Qualitative Field Research

The Basics of Social Research
By Earl Babbie

Presented by Karl F. MacDorman
Chapter Outline

- 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
Purpose of Field Research

- Why do we need to perform field research?
Purpose of Field Research

- Often we can best understand attitudes and behaviors in a natural setting.
  - Ecological validity
  - Example: Cleaning up public places
- We can observe social processes over time.
Elements of Social Life 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
Elements of Social Life Appropriate to Field Research

- Groups: cliques, teams, work groups
- Organizations: hospitals, schools
- Settlements: neighborhoods, ghettos
- Social worlds: Wall St., the world of sports
- Lifestyles (subcultures): black, urban, gay, homeless

- What is reactivity?
Elements of Social Life Appropriate to Field Research

- Reactivity
  Participants in social research may react to being studied, thus altering their behavior.

- What are some field research paradigms?
Field Research Paradigms

- Naturalism
- Ethnography
- Ethnomethodology
- Grounded theory
- Case studies and the extended case method
- Institutional ethnography
- Participatory action research

What is naturalism?
Field Research Paradigms

- **Naturalism** – An approach to field research based on the assumption that an objective social reality exists and can be observed and reported accurately.

What is ethnography?
Field Research Paradigms

- **Ethnography** – A report on social life that focuses on detailed and accurate description rather than explanation.
  - The ethnographer may become immersed in a group and setting.
  - Descriptions are collected, organized, and reflected upon in a continuous cycle.
  - Example: Snow and Anderson’s *Street Corner Society*, Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*.

What is ethnomethodology?
Field Research Paradigms

- **Ethnomethodology** – An approach to the study of social life that focuses on the discovery of implicit, usually unspoken assumptions and agreements.
  - People construct reality socially, describing it “as they make sense of it.”
  - Ethnomethodology explains how and why by uncovering interactive patterns that regulate everyday life.
  - Breaching experiments: “How are you?” “In regard to what?” “I was just trying to be polite. I don’t care.”
Field Research Paradigms

- Lawrence Wieder’s *Language and Social Reality: The Case of Telling the Convict Code.*
  - Don’t kiss ass, snitch, or trust staff.
  - A method of moral persuasion and justification.

What is grounded theory?
Field Research Paradigms

- **Grounded Theory** – An inductive approach to the study of social life that attempts to generate a theory from the constant comparing of unfolding observations.
  - Attitude of skepticism (theories are provisional)
  - Follow systematic procedures (for rigor, avoid bias)
  - Often a mixed-method approach

What are case studies and the extended case method?
Field Research Paradigms

- **Case Studies** – In-depth examination of a single instance of some social phenomenon, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang.

- **Extended case method** – Technique in which case study observations are used to discover flaws in existing social theories to improve them.

What is institutional ethnography?
Field Research Paradigms

- **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.

What is participatory action research?
Field Research Paradigms

- **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 is interpretative phenomenological analysis?
Field Research Paradigms

- **Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)** – a methodological tool for the qualitative analysis of a phenomenon based on the experiences of individuals.

How might you prepare yourself to conduct fieldwork?
Preparing for Fieldwork

- Fill in your knowledge of the subject.
- Discuss the group you plan to research with an informant.
- Develop an identity with the people to be studied.
- Realize that your initial contact with the group can influence your observations.

What are the seven stages in interviewing?
Seven Stages of Interviewing

1. Thematizing
2. Design
3. Interviewing
4. Transcribing
5. Analyzing
6. Verifying and checking facts
7. Reporting

What is a qualitative interview?
Interviewing

- **Qualitative interview** – An interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry but not a specific set of questions that must be asked with particular words and in a particular order.

What is a focus group?
Focus Groups

- **Focus Group** – A group of people brought together in a room to engage in guided discussion of a topic.

What are the advantages of a focus group?
Advantages of Focus Groups

- Socially oriented research method
- Flexible
- High face validity
- Speedy results
- Low cost

What are the disadvantages of a focus group?
Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- Less control than individual interviews.
- Data can be difficult to analyze.
- Moderators must be skilled.
- Difference between groups can be troublesome.
- Groups are difficult to assemble.
- Discussion must be conducted in a conducive environment.
- Some individuals may dominate: quick consensus.

How should you take notes?
Guidelines - Taking 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.
Guidelines – Taking Research Notes

- Deborah Gordon’s “Wittgenstein and Ant Watching.”

- What are some strengths of field research?
Strengths of Field Research

- It permits a great depth of understanding.
- It is flexible: research may be modified at any time.
- Inexpensive
- Has more ecological validity than surveys or experiments.

What are some weaknesses of field research?
Weaknesses of Field Research

- Not appropriate for statistical descriptions of populations.
- Has potential problems with reliability, because field research methods are often personal.
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?
Is It Ethical?

- 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?
Is It Ethical?

- To “pay” people with tradeoffs for access to their lives and minds?
- To “use” people as allies or informants to gain entrée to other people or to elusive understandings?