11 Watch and Learn: Field Research

Think for a moment. What's the best way to *really* know what it means to be President of the United States, a New York City firefighter, or a cast member of a Broadway production? If you're thinking you'd like to spend some time with these people and follow them through their daily routines, you're thinking like a field researcher. Those dedicated to field research see much wisdom in pursuing the advice of "walking a mile in someone's shoes" in order to know something about their life. In essence, this "put yourself in my place" way of knowing is the heart of field research. In pursuing this data collection strategy, we take our study to the natural "field" or setting of our research topic and we literally watch (and listen to) what happens.

Of all the data collection techniques available to the social researcher, field studies may have the most intuitive appeal. After all, field research is essentially about people-watching. It entails spending time observing the normal or natural flow of social life in some specific social/cultural setting. To some degree, all of us have engaged in such observations at one time or another. People-watching is a good way to pass the time and/or amuse ourselves during long layovers at airports or long lines at motor vehicle agencies. Few of us, however, have taken our people-watching as seriously as the field researcher. **Field research** involves an extremely systematic and rigorous study of everyday life. Field researchers are committed to long-term observation. To maximize their understanding of some social phenomenon, they will actively seek out interactions with specific people or in specific places and they will intentionally vary the times and days of their field experiences. Their observations will be conducted in the interest of answering specific research questions. Field researchers are also committed to a full documentation of their observations by recording complete field notes.

Location, Location, Location ... and More

To fully appreciate field research, we must view it with an eye to two separate research endeavors. First, field research entails doing our research in a *certain place or setting* – i.e., the natural setting of the phenomenon being studied. Our field studies may take us to the halls of Congress, an urban police precinct, or to a corner of a local neighborhood. Field research also entails a *certain way of knowing* – i.e., knowing that comes from immersing ourselves in the social world of our research setting. It is this feature of field research that sees the researcher trying to understand the meaning of events from the perspective of those being studied. While both of these features are defining ones for field studies, they are also challenging ones.

In *entering* the natural setting of some social phenomenon, the researcher must confront access problems. Not all settings will welcome the researcher with open arms. Successful entry requires the researcher to do some background homework about the setting and its local culture. The researcher might actually need the assistance of a gatekeeper for gaining access. **Gatekeepers** are individuals who can give the researcher legitimate access to the field. In entering the field, the researcher must also take great care not to disrupt its "naturalness." Indeed, if the setting significantly changes by virtue of the researcher's presence, the purpose of our research is seriously undermined. This problem of disrupting the routine is known as **reactive effects** in field research and it demands some careful attention in the planning stages of our research.

In *immersing* oneself in the field, researchers must decide the level of involvement they will assume. To what extent will they participate in the setting? They must also decide whether or not they will disclose their research agenda. Will their research activities be open or covert? The following levels of involvement – complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, and complete participant – each take somewhat different stands on the involvement and disclosure issues. All levels have both advantages and disadvantages.

Complete observer In entering the field as a complete observer, the researcher minimizes his or her immersion in the social phenomenon being investigated. This strategy is really one of *non-participatory* observation. The researcher tries to remain as detached as possible from the situation being observed. Complete observation may be accomplished via some kind of hidden observation (e.g., watching children play through a two-way mirror) or via simple detachment (observing hospital

emergency room behaviors by sitting in the waiting area). Ideally, field subjects will be totally unaware of the ongoing research efforts. Consequently, researchers who hope to keep the reactive effects of field research to a minimum frequently adopt the complete observer role. The shortcoming of this strategy, however, is somewhat apparent. Critics argue that the distance and detachment implied in this role limit the amount of insight or understanding that can be achieved by the researcher. Some would also argue that any kind of hidden or disguised observation raises ethical dilemmas since research subjects are denied the chance to give their informed consent to the research project. Sometimes the choice of complete observation is a forced one given the clear boundary between researcher and subjects. Consider for instance, Barbara Myerhoff's (1989) observation study of a senior citizen's group in California or Barrie Thorne's (2001) study of children's playgroups. In both instances, natural age differences precluded the researchers from adopting a decidedly participatory stance.

Observer as participant   With this level of involvement, the researcher acknowledges his or her research agenda and participates to a limited degree in the field. By way of example, you might envision a researcher studying a weight watchers group who tells the members about the research project and who attends weekly meetings but doesn't commit to the dieting process. This strategy is more ethically defensible than the complete observer but it has a drawback. In going public about one's research agenda and in limiting one's involvement, field interaction may be strained and once again insight might be limited or superficial. There is also a greater chance that this level of involvement will encounter stronger reactive effects. Still, there are many field projects where the researcher's involvement is necessarily limited. For a good example of such restricted involvement, see Anderson and Calhoun's work on male street prostitutes (2001). The authors readily acknowledge that "learning from doing" was not a legitimate option for them.

Participant as observer   The participant as observer becomes fully involved with the group or setting under study and is totally open about his or her research agenda. In entering the field this way, the researcher is trying to maximize participation while maintaining the ethical high ground. Initially, there may be some concern that the known research agenda will encourage a reactive effect. Sincere involvement, however, can effectively offset these effects. Many researchers who have adopted this level of involvement maintain that, with time and effort, they come to enjoy full acceptance in the field. A good illustration of this level of involvement is found in Mitchell Duneier's work (2001) on New York

City street vendors. Duneier devoted considerable time to "clearing" his research interest and project with other key vendors before he ventured into street sales himself. Indeed, Duneier observed street vendors for two years and completed a book manuscript about the everyday life of vendors before deciding to start his project anew. He felt his work needed "more" than observation alone was providing and eventually he ventured into working street sales himself.

Complete participant In adopting the complete participant role, the researcher *appears* to be a genuine participant in the group or setting being observed. In effect, researchers acting as complete participants are involved in *covert* research – they only let research subjects see them as participants, not as researchers. This level of involvement is often justified as necessary for gaining access to controversial or illicit research settings. Consider Laud Humphreys' (1969) study of tearooms – public rest rooms used for homosexual encounters. Humphreys posed as a "watchqueen" at rest rooms in public parks in order to observe fleeting homosexual acts between strangers. (Watchqueens are lookouts who warn participants of approaching police.) Humphreys defended his covert tactics on the grounds that a "declared" researcher would never have been permitted to observe this activity. Following the same line of reasoning, this level of involvement is also pursued in the interest of lessening reactive effects. While it is true that a covert researcher *should not* destroy the natural dynamics of the field under investigation, it is nonetheless true that the complete participant will inevitably affect the social setting. As apparently genuine group members, complete participants will influence group interactions. Perhaps more than any other level of involvement, the complete participant also runs the risk of "going native" and abandoning their scientific stance. The full immersion necessary to achieve complete participation could very well encourage a loss of objectivity on the part of the researcher. Lastly, since complete participation is a covert activity, critics fault it on ethical grounds.

Fieldwork Tasks

The most basic task of field research is to provide descriptions of the social realm or setting being studied. This description process is not as easy or straightforward as it may sound. Indeed, the biggest challenge is often that of deciding just what the researcher should describe. Description is necessarily a selective and a partial process. In large measure, the

process of looking and recording will be guided by the researcher's theoretical and conceptual assumptions. It will also be influenced by the researcher's own history, biography, and training.

The descriptions provided should be **thick descriptions** (Geertz 1973). Thick descriptions are highly detailed accounts of what the researcher has experienced in the field. In providing thick descriptions the researcher is trying to explicate the connection between behaviors or events and their contexts. A concentrated effort is made to identify the *subjective* meanings people attribute to events. The researcher tries to describe social life from an "inside perspective" and to adopt what Matza calls an "appreciative" stance (1969). In so doing, the researcher strives to understand and communicate not only *what* happens but also *how field subjects themselves interpret and understand what happens*. The following quote from Goffman about his year of field work at St Elizabeths Hospital (a federal mental institution) in Washington, DC speaks to this point:

> My immediate object in doing field work at St. Elizabeths was to try to learn about the social world of the hospital inmate, as this world is subjectively experienced by him ... I passed the day with patients ... It was then and still is my belief that any group of persons – prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients – develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject. (Goffman 1961: ix–x)

Description is the *initial* task of field research. The goal of providing thick descriptions of field events and behaviors is to transcend particular events and identify general patterns or regularities of social life. Consequently, field research typically has an inductive quality to it that is different from survey research. In survey research, theoretical ideas are often stated and then "tested" via survey questions. In field research, the researcher starts first by closely examining the social world. These observations are then used to inductively arrive at theoretical propositions that are informed by the field observations. In following this inductive path, field research is most often associated with developing or building "grounded theory." As the name implies, grounded theory is "grounded" or based in the setting being studied (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Another distinctive feature of field research is its ongoing, dynamic approach to data analysis. In survey research, data collection and analysis are separate stages of work: i.e., first we administer our questionnaires

and collect our data and then we enter that data into our computers for analysis. Analysis starts only after the data collection phase is complete. In field research, this separation between data collection and analysis doesn't exist. Analysis occurs at all points of the field study. As theoretical "leads" appear in the field, the field researcher is well advised to follow up on them. Theoretical hunches from yesterday may direct our data collection decisions of tomorrow. Analysis is ongoing and can occur as data are collected, recorded, and reflected upon.

Informal Interviews

Observation work is not restricted to what we see. Much understanding is gained by listening to the noises, sounds, talk, and conversations of the field. An important tool for gaining this level of understanding is the **informal interview.** These interviews are usually less structured than the interviews discussed in Chapter 10. This is largely due to the dynamic nature of field studies. The researcher may make an on the spot decision to ask questions as the need or opportunity arises. In the early phases of field research, the informal interview may simply be a series of broad overview or general information questions. As the research progresses, questions will become more focused and specific (Bailey 1996). As the study progresses, informal interviews are also likely to be supplemented by intensive, in-depth interviews with key members of the field.

Carol Bailey (1996) notes that a key difference between formal and informal interviews is that the latter are really *reciprocal exchanges.* There's a give and take between the researcher and field members – both engage in the sharing of ideas, information, emotions, etc. This reciprocal sharing is particularly important in field studies because it helps establish and maintain rapport. It also helps to eliminate the typical hierarchical nature of relationships between researchers and respondents. Informal interviews are also interested in capturing the context of talk and conversation. In this way, they help to advance the cause of thick description.

Notes

While field research is a rather dynamic undertaking, there is one essential constant in such studies: field notes. In survey research, our data winds up in the form of a data file – i.e., a block of numbers that represent respondents' answers to survey questions. In contrast, the data file of

field research consists of recorded **field notes** – i.e., the words or images used to record one's field observations. Our research findings or conclusions will be based on a careful analysis of what it is we have logged in our field notes. Anyone who isn't interested in faithfully recording field notes should *not* be doing field research. No field notes, no data, no go. It's as simple as that.

In the best of all possible worlds, field notes consist of a faithful recording of what we observe while in the field. In effect, then, field notes depend on our ability to "pay attention" – on our ability to watch, listen, smell, feel, and sense what's going on around us. How much of what we observe should be recorded? As much as possible – in field research more is better than less. Given its dynamic nature, it may be weeks or even months before field researchers discover the significance of their observations. Consequently, the more details recorded in one's field notes, the better one's documentation of insights or conclusions.

In light of the importance of logging field notes, you might now be thinking that researchers must enter the field with recording equipment in hand. And in a sense, this is true. Field researchers would never want to be in the field without their powers of observation "activated" or without a trusty notebook and pen. Yet, the actual recording of field information can be a tricky undertaking. Recall the point made earlier: field researchers are loath to do anything that might disrupt the naturalness of the setting being observed. Consequently, making the recording process an obvious or explicit one is not a good idea. It is not unusual, in fact it is rather typical, for the actual recording of full field notes to be delayed until *after* the researcher has left the field. Two of the premier authorities on field research, John and Lyn Lofland (1995), recommend that field researchers master two techniques that will make note-taking as unobtrusive yet as accurate as possible: the taking of mental notes and jotted notes.

With the practice of **mental notes**, the field observer tries to mentally capture or "freeze" a moment or event. The researcher makes a concerted effort to draw as detailed a mental picture as possible for later recording. Taking **jotted notes** is the practice of recording short but evocative words or phrases that will serve as cues to fuller ruminations once one has left the field. To minimize any disruption of the natural flow, jotted notes are best recorded as inconspicuously as possible, A researcher observing the interactions in a neighborhood bar might make jotted notes while appearing to doodle on napkins or beer coasters. The idea behind both mental notes and jotted notes is to develop skills that will support the practice of recording fuller notes once the researcher has left the field.

While the exact content of field notes will inevitably vary from one study to the next, there are essentially five elements that should be included in all notes (Lofland & Lofland 1995):

- a basic record of each observation period,
- afterthoughts and previously forgotten observations,
- ideas for analysis,
- the researcher's personal impressions and/or emotional reactions,
- notes or ideas for future observations.

Basic record   The basic record offers a running, chronological account of all research activities. It should include a detailed description of both the setting and the people in those settings. In describing settings, particular attention should be given to the exact physical layout of the setting (providing a diagram or photos is a good idea), as well as to the colors, furnishings, and lighting of the setting. If you have any doubts as to the significance of this kind of information, imagine what understanding would be lost if you weren't able to consider how the physical environment of a nursing home or a hospital influences the interactions that take place there. Descriptions of settings should also detail the smells and the sounds of settings. (Again, think of the hospital and the significance of this kind of data.) In addition to describing the physical environment, the basic record should also include a physical and social description of the main players in the field. How many people are there? How do they occupy the space? What do they look like? What information do they communicate to others via their clothing, hairstyles, accessories, or other "props"? How do they behave? What are the lines of interaction between players? Who are the social isolates and the social butterflies? What kind of verbal and nonverbal communication is taking place? Is there a special language of the setting? Particular care should be taken when recording talk and conversation. Lofland and Lofland (1995) recommend developing a system where it is quite clear whether the notes are recording paraphrases vs. exact quotes of others or whether the notes are recording the researcher's own thoughts and reflections. Finally, basic record entries should always include the date and time span of each observation session.

Afterthoughts   As hard as we might try, it is unlikely that we will faithfully record everything from an observation session immediately afterwards. Sometimes we will find ourselves remembering events or episodes at a later time. These lapses should not go unrecorded. Instead they should become part of the record as soon as we recall them. As the

events are recalled, care should be taken to fill in details from the original time line.

Ideas for analysis   While in the process of writing up field notes, the field researcher will surely have some flashes of insight into possible patterns emerging in the data. These ideas should be recorded as they occur and reviewed as observations continue. These insights might prove to be rich fodder for more rigorous analysis.

Personal impressions and emotional reactions   Recording one's personal feelings may seem at odds with the objective mission of scientific research. Yet, making such notes part of the record is what allows the researcher to consider precisely how our subjective states may taint or color our "objective" reading of situations. The tone that characterizes a given event may be more a function of the researcher's mood than a genuine aspect of the field experience being described.

Notes for future observations   This last standard feature of field notes might best be thought of as a running "to do" list. As the researcher concludes the latest set of notes, she or he should explicitly list those things that still need to be done in future sessions: i.e., interviews with key players, observations of special events, first-hand encounters of field ceremonies or rituals, etc. Items that remain from previous lists should be carried over onto subsequent lists. As one's field work progresses, this "to do" list should grow smaller and smaller. Indeed, the size of the list may be taken as a rough indicator of the time line for a field project. When there's relatively little left to do, the researcher should be preparing to leave the field and devoting more attention to final analysis and write-ups.

The commitment to field notes must be strong. The time delay between observation and recording sessions should be kept to a minimum (we should never let more than a day go by between sessions). The Loflands have suggested that for any one hour of observation, one should be prepared to record up to 13 pages of notes (Lofland & Lofland 1984). While others may find this 13 to 1 ratio extreme, it is still widely accepted that one should spend more time writing up one's field notes than one actually spent in the field. If all of this sounds like more work than you care to do, then stand forewarned that field research may not be the data collection strategy for you.

Files

As we stated earlier, the content of field notes constitutes the raw material for data analysis. But given the fact that field notes are likely to yield

pages and pages and pages for analysis, how should the field researcher proceed? One essential technique is the creation of files. There are essentially four different types of files that enable the researcher to transform field notes into meaningful and useful categories.

Chronological files organize the full record of all thick descriptions in a series of folders ordered along a logical time line. For instance, the researcher might create a series of folders organized by each week of observation. These files should help the researcher "see" the big picture of the research project. They should also help the researcher "see" any change over time. Finally, chronological files, since they contain a full listing of all thick descriptions, should help the researcher see all events in context.

Analytical files are created in order to help the researcher make sense of the data. As indicated in the previous section on field notes, ideas for analysis should be recorded for each observation period. These ideas or hunches or themes that might be productive leads for analysis should subsequently each receive their own folders. The folders would then be filled with all *pertinent* entries from the field notes. Unlike the chronological file, the analytical files will be "cut and paste" files. That is, these files will not be a source of the full record of observations. Rather, they will only contain notes that illustrate the idea or theme of a particular folder. While the specific field experience will certainly suggest some topics for analytical files, folders are often established for main concepts of sociology: norms, roles, values, conflict, interactions, groups, etc.

Mundane files organize all the information from your field notes into the most obvious categories. Bailey (1996) suggests that these files consist of the "people, places, events, and things" of one's field observations. The field researcher should consider establishing a separate folder for each major player in the field. Major events or field episodes should have their own folder. If observations varied by morning, afternoon, and evening hours, each time period should have its own mundane folder. Like analytical files, mundane files will consist of "cut and paste" entries – i.e., pertinent entries will be culled from the entire field record and filed in the relevant folder. The idea behind mundane files is to create a system that will allow the researcher to access all information about major categories as quickly as possible.

Methodological files would contain any and all notes about one's research procedures. Notes on how the researcher selected the field site, decided on observation periods, selected key informants, made sampling decisions, etc. should all be found in these files. These files will prove

most relevant during the write-up phase of research when one needs to justify or explain or elaborate on various methodological strategies and decisions.

The creation of files, like the recording of notes, deserves the most serious attention of the field researcher. The good news is that in creating files, the researcher is actively involved in the analysis of field data. In identifying the various folders and thinking about the appropriate placement of entries, the researcher is doing the work of analysis. *Understanding* what one has seen in the field *requires* the researcher to engage the data in this way. In a very real sense, the more the researcher puts into field notes and files, the more she or he will get out of them. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

The Validity of Field Research

If you are reading this book from beginning to end, you may now be wondering how field research measures up on the various validity issues: measurement, causal and external.

For some, there is no better way of empirically documenting the world around us than through natural observational methods. As the opening paragraph of this chapter suggests, much understanding can come from going to your research subjects and spending time in their terrain. Measuring parental love by watching parent–child interactions over time and under a variety of circumstances may offer a degree of accuracy that can't be matched by questions or indexes designed to measure parental love "on paper." And because of its extended time commitment and its attention to details, field work is strong on some of the essential ingredients for the process-analysis of idiographic causal research. Field researchers are present to witness the unfolding of events and outcomes. And while some might be quick to give field research low grades in terms of external validity, such judgments are really misguided. Indeed, by making careful sampling decisions – i.e., by increasing the number or the variety of observations made in one's study – the field researcher may be able to make some informed generalizations. Of course, the accuracy of such generalizations can be directly tested by careful replication. By repeating one field study in other settings or with other groups, the researcher can directly address the generalizability of a given set of research findings.