

Chapter 10: Qualitative Field Research

- Topics Appropriate to Field Research
- Special Considerations in Qualitative Field Research
- Some Qualitative Field Research Paradigms
- Conducting Qualitative Field Research
- Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Field Research
- Research Ethics in Qualitative Field Research

Examples of Field Research

- Studying the Satanists (Randall Alfred, 1976)
 - Subject: The Church of Satan based in San Francisco
 - Time period: 1968 - 1973
 - Became a member of the church, was given administrative as well as magical responsibilities, and was appointed to the "ruling" body of the church
- Life in the streets (Liebow, 1967)
 - Subject: Street life of African Americans
 - Made friends with the subjects, recorded what they said, did, and the related contexts
 - Went to places where the subjects would go
 - Helped the subjects by given legal advice

What are the topics appropriate for field research?

- Attitudes and behaviors best understood in a natural setting.
- Social processes over time.

What are the elements of social life that are appropriate to field research?

- Practices: talking, reading a book
- Episodes: divorce, crime, illness
- Encounters: people meeting and interacting
- Role: occupations, family roles
- Relationships: friendships, family
- Groups: cliques, teams, work groups
- Organizations: hospitals, schools
- Settlements: neighborhoods, ghettos
- Social worlds: "wall street", "the sports world"
- Lifestyles (subcultures): urban, homeless

What are the various roles of the researcher in field research?

- Complete participant
 - The researcher's identity and purpose are not known to those being observed in the complete participant role.
- Participant-as-observer
 - The researcher fully participates the social activity, but people being studied know the researcher's identity.
- Observer-as-participant
 - The researcher identifies himself and his purpose, has some interaction but not extensive participation.
- Complete observer
 - The researcher is a complete observer of a social situation without becoming a part of it.

What is reactivity?

- **Reactivity**
 - The problem that the subjects of social research may react to the fact of being studied, thus altering their behavior from what it would have been normally.
 - Reactivity becomes an issue when the researcher has the role of "participant-as-observer" or "observer-as-participant" because in these two cases subjects know they are being studied.
 - Reactivity affects the validity of the research.

What are the major field research paradigms?

- Naturalism
 - Approach to field research based on the assumption that an objective social reality exists and can be observed and reported accurately.
- Ethnography
 - A report on social life that focuses on detailed and accurate description rather than explanation.
- Ethnomethodology
 - An approach to the study of social life that focuses on the discovery of implicit, usually unspoken assumptions and agreements.
- Grounded theory
 - An inductive approach to the study of social life that attempts to generate a theory from the constant comparing of unfolding observations.

What are the major field research paradigms? - Continued

- Case studies
 - In-depth examination of a single instance of some social phenomenon, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang.
- The extended case method
 - Technique in which case study observations are used to discover flaws in and to improve existing social theories.
- Institutional ethnography
 - Research technique in which the personal experiences of individuals are used to reveal power relationships and other characteristics of the institutions within which they operate.
- Participatory action research
 - Approach to social research in which the people being studied are given control over the purpose and procedures of the research; intended as a counter to the implicit view that researchers are superior to those they study.

What are some important aspects of the process of field research?

- How to prepare for the field?
- How to do sampling in field research?
- How to conduct qualitative interviewing?
- What are focus groups?
- How to record observations?

How to preparing for field work?

- In most cases, fill in your knowledge of the subject by doing a literature review.
- Discuss the group you plan to research with an informant.
- Develop an identity with the people to be studied: complete participant – complete observer and roles in between
- Realize that your initial contact with the group can influence your observations.

How to do sampling in field research?

- Nonprobability sampling is common because a sampling frame is usually not available. Any of the following methods can be used.
 - Quota sampling
 - Snowball sampling
 - Deviant cases: Find people different from the rest of the group.
- Problem with generalizability:
 - As with all non-probability sampling, one can never know how representative the sample is. As such, generalizability becomes an issue.

How to conduct qualitative interviews? – Seven stages

1. Thematising: clarify the purpose of the interviews and the concepts to be explored
2. Design: lay out the process through which you will accomplish your purpose
3. Interviewing: do the actual interviews
4. Transcribing: create a written text of the interviews
5. Analyzing: determine the meaning of the material to the topic under study
6. Verifying and checking facts: check the reliability and validity of the material
7. Reporting: tell others what you have learned

What are focus groups?

- Focus group is a group of subjects interviewed together, prompting a discussion.
- The technique is frequently used by market researchers, who ask a group of consumers to evaluate a product or discuss a type of commodity, for example.
- Typically 12-15 people are brought together in a room to engage in a guided discussion of the research topic.

What are the advantages of focus groups?

- Able to capture real-life data in a social environment
- Flexible
- High face validity
- Speedy results
- Low in cost
- May bring up issues researchers have not thought about

What are the difficulties and disadvantages of focus groups?

- Less control than individual interviews.
- Data can be difficult to analyze.
- Moderators must be skilled.
- If more than one group is used on the same topic, difference between groups can be troublesome.
- Groups are difficult to assemble.
- Discussion must be conducted in a conducive environment.

How to take field research notes?

- Don't trust your memory. Take notes while you observe.
- Take sketchy notes in the field and rewrite them later, filling in the details.
- Record everything.
 - Things that don't seem important may turn out to be significant.
- Realize that most of your field notes will not be reflected in your final project.

What are the strengths of field research?

- Permits a great depth of understanding.
- Flexibility - research may be modified at any time.
- Inexpensive
- Has more validity than surveys or experiments.

What are the weaknesses of field research?

- Qualitative and not appropriate for statistical descriptions of populations.
- Has potential problems with reliability since field research methods are often personal.
- Has potential problems with generalizability because samples are quite often not randomly selected.

Think about these questions: Is it ethical?

- To talk to people when they don't know you will be recording their words?
- To get information for your own purposes from people you hate?
- To see a severe need for help and not respond to it directly?
- To be in a situation but not commit yourself wholeheartedly to it?
- To be strategic in your relations with others?
- To take sides or avoid taking sides in a factionalized situation?
- To "pay" people with tradeoffs for access to their lives and minds?
- To "use" people as allies or informants in order to gain entrée to other people or to elusive understandings?

Sample Article

- Salari, Sonia M. & Melinda Rich (2002). Social and environmental infantilization of aged persons: Observations in two adult day care centers. International Journal of Aging and Human Development.
 - Literature review:
 - Societal treatment of old age as a "second childhood", especially in total institutions, which can cause "self mortification (loss of self identity)".
 - Social infantilization can lead to a loss of identity, lowered status, decreased sense of self efficacy, social marginalization, and humiliation, which will further lead to social responses such as withdrawal, aggressive behaviors, adoption of lowered sense of responsibility and even child-like behavior.

- Theoretical framework:
 - Goffman's total institution leading to self mortification
- Research questions:
 - What are the social interaction patterns of elderly persons in the two adult day care centers?
 - How do differing levels of infantilization in the social and environmental settings of the centers lead to varying atmospheres which require adaptation on the part of elderly clients?
 - Do these adaptations have an impact on the client social interaction patterns?

- Mode of observation
 - Non-participant observations
 - Two researchers
 - Total of 80 hours of observation, approximately 40 at each location
 - Observations occurred within a four month period at random times and days, ranging from 7:30am to 6pm Monday through Friday.
 - First center observations in 1989, second center observations in 1996
 - Entry into the center: author contact to the center director

- What are observed?
 - Social interaction patterns
 - Verbal and non-verbal
 - Client to staff, staff to client, client to client, staff to staff
 - Formal activities recorded and counted
 - Infantilization
 - Speech
 - Behavior
 - Activities
 - Social environments (bathroom facility as an example)

- Results:
 - Center A has a great deal of infantilization
 - Language and behavior examples
 - 47 group activities recorded, 74% had some form of infantilization
 - Open style bathroom
 - Center B has more adult-appropriate speech/behavior patterns and physical environment
 - Language and behavior examples
 - 59 group activities recorded, 24 had some form of infantilization
 - Private bathroom

Try this exercise:

- Suppose you are interested in power relationships in hospital settings (e.g., between doctors and nurses, etc.). That is, you suspect doctors have the most power, much more than other medical professionals.
- Answer the following questions about the power dynamics in a medical setting:
 - How would you study power dynamics in a hospital setting from each of the four roles of the field observer (in 4 separate studies, obviously). Explain each scenario.
 - Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of studying power dynamics from each of these 4 roles.
 - Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of examining the issues of power dynamics with field research as opposed to surveys. Make sure you include the issues of reliability and validity.

Read this research article more carefully:

- Salari, Sonia M. & Melinda Rich (2002). Social and environmental infantilization of aged persons: Observations in two adult day care centers. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*
- Think about the process the researchers used. What role did they play? Were there ethical concerns? Could other modes of observation be used for this topic? What would be the pros and cons of using this method? Are the results generalizable?