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Fieldnotes

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Fieldnotes constitute the ethnographic record of ethnographic or participant observation research and are arguably the most essential part of the field research enterprise. Comprising the chronological log of experiences in the field, they include descriptions of people, events, the fabric of the setting, conversations with people, observed interactions, and sequences and duration of events, as well as the researcher's experiences connected to the investigation. It is important, too, that the observer note anything about the general state of him or herself that might have bearing on the form or quality of the data. These notes may also contain interpretations of observed events and interactions and insights into the culture studied. In short, fieldnotes comprise the contents from which the analysis derives.

Fieldnotes should be written up as completely and comprehensively as soon as possible. Researchers generally agree that Fieldnotes are more vivid and detailed the sooner they are recorded. However, in many situations, it is impossible, inconvenient, or inappropriate to record observations immediately. In such cases, it is usual to make temporary notes first, which essentially provide a summary that could be used to write up more detailed notes later. Such condensed notes, [p. 387 ↓] which typically include phrases, single words, and unconnected sentences, can be recorded quickly and even inconspicuously, and serve as memory triggers to help reconstruct an event. Then, the researcher can expand on this condensed version by filling in the details and recalling things that were not recorded on the spot. To be sure, field notes are comprehensive only in the relative sense. Even permanent notes are altered, added to, corrected, and updated as the researcher becomes more familiar with the range of data at his or her disposal and with emerging hypotheses and interpretations.

Labor-intensive and requiring considerable selfdiscipline, some Fieldnotes may, at first, seem obvious and trivial. However, researchers should not assume in advance what kinds of information fall within this domain. At least initially, the observer's mind-set should be that everything occurring in the field is potentially important and, therefore, worth recording. As the research becomes more focused, the researcher is more selective in what is written down.

Because researchers are selective in what is observed and recorded, and the specific words and terminology used, the language employed necessarily, even if

inadvertently, imposes a structure on the social world under study. To mitigate against the obtrusiveness of preconceptions, cultural and otherwise, researchers should record verbatim what people say and avoid writing summaries of people's remarks or restating them in a more familiar language.

Fieldnotes should be reviewed frequently because this process allows them to be corrected and completed. Such a review also assists in the tasks of data categorization and analysis, which are best pursued simultaneously with data collection. Thus, for example, Fieldnotes may contain analytic memos that complement those of a more substantive and methodological nature and that form the core of the preliminary analysis. Such memos may include summaries that are written at the end of a day in the field in which the researcher indicates themes that have emerged and concepts that might be developed, together with preliminary thoughts about the analytic framework. Moreover, the review also provides a guide to areas where additional data are required. If their contribution to the emerging analysis is not considered systematically, and if accumulated for their own sake, Fieldnotes become progressively less useful and, perhaps, even useless.

Generating and organizing Fieldnotes is a personal activity, so researchers rely upon a format that suits their taste and requirements. Generally, it includes some variation of the following: Each set of notes begins with the date, time, and place of observation, and when the notes were recorded; where appropriate, pseudonyms are used for names of people and places; and verbatim descriptions of people, events, and situations should be distinguished from those that are paraphrased. Because the objective is to record information as correctly and quickly as possible, there is little need to be overly concerned with grammar and spelling. The literature includes stylistic suggestions distinguishing between verbatim accounts and those based on reasonable and approximate recall.

Proficiency at writing up Fieldnotes is gained over time and with practice. Experience, however, does not diminish the reality that writing Fieldnotes is tedious, requiring patience and perseverance. However, the work is not characterized solely by drudgery: Writing Fieldnotes is frequently accompanied by flashes of insight, excitement, and understandings about the social world under investigation.

Although most observers traditionally rely on their memories for recording data, it is not unusual for researchers to use recording devices. Despite the absence of absolute rules regarding such practices, a general consensus is that the researcher's obtrusiveness may detract from the quality of the data that are collected, recording devices should be used advisedly, and then only after some measure of familiarity with the setting and its key participants has been achieved.

Prior to the advent of computer programs, the task of categorizing Fieldnotes was arduous. Computer programs for qualitative data can now perform many of the tedious, time-consuming, and mechanical operations associated with traditional analytic procedures as well as allow for the more rapid retrieval of field data. These operations can be performed with greater efficiency and accuracy, thus allowing the researcher to devote more time to the interpretive phase of data analysis. However, in and of itself, the technology adds little to nothing to the organization and analysis of Fieldnotes without the researcher's conceptual input.

Because a good ethnography is only as good as the field notes upon which it is based, it is surprising that published accounts of field research methods pay relatively little attention to how the notes are written and organized. Their importance is underscored by the generally accepted view that field researchers may as **[p. 388 ↓]** well not spend time in the research setting if they fail to record their Fieldnotes in a timely manner.

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