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Prelude to Qualitative Fieldwork

Now that you have received a broad overview of field research and gained an awareness of some of its ethical concerns, you are ready to learn specific details about planning a field research project. To that end, I provide suggestions for selecting a research topic, creating preliminary goals and research questions, reviewing the literature, and making final preparations.

Selecting a Research Topic

Researchers usually decide to conduct field research because they believe it is the best way to examine a particular setting, group, and social processes and structures that are of interest to them theoretically, personally, or academically. Fieldwork allows them to effectively seek in-depth answers, based on the perspectives of those in the setting, to research questions that intrigue them.

Examples of projects undertaken by field researchers can illustrate the range of interests of scholars who engage in field research and possibly help generate ideas for those of you who are required to undertake fieldwork as a class assignment. Among the topics that have been the focus of published field research one finds

- the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala (Sundberg, 2004);
- the wives of professional athletes (Ortiz, 2004);
- genital piercing, branding, burning, and cutting (Myers, 1994);

- two Native American social movement organizations challenging educational practices (Gongaware, 2003);
- pregnant women's under-utilization of clinic-based prenatal services in Mozambique (Chapman, 2003);
- a food bank that distributes food to the needy in southern Canada (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003);
- women farmers in central Pennsylvania (Trauger, 2004);
- a symphony orchestra in Soka Gakkai, Japan (Levi, 2003).

Of course, this list focuses on projects undertaken by professional, practicing field researchers, and as such it presents ideas that are at times grand and far-reaching in scope, even international in focus. If you are assigned a research project in a college course in the United States of America, you are not going to be expected to study a symphony orchestra in Japan or clinic-based prenatal services in Mozambique. As a student, you will be pleased to know that your local community can offer rich resources for a field research project. Consider some of the topics students in my classes have studied:

- employees at a local sewage treatment facility,
- a church where members handle snakes as part of their religious rituals,
- a rural grocery store where dances are held on Friday nights,
- the process of selecting a pet at an animal shelter,
- gendered interactions among sky divers.

In addition, my students have conducted field research in the university library, dorm cafeterias, more than a few local bars, and other settings familiar to college students.

Several factors influence the selection of the final project. For example, a researcher must consider how much of a time investment a particular topic will take. The choice is often affected by the scholar's theoretical perspective and area of expertise. Curiosity about and availability of a social group or setting are motivating factors.

The status characteristics of researchers and their values also can influence project selection. For example, Bourgois (1995) explains how economic, theoretical, personal, and political perspectives motivated his research:

When I first moved to East Harlem—'El Barrio'—as a newlywed in the spring of 1985, I was looking for an inexpensive New York City apartment from which I could write a book on the experience of poverty and

ethnic segregation in the heart of one of the most expensive cities in the world. On the level of theory, I was interested in the political economy of inner-city street culture. From a personal, political perspective, I wanted to probe the Achilles heel of the richest industrialized nation in the world by documenting how it imposes racial segregation and economic marginalization on so many of its Latino/a and African-American citizens. (p. 1)

Whereas researchers often possess years of training within a particular field and have a well-defined theoretical orientation, both of which assist them in the selection of research topics, not all of you will have these advantages. Nonetheless, you most likely have a worldview of some sort and, hopefully, you will have some disciplinary interests to help decide what topic you want to explore.

Once you have determined whether you will focus your research project on a particular setting or on a selected social group, you can then turn your attention to one of the themes introduced earlier in this guide: ethical considerations.

Ethical Issues

One goal of your selection process is to focus on projects that are ethically well grounded. Although you cannot predict all of the ethical issues that could possibly arise from your choice of a field research project, you can minimize such problems by asking yourself a series of questions before finalizing where you will do your research. First, can the research you are considering be completed without deception? Deception is tempting when you think that participants in the setting will change their behavior enough to make the research meaningless as a result of your presence. If you think this will be the case, in order to avoid slipping into deceptive practices, you should probably select another project. Second, how difficult will it be to keep promises of confidentiality? As discussed earlier, confidentiality issues are more problematic during research on illegal, immoral, or unethical behaviors. Third, what are your chances of getting **dirty hands** while conducting this research—of participating in illegal behavior or behavior that is against your own moral standards? You need to be particularly careful about illegal behaviors because engaging in research cannot be used as a legal defense for breaking the law.

Fourth, what are the chances that your research will harm someone in the setting? Even if you maintain confidentiality, can your presence in

the setting be distressful to group members? For instance, if you decide to study mothers receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families, would your research interest in them make these mothers feel somehow unfit or different in spite of your reassurance to the contrary? Might your final report bring unintended, negative consequences to group members?

Finally, could the project be harmful to your personal safety? Do the responses of others to your race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual orientation put you at risk? Simply being an outsider can increase your risk in some situations. For example, Maria Macabuac (2005) elected to conduct her dissertation research in the Philippines. She had already written her proposal and received approval from her committee, but just as she was about to undertake the fieldwork portion of her research, violence in the area she wanted to study increased considerably. Although she is from the Philippines, Macabuac's ethnic status made it unsafe for her to be in the region where she planned to collect her data. With prodding and approval from her committee, she selected another site, a decision that required modification of her focus and a delay in her data collection. As is often the case when field researchers have to deviate from their original design, the adjustments Macabuac made in her project resulted in an excellent dissertation.

These questions cover just a few of the ethical issues you should ponder as you begin the process of selecting a field research project. As with most aspects of field research, there is no complete list of ethical issues to consider—nor is there a rulebook on how to resolve ethical issues in project selection.

At this point in your determination of a research topic, you can now turn your attention to practical issues.

Practicality

There are numerous practical issues to consider in selecting a research topic. One important issue is time. Field research requires long-term engagement with those being studied. Do you have enough time to commit to a project that interests you? Do you have the flexibility to make observations during different times of day and night? How long fieldwork takes varies greatly from project to project, but be warned that however long you think your particular project will take is probably an underestimation of the time you will actually need. Keep in mind that even fairly narrowly defined projects undertaken by seasoned field researchers can

take years to complete. Graduate students often need to consider whether their research can be completed before their funding runs out.

Think about your interpersonal skills as you go about selecting your research setting. If you are extremely shy, you might want to avoid settings where interacting with strangers would be a frequent requirement. Field research is not for the fainthearted. Even a place as familiar as a car dealership can feel alien when one is there to conduct field research. For example, in speaking of her experiences with women sales agents, Helene Lawson (2000) noted that “I felt, much as other field workers before me, unfamiliar with the social world under investigation and a resulting sense of edginess, uncertainty, discomfort, and anxiety” (p. 135).

Regardless of this warning, you need not always avoid settings in which you might feel ill at ease. Researchers who are not only uncomfortable but also downright miserable in a setting have done wonderful research. Eleanor Miller (1986), for instance, wrote that overcoming her fear was part of her motivation to continue her research on women involved in crime. However, your primary goal is to complete the research, and you simply won’t be able to finish it if you end up in a setting that requires more investment in resources than you are willing or able to give.

Accessibility

Another important question in topic selection is access. Sites range from open—requiring no permission to enter—to closed—requiring permission to enter. Most public areas such as local parks, swimming pools, and libraries are open. You do not have to obtain permission to be there, although you still need to decide whether your research will be overt or covert and whether informed consent is required. At the other extreme are closed private settings, such as homes. Some settings, such as elementary schools, are for security reasons governed by laws and regulations restricting access. Even when channels are available for obtaining permission, following the necessary procedures for gaining access can increase the time required to complete the research.

Often, field researchers discover that they are not allowed in a particular setting because of their status characteristics. If you are of the “wrong” gender, for example, you might be denied access to numerous activities, roles, and locations designated as appropriate for only one gender (Warren, 1988). Restrictions can also be based on other status characteristics such as age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or religion.

Even if you can gain access to a setting, those within it might restrict your observations and interactions as a result of your status characteristics. For example, if you were doing field research on members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you would not be able to observe some religious rituals unless you were a member of this church. Sometimes a combination of status characteristics is used to restrict access. For example, because Peggy Golde (1986) was a woman, she was not accepted in the world of men during her study of the Nahua Indians of Mexico. In addition, the fact that she was unmarried and childless also prevented her from being fully accepted into the world of the adult women. Because so many settings impose unexpected restrictions on the sorts of information you might be able to gather or observe firsthand, is it therefore better to choose a setting where you already have access?

The Familiar Versus the Unfamiliar

Whether to undertake research in a place where one is familiar is one of the most common questions students ask me when they are considering conducting field research. Opinions are mixed on whether it is better to conduct field research in a familiar or an unfamiliar setting. Some argue that if a person already understands the dynamics of a setting from the participants' perspectives, then there is little need to undertake the research. Moreover, research in unfamiliar settings might be more fruitful than research conducted in familiar ones, some claim, because cultural and social events in unfamiliar settings are easier to see (Neuman, 1991, p. 344).

Others argue that familiarity with a setting or group provides a firm foundation on which to build. Those who are familiar with a setting may already have rapport with participants, understand the nuances of language and behavioral expectations, and possess analytic insights into the working of the setting. In some instances, the only person who has a chance of being allowed to conduct research is someone who is already known to the group. This was the case for Columbus Hopper and Johnny Moore (1994), who studied women in outlaw motorcycle gangs.

Prior to the work of Hopper and Moore (1994), women's involvement in motorcycle gangs was virtually ignored. Hopper and Moore's study provided details about the place of women in biker culture, the rituals in which they engage, their role as moneymakers, and their motivations and backgrounds. Hopper and Moore were able to conduct this study only because this was a familiar setting. They write:

The main reason we were able to make contacts with bikers was the background of Johnny Moore, who was once a biker himself. During the 1960s, "Big John" was president of Satan's Dead, an outlaw club on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. He participated in the rituals we describe, and his own experience and observations provided the details of initiation ceremonies that we related. As a former club president, Moore was able to get permission for us to visit biker clubhouses, a rare privilege for outsiders. (p. 391)

An important contribution to our understanding of women's participation in motorcycle gangs would have been lost had Hopper and Moore followed the advice not to study familiar settings.

Knowing the local culture can also help facilitate the interviewing process. For example, Lewis (2005) was fortunate to know the local expectations before he began interviewing participants with a history of violence for his dissertation on interactions among African American urban men. Lewis describes the events leading up to an interview with one of the men:

Chip had just purchased his first house, to which I had been on one previous occasion. I called him from outside out of respect for his home, even though we had arranged the meeting. This is another unspoken rule. You DO NOT just "pop up" at someone's residence without giving him notice. I could tell that Chip appreciated the phone call. He said, "oh, you outside, give me a second." I waited in my jeep until the door opened about three minutes subsequent to the cessation of the phone call. (p. 74)

I believe the field research process can be more exciting if one engages in research in an unfamiliar setting. In fact, I encourage my undergraduate students to push themselves to do research in places that are foreign to them. In contrast, I advise graduate students to conduct research in places or among groups where questions of theoretical interest to them can be answered, regardless of the level of familiarity.

Record Keeping

In this chapter, I have spent considerable time discussing the process of project selection because it is not an antecedent to field research but rather an integral part of it. Why, how, and where you select a particular setting

or social group will affect everything that follows. Your thoughts about where you want to conduct research, the early questions you have, your first impressions, why you reject one setting for another, and the initial contacts you make as you consider places all have implications for your work. Thus, well before any actual fieldwork begins, you should start keeping records of your activities and thoughts. As you will learn in the last chapter, a **dependability audit**—reviewing records of everything done during the research—is one of the things used to assess the quality of your research. It is at this point in the research that you begin creating such a paper trail.

In addition to keeping records of your activities during every stage of the research, you should periodically review your notes to help you plan what to do next. For example, when she began her dissertation, Chenault (2004) had only a vague idea about what she wanted to accomplish with her research in a public housing community. She had conducted mediations in the community, so she felt that she would have a certain level of access. Beyond that, she was unsure what the focus of her research might be. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, she began talking to managers in several communities to see if that would help her generate ideas. Rather than wait to start her field notes until she was certain of her research questions, she correctly started writing them during her decision-making process. The following excerpt from her field notes represents an informal conversation with Tyler, a manager in one of the communities, during the time when she was still generating ideas for her dissertation research:

While Tyler provided useful information regarding several areas of investigation, he repeatedly returned our conversation to the topic of “site-based meetings,” saying such things as the following:

“At site-based meetings. . . you know and see what our community wants.”

“Site-based means everything is done.”

“Site-based meetings have full control over our properties.”

“You need to come to a site-based meeting.”

That man gave me a headache, I didn’t get the response I wanted, and he kept talking about site-based meetings. Almost every other word was site-based meetings. I asked about a shooting death that happened in the community and he talked about the resident council. (Chenault, 2004, pp. 7–8)

You should not be surprised to learn that, after reading her field notes a few days later, she followed Tyler's lead and decided to explore the site-based meetings about which he was so enthusiastic. After attending several such meetings, she became interested in the resident council who also attended these meetings. Ultimately, the resident council became the focus of her study. In the process of reviewing a discussion captured by field notes—recorded well before she had settled upon a particular focus—she was led to explore a group that she might have overlooked otherwise. Once she had settled on a topic, she could then proceed to establishing research goals and questions.

Goals and Research Questions

Almost all field researchers have the same general purpose: to understand social interactions within the setting or social group from the perspective of the participants. In addition to this desire to understand daily life, researchers usually enter the field with general goals and a series of research questions specific to their study. Without at least some preliminary research questions, field researchers would be almost overwhelmed with the task of observing everything and talking to everyone. It is not uncommon for researchers to devise research questions *before* they have uncovered an appropriate setting for answering them. They then tailor their general research questions to the specific setting once they have decided where to conduct their fieldwork.

Sometimes field researchers begin with general goals for their research. For instance, when Robert Prus and Stylianoss Irini (1988) studied the daily lives of members of a hotel community—hookers, strippers, bartenders, cocktail waitresses, bouncers, desk clerks, bar patrons, and rounders—they began not with specific research questions, but with three simple goals. First, they wanted to understand the interrelatedness of these different groups. Second, they wanted to understand how individuals in the groups managed their careers. Third, they were interested in the interpersonal relationships in the hotel setting—such as friendships, loneliness, sexuality, and violence. It took these two researchers over three years before they felt that they had answered their questions or reached their goals sufficiently. It is difficult to guess how long their research would have taken had they established more than three goals.

Research questions in fieldwork often are formulated around “what” and “how.” Since writing research questions is one of the most difficult

and important components of field research, I will provide numerous examples that will help guide your own formulation of such questions.

Early in her book about homeless women, for example, Russell (1991) provides her readers with her goal and research questions. Russell indicated that she was interested in “To what extent homeless women have developed a specific culture or subculture” (p. 4). From this general goal she created a list of specific questions to provide focus for her study:

Once a woman was without permanent shelter, what strategies did she use to survive? Where did a woman find food? What arrangements did she make for shelter? Where did she obtain clothing? Where did she bathe and launder her clothing? How and where did she fill the hours of her days? What possessions did she take with her when she became homeless? How did she view the agencies with whom she came in contact? How did she view herself and other homeless women? What were her hopes, fears, and dreams? What attitudes did she bring with her from the mainstream, and what attitudes did she change? (p. 4)

Similarly, in her study of women who sold cars, Lawson (2000) devised clear questions. How did women accomplish their careers in commission car sales? What attracted women to this occupation? What obstacles did they face as they pursued their careers (p. x)?

Duneier’s (1999) study of life on the sidewalks of Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village was based on a series of research questions. In addition to asking the basic question of how the sidewalk life works today, he also wanted to know:

How do these persons live in a moral order? How do they have the ingenuity to do so in the face of exclusion and stigmatization on the basis of race and class? How does the way they do so affront the sensibilities of the working and middle classes? How do their acts intersect with a city’s mechanisms to regulate its public spaces? (p. 9)

Researchers sometimes change their goals and research questions as their studies progress. Elliot Liebow (1994) changed his goals during the course of his research. As he began analyzing his field notes, he realized that he had discovered a new aim for his study of homeless women. Liebow explains this change early in his book:

Tell Them Who I Am focuses on the dynamics of shelter life. Initially, my aim was to write a straightforward description of shelter life and, ideally, to try to see the world of homelessness as homeless women see and experience it. Later, when trying to make sense of my notes, I realize that another of my aims was to explain both to others and myself how these women remained human in the face of inhuman conditions. (p. 1)

Similarly, Bourgois found the focus of his research in East Harlem (“El Barrio”) changing from the entire underground (untaxed) economy to a focus on crack, a drug that he did not know about before 1985, when he began his five-year study (1995, p. 1).

I do not mean to imply that researchers change their goals and questions most of the time. In fact, changing one’s goals or questions is particularly problematic if one already has committee and IRB approval. However, being able to revise one’s research questions as one proceeds is an advantage of field research over many other methodologies. You may recall from the first chapter that flexibility is one of the key features of such research. Nonetheless, the savvy field researcher will delineate some measure of goals or questions, no matter how minimal, at the beginning of the research project.

Review of Literature

Placing one’s own work into the wider context of academic literature is an important part of conducting research. I suggest that you learn about a setting by thoroughly reviewing the literature before entering the field and that you continue reading relevant literature throughout the research process. When looking for relevant literature, I advise reading field research by others who have studied your particular, or a similar, setting or group. I hope that you are already familiar with reviewing academic literature, so I will not provide detailed instructions here. However, I do suggest that in addition to academic books and articles you read newspapers, autobiographies, and historical accounts. Even novels can be useful in helping prepare you emotionally, physically, and intellectually for field research in a particular setting. Having read a wide range of literature facilitates the analysis process, as does having a good theoretical foundation.

At this point in the field research process, you probably have not spent much time—if any at all—in the actual field. You have devoted yourself to necessary prep work: determining the topic and setting, devising

research goals and questions, beginning your record keeping, firmly grounding yourself in the body of existing literature. Now, you need to prepare to take your project to the next level: the field itself.

Final Preparations

When explaining to students the importance of preparing for the field, I use as an example Herbie Goldfarb, one of the characters in the book *The Milagro Beanfield War* (Nichols, 1974). Herbie arrived in Milagro as a VISTA volunteer without sufficiently preparing for the task: He did not speak Spanish (the language of Milagro); he failed to bring warm clothes because he thought the Southwest would be hot all the time (there are snowcapped mountains in the Southwest); and he shared a one-room “house” with snakes, skunks, and black widow spiders because he thought living arrangements had been made for him (they hadn’t). In order to avoid becoming a Herbie Goldfarb during your field research, you need to prepare.

Conducting fieldwork in a culture or subculture extremely different from your own requires levels of preparation beyond what, because of space restrictions, this book can cover. However, one suggestion for preparation is worth mentioning. Having a contact person in the place you plan to conduct your fieldwork is priceless. Although you might be brave and adventurous enough simply to show up in a location where you do not speak the language and have made no advance plans, your fieldwork will be exponentially more difficult should you choose this route.

Conducting fieldwork closer to your home requires less advance preparation but still demands some measure of planning. Preparation might be something as simple as wearing appropriate clothing. Consider as well how you will record your observations and interviews. Although you might have to rely on writing field notes during observations and informal interviews, field researchers often choose to use tape recorders to capture all of the nuances of formal interviews.

In order to illustrate the differences between taking notes during interviews and tape recording, I often ask graduate students to conduct hour-long mock interviews, during which they take notes for a half-hour and then tape the last half-hour. Even when they thought they were doing a capable job of taking notes by hand, they are often embarrassed by how sparse their notes are in comparison to what was captured by the tape. In both cases, however, they are dismayed by how long it takes to transcribe the interviews. Clearly, tape recordings are far superior to

hand-written notes; however, as a field researcher you must be prepared for the occasion when recording is not possible.

When you have the opportunity to tape-record interviews, I cannot stress enough the importance of having multiple tapes and batteries. You might consider having more than one tape recorder. Out of 17 students who attempted to tape interviews as part of a class requirement, four could not do so because of problems with their recorders. Several others found that external noises or the misplacement of a microphone rendered their tapes almost useless. Some researchers recommend recorders with clip-on microphones for both the interviewer and interviewee. I have become a fan of digital recorders. Even when you believe that you will be taping, also be prepared to take notes. Technology is wonderful, but it sometimes fails, and on occasion a participant will consent to being interviewed but not recorded.

A last note about preparation. Be aware that Murphy's Law frequently operates in field research: If something can go wrong, it probably will. One common problem is the "no show" interviewee. During her dissertation research in the Philippines, Mary Janet Arnado (2002) frequently encountered this problem. She made plans to interview domestic maids on their days off, but many times the women simply did not show up as planned. Arnado would reschedule and the result would be the same. Sometimes her perseverance paid off and the interview was held; at other times, her efforts proved fruitless.

Field researchers know they must prepare themselves mentally for things to go wrong. They must be willing to be flexible, to adjust, and to make compromises in their original plans. Field researchers benefit by subscribing to the German expression "Glück im Unglück," which roughly translates to "fortune in misfortune." A good researcher can turn unfortunate events into advantages.

For instance, Thomas Parkhill was able to do just this. The original goal of his research was to get to the town of Ramnagar in India so that he could study the *Ramlila*, an important religious event. Parkhill never made it to Ramnagar. Parkhill writes,

Arriving in Banaras in early autumn, 1984, I intended to follow other scholars from the West across the Ganges River to study the Ramnagar *Ramlila*, a religious drama of widespread reputation. Determined to learn how a religious story was treated in a performance context, I spent the first days of the *Ramlila* season negotiating the river currents and the sometimes soggy Ramnagar geography. One afternoon, after I'd literally missed the boat to Ramnagar, I began to explore my own neighborhood and discovered a *Ramlila* there. (1993, p. 103)

By focusing on smaller neighborhoods, he was able to accomplish a wonderful study of the *Ramlila*. This does not mean, however, that his study was without further complications. Although he was able to visit 14 *Ramlilas*, many of them up to four times, his observations ended abruptly when the *Ramlila* season was cut short by the assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984.

I am pointing out some of these small and not so small practical issues because they affect field research in ways they might not affect other types of research. If you get cold or hungry and your feet hurt while you are sitting at your computer doing multiple regression with variables from a national data set, you can simply stop, put on a sweater, grab a snack, and kick off your shoes. The data will still be there, and it will remain unchanged. If, however, you leave the room, the building, or the street when doing observations to get a jacket or because you are hungry and your feet hurt, things will not be the same when you return, and you will not know what happened in the meantime. If you are so overcome with insecurities and frustration that you hide in your room rather than interact with the participants in the setting, then you are not conducting fieldwork. Field research is time sensitive—the data unfold in real time. If you are not there as the research instrument to see it, gather it, or hear it, it moves on without you. Being prepared will help you be part of the experience.

Chapter Highlights

1. Numerous factors, such as theoretical importance, curiosity, time, and values, affect the selection of a research project.
2. Myriad ethical issues should be factored into the decision-making process when considering different research topics.
3. Research projects will fail or be considerably more difficult if the researcher is insufficiently prepared for the task.
4. Scholars debate whether being familiar or unfamiliar with a research site is an advantage.
5. Immediately upon considering field research, researchers should keep written records of their decisions, thoughts, and experiences related to the research.

6. Field research is guided by overarching goals and research questions.
7. Research questions are often formatted around “how” and “what” questions.
8. Situating one’s research in a larger body of academic literature is a requirement of field research.

Exercises

1. Create three research questions that could guide field research on a particular setting or social group of interest to you.

2. Take notes as you conduct a 10-minute interview with a friend on a topic that requires him or her to talk at length. For example, ask about childhood or high school experiences. Transcribe the notes and describe the process. Was it easy for you to take notes and listen? Were you able to write fast enough to get most of what was said? Did note-taking affect the speed at which your friend talked? How long did it take you to transcribe the notes? Did you recall and add things as you typed? Were you able to make sense out of all your notes? Summarize your views on the benefits and costs of taking notes.

3. Locate five academic articles that employ field research, ethnography, or participant observation as the methodology. Summarize the topic of each and list the related research questions.

4. Pretend that you are an instructor for a research methods class. A student wants to conduct field research on a campus group whose purpose is to work for the legalization of marijuana. Discuss with this student all the pro and con factors that should be considered during selection of this group as a project setting.

