

Observational Studies

Participant Observation

Observation and Participant Observation

- **Some concepts**
 - observation more generally vs. participant observation
 - field research
 - ethnography, ethnographic research

- **Researchers' role (Raymond Gold)**
 - varies from open to covert
 - for ethical reasons, open role is the norm, but
 - how about studying neonatists?

Process in broad terms

- **Before field phase**
 - (1) *Defining research questions*
 - (2) *Choosing the site*
 - The site should be the best "laboratory animal" you can get
 - remember safety!

- **Entering the field**

- various places require different tactics
 - public places, formal organizations, informal groups and communities

- **Leaving the field**

- "saturation"
 - when we do not find anything new anymore
 - don't be lazy!
 - € informs decision a lot
 - what is your relationship to the site after field work:
 - these can vary from friendships to consulting

– The question of "going back to the field"

Writing notes

- **A Main Instrument: The research diary**

- the single most crucial thing in observational studies is the quality of field notes
- memory is unreliable
 - but in a typical Ph.D. thesis, the time span between making a field note and writing it into a book may be 4 years
 - you have to write notes that are clear enough to be intelligible after 4 years!

- **What to Write**

- **A journalist's memory aid list**

- whom what, where, when, how, (why)

- **James Spradley's list (1980: 78):**

- *place*
- *material environment*
- *actors*
- *action*
- *discrete acts*
- *event* (how activities constitute an event: socializing, program and drinking = a party);
- *time* (action over time)
- *participants' motivations*
- *mood*

- *How to Write*

- be simple, concrete, use your "naive" concepts
- that is, don't write things down using
 - abstract
 - general
 - scientific concepts
- be a naïve empiricist, and be proudly so!

- *When to write*

- while observing
- when this is not possible...
 - (1) write short notes while observing
 - (2) expanded these notes as quickly as possible into complete sentences
 - (3) expand these notes later into a diary

Memos

- Conceptualizing data takes largely place through memos

- after a set of observations, you begin to see things that are interesting
- "How I Learned What a Crock Was"
- you make a note of this recurrent thing, which is a possible pattern

- if you see it more often, and feel that your observation becomes more or less stable...
- it is time to extend your notes into a memorandum
- ...which describes the pattern, thinks about why it exists, describes its variations, meanings, etc.

- later when you realize that

- several memos are facets of the same thing...
 - ...you write another memo that links these memos
 - ...and try to connect them to theory
- (ideally, you should check your data by searching negative/deviant cases)

- ultimately, this process leads you to a more abstract representation of your data - that is, a few main themes that are explained
- this “trunk” becomes the basis of your interpretation

- Types of text in the diary:
 - Field notes
 - theoretical notes (TN)
 - analytic memos (longer, connect TNs)
 - thematic memos (often pretty extensive, providing raw material and structure for chapters)

Exercise for today's break

- go into one of the cafes or the library *in groups of three*
- don't talk: observe the queue for 10 minutes
 - one person observes the q in general
 - one observes how people pick up things from the counter
 - one observes what kinds of things people do at the counter

Sampling

- Sampling
 - You can't observe everything at once
 - What interests observers is determined not just by their interest, but also by their current "sampling" scheme!

- typically sampling proceeds from simple to complex
- first observations are typically useless

- Sampling is usually driven by
 - theoretical or conceptual concerns
 - and cannot be diverted from the observational process

Special questions

- “The fieldworker’s blues”
- emotions in observation
 - a problem or a resource?

- “Writing culture”: problem and solutions, and are they solutions
 - cultural biases. Is ethnography tourism?
Writing compelling but authoritative stories - whose “voice” should count?
 - also, there are new, typically subjective writing conventions
 - however, these are marginal phenomenon even in anthropology

- still, it is good to keep in mind one thing
 - participant observation is *the* prototype of qualitative analysis
 - wonderfully rich method
 - but it is also a boring and an inefficient method

