

Grounded theory emphasizes research procedures. In particular, systematic coding is important for achieving validity and reliability in the data analysis. Because of this somewhat positivistic view of data, grounded theorists are very open to the use of qualitative studies in conjunction with quantitative ones. Here are two examples of the implementation of this approach.

Studying Academic Change Clifton F. Conrad’s (1978) study of academic change in universities is an early example of the grounded theory approach. Conrad hoped to uncover the major sources of changes in academic curricula and at the same time understand the process of change. Using the grounded theory idea of *theoretical sampling*—whereby groups or institutions are selected on the basis of their theoretical relevance—Conrad chose four universities for the purpose of his study. In two, the main vehicle of change was the formal curriculum committee; in the other two, the vehicle of change was an ad hoc group.

Conrad explained, step by step, the advantage of using the grounded theory approach in building his theory of academic change. He described the

process of systematically coding data in order to create categories that must “emerge” from the data and then assessing the fitness of these categories with each other. Going continuously from data to theory and theory to data allowed him to reassess the validity of his initial conclusions about academic change.

For instance, it first seemed that academic change was mainly caused by an administrator who was pushing for it. By reexamining the data and looking for more-plausible explanations, Conrad found the pressure of interest groups a more convincing source of change. The emergence of these interest groups actually allowed the administrator to become an agent of change.

Assessing how data from each of the two types of universities fit with the other helped refine theory building. This refinement process stands in contrast to a naturalist approach, in which the process of building theory would have stopped with Conrad’s first interpretation.

Conrad concluded that changes in university curricula are based on the following process: Conflict and interest groups emerge because of internal and external social structural forces; they push for administrative intervention and recommendation to make changes in the current academic program; these changes are then made by the most powerful decision-making body.

Shopping Romania Much has been written about large-scale changes caused by the shift from socialism to capitalism in the former USSR and its Eastern-European allies. Patrick C. Jobs and his colleagues (1997) wanted to learn about the transition on a smaller scale among average Romanians. They focused on the task of shopping.

Noting that shopping is normally thought of as a routine, relatively rational activity, the researchers suggested that it could become a social problem in a radically changing economy. They used the grounded theory method to examine Romanian shopping as a social problem, looking for the ways in which ordinary people solved the problem.

Their first task was to learn something about how Romanians perceived and understood the task of shopping. The researchers—participants in

a social problems class—began by interviewing 40 shoppers and asking whether they had experienced problems in connection with shopping and what actions they had taken to cope with those problems.

Once the initial interviews were completed, the researchers reviewed their data, looking for categories of responses—the shoppers’ most common problems and solutions. One of the most common problems was a lack of money. This led to the researchers’ first working hypothesis: The “socio-economic position of shoppers would be associated with how they perceived problems and sought solutions” (1997:133). This and other hypotheses helped the researchers to focus their attention on more-specific variables in subsequent interviewing.

As they continued, they also sought to interview other types of shoppers. When they interviewed students, for example, they discovered that different types of shoppers were concerned with different kinds of goods, which in turn affected the problems faced and the solutions tried.

As additional hypotheses were developed in response to the continued interviewing, the researchers began to develop a more or less standardized set of questions to ask shoppers. Initially, all the questions were open-ended, but they eventually developed closed-ended items as well.

This study illustrates the key, inductive principles of grounded theory: data are collected in the absence of hypotheses. The initial data are used to determine the key variables as perceived by those being studied, and hypotheses about relationships among the variables are similarly derived from the data collected. Continuing data collection yields refined understanding and, in turn, sharpens the focus of data collection itself.

Case Studies and the Extended Case Method

Social researchers often speak of **case studies**, which focus attention on one or a few instances of some social phenomenon, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang. As Charles Ragin and Howard Becker (1992) point out, there is little

consensus on what may constitute a “case” and the term is used broadly. The case being studied, for example, might be a period of time rather than a particular group of people. The limitation of attention to a particular instance of something is the essential characteristic of the case study.

The chief purpose of a case study may be descriptive, as when an anthropologist describes the culture of a preliterate tribe. Or the in-depth study of a particular case can yield explanatory insights, as when the community researchers Robert and Heley Lynd (1929, 1937) and W. Lloyd Warner (1949) sought to understand the structure and process of social stratification in small-town USA.

Case study researchers may seek only an idiographic understanding of the particular case under examination, or—as we’ve seen with grounded theory—case studies can form the basis for the development of more general, nomothetic theories.

Michael Burawoy and his colleagues (1991) have suggested a somewhat different relationship between case studies and theory. For them, the **extended case method** has the purpose of discovering flaws in, and then modifying, existing social theories. This approach differs importantly from some of the others already discussed.

Whereas the grounded theorists seek to enter the field with no preconceptions about what they’ll find, Burawoy suggests just the opposite: to try “to lay out as coherently as possible what we expect to find in our site *before* entry” (Burawoy et al. 1991:9). Burawoy sees the extended case method as a way to rebuild or improve theory instead of approving or rejecting it. Thus, he looks for all the ways in which observations conflict with existing theories and what he calls “theoretical gaps and silences” (1991:10). This orientation to field research implies that knowing the literature beforehand is actually a must for Burawoy and his colleagues, whereas grounded theorists would worry that knowing what others have concluded might bias their observations and theories.

To illustrate the extended case method, I’ll use two examples of studies by Burawoy’s students.

Teacher-Student Negotiations Leslie Hurst (1991) set out to study the patterns of interaction

between teachers and students of a junior high school. She went into the field armed with existing, contradictory theories about the “official” functions of the school. Some theories suggested that the purpose of schools was to promote social mobility, whereas others suggested that schools mainly reproduced the status quo in the form of a stratified division of labor. The official roles assigned to teachers and students could be interpreted in terms of either view.

Hurst was struck, however, by the contrast between these theories and the types of interactions she observed in the classroom. In her own experiences as a student, teachers had total rights over the mind, body, and soul of their pupils. She observed something very different at a school in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Berkeley, California—Emerald Junior High School, where she volunteered as a tutor. She had access to several classrooms, the lunchroom, and the English Department’s meetings. She wrote field notes based on the negotiation interactions between students and teachers. She explained the nature of the student-teacher negotiations she witnessed by focusing on the separation of functions among the school, the teacher, and the family.

In Hurst’s observation, the school fulfilled the function of controlling its students’ “bodies”—for example, by regulating their general movements and activities within the school. The students’ “minds” were to be shaped by the teacher, whereas students’ families were held responsible for their “souls”; that is, families were expected to socialize students regarding personal values, attitudes, sense of property, and sense of decorum. When students don’t come to school with these values in hand, the teacher, according to Hurst, “must first negotiate with the students some compromise on how the students will conduct themselves and on what will be considered classroom decorum” (1991:185).

Hurst explained the constant bargaining between teachers and students is an expression of the separation between “the body,” which is the school’s concern, and “the soul” as family domain. The teachers, who had limited sanctioning power to control their students’ minds in the classroom,

were using forms of negotiations with students so that they could “control . . . the student’s body and sense of property” (1991: 185), or as Hurst defines it, “baby-sit” the student’s body and soul.

Hurst says she differs from the traditional sociological perspectives as follows:

I do not approach schools with a futuristic eye. I do not see the school in terms of training, socializing, or slotting people into future hierarchies. To approach schools in this manner is to miss the negotiated, chaotic aspects of the classroom and educational experience. A futurist perspective tends to impose an order and purpose on the school experience, missing its day-to-day reality. — (1991: 186)

In summary, what emerges from Hurst’s study is an attempt to improve the traditional sociological understanding of education by adding the idea that classroom, school, and family have separate functions, which in turn can explain the emergence of “negotiated order” in the classroom.

The Fight against AIDS Katherine Fox (1991) set out to study an agency whose goal was to fight the AIDS epidemic by bringing condoms and bleach (for cleaning needles) to intravenous drug users. It’s a good example of finding the limitations of well-used models of theoretical explanation in the realm of understanding deviance—specifically, the “treatment model” that predicted that drug users would come to the clinic and ask for treatment. Fox’s interactions with outreach workers—most of whom were part of the community of drug addicts or former prostitutes—contradicted that model.

To begin, it was necessary to understand the drug users’ subculture and use that knowledge to devise more realistic policies and programs. The target users had to be convinced, for example, that the program workers could be trusted, that they were really interested only in providing bleach and condoms. The target users needed to be sure they were not going to be arrested.

Fox’s field research didn’t stop with an examination of the drug users. She also studied the agency workers, discovering that the outreach pro-

gram meant different things to the research directors and the outreach workers. Some of the volunteers who were actually providing the bleach and condoms were frustrated about the minor changes they felt they could make. Many thought the program was just a bandage on the AIDS and drug-abuse problems. Some resented having to take field notes. Directors, on the other hand, needed reports and field notes so that they could validate their research in the eyes of the federal and state agencies that financed the project. Fox’s study showed how the AIDS research project developed the bureaucratic inertia typical of established organizations: Its goal became that of sustaining itself.

Both of these studies illustrate how the extended case method can operate. The researcher enters the field with full knowledge of existing theories but aims to uncover contradictions that require the modification of those theories.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography is an approach originally developed by Dorothy Smith (1978) to better understand women’s everyday experiences by discovering the power relations that shape those experiences. Today this methodology has been extended to the ideologies that shape the experiences of any oppressed subjects.

Smith and other sociologists believe that if researchers ask women or other members of subordinated groups about “how things work,” they can discover the institutional practices that shape their realities (M. L. Campbell 1998; D. Smith 1978). The goal of such inquiry is to uncover forms of oppression that often are overlooked by more traditional types of research.

Dorothy Smith’s methodology is similar to ethnomethodology in the sense that the subjects themselves are not the focus of the inquiry. The institutional ethnographer starts with the personal experiences of individuals but proceeds to uncover the institutional power relations that structure and govern those experiences. In this process, the researcher can reveal aspects of society that would have been missed by an inquiry that began with the official purposes of institutions.

This approach links the “microlevel” of everyday personal experiences with the “macrolevel” of institutions. As M. L. Campbell put it:

Institutional ethnography, like other forms of ethnography, relies on interviewing, observations and document as data. Institutional ethnography departs from other ethnographic approaches by treating those data not as the topic or object of interest, but as “entry” into the social relations of the setting. The idea is to tap into people’s expertise. — (1998:57)

Here are two examples of this approach.

Mothering, Schooling, and Child Development

Our first example of institutional ethnography is a study by Alison Griffith (1995), who collected data with Dorothy Smith on the relationship between mothering, schooling, and children’s development. Griffith started by interviewing mothers from three cities of southern Ontario on their everyday work of creating a relationship between their families and the school. This was the starting point for other interviews with parents, teachers, school administrators, social workers, school psychologists, and central office administrators.

In her findings, Griffith explained how the discourse about mothering had shifted its focus over time from mother-child interactions to “child-centered” recommendations. She saw a distinct similarity in the discourse used by schools, the media (magazines and television programs), the state, and child development professionals.

Teachers and child development professionals saw the role of mothers in terms of a necessary collaboration between mothers and schools for the child’s success not only in school but also in life. Because of unequal resources, all mothers do not participate in this discourse of “good” child development the same way. Griffith found that working-class mothers were perceived as weaker than middle-class mothers in the “stimulation” effort of schooling. Griffith argued that this child development discourse, embedded in the school institution, perpetuates the reproduction of class by making middle-class ideals for family-school relations the norm for everyone.

Compulsory Heterosexuality The second illustration of institutional ethnography is taken from Didi Khayatt’s (1995) study of the institutionalization of compulsory heterosexuality in schools and its effects on lesbian students. In 1990, Khayatt began her research by interviewing 12 Toronto lesbians, 15 to 24 years of age. Beginning with the young women’s viewpoint, she then expanded her inquiry to other students, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators.

Khayatt found that the school’s administrative practices generated a *compulsory heterosexuality*, which produced a sense of marginality and vulnerability among lesbian students. For example, the school didn’t punish harassment and name-calling against gay students. The issue of homosexuality was excluded from the curriculum lest it appear to students as an alternative to heterosexuality.

In both of the studies I’ve described, the inquiry began with the women’s standpoint—mothers and lesbian students. However, instead of emphasizing the subjects’ viewpoints, both analyses focused on the power relations that shaped these women’s experiences and reality.

Participatory Action Research

Our final field research paradigm takes us further along in our earlier discussion of the status and power relationships linking researchers to the subjects of their research. Within the **participatory action research** paradigm (PAR), the researcher’s function is to serve as a resource to those being studied—typically, disadvantaged groups—as an opportunity for them to act effectively in their own interest. The disadvantaged subjects define their problems, define the remedies desired, and take the lead in designing the research that will help them realize their aims.

This approach began in Third-World research development, but it spread quickly to Europe and North America (Gaventa 1991). It comes from a vivid critique of classical social science research. According to the PAR paradigm, traditional research is perceived as an “elitist model” (Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1991) that reduces the “subjects” of research to “objects” of research. Ac-

ording to many advocates of this perspective, the distinction between the researcher and the researched should disappear. They argue that the subjects who will be affected by research should also be responsible for its design.

Implicit in this approach is the belief that research functions not only as a means of knowledge production but also as a "tool for the education and development of consciousness as well as mobilization for action" (Gaventa 1991:121-22). Advocates of participatory action research equate access to information with power and argue that this power has been kept in the hands of the dominant class, sex, ethnicity, or nation. Once people see themselves as researchers, they automatically regain power over knowledge.

Examples of this approach include community power structure research, corporate research, and "right-to-know" movements (Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1991). Here are two examples of corporate research that used a PAR approach.

The Xerox Corporation A participatory action research project took place at the Xerox corporation at the instigation of leaders of both management and the union. Management's goal was to lower costs so that the company could thrive in an increasingly competitive market. The union suggested a somewhat broader scope: improving the quality of working life while lowering manufacturing costs and increasing productivity.

Company managers began by focusing attention on shop-level problems; they were less concerned with labor contracts or problematic managerial policies. At the time, management had a plan to start an "outsourcing" program that would lay off 180 workers, and the union had begun mobilizing to oppose the plan. Peter Lazes, a consultant hired by Xerox, spent the first month convincing management and the union to create a "cost study team" (CST) that included workers in the wire harness department.

Eight full-time workers were assigned to the CST for six months. Their task was to study the possibilities of making changes that would save the company \$3.2 million and keep the 180 jobs. The team had access to all financial information

and was authorized to call on anyone within the company. This strategy allowed workers to make suggestions outside the realm usually available to them. According to Whyte and his colleagues, "reshaping the box enabled the CST to call upon management to explain and justify all staff services" (1991:27). Because of the changes suggested by the CST and implemented by management, the company saved the targeted \$3.2 million.

Management was so pleased by this result that it expanded the wire harness CST project to three other departments that were threatened by competition. Once again, management was happy about the money saved by the teams of workers.

The Xerox case study is an interesting example of participatory action research because it shows how the production of knowledge does not always have to be an elitist enterprise. The "experts" do not necessarily have to be the professionals. According to Whyte and his colleagues, "at Xerox, participatory action research created and guided a powerful process of organizational learning—a process whereby leaders of labor and management learned from each other and from the consultant/facilitator, while he learned from them" (1991:30).

Mondragón-Cornell Project The Mondragón-Cornell PAR project is based on the Mondragón cooperative complex in the Basque area of Spain. The complex includes industrial-worker cooperatives, a consumer-worker cooperative, a cooperative bank, a cooperative research and development organization, and other supporting and linked structures (Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1991:31).

The research project arose from three things: the need for organizational restructuring, the increase in national unemployment, and the large-scale expansion of the Mondragón complex. The project was proposed by the sociologist William Foote Whyte and jointly directed by Davydd Greenwood, the director of Cornell's Center for International Studies, and Jose Luis Gonzalez, a staff member in the Mondragón cooperative. Whyte was involved in the early stage of the project. Greenwood and Gonzalez played the roles of facilitators and consultants during the whole project, which was mainly financed with grants from the

Spain-U.S. Joint Committee on Educational and Cultural Exchange.

A main team of 15 cooperative members was established, and they set out to survey approximately 50 other members. From the first stage of the project, the research revolved around using the literature and theories about corporate culture and contrasting these concepts and theories with the everyday reality of the Mondragón cooperative. Early on, the team concluded that the cooperative needed to capitalize on the diversity of its members instead of implementing uniformity in organizational changes.

This approach to field research was particularly efficient in uncovering feelings that were shared by the cooperative members, such as commitment to the organization and an interest in rewards beyond a job and a secure salary. Collaboration with members of the cooperative who had diverse ages, experiences, formal positions, and educational backgrounds increased the level of commitment and a sense that they needed to find solutions in order to match their ideals with realities. Because “conceptualization and application went hand in hand” (Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1991:39) in the analysis generated by the PAR project, it also encouraged the same process in finding solutions.

As you can see, the seemingly simple process of observing social action as it occurs has subtle though important variations. As we saw in Chapter 2, all our thoughts occur within, and are shaped by, paradigms, whether we’re conscious of it or not. Qualitative field researchers have been unusually deliberate in framing a variety of paradigms to enrich the observation of social life.

CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH

So far in this chapter we’ve considered the kinds of topics appropriate to qualitative field research, special considerations in doing this kind of research, and a sampling of paradigms that direct different types of research efforts. Along the way we’ve seen some examples that illustrate field research in action. To round out the picture, we turn

now to specific ideas and techniques for conducting field research, beginning with how researchers prepare for work in the field.

Preparing for the Field

Suppose for the moment that you’ve decided to undertake field research on a campus political organization. Let’s assume further that you’re not a member of that group, that you do not know a great deal about it, and that you will identify yourself to the participants as a researcher. This section will use this example and others to discuss some of the ways you might prepare yourself before undertaking direct observations.

As is true of all research methods, you would be well advised to begin with a search of the relevant literature, filling in your knowledge of the subject and learning what others have said about it (library research is discussed at length in Appendix A).

In the next phase of your research, you might wish to discuss the student political group with others who have already studied it or with anyone else likely to be familiar with it. In particular, you might find it useful to discuss the group with one or more informants (discussed in Chapter 7). Perhaps you have a friend who is a member, or you can meet someone who is. This aspect of your preparation is likely to be more effective if your relationship with the informant extends beyond your research role. In dealing with members of the group as informants, you should take care that your initial discussions do not compromise or limit later aspects of your research. Keep in mind that the impression you make on the informant, the role you establish for yourself, may carry over into your later effort. For example, creating the initial impression that you may be an undercover FBI agent is unlikely to facilitate later observations of the group.

You should also be wary about the information you get from informants. Although they may have more direct, personal knowledge of the subject under study than you do, what they “know” is probably a mixture of fact and point of view. Members of the political group in our example would be unlikely to provide completely unbiased information (so would members of opposing political groups).

Before making your first contact with the student group, then, you should already be quite familiar with it, and you should understand its general philosophical context.

There are many ways to establish your initial contact with the people you plan to study. How you do it will depend, in part, on the role you intend to play. Especially if you decide to take on the role of complete participant, you must find a way to develop an identity with the people to be studied. If you wish to study dishwashers in a restaurant, the most direct method would be to get a job as a dishwasher. In the case of the student political group, you might simply join the group.

Many of the social processes appropriate to field research are open enough to make your contact with the people to be studied rather simple and straightforward. If you wish to observe a mass demonstration, just be there. If you wish to observe patterns in jaywalking, hang around busy streets.

Whenever you wish to make more formal contact with the people, identifying yourself as a researcher, you must establish a rapport with them. You might contact a participant with whom you feel comfortable and gain that person's assistance. In studying a formal group, you might approach the groups' leaders, or you may find that one of your informants can introduce you.

While you'll probably have many options in making your initial contact with the group, realize that your choice can influence your subsequent observations. Suppose, for example, that you're studying a university and begin with high-level administrators. This choice is likely to have a couple of important consequences. First, your initial impressions of the university will be shaped to some extent by the administrators' views, which will be quite different from those of students or faculty. This initial impression may influence the way you observe and interpret events subsequently—especially if you're unaware of the influence.

Second, if the administrators approve of your research project and encourage students and faculty to cooperate with you, the latter groups will probably look on you as somehow aligned with the administration, which can affect what they say to you. For example, faculty members might be reluc-

tant to tell you about plans to organize through the teamsters' union.

In making a direct, formal contact with the people you want to study, you'll be required to give them some explanation of the purpose of your study. Here again, you face an ethical dilemma. Telling them the complete purpose of your research might eliminate their cooperation altogether or significantly affect their behavior. On the other hand, giving only what you believe would be an acceptable explanation may involve outright deception. Your decisions in this and other matters will probably be largely determined by the purpose of your study, the nature of what you're studying, the observations you wish to use, and similar factors, but ethical considerations must be taken into account as well.

Previous field research offers no fixed rule—methodological or ethical—to follow in this regard. Your appearance as a researcher, regardless of your stated purpose, may result in a warm welcome from people who are flattered that a scientist finds them important enough to study. Or, it may result in your being totally ostracized or worse. It probably wouldn't be a good idea, for example, to burst into a meeting of an organized crime syndicate and announce that you're writing a term paper on organized crime.

Qualitative Interviewing

In part, field research is a matter of going where the action is and simply watching and listening. As the baseball star Yogi Berra said, "You can observe a lot by watching"—provided that you're paying attention. At the same time, as I've already indicated, field research can involve more active inquiry. Sometimes it's appropriate to ask people questions and record their answers. Your on-the-spot observations of a full-blown riot will lack something if you don't know why people are rioting. Ask somebody.

We've already discussed interviewing in Chapter 9, and much of what was said there applies to qualitative field interviewing. The interviewing you'll do in connection with field observation, however, is different enough to demand a separate

treatment. In surveys, questionnaires are rigidly structured; however, less structured interviews are more appropriate to field research. As Herbert and Riene Rubin (1995:43) describe the distinction: “Qualitative interviewing design is flexible, iterative, and continuous, rather than prepared in advance and locked in stone.” They elaborate in this way:

Design in qualitative interviewing is iterative. That means that each time you repeat the basic process of gathering information, analyzing it, winnowing it, and testing it, you come closer to a clear and convincing model of the phenomenon you are studying. . . .

The continuous nature of qualitative interviewing means that the questioning is redesigned throughout the project. — (RUBIN AND RUBIN 1995:46, 47)

Unlike a survey, a **qualitative interview** is an interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry but not a specific set of questions that must be asked with particular words and in a particular order. At the same time, it is vital for the qualitative interviewer, like the survey interviewer, to be fully familiar with the questions to be asked. This allows the interview to proceed smoothly and naturally.

A qualitative interview is essentially a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent. Ideally, the respondent does most of the talking. If you’re talking more than 5 percent of the time, that’s probably too much.

Steinar Kvale (1996:3–5) offers two metaphors for interviewing: the interviewer as a “miner” or as a “traveler.” The first model assumes that the subject possesses specific information and that the interviewer’s job is to dig it out. By contrast, in the second model, the interviewer

wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people encountered. The traveler explores the many domains of the country, as unknown territory or with maps, roaming freely around the territory. . . . The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks

questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world.

Asking questions and noting answers is a natural human process, and it seems simple enough to add it to your bag of tricks as a field researcher. Be a little cautious, however. Wording questions is a tricky business. All too often, the way we ask questions subtly biases the answers we get. Sometimes we put our respondent under pressure to look good. Sometimes we put the question in a particular context that omits altogether the most relevant answers.

Suppose, for example, that you want to find out why a group of students is rioting and pillaging on campus. You might be tempted to focus your questioning on how students feel about the dean’s recent ruling that requires students always to carry *The Basics of Social Research* with them on campus. (Makes sense to me.) Although you may collect a great deal of information about students’ attitudes toward the infamous ruling, they may be rioting for some other reason. Perhaps most are simply joining in for the excitement. Properly done, field research interviewing enables you to find out.

Although you may set out to conduct interviews with a reasonably clear idea of what you want to ask, one of the special strengths of field research is its flexibility. In particular, the answers evoked by your initial questions should shape your subsequent ones. It doesn’t work merely to ask preestablished questions and record the answers. Instead, you need to ask a question, listen carefully to the answer, interpret its meaning for your general inquiry, and then frame another question either to dig into the earlier answer or to redirect the person’s attention to an area more relevant to your inquiry. In short, you need to be able to listen, think, and talk almost at the same time.

The discussion of probes in Chapter 9 provides a useful guide to getting answers in more depth without biasing later answers. More generally, field interviewers need the skills to be a good listener. Be more interested than interesting. Learn to say things like “How is that?” “In what ways?” “How do you mean that?” “What would be an example of that?” Learn to look and listen expectantly, and let the person you’re interviewing fill in the silence.

At the same time, you can't afford to be a totally passive receiver. You'll go into your interviews with some general (or specific) questions you want answered and some topics you want addressed. At times you'll need the skill of subtly directing the flow of conversation.

There's something we can learn in this connection from the martial arts. The aikido master never resists an opponent's blow but instead accepts it, joins with it, and then subtly redirects it in a more appropriate direction. Field interviewing requires an analogous skill. Instead of trying to halt your respondent's line of discussion, learn to take what he or she has just said and branch that comment back in the direction appropriate to your purposes. Most people love to talk to anyone who's really interested. Stopping their line of conversation tells them that you are not interested; asking them to elaborate in a particular direction tells them that you are.

Consider this hypothetical example in which you're interested in why college students chose their majors.

You: What are you majoring in?

RESP: Engineering.

You: I see. How did you come to choose engineering?

RESP: I have an uncle who was voted the best engineer in Arizona in 1981.

You: Gee, that's great.

RESP: Yeah. He was the engineer in charge of developing the new civic center in Tucson. It was written up in most of the engineering journals.

You: I see. Did you talk to him about your becoming an engineer?

RESP: Yeah. He said that he got into engineering by accident. He needed a job when he graduated from high school, so he went to work as a laborer on a construction job. He spent eight years working his way up from the bottom, until he decided to go to college and come back nearer the top.

You: So is your main interest civil engineering, like your uncle, or are you more interested in some other branch of engineering?

RESP: Actually, I'm leaning more toward electrical engineering—computers, in particular. I

started messing around with microcomputers when I was in high school, and my long-term plan is . . .

Notice how the interview first begins to wander off into a story about the respondent's uncle. The first attempt to focus things back on the student's own choice of major ("Did you talk to your uncle . . .?") fails. The second attempt ("So is your main interest . . .?") succeeds. Now the student is providing the kind of information you're looking for. It's important for field researchers to develop the ability to "control" conversations in this fashion.

Herbert and Riene Rubin offer several ways to control a "guided conversation," such as the following:

If you can limit the number of main topics, it is easier to maintain a conversational flow from one topic to another. Transitions should be smooth and logical. "We have been talking about mothers, now let's talk about fathers," sounds abrupt. A smoother transition might be, "You mentioned your mother did not care how you performed in school—was your father more involved?" The more abrupt the transition, the more it sounds like the interviewer has an agenda that he or she wants to get through, rather than wanting to hear what the interviewee has to say. — (1995: 123)

Because field research interviewing is so much like normal conversation, researchers must keep reminding themselves that they are not having a normal conversation. In normal conversations, each of us wants to come across as an interesting, worthwhile person. If you watch yourself the next time you chat with someone you don't know too well, you'll probably find that much of your attention is spent on thinking up interesting things to say—contributions to the conversation that will make a good impression. Often, we don't really hear each other, because we're too busy thinking of what we'll say next. As an interviewer, the desire to appear interesting is counterproductive. The interviewer needs to make the other person seem interesting, by being interested—and is listening

more than talking. (Do this in ordinary conversations, and people will actually regard you as a great conversationalist.)

John and Lyn Lofland (1995:56–57) suggest that investigators adopt the role of the “socially acceptable incompetent” when interviewing. That is, offer yourself as someone who does not understand the situation you find yourself in and must be helped to grasp even the most basic and obvious aspects of that situation: “A naturalistic investigator, almost by definition, is one who does not understand. She or he is ‘ignorant’ and needs to be ‘taught.’ This role of watcher and asker of questions is the quintessential *student* role” (Lofland and Lofland 1995:56).

Interviewing needs to be an integral part of the entire field research process. Later, I’ll stress the need to review your observational notes every night—making sense out of what you’ve observed, getting a clearer feel for the situation you’re studying, and finding out what you should pay more attention to in further observations. In the same fashion, you’ll need to review your notes on interviews, recording especially effective questions and detecting all those questions you should have asked but didn’t. Start asking such questions the next time you interview. If you have recorded the interviews, replay them as a useful preparation for future interviews.

Steinar Kvale (1996:88) details seven stages in the complete interviewing process:

1. *Thematising*: clarifying the purpose of the interviews and the concepts to be explored
2. *Designing*: laying out the process through which you’ll accomplish your purpose, including a consideration of the ethical dimension
3. *Interviewing*: doing the actual interviews
4. *Transcribing*: creating a written text of the interviews
5. *Analyzing*: determining the meaning of gathered materials in relation to the purpose of the study
6. *Verifying*: checking the reliability and validity of the materials
7. *Reporting*: telling others what you’ve learned

As with all other aspects of field research, interviewing improves with practice. Fortunately, it’s something you can practice any time you want. Practice on your friends.

Focus Groups

While our discussions of field research so far have focused on studying people in the process of living their lives, researchers sometimes bring people into the laboratory for qualitative interviewing and observation. The focus group method, which is also called group interviewing, is essentially a qualitative method. It is based on structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews. It allows the researcher/interviewer to question systematically and simultaneously several individuals. Focus group techniques are typically used in marketing research, but not exclusively.

Imagine that you’re thinking about introducing a new product. Let’s suppose that you’ve invented a new computer that not only does word processing, spreadsheets, data analysis, and the like, but also contains a fax machine, AM/FM/TV tuner, CD player, dual-cassette unit, microwave oven, denture cleaner, and coffeemaker. To highlight its computing and coffee-making features, you’re thinking of calling it “The Compulator.” You figure the new computer will sell for about \$28,000, and you want to know whether people are likely to buy it. Your prospects might be well served by focus groups.

In a **focus group**, typically 12 to 15 people are brought together in a room to engage in a guided discussion of some topic—in this case, the acceptability and salability of The Compulator. The subjects are selected on the basis of relevance to the topic under study. Given the likely cost of The Compulator, your focus group participants would probably be limited to upper-income groups, for example. Other, similar considerations might figure into the selection.

Participants in focus groups are not likely to be chosen through rigorous, probability sampling methods. This means that the participants do not statistically represent any meaningful population. However, the purpose of the study is to explore

rather than to describe or explain in any definitive sense. Nevertheless, typically more than one focus group is convened in a given study because of the serious danger that a single group of 7 to 12 people will be too atypical to offer any generalizable insights.

William Gamson (1992) has used focus groups to examine how U.S. citizens frame their views of political issues. Having picked four issues—affirmative action, nuclear power, troubled industries, and the Arab-Israeli conflict—Gamson undertook a content analysis of press coverage to get an idea of the media context within which we think and talk about politics. Then the focus groups were convened for a firsthand observation of the process of people discussing issues with their friends.

Richard Krueger points to five advantages of focus groups:

1. The technique is a socially oriented research method capturing real-life data in a social environment.
2. It has flexibility.
3. It has high face validity.
4. It has speedy results.
5. It is low in cost. — (1988:47)

In addition to these advantages, group dynamics frequently bring out aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals. In a side conversation, for example, a couple of the participants might start joking about the results of leaving out one letter from a product's name. This realization might save the manufacturer great embarrassment later on.

Krueger also notes some disadvantages of the focus group method, however:

1. Focus groups afford the researcher less control than individual interviews.
2. Data are difficult to analyze.
3. Moderators require special skills.
4. Difference between groups can be troublesome.
5. Groups are difficult to assemble.
6. The discussion must be conducted in a conducive environment. — (1988:44–45)

APPLYING THE RESULTS

While the focus group format lends itself to a wide range of research topics and purposes, it has become very popular in the field of market research, allowing researchers to explore public reactions to new and existing products, packaging, and advertising. Moreover, it taps into such attitudes in a social setting, with participants interacting with, and being influenced by, one another—mimicking the products' fate in real life.

In a focus group interview, more than in any other type of interview, the interviewer has to be a skilled moderator. Controlling the dynamic within the group is a major challenge. Letting one interviewee dominate the focus group interview reduces the likelihood that the other subjects will participate. This can generate the problem of group conformity or what Janis called "groupthink," which is the tendency for people in a group to conform with the opinions and decisions of the most outspoken members of the group. Interviewers need to be aware of this phenomenon and try to get everyone to participate fully on all the issues brought up in the interview. In addition, interviewers must resist bringing their own views into play by overdirecting the interview and the interviewees.

While focus group research differs from other forms of qualitative field research, it further illustrates the possibilities for doing social research face-to-face with those we wish to understand. In addition, David Morgan (1993) suggests that focus



To see more on market research,* check out the Survey/Marketing eStore listing at <http://www.streamlinesurveys.com/Streamline/estore/focus.htm>

*Each time the Internet icon appears, you'll be given helpful leads for searching the World Wide Web.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT ANNOTATED WITH RESEARCHER MEMOS

Thursday August 26, 12:00–1:00

R: What is challenging for women directors on a daily experience, on a daily life?

J: Surviving.

R: OK. Could you develop a little bit on that? [I need to work on my interview schedule so that my interviewee answers with more elaboration without having to probe.]

J: Yeah, I mean it's all about trying to get, you know, in, trying to get the job, and try, you know, to do a great job so that you are invited back to the next thing. And particularly since they are so many, you know, difficulties in women directing. It makes it twice as hard to gain into this position where you do an incredible job, because . . . you can't just do an average job, you have to [347] do this job that just knocks your socks off all the time, and sometimes you don't get the opportunity to do that, because either you don't have a good producer or you have so many pressures that you can't see straight or your script is lousy, and you have to make a silk

purse out of sow's hair. You know, you have a lot of extra strikes against you than the average guy who has similar problems, because you are a woman and they look at it, and women are more visible than men . . . in unique positions. [It seems that Joy is talking about the particularities of the film industry. There are not that many opportunities and in order to keep working, she needs to build a certain reputation. It is only by continuing to direct that she can maintain or improve her reputation. She thinks that it is even harder for women but does not explain it.]

R: Hum . . . what about on the set did you experience, did it feel . . . did people make it clear that you were a woman, and you felt treated differently? [I am trying to get her to speak about more specific and more personal experiences without leading her answer]

J: Yeah, oh yeah, I mean . . . a lot of women have commiserated about, you know when you have to walk on the set for the first time, they're all used to working like a well-oiled machine and they say, "Oh, here is the

groups are an excellent device for generating questionnaire items for a subsequent survey.

Recording Observations

The greatest advantage of the field research method is the presence of an observing, thinking researcher at the scene of the action. Even tape recorders and cameras cannot capture all the relevant aspects of social processes. Consequently, in both direct observation and interviewing, it is vital to make full and accurate notes of what goes on. If possible, take notes on your observations while you observe. When that's not feasible, write down your notes as soon as possible afterward.

In your notes, include both your empirical observations and your interpretations of them. In other words, record what you "know" has hap-

pened and what you "think" has happened. Be sure to identify these different kinds of notes for what they are. For example, you might note that Person X spoke out in opposition to a proposal made by a group leader (an observation), that you *think* this represents an attempt by Person X to take over leadership of the group (an interpretation), and that you *think* you heard the leader comment to that effect in response to the opposition (a tentative observation).

Of course, you cannot hope to observe everything; nor can you record everything you do observe. Just as your observations will represent a sample of all possible observations, your notes will represent a sample of your observations. The idea, of course, is to record the most pertinent ones. The accompanying box, "Interview Transcript Annotated with Researcher Memos," provides an ex-

woman, something different” and sometimes they can be horrible, they can resist your directing and they can, they can sabotage you, by taking a long time to light, or to move sets, or to do something . . . and during that time you’re wasting time, and that goes on a report, and the report goes to the front [368] office, and, you know, and so on and so on and so on and so forth. And people upstairs don’t know what the circumstances are, and they are not about to fire a cinematographer that is on their show for ever and ever . . . nor do they want to know that this guy is a real bastard, and making your life a horror. They don’t want to know that, so therefore, they go off, because she’s a woman let’s not hire any more women, since he has problems with women. You know, so, there is that aspect.

[I need to review the literature on institutional discrimination. It seems that the challenges that Joy is facing are not a matter of a particular individual. She is in a double bind situation where

whether she complains or not, she will not be treated equal to men. Time seems to be one quantifiable measurement of how well she does her job and, as observed in other professions, the fact that she is a woman is perceived as a handicap. Review literature on women in high management position. I need to keep asking about the dynamics between my interviewees and the crew members on the set. The cinematographer has the highest status on the set under the director. Explore other interviews about reasons for conflict between them.]

[Methods (note to myself for the next interviews): try to avoid phone interviews unless specific request from the interviewee. It is difficult to assess how the interviewee feels with the questions. Need body language because I become more nervous about the interview process.]

Note: A number in brackets represents a word that was inaudible from the interview. It is the number that appeared on the transcribing machine, with each interview starting at count 0. The numbers help the researcher locate a passage quickly when he or she reviews the interview.

ample given by Sandrine Zerbib from an in-depth interview with a woman film director.

Some of the most important observations can be anticipated before you begin the study; others will become apparent as your observations progress. Sometimes you can make note taking easier by preparing standardized recording forms in advance. In a study of jaywalking, for example, you might anticipate the characteristics of pedestrians that are most likely to be useful for analysis—age, gender, social class, ethnicity, and so forth—and prepare a form in which observations of these variables can be recorded easily. Alternatively, you might develop a symbolic shorthand in advance to speed up recording. For studying audience participation at a mass meeting, you might want to construct a numbered grid representing the different sections of the meeting room; then you could

record the location of participants easily, quickly, and accurately.

None of this advance preparation should limit your recording of unanticipated events and aspects of the situation. Quite the contrary, the speedy handling of anticipated observations can give you more freedom to observe the unanticipated.

You are already familiar with the process of taking notes, just as you already have at least informal experience with field research in general. Like good field research, however, good note taking requires careful and deliberate attention and involves specific skills. Some guidelines follow. (You can learn more from John and Lyn Lofland’s *Analyzing Social Settings* [1995:91–96].)

First, don’t trust your memory any more than you have to; it’s untrustworthy. To illustrate this point, try this experiment. Recall the last three or

four movies you saw that you really liked. Now, name five of the actors or actresses. Who had the longest hair? Who was the most likely to start conversations? Who was the most likely to make suggestions that others followed? Now, if you didn't have any trouble answering any of those questions, how sure are you of your answers? Would you be willing to bet a hundred dollars that a panel of impartial judges would observe what you recall?

Even if you pride yourself on having a photographic memory, it's a good idea to take notes either during the observation or as soon afterward as possible. If you take notes during observation, do it unobtrusively, because people are likely to behave differently if they see you taking down everything they say or do.

Second, it's usually a good idea to take notes in stages. In the first stage, you may need to take sketchy notes (words and phrases) in order to keep abreast of what's happening. Then go off by yourself and rewrite your notes in more detail. If you do this soon after the events you've observed, the sketchy notes should allow you to recall most of the details. The longer you delay, the less likely you'll be able to recall things accurately and fully.

I know this method sounds logical, but it takes self-discipline to put it into practice. Careful observation and note taking can be tiring, especially if it involves excitement or tension and if it extends over a long period. If you've just spent eight hours observing and making notes on how people have been coping with a disastrous flood, your first desire afterward will likely be to get some sleep, dry clothes, or a drink. You may need to take some inspiration from newspaper reporters who undergo the same sorts of hardships then write their stories to meet their deadlines.

Third, you'll inevitably wonder how much you should record. Is it really worth the effort to write out all the details you can recall right after the observation session? The general guideline is yes. Generally, in field research you can't be really sure of what's important and what's unimportant until you've had a chance to review and analyze a great volume of information, so you should record even things that don't seem important at the outset. They may turn out to be significant after all. Also,

the act of recording the details of something "unimportant" may jog your memory on something that is important.

Realize that most of your field notes will not be reflected in your final report on the project. Put more harshly, most of your notes will be "wasted." But take heart: Even the richest gold ore yields only about 30 grams of gold per metric ton, meaning that 99.997 percent of the ore is wasted. Yet, that 30 grams of gold can be hammered out to cover an area 18 feet square—the equivalent of about 685 book pages. So take a ton of notes, and plan to select and use only the gold.

Like other aspects of field research (and all research for that matter), proficiency comes with practice. The nice thing about field research is that you can begin practicing now and can continue practicing in almost any situation. You don't have to be engaged in an organized research project to practice observation and recording. You might start by volunteering to take the minutes at committee meetings, for example. Or just pick a sunny day on campus, find a shady spot, and try observing and recording some specific characteristics of the people who pass by. You can do the same thing at a shopping mall or a busy street corner. Remember that observing and recording are professional skills, and, like all worthwhile skills, they improve with practice.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH

Like all research methods, qualitative field research has distinctive strengths and weaknesses. As I've already indicated, field research is especially effective for studying subtle nuances in attitudes and behaviors and for examining social processes over time. As such, the chief strength of this method lies in the depth of understanding it permits. Whereas other research methods may be challenged as "superficial," this charge is seldom lodged against field research.

Flexibility is another advantage of field research. As discussed earlier, you may modify your field research design at any time. Moreover, you're

always prepared to engage in field research, whenever the occasion should arise, whereas you could not as easily initiate a survey or an experiment.

Field research can be relatively inexpensive as well. Other social research methods may require expensive equipment or an expensive research staff, but field research typically can be undertaken by one researcher with a notebook and a pencil. This is not to say that field research is never expensive. The nature of the research project, for example, may require a large number of trained observers. Expensive recording equipment may be needed. Or you may wish to undertake participant observation of interactions in expensive Paris nightclubs.

Field research has several weaknesses as well. First, being qualitative rather than quantitative, it is not an appropriate means for arriving at statistical descriptions of a large population. Observing casual political discussions in Laundromats, for example, would not yield trustworthy estimates of the future voting behavior of the total electorate. Nevertheless, the study could provide important insights into how political attitudes are formed.

To assess field research further, let's focus on the issues of validity and reliability. Recall that validity and reliability are both qualities of measurements. Validity concerns whether measurements actually measure what they're supposed to rather than something else. Reliability, on the other hand, is a matter of dependability: If you made the same measurement again and again, would you get the same result? Let's see how field research stacks up in these respects.

Validity

Field research seems to provide measures with greater validity than do survey and experimental measurements, which are often criticized as superficial and not really valid. Let's review a couple of field research examples to see why this is so.

"Being there" is a powerful technique for gaining insights into the nature of human affairs in all their rich complexity. Listen, for example, to what this nurse reports about the impediments to patients' coping with cancer:

Common fears that may impede the coping process for the person with cancer can include the following:

- Fear of death—for the patient, and the implications his or her death will have for significant others.

- Fear of incapacitation—because cancer can be a chronic disease with acute episodes that may result in periodic stressful periods, the variability of the person's ability to cope and constantly adjust may require a dependency upon others for activities of daily living and may consequently become a burden.

- Fear of alienation—from significant others and health care givers, thereby creating helplessness and hopelessness.

- Fear of contagion—that cancer is transmissible and/or inherited.

- Fear of losing one's dignity—losing control of all bodily functions and being totally vulnerable. — (GARANT 1980:2167)

Observations and conceptualizations such as these are valuable in their own right. In addition, they can provide the basis for further research—both qualitative and quantitative.

Now listen to what Joseph Howell has to say about "toughness" as a fundamental ingredient of life on Clay Street, a white, working-class neighborhood in Washington, D.C.:

Most of the people on Clay Street saw themselves as fighters in both the figurative and literal sense. They considered themselves strong, independent people who would not let themselves be pushed around. For Bobbi, being a fighter meant battling the welfare department and cussing out social workers and doctors upon occasion. It meant spiking Barry's beer with sleeping pills and bashing him over the head with a broom. For Barry it meant telling off his boss and refusing to hang the door, an act that led to his being fired. It meant going through the ritual of a duel with Al. It meant pushing Bubba around and at times getting rough with Bobbi.

June and Sam had less to fight about, though if pressed they both hinted that they, too, would

fight. Being a fighter led Ted into near conflict with Peg's brothers, Les into conflict with Lonnie, Arlene into conflict with Phyllis at the bowling alley, etc. — (1973:292)

Even without having heard the episodes Howell refers to in this passage, you have the distinct impression that Clay Street is a tough place to live in. That “toughness” comes through far more powerfully through these field observations than it would in a set of statistics on the median number of fist-fights occurring during a specified period.

These examples point to the superior validity of field research, as compared with surveys and experiments. The kinds of comprehensive measurements available to the field researcher tap a depth of meaning in concepts such as common fears of cancer patients and “toughness” (or such as liberal and conservative) that are generally unavailable to surveys and experiments. Instead of specifying concepts, field researchers commonly give detailed illustrations.

Reliability

Field research has, however, a potential problem with reliability. Suppose you were to characterize your best friend's political orientations according to everything you know about him or her. Your assessment of your friend's politics would appear to have considerable validity; certainly it's unlikely to be superficial. We couldn't be sure, however, that another observer would characterize your friend's politics the same way you did, even with the same amount of observation.

In-depth, field research measurements are also often very personal. How I judge your friend's political orientation depends very much on my own, just as your judgment depends on your political orientation. Conceivably, then, you could describe your friend as middle-of-the-road, although I might feel that I've been observing a fire-breathing radical.

As I've suggested earlier, researchers who use qualitative techniques are conscious of this issue and take pains to address it. Individual researchers often sort out their own biases and points of view, and the communal nature of science means that

A QUANDARY REVISITED

Doesn't field research simply involve going where social life is happening and watching it unfold? As we've seen in the chapter, the answer is “yes and no.”

On the one hand, field research is perhaps the most “natural” social research technique. At the same time, casual participant observation of social life involves many implicit assumptions, and subjective observations and analyses are wide open to error. Professional field research is conscious and deliberate, forcing researchers to question their assumptions, see alternatives, and choose carefully among those alternatives. For example, because the participant observer inevitably impacts what's being observed, field researchers need to make careful choices about their relationship to the subjects in their studies. Further, researchers have several paradigms or fundamentally different ways of “simply observing” what's in front of them. Certain field research methods involve special skills such as active listening and monitoring. Clearly, just showing up and watching does not make for good field research, though that's where it often begins.

their colleagues will help them in that regard. Nevertheless, it's prudent to be wary of purely descriptive measurements in field research—your own, or someone else's. If a researcher reports that the members of a club are fairly conservative, such a judgment is unavoidably linked to the researcher's own politics. You can be more trusting of *comparative* evaluations: identifying who is more conservative than who, for example. Even if you and I had different political orientations, we would probably agree pretty much in ranking the relative conservatism of the members of a group.

As we've seen, field research is a potentially powerful tool for social scientists, one that provides a useful balance against the strengths and weaknesses of experiments and surveys. The re-

maining chapters of Part 3 present additional modes of observation available to social researchers.

RESEARCH ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH

As I've noted repeatedly, all forms of social research raise ethical issues. By bringing researchers into direct and often intimate contact with their subjects, field research raises ethical concerns in a particularly dramatic way. Here are some of the issues mentioned by John and Lyn Lofland (1995:63):

- Is it ethical to talk to people when they do not know you will be recording their words?
- Is it ethical to get information for your own purposes from people you hate?
- Is it ethical to see a severe need for help and not respond to it directly?
- Is it ethical to be in a setting or situation but not commit yourself wholeheartedly to it?
- Is it ethical to develop a calculated stance toward other humans, that is, to be strategic in your relations?
- Is it ethical to take sides or to avoid taking sides in a factionalized situation?
- Is it ethical to "pay" people with trade-offs for access to their lives and minds?
- Is it ethical to "use" people as allies or informants in order to gain entree to other people or to elusive understandings?

Planning and conducting field research in a responsible way requires attending to these and other ethical concerns.

Main Points

- Field research involves the direct observation of social phenomena in their natural settings. Typically, field research is qualitative rather than quantitative.
- In field research, observation, data processing, and analysis are interwoven, cyclical processes.
- Field research is especially appropriate to topics and processes that are not easily quantifiable, that are best studied in natural settings, or that change over time. Among these topics are practices, episodes, encounters, roles, relationships, groups, organizations, settlements, social worlds, and lifestyles or subcultures.
- Among the special considerations involved in field research are the various possible roles of the observer and the researcher's relations with subjects. As a field researcher, you must decide whether to observe as an outsider or as a participant, whether or not to identify yourself as a researcher, and how to negotiate your relationships with subjects.
- Field research can be guided by any one of several paradigms, such as naturalism, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, case studies and the extended case method, institutional ethnography, and participatory action research.
- Preparing for the field involves doing background research, determining how to make contact with subjects, and resolving issues of what your relationship to your subjects will be.
- Field researchers often conduct in-depth interviews that are much less structured than those conducted in survey research. Qualitative interviewing is more of a guided conversation than a search for specific information. Effective interviewing involves skills of active listening and the ability to direct conversations unobtrusively.
- To create a focus group, researchers bring subjects together and observe their interactions as they explore a specific topic.
- Whenever possible, field observations should be recorded as they are made; otherwise,

they should be recorded as soon afterward as possible.

- Among the advantages of field research are the depth of understanding it can provide, its flexibility, and (usually) its lack of costs.
- Compared with surveys and experiments, field research measurements generally have more validity but less reliability. Also, field research is generally not appropriate for arriving at statistical descriptions of large populations.
- Conducting field research responsibly involves confronting several ethical issues that arise from the researcher's direct contact with subjects.

Key Terms

naturalism	extended case method
ethnography	institutional ethnography
ethnomethodology	participatory action research
grounded theory	qualitative interview
case studies	focus group

Review Questions

1. Think of some group or activity you participate in or are very familiar with. In two or three paragraphs, describe how an outsider might effectively go about studying that group or activity. What should he or she read, what contacts should be made, and so on?
2. Choose any two of the paradigms discussed in this chapter. How might your hypothetical study from item 1 be conducted if you followed each? Compare and contrast the way these paradigms might work in the context of your study.
3. To explore the strengths and weaknesses of experiments, surveys, and field research, choose a general research area (e.g., prejudice, political orientation, education) and write brief descriptions of studies in that area that could be conducted using each of these three methods. In each case, why is the chosen method the most appropriate for the study you describe?

4. Return to the example you devised in response to item 1 above. What five ethical issues can you imagine having to confront if you were to undertake your study?
5. Using the Web, find a research report using the grounded theory method. Briefly, what are the study design and main findings?

Additional Readings

- Denzin, Norman K., and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. 1994. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This handbook is an extensive collection of articles covering issues regarding the wide field of qualitative research. This book also exists in three volumes: Vol 1. *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*; Vol 2. *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*; and Vol. 3. *Interpreting Qualitative Materials*.
- Emerson, Robert M., ed. 1988. *Contemporary Field Research*. Boston: Little, Brown. A diverse and interesting collection of articles on how field research contributes to understanding, the role of theory in such research, personal and relational issues that emerge, and ethical and political issues.
- Gubrium, Jaber F., and James A. Holstein. 1997. *The New Language of Qualitative Method*. New York: Oxford University Press. This book provides the necessary foundations for understanding some of the main approaches or traditions in qualitative field research.
- Johnson, Jeffrey C. 1990. *Selecting Ethnographic Informants*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. The author discusses the various strategies that apply to the task of sampling in field research.
- Kelle, Udo, ed. 1995. *Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis: Theory, Methods, and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. An international group of scholars report on their experiences with a variety of computer programs used in the analysis of qualitative data.
- Kvale, Steinar. 1996. *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. An in-depth presentation of in-depth interviewing. Besides presenting techniques, Kvale places interviewing in the context of postmodernism and other philosophical systems.
- Lofland, John, and Lyn Lofland. 1995. *Analyzing Social Settings*, 3rd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. An excellent presentation of field research methods from beginning to end. This eminently readable book manages successfully to draw the links between the

logic of scientific inquiry and the nitty-gritty practicalities of observing, communicating, recording, filing, reporting, and everything else involved in field research. In addition, the book contains a wealth of references to field research illustrations.

Morgan, David L., ed. 1993. *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

This collection of articles on the uses of focus groups points to many aspects not normally considered.

Shaffir, William B., and Robert A. Stebbins, eds. 1991.

Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Several field research practitioners discuss the nature of the craft and recall experiences in the field. Here's an opportunity to gain a "feel" for the method as well as learn some techniques.

Shostak, Arthur, ed. 1977. *Our Sociological Eye: Personal Essays on Society and Culture*. Port Washington, NY: Alfred.

An orgy of social scientific introspection, this delightful collection of first-person research accounts offers concrete, inside views of the thinking process in sociological research, especially field research.

Silverman, David. 1999. *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book focuses on the process of collecting and interpreting qualitative data.

Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

This is a very important book to read before data collection and during data analysis if you choose to take a grounded theory approach.

Uwe, Flick. 1998. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*.

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This book provides a good entrance to the large field of qualitative research.

Multimedia Resources



The Wadsworth Sociology Resource Center: Virtual Society

<http://sociology.wadsworth.com/>

Visit the companion Web site for the second edition of *The Basics of Social Research* to access a wide

range of student resources. Begin by clicking on the Student Resources section of the book's Web site to access the following study tools:

- eBabbie Resource Center
- Planning a Research Project
- Doing Data Analysis
- Statistics Review
- Flash Cards
- Internet Links and Exercises
- InfoTrac College Edition: Exercises
- Quizzes

Visit the **eBabbie Resource Center** for an overview of each chapter and helpful online tutorials. Find information on budgeting and step-by-step examples of model research projects at **Planning a Research Project**. Learn how to use quantitative and qualitative data analysis programs at **Doing Data Analysis**, and brush up on your statistics at **Statistics Review**. You can also further your study by accessing **Internet Links and Exercises** related to chapter materials, **Flash Cards**, **Quizzes**, and many other learning tools.



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- Ethnomethodology
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- Participant observation
- Participatory action research

