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Introduction to Qualitative Field Research

Betty G. Russell lived with homeless women. She slept in shelters for the homeless, and she ate in soup kitchens. Russell, however, was not homeless; instead, she was a researcher who chose to explore and thus understand the lives of homeless women from their own perspectives. The methodology she used is known as *field research* (Russell, 1991).

Simply stated, field research is the systematic study of ordinary activities in the settings in which they occur. Its primary goal is to understand these activities and what they mean to those who engage in them. To gain this understanding, field researchers collect data by interacting with, listening to, and observing people during the course of their daily lives, usually in some self-contained setting, such as an elementary school classroom, a street corner, a car dealership, or a public housing community.

Just as survey research consists of more than asking a few people a few questions, field research involves much more than hanging out with, talking to, and watching people. Both methods of research are complicated and systematic, with clearly defined procedures to follow. Yet, at the same time, field research requires flexibility, because it can be chaotic, emotional, dangerous, and lacking in rigid rules to guide some aspects of the research process. In fact, luck, ambiguity, time constraints, and feelings often affect the planning, execution, and analysis of field research, making it all the more important for the researcher to be well prepared and trained in this methodology before engaging in it.

2 A GUIDE TO QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH

I highly recommend that before starting your own field research project, you take the time to read the guide in its entirety. Because field research is not conducted in stages, you will benefit from fully understanding the entire process prior to designing your own field research project.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of field research, and then I introduce to you the first of several themes integrated throughout this guide: the effects of status characteristics on the field research process. I hope that after reading this chapter, you will be better able to visualize the “big picture” and thus be more capable of understanding the specific details and instructions offered in subsequent chapters.

Overview

Field research* is the systematic study, primarily through long-term, face-to-face interactions and observations, of everyday life. A primary goal of field research is to understand daily life from the perspectives of people in a setting or social group of interest to the researcher. Field research is classified as a longitudinal research design because data collection can take a long time—usually months or years.

Naturalistic Setting

One of the distinguishing features of field research is where it is conducted. During field research, data are collected in the setting of the phenomenon of interest. For example, in her study of homeless women, instead of asking the women to come to her office, Russell (1991) went directly to them, to the shelters that served as their temporary homes. Field researchers go to myriad locations, from city council meetings to race-tracks, from television stations to beauty pageants. They observe factory workers, dogcatchers, tattoo artists, drug dealers, and flight attendants.

Research conducted “in the field” is referred to as **naturalistic inquiry** because it does not require people in the setting of interest to deviate from their daily routines during the research. Data collected in this way provide a more holistic picture of people and their lives than what could be obtained from asking them to participate in an experiment or complete a survey about everyday events. Instead of looking at a limited number of preselected variables, as survey researchers must do, field researchers derive understanding from the larger, complicated, multifaceted, social,

* Boldface terms in the text are defined in the Glossary.

and historical contexts within which people's lives unfold. Field researchers pay attention to the temporal order of events and to changes over time. They believe that life is, metaphorically, better captured by a movie than by a photograph.

Rather than controlling events, the field researcher attempts to become part of the setting, with the goal of providing in-depth descriptions and analytical understandings of the meanings participants in a setting attach to their interactions and routines. The field researcher does this by becoming directly involved with the people in the setting and personally experiencing parts of their daily lives (Neuman, 1991). For example, Russell (1991) was concerned with how homeless women live from day to day; thus, for her data collection she volunteered for four months at a day shelter, where she could directly observe the women in their roles as residents of the shelters, diners at soup kitchens, participants in social activities, and mothers of children. Russell held babies, poured coffee, and chatted with shelter women. To discover how they found food, where they bathed or did their laundry, and how they coped with the routine and problematic events of their daily lives, she not only observed but also talked to them (Russell, 1991). She wished to know what these women did each day, but she also wanted to explore how they made sense of their lives and how they viewed themselves and other homeless women. It was through her participation at the shelter that Russell gained answers to her questions.

During his field research, Mitch Duneier became involved in the daily activities of street vendors—individuals selling books and magazines—on Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village. He began his research as a customer then moved to an assistant (scavenging magazines from the trash, going for coffee, watching the tables), until he eventually worked as a full-time magazine vendor (Duneier, 1999, p. 11). Duneier's continual presence on the streets over several years allowed him to become privy to events, conversations, and rhythms of life among the vendors and panhandlers.

Over a five-year period, Philippe Bourgois spent hundreds of nights on the streets and in crack houses in East Harlem while conducting his field research. As a result of his immersion in their world, Bourgois was able to gain access to intimate moments in the lives of some of the participants. He

visited [participants'] families, attending parties and intimate reunions—from Thanksgiving dinners to New Year's Eve celebrations. [He] interviewed, and in many cases befriended, the spouses, lovers, siblings, mothers, grandmothers, and—when possible—the fathers and stepfathers of the crack dealers. (1995, p. 13)

He observed, interviewed, and took photographs of them, even one of “Primo feeding cocaine to Caesar on the benches of a housing project courtyard” (p. 101).

Purpose of Research and Research Questions

Although all field research takes place within natural settings, it serves different purposes. It is well suited for, but not restricted to, descriptive or exploratory research. Generating theory is another frequent motivation for engaging in field research. Evaluation researchers and activist researchers are among those who often choose this method to generate data for their projects. Field research is sometimes used in the search for cause-and-effect relationships.

The primary reason for engaging in field research is to answer questions. Without research questions, the researcher—particularly one at the beginning of his or her career—most likely would be adrift in the setting for a long time before stumbling across a focus. Although experienced researchers might enter a setting without research questions and undertake their endeavors successfully, I do not recommend this course of action for undergraduate students—and I have never seen a committee approve a thesis or dissertation proposal without well-articulated research questions.

Field researchers usually begin their study with an overarching question, issue, or problem that leads to more specific research questions. For example, Duneier began his work with a focus on the moral order of the street vendors (1999, p. 9). As his research progressed, it was guided by the question of what relationships or tensions existed between the vendors and those who attempted to regulate the sidewalk space. He later asked even more specific questions, such as why are the informal mechanisms of social control not able to regulate the interactions between the men and women pedestrians (p. 190)?

Some researchers change their original research questions during the course of their work, and it is common to add, refine, or delete questions while in the field. Even though the flexible and emergent nature of fieldwork allows for the modification of research questions while research is on-going, if you are undertaking field research, I recommend that you seek approval from your instructor or graduate committee before you change your research questions.

Data

To answer their research questions, field researchers collect data primarily through systematic observations and interactions. In fact,

observations using sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell are crucial to this type of research. Field researchers sometimes observe at predetermined times; they actively seek out interactions with particular people. Alternatively, the interactions and observations of the field researcher might be more flexible. Frequently, researchers simply try to be around the setting as often as possible. They might not have a standardized checklist of behaviors to observe; rather, the events in the setting determine both the nature of the interactions and what is observed.

In addition to interactions and observations, field researchers sometimes use other methods to gain insight into a setting. **Unstructured, semi-structured, and structured interviews** are common techniques for supplementing observations. For example, Russell (1991) held semistructured interviews with 22 women, 10 more than once, and unstructured interviews with 50–60 women.

Interaction, observation, and interviewing are not the only techniques adopted by the field researcher. Researchers might analyze the content of documents or give out surveys to some individuals in a setting. Russell (1991), for instance, includes in her book the results of a survey she gave to 100 women. As this example illustrates, the data field researchers use can be amenable to statistical analysis, further blurring the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods.

Data collected by the field researcher might also consist of the text of conversations among members in a setting. This type of research is called **conversational analysis**. Although Duneier's (1999) study of the men and women who sold books on the sidewalks of Greenwich Village was not primarily a conversational analysis, he included conversational analysis in an effort to provide additional insight into why some women felt threatened by encounters with one of the men on the sidewalk. Researchers who conduct conversational analysis might tape-record conversations for rigorous analysis, measuring even the briefest of pauses between speakers.

The types of data collected depend on the purposes of the specific field research project and the research questions that drive it. The bulk of data used for analysis by field researchers consists of nonnumeric texts—words, sentences, and observational and interview notes. The data collected by the researcher often result in many pages of observation and **field notes**, as well as transcripts of interviews and conversations.

Analysis

Trying to make sense of the massive amount of data and reducing it to meaningful accounts usually is a difficult, but often interesting, task.

Usually, data from fieldwork are analyzed inductively. Researchers engage in the rigorous process of **coding** as a mechanism for identifying portions of the data potentially useful for analysis. A researcher might then create a typology or develop themes from the data. Some researchers refine their hypotheses on the basis of the data, whereas others highlight key events, divergent findings, daily routines, and important processes. Field researchers often write their final manuscript in the form of engaging narratives that include detailed descriptions and key conceptual and theoretical implications of their work.

Ultimately, the researcher determines what is learned from field research. The researcher asks the questions, conducts the observations, and engages in the interactions. The project's data include the researcher's field notes. The researcher also analyzes the data, interprets them, and creates the final manuscript. Because of the central role played by the researcher in generating and analyzing the data, he or she is referred to as the research instrument. Thus, to a much greater degree than in other forms of research, field research is influenced by the characteristics of the researcher.

For the production of knowledge through field research, the researcher's history, personality, values, training, and status characteristics—gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and social class—become particularly relevant (Warren, 1988). What **participants** in the setting are willing to say and allow the researcher to observe will not be the same for all researchers. In other words, different researchers in the same setting will elicit different information from the participants. Additionally, what the researcher considers important enough to include in the field notes might vary. For example, in field notes, one researcher might highlight a detail that another might overlook or consider irrelevant.

In addition to researchers' personal characteristics informing data collection, they enter into the interpretive process and thus affect what is learned. Because the researcher is so central to this type of research, from the inception of the project to the final manuscript, many field researchers engage in the practice of **reflexivity**.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is, in part, critically thinking about how one's status characteristics, values, and history, as well as the numerous choices one has made during the research, affect the results. As a result of the reflections, sometimes the researcher takes action, such as asking for assistance with

some parts of the research or changing some facet of the research design. Then, in order to provide readers with information that can help them judge the quality of the final manuscript, researchers include relevant parts of the reflections. Whether researchers include their reflections in their final manuscript is often dependent on the paradigm that guides the research.

Paradigms

The procedures for conducting field research are complicated because they depend on the **paradigm** employed by the researcher. For example, some field research is conducted within a **positivist** paradigm, which has a commitment to objectivism, value-free research, and reliability. Alternatively, many field researchers adhere to an **interpretive** paradigm, which holds that social reality is not independent of the social meaning given to it by those in the setting. One of the many differences among the paradigms is the role of values in the research.

Values

The role of values in field research presents an ongoing area of disagreement among practitioners. I am drawn to field research because moral neutrality is not always a methodological requirement. I am among the group of researchers who believe that field research can help illuminate the life experiences of groups who are absent from much research. My hope is to provide insights into what might otherwise have been invisible, while knowing that the experience of others can be at best only represented, not captured, by field researchers. During some research projects, though, my values play a less important role. However, since I know that I am not value neutral in some of the work I conduct, I include a discussion of my value stance in some of my manuscripts.

In contrast, for some researchers, the quest for value neutrality is a hallmark of good qualitative research. Such researchers are less apt to include reflexive statements about values in their final manuscripts.

Final Manuscript

Field researchers usually publish their results in the form of journal articles, master's theses, dissertations, books, or technical reports—the same outlets available to other methodologies. However, the analysis

strategies used and the presentation of the results can look considerably different. For example, dissertations using secondary data often have the chapter headings *Introduction* or *Statement of the Problem, Theory, Literature Review, Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusions*. Although field researchers can use these standard titles, they are less likely to do so. For instance, for her dissertation, Tiffany Chenault (2004) conducted a two-year study of the disjunctions between what was expected of a resident council in a public housing community and what it actually did. Her dissertation chapter headings included *Just Getting Started, The Voices of Rivertown, and Centering the Council*.

Overview Summary

Prior to engaging in it, one can rarely predict the fieldwork experience. Field research can be exciting or tedious, cheap or expensive, easy or difficult. It can result in the creation of a friendship—or the loss of one. The research results might confirm the researcher's expectations or be full of surprises.

Graduate students often say that they feel overwhelmed and lost while conducting field research. They report having almost a constant fear that they did not know what they were doing and felt fairly certain they were not doing it "right." These same students also tell me, though, that at some point their efforts began to make sense. That is the point where most of us who engage in field research start to have fun.

Field research is not restricted to academics or to any one discipline within academia; for example, students in nursing, education, anthropology, management, hospitality and tourism, Africana studies, communications, and sociology all conduct field research. However, different academic disciplines have developed different field research traditions, and there is not always consistency even within a discipline (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, the standards for field research have changed historically, and the exemplars in the early field research literature are methodologically different from those of today. One of the reasons for the diversity within field research lies in its history.

History of Field Research

Writing about the history of field research is challenging because no definitive study has been undertaken into the origins of this strategy of inquiry

(Flick, von Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004), and authors disagree about when it was first done. Some scholars say that field research first appeared at the end of the 18th century; this group takes the position that field research is primarily an academic activity. Others, however, argue that this form of knowledge production existed long before it became the territory of academics.

Those discussing the history of fieldwork often refer to the work of Rosalie Wax. In a chapter in *Doing Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice*, Wax (1971) argues that some of the earliest descriptions of social settings date back to the fifth century B.C. She provides as an example of early fieldwork the report made by Herodotus to his readers that the Scythians collected the scalps of their enemies and made drinking cups from their skulls. Wax also writes that Romans in 37 A.D., Chinese in the fifth century, and Islamic traders and ambassadors in the eighth century wrote descriptions of other cultures, and European explorers, missionaries, government officials, and traders engaged in field research for the first time in the 13th century. Wax asserts that British and French field researchers also were conducting field research within their own countries as early as the latter part of the 18th century. For example, with the goal of “improving the conditions of the poor and working classes,” researchers during this time period studied the conditions of hospitals, agricultural practices, illnesses of prisoners, and the lifestyles of prostitutes (Wax, 1971, p. 24).

In contrast to Wax’s views, Flick, von Kardorff, and Steinke (2004) suggest that field research and other qualitative methods did not exist until the birth of the social sciences in the 19th century. One of the first sociologists to engage in field research was Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), who during the two years she spent traveling in the United States in the early 1800s (1834–1836) paid particular attention to the lives of women and children. En route to America, she began what would in its final form be considered one of the first sociological guides to field research, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838). In this book she codifies the procedures that the foreign traveler should follow in observing and discovering ways of life different from one’s own. Martineau’s work arrived at a time when British travelers in particular were beginning to make odysseys abroad that combined pleasure with observation. After their journeys, many of these travelers—a great number of whom were women—recorded their observations in travel narratives that captured sociological features of the peoples among whom they lived (J. Mooney, personal communication, July 15, 2005).

Later in the 19th century, two of Martineau's fellow Britons, Charles Booth (1840–1916) and Beatrix Potter (1866–1943), contributed studies based on field research among the London working class. Booth, a wealthy Londoner, conducted a systematic study of London laborers. The resulting publication was the 17-volume *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1891–1903). His field research, which included living with workingmen's families, eventually led to the Old Age Pensions Act (1908) that established minimum wages, unemployment insurance, and state coverage for the sick and disabled (J. Mooney, personal communication, July 15, 2005).

Although Potter, the daughter of an industrial magnate, is best known for her work as a children's author (she produced the "Peter Rabbit" series of stories), she engaged in field research when she took a job as a sewing machine operator in a London sweatshop in order to observe firsthand the trials of factory life. She hoped that by experiencing the working conditions herself, she would be in a better position to document them and to work toward meaningful change (J. Mooney, personal communication, July 15, 2005; Wax, 1971).

One of the first anthropologists to live with people from other cultures was British social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), who during the first half of the 20th century collaborated with his students and colleagues to produce many influential field studies (Wax, 1971). One of Malinowski's main contributions was convincing researchers that instead of being "armchair anthropologists" who studied other cultures by reading the narratives of competent informants, they should undertake intensive studies of other contemporary cultures: live with the people, learn their language, and experience every facet of their daily lives. Another anthropologist from this period was the German Franz Boas (1858–1942), who mentored other well-known anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), and Margaret Mead (1901–1978).

Around the same time in the United States, several sociologists, including Robert Ezra Park (1864–1944) at the University of Chicago, systematically observed ethnic enclaves, religious communities, occupational associations, and mental institutions in Chicago. In spite of the simultaneous growth of survey research and statistical techniques of data analysis, interest in field research quickly spread beyond Chicago and continues, with varying levels of acceptance, to this day (Neuman, 1991).

Disagreeing about when field research actually began is only one of many areas of contention among field researchers. As you read this guide,

you will realize that the “field” of field research is somewhat messy (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). For example, scholars continue to debate about what field research is, how it should be conducted, how it should be evaluated, and how ethical issues should be resolved. Rather than cleaning up this mess for you, I prefer to highlight points of disagreement and introduce alternative perspectives. Also, I think it is important to devote some time to one component of field research about which most scholars agree: It is affected by the status characteristics of the researcher.

Status Characteristics

Sociologists frequently look at the effects of **status characteristics**—gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and age—on life experiences. A large body of empirical evidence indicates that status characteristics structure nearly every aspect of everyday life. For example, gender is related to such things as occupational patterns, wage distributions, likelihood of being interrupted when talking, and risks of personal violence. Women tend to be clustered in fewer occupations than men, they are more apt to be interrupted in mixed groups than are men, and they have a greater risk than men of being raped but a lower risk of being murdered. Race and ethnicity are related to residential segregation, quality of educational experiences, job opportunities, and access to health care.

The effects of status characteristics on life chances are far more complex than is implied by the above paragraph, primarily because individuals possess multiple characteristics simultaneously. We do not have either a gender or a race; instead, we have both. We concomitantly have an age, a sexual orientation, and a social class and live in a particular place in a specific historical period. Many of us have an ethnicity that is important to us. The combination of these characteristics affects our life chances.

Status characteristics affect almost every part of the field research process. For example, when one is conducting field research, one frequently engages in gendered interactions, gendered conversations, and gendered interpretations (Warren, 1988, p. 10). One’s gender can influence which aspects of a setting one will come to know and how one will interpret experiences in that setting. Thus, gender can affect the production of knowledge. Simultaneously, the intersection of gender and other status characteristics can influence the research process.

Clearly, an analysis of the gender/field research nexus is much broader than I can discuss here. A complete review of gender and field research

would need to address, at a minimum, how changing definitions of gender have corresponded with who does field research, how it is done, what is considered worthy of study, what is learned and for what purpose, how the final product is written, and how the work ultimately is evaluated. An examination of other characteristics would be equally complex.

Summary

This chapter has provided you with an overview of field research and an introduction to the theme of status characteristics and field research. You may have correctly surmised from this chapter that a “how-to guide” to field research is somewhat of a contradiction given the complexity of the subject and the lack of unified standards governing it. In fact, rigid rules are ineffective for many aspects of the research process. Field research simply requires flexibility. Nonetheless, in an effort to introduce you in a cohesive manner to the basic principles of field research, the chapters that follow present suggestions derived from generations of researchers—guidelines for you to use as a flashlight, rather than a map, throughout your journey into field research. The second theme of this guide, ethical issues in field research, is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter Highlights

1. Field research is the systematic study of ordinary events and activities in the settings in which they occur.
2. A goal of field research is to understand what these activities and events mean to those who engage in them.
3. Interactions with participants in the setting, including observations and informal interviews, are the primary means of collecting data during field research.
4. The field researcher’s experiences are recorded in the form of field notes and analyzed for a publication or final manuscript.
5. Field research is an interpretive process—researchers’ interpretation of the data can be influenced by their biography and status characteristics.
6. At times, disagreement exists over some facets of what field research is, how it should be conducted, and how it should be evaluated.

7. Status characteristics affect many aspects of the field research process: What is learned during field research is not independent of who the researcher is.

Exercises

1. If you are going to conduct field research, you may need to include a description of field research in your proposal. Summarize, in paragraph form, what field research is on the basis of the characteristics given in this chapter.

2. Field researchers often publish their work in academic journals. Search the Internet for a Web site that provides a list of qualitative research journals. Follow the links to five journals. Browse the table of contents for several issues and read the purpose or mission statement for each journal. Summarize the differences and similarities among the five journals. For example, how do the types of articles and the audience for the journals differ? Are the journals' purposes similar?

3. Discuss the myriad ways that your college experiences are affected by your particular combination of status characteristics. Be sure to discuss both the privileges and the costs of having a particular configuration of characteristics.

