

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Fieldnotes

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Fieldnotes can be crucial to any qualitative study, regardless of data collection tool or methods used. In fieldnotes, qualitative researchers record in-depth descriptive details of people (including themselves), places, things, and events, as well as reflections on data, patterns, and the process of research. These details form the context and quality control that shape multiple qualitative data points into articulated, meaningful, and integrated research findings.

Fieldnotes are a type of personal journal, written, in Thomas Schwandt's (1997) words, "for an audience of one" (p. 115). Thus, they are unique to each researcher, written in the first person and in a free-flowing, spontaneous manner. David Fetterman suggests separating fieldnotes into two sections—observations and speculative-personal reflections. This separation may be most appropriate in ethnography, in which all data from activities such as participant observation might be collected in fieldnotes in the form of observations. In other types of qualitative methods, such as semi-structured, recorded interviews, data may be defined as verbatim interview recording or transcripts and fieldnotes as the descriptive elements that recordings cannot capture—such as dress; demeanor; gestures; facial expressions; off-mic comments; setting characteristics, such as what is on walls and bulletin boards and the furniture arrangement; weather; smells; back story; and researcher impressions, assumptions, and feelings during time in field; and so on.

It is crucial that fieldnotes be written as soon as possible after each field activity and in as much rich detail as possible. These notes should be done prior to discussing the experience with anyone else, for such discussion may dilute memory. Writing notes is a time-intensive, but [p. 342 ↓] invaluable process, and the quantity of observations and reflections recorded can be quite large. Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen suggest that the researcher jot down a topical, sequential outline as soon as possible, and then, as soon as possible after leaving the immediate field, write a chronological account of observations and impressions. They counsel that the language of descriptive fieldnotes, in particular, should dissect the world, objectively describing it with rich adjectives rather than with abstract, evaluative, or summative phrases. Thus, instead of describing a "brave and determined Afghan women," one would describe "an Afghan women in her mid-30s, head uncovered, whose voice slows and hardens, forehead furrows, and eyes

narrow as she holds my gaze in hers and describes working for women's rights, despite death threats, in post-Taliban Afghanistan.”

Reflective fieldnotes can be written whenever one muses on the process, findings, problems, patterns, and so on of the study. They capture impressions and the researcher's ongoing analytic process. Reflections often change iteratively over the study course, as is true of most qualitative work, and serve as a record of progress as well as a place to work out problems. Reflective fieldnotes should also document researcher biases, standpoint, dilemmas, possible mistakes, reactions, and responses to fieldwork and participants. Finally, it is important that all fieldnotes be well organized so that memoing, coding, and other analytic techniques can be utilized to draw meaning from this rich qualitative tool.

Fieldnotes Excerpts: First Winter Fieldwork with Afghan Women Refugees

1/1/02 Old Jalojai Refugee Camp, near Peshawar, Pakistan

... electricity had been out for days ... just now it went out again. Someone got a lantern and we talked in the near darkness ... For heat there is a kerosene heater that really smells bad, but you only smell it intermittently ... have to blow it out before sleep so you don't asphyxiate ...

1/3/02

Woke to a brisk morning ... put on coat to use outside bathroom. Cold face washing was bracing but not too bad ... “Shakira” came by early and fussed over me. Talking about finding a warm bathroom, electric blanket, things I don't need and too much trouble ... To distract them, I said what I really needed were warm socks, which I knew

was possible. This led to a day where socks kept appearing. “Zareen” came back with two pairs during the morning. “Shakira” brought me two pairs at lunch ...

1/7/02

2:15 PM:... I have a minute to see where I'm at ... Need more material, different material, but don't know how to get at it. In some ways I have plenty of stories and perspectives. In others I am missing the facts to string it together ...

11:45 PM: I'm having trouble figuring my way around the gaps ... I can't get the confirmation I need ... I'm getting concrete examples, but also ideology. I think I'm taking too many short cuts ... Need to ask about thoughts, feelings, actions. Not “why” questions ...

There's a shorthand to speech that isn't familiar to me ... “Talk to some people” “He accepted” “He didn't dare” Of course “why not?” is the next question, so maybe banning “why” isn't the answer ...

(Added 1/17/02)

I asked later about “accepted” ... It's shorthand for accepted the argument and agreed to change behavior ... “he accepted that women should be educated and agreed that his sister/wife/daughter could attend classes.”

Source: Brodsky, A. E. (2003). *With all our strength: The revolutionary association of the women of Afghanistan*. New York: Routledge.

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See also

- [Data Analysis](#)
- [Fieldwork](#)

- [Reflexivity](#)

Further Readings

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