Field Research and Focus Group Research

Basics of Social Research by Lawrence Neuman

This chapter describes field research, also called *ethnography* or *participant-observation research.* It is a type of qualitative research in which you, as a researcher, directly observe and participate in small-scale social settings in the present time and in your home culture. We also look at focus groups.

INTRODUCTION TO FIELD RESEARCH

Many students are excited by field research. It involves hanging out with some exotic group of people. There are no cold mathematics or complicated statistics, and no abstract deductive hypotheses. Instead, you interact directly, face-to-face with "real people" in a natural setting. Unlike many types of social research, in field research you talk with and directly observe the people you study. By observing and interacting over months or even years, you learn about them firsthand. You get to know their life histories, their hobbies and interests, and their habits, hopes, fears, and dreams. Meeting new people, developing friendships, and discovering new social worlds can be fun. It is also time consuming, emotionally draining, and sometimes physically dangerous.

Field research is appropriate when the research question involves learning about, understanding, or describing a group of interacting people. It is usually best when the question is, How do people do Y in the social world? or What is the social world of X like? You can use it when other methods (e.g., survey, experiments) are not practical, as in studying street gangs. You study people in the "field" location or setting. As a beginning field researcher, you will want to start with a relatively small group (30 or fewer) who interact with each other on a regular basis in a relatively fixed setting (e.g., a street corner, church, bar, beauty salon, baseball field, etc.).

In order to use consistent terminology, we can call the people you study in a field setting **members.** They are insiders or natives in the field and belong to a group, subculture, or social setting that you, the "outsider" field researcher, wants to penetrate and learn about.

Field researchers have explored a wide variety of social settings, subcultures, and aspects of social life[1] (see Figure 1). Places my students have conducted in successful short-term, small-scale field research studies include a beauty salon, day care center, bakery, bingo parlor, bowling alley, church, coffee shop, laundromat, police dispatch office, nursing home, tattoo parlor, and weight room.

Ethnography and Ethnomethodology

Two specialized extensions of field research, ethnography and ethnomethodology, build on the social constructionist perspective. Each has redefined how field research is conducted.

Ethnography comes from cultural anthropology.[2] It is mostly found in anthropology and sociology, but also used in communication studies, criminology, economics, education, geography, history, linguistics, marketing, medicine and nursing, and social work. *Ethno* means people or folk, and *graphy* refers to write or describe. Thus, **ethnography** means writing about/describing a people. It does this to understand better a people's way of life. The ethnographer is an outsider (i.e., a non-insider who does not belong to the community or culture that he or she studies). Yet, the ethnographer's goal is to learn from insiders, to gain the native point of view, and to understand deeply the culture or community. Ethnography is not a single technique but a collection of specific techniques and an approach to study human activity.

Ethnography assumes that people constantly make inferences. To infer means going beyond what we explicitly see or say outwardly in a situation to an implicit, inner meaning. Ethnography also assumes that people display

FIGURE 1 Examples of Field Research Sites/Topics

Small-Scale Settings

Passengers in an airplane
Bars or taverns
Battered women's shelters
Camera clubs
Laundromats
Social movement organizations
Social welfare offices
Television stations
Waiting rooms

Community Settings

Retirement communities
Small towns
Urban ethnic communities
Working-class neighborhoods

Children's Activities

Children's playgrounds
Little League baseball
Youth in schools
Junior high girl groups

Occupations

Airline attendants
Artists
Cocktail waitresses
Dog catchers

Door-to-door salespersons
Factory workers
Gamblers
Medical students
Female strippers
Police officers
Restaurant chefs
Social workers
Taxi drivers

Deviance and Criminal Activity

Body/genital piercing and branding
Cults
Drug dealers and addicts
Hippies
Nude beaches
Occult groups
Prostitutes
Street gangs, motorcycle gangs
Street people, homeless shelters

Medical Settings and Medical Events

Death
Emergency rooms
Intensive care units
Pregnancy and abortion
Support groups for Alzheimer's caregivers

their culture (i.e., what people think, ponder, or believe) through many behaviors (e.g., speech and actions) in specific social contexts. Displays of behavior do not give meaning in themselves; rather, people must infer or learn how to "read" meaning.

The center of ethnographic research is to be able to move from what you hear or observe explicitly to what a situation actually means for insiders. Ethnography can be difficult because the meaning you come away with depends on possessing a detailed knowledge of the immediate situational context and the broader social–cultural context. Another complication is that

different insiders might not all share the same meaning of an event or situation.

For example, a college student is invited to a "kegger." The student will infer certain things. It will be an informal party with other student-aged people and there will be beer at the party. To arrive at this inference, the student draws on prior knowledge about the local college culture. Cultural knowledge can include symbols, songs, sayings, facts, ways of behaving, values, customs, and objects (e.g., telephones, newspapers, etc.). We learn the culture by watching television, listening to parents, observing others, and the like.

Cultural knowledge includes both explicit knowledge (i.e., what we know and talk about directly) and tacit knowledge (i.e., what we rarely acknowledge but know about). For example, explicit knowledge includes easily recognized information such as college students, alcohol consumption patterns, and the social event (e.g., a "kegger"). Most college students can describe what happens at the event based on rumor or past participation. *Tacit knowledge* includes the unspoken cultural norms: quantity and types of beverages consumed at the kegger, types of people to be present (e.g., no young children or elderly grandparents), and the border between appropriate and inappropriate behavior (e.g., sexual comments or contact). Another example of tacit knowledge is the proper distance to stand from other people when you talk with them. People are generally unaware that they use this norm. They feel unease or discomfort when the norm is violated but find it difficult to pinpoint the source of their discomfort.

Ethnographers describe the explicit and tacit cultural knowledge that members use in a field setting. They create detailed descriptions of what they observe in setting and their interactions with members. They then conduct a careful analysis of the descriptions. They do this by relying on their detailed knowledge of the local culture and by disassembling and reassembling various aspects of the description, and looking at it from divergent viewpoints.

Ethnomethodology is a distinct approach developed in the 1960s. It is a method for the study of everyday commonsense knowledge and interactions of people. Some people consider it to be a distinct field of study unto itself, but others see it as a subfield within sociology. It is a radical or extreme form of field research that merges interactionist theory, phenomenological philosophy, a social constructionist orientation, and specific methodological techniques.

Ethnomethodologists study everyday common sense by observing its creation and use in ongoing social interactions that occur in natural settings. They use a specialized, highly detailed analysis of micro-situations (e.g., transcripts of short conversations or videotapes of social interactions). Compared to other field research, they are more concerned about method. They argue that knowledge about the social world depends greatly on the particular method used to study it.

Ethnomethodology assumes that social meaning is fragile and fluid, not fixed, stable, or solid. People are constantly creating and re-creating social meaning in ongoing interactions. One technique ethnomethodologists use is conversation analysis. They examine audio recording and/or transcription of each utterance, including pauses and the context of speech. The purpose is to uncover the implicit and explicit ways people understand and misunderstand, communicate and miscommunicate with each another.

Ethnomethodologists assume that people "accomplish" a commonsense understanding by applying many tacit social–cultural rules and see social interaction as an ongoing process of reality construction. People use their cultural knowledge and clues from a social context to interpret everyday events in a fluid, changing process. The goal of ethnomethodology is to examine how people in ordinary, everyday settings apply tacit rules to make sense of social life (e.g., to know whether or not someone is joking, to decide how to respond to a question) and how they construct a shared social reality.

By examining ordinary micro-level social interaction in great detail—minute by minute, over and over—ethnomethodologists try to identify the informal rules people use to construct social reality and commonsense understanding. They study how people apply existing rules and create new rules. For example, they argue that standardized tests or survey interviews are social interactions that reveal a person's ability to pick up implicit clues and apply commonsense understanding rather than being objective measures of fixed factual information.

The Logic of Field Research

Field research is not easy to define. It is an orientation toward doing social research more than a fixed set of techniques that you apply.[3] Field research is based on the principle of naturalism. *Naturalism* is found in the study of other phenomena (e.g., oceans, animals, plants, etc.) and involves observing ordinary events in natural settings, rather than in contrived, invented, or researcher-created settings. This means you conduct research "in the field" or outside an office, laboratory, or classroom. Removed from the safety, security, and predictability of such settings makes field research more uncertain and risky.

In field research, you examine social meanings and try to grasp multiple perspectives in a natural social setting. To do this, you try to empathize with and enter into the subjective meanings and social reality of members. Yet, you also need to be an outside observer. Doing field research requires you to switch perspectives and to view a setting from multiple points of view simultaneously. This can be complex and difficult, requiring sophisticated cognitive and emotional skills. In field research, you obtain information using multiple techniques and must be a resourceful, talented individual with ingenuity and an ability to think quickly "on your feet" while you are in the field (see Expansion Box 1).

Most field research is conducted by a single individual who works alone, although small teams also have been effective. In most field research, you are directly involved in and part of the social world that you study. This makes your personal characteristics (e.g., physical appearance, mannerisms, demeanor, and emotional condition) relevant to the research task. Your direct involvement in the field can also have an emotional impact on you. Field research can be fun and exciting, but it can also disrupt your personal life, threaten your physical security, or unsettle your emotional well-being. More than other types of social research, it can reshape your friendships, family life, self-identity, and personal values.

I EXPANSION BOX
What Do Field Researchers Do?

A field researcher does the following:

1. Observes ordinary events and everyday activities as they happen in natural settings, in addition to any unusual occurrences

2. Becomes directly involved with the people being studied and personally experiences the process of daily social life in the field setting

3. Acquires an insider's point of view while maintaining the analytic perspective or distance of an outsider

4. Uses a variety of techniques and social skills in a flexible manner as the situation demands

5. Produces data in the form of extensive written notes, as well as diagrams, maps, or pictures to provide very detailed descriptions

6. Sees events holistically (e.g., as a whole unit, not in pieces) and individually in their social context

7. Understands and develops empathy for members in a field setting, and does not just record "cold" objective facts

8. Notices both explicit (recognized, conscious, spoken) and tacit (less recognized, implicit, unspoken) aspects of culture

9. Observes ongoing social processes without upsetting, disrupting, or imposing an outside point of view

10. Copes with high levels of personal stress, uncertainty, ethical dilemmas, and ambiguity

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CONDUCTING A FIELD RESEARCH STUDY

Field research is less standardized or structured than quantitative research techniques. This makes it essential for you to be well organized and prepared before you enter the field. It also means that the steps of conducting a study are not

rigidly predetermined but only serve as an approximate guide or road map (see Expansion Box 2).

Step 1: Prepare to Enter the Field

As you prepare to conduct field research, you want to be flexible, get organized, rehearse skills and build background, defocus attention, and become self-aware.

Be Flexible. Flexibility is a key advantage of field research. This lets you shift direction and follow new leads as they develop. A good field researcher can quickly recognize and seize opportunities, "play it by ear," and rapidly adjust to changing social situations. In field research, you do not start with a fixed set of methods to apply or explicit hypotheses to test. Rather, you pick a technique based on its value for providing you with information. In the beginning, you should anticipate having little control over the data and little direction. After you become socialized to the setting, you can begin to focus the inquiry and assert some control over the data.

Get Organized. Human and personal factors can play a role in any study, but they are central to field research studies. Field research studies often begin with chance occurrences or a personal interest. Field researchers start with personal experiences, such as working at a job, having a hobby, being a sports team member or devout religious believer, confronting a family tragedy, or being a patient or an activist. Your personal biography and experiences can play a large role in initiating a field research study.

Rehearse Skills and Build Background. To conduct field research, you need the skills of careful looking and listening, good short-term memory, and regular writing. Before you enter the field, you practice observing the ordinary details of social situations and writing them down. Disciplined attention to details and short-term memory can improve with practice.

EXPANSION BOX
2 **Steps in Conducting Field Research**

1. Prepare to enter the field: Be flexible, Be organized, Rehearse skills and build background, Defocus attention, Be self-aware.
2. Choose a field site and gain access: Select a site, Deal with gatekeepers, Enter and gain access, Assume a social role, Adopt a level of involvement, Build rapport.
3. Apply Strategies: Negotiate, Normalize research, Decide on disclosure, Focus and sample, Assume the attitude of strangeness, Cope with stress.
4. Maintain Relations in the Field: Adjust and adapt, Use charm and nurture trust, Perform small favors, Avoid conflicts, Appear interested, Be an acceptable incompetent.
5. Gather and record data: Absorb and experience, Watch and learn, Record the data.
6. Exit the field site.

Likewise, keeping a daily diary or personal journal is good practice for writing field notes. As with all social research, you will want to read the scholarly literature to learn concepts, potential pitfalls, data collection methods, and techniques for resolving conflicts. In addition, you may find reading diaries, novels, journalistic accounts, and autobiographies useful for gaining familiarity with a setting and preparing yourself emotionally for field situations.

Defocus Attention. Field research begins with a general topic or interest, not specific hypotheses. You do not want to lock onto initial misconceptions; instead, you want to be very open to discovering new ideas. Finding the "right questions" to ask about a field setting often takes time. As you first enter the field, try to erase preconceptions about it and defocus. *Defocusing* is the opposite of focusing. To focus, you restrict what you observe, limit your attention, and narrow the boundaries of your awareness to a specific

issue or question and what is immediately relevant to it. To defocus, you release restrictions on what to observe, remove limits on attention, and loosen the boundaries of your awareness. You try to move beyond your usual, comfortable social niche to experience as much as possible in the field setting, yet always doing so without betraying a primary commitment to being a researcher.

Become Self-Aware. Another preparation for field research is self-knowledge. You need to know yourself and reflect on personal experiences. Such an "inner search" or look into yourself is not always easy, but it is very helpful for field research. You can expect anxiety, self-doubt, frustration, and uncertainty in the field. Especially in the beginning, you may feel that you are collecting the wrong data and may suffer from emotional turmoil, isolation, and confusion.

You may feel doubly marginal: you are an outsider in the field setting and you are removed from friends, family, and other researchers.[4]

Field research requires a great deal of time. A study may require hundreds, if not thousands, of hours in direct observation and interaction, over several months or years, with nearly daily visits to a field setting. The researcher's emotional makeup, personal biography, and cultural experiences are highly relevant in field research. This suggests you should be aware of your personal values, commitments, and inner conflicts (see Example Box 1). You want to know "who you are." Fieldwork can have a great impact on your identity and outlook. The field experience has transformed many researchers personally. They adopted new values, interests, and moral commitments, or changed their religion or political ideology.[5]

I EXAMPLE BOX
Field Research at a Country and Western Bar

Eliasoph (1998) conducted field research on several groups in a California community to understand how Americans avoid political expression. One was a social club. Eliasoph describes herself as an "urban, bi-coastal, bespectacled, Jewish, Ph.D. candidate from a long line of communists, atheists, liberals, book-readers, ideologues, and arguers" (p. 270). The social club's world was very foreign to her. The social club, the Buffalos, centered on country and western music at a bar, the Silverado Club. She describes it:

> *The Silverado huddled on a vast, rutted parking lot on what was once wetlands and now was a truck stop, a mile and a half from Amargo's [town name] nuclear battleship station. Occasional gulleys of salt water cattails poked through the wide flat miles of paved malls and gas stations. Giant four-wheeled-drive vehicles filled the parking lot, making my miniature Honda look like a toy. . . . Inside the windowless Silverado, initial blinding darkness gave way to a huge Confederate flag pinned up behind the bandstand, the standard collection of neon beer signs and beer mirrors, men in cowboys hats,*

> *cowboys shirts and jeans, women in curly perms and tiered flounces of lace or denim skirts, or jeans, and belts with their names embroidered in glitter on the back. (1998:92)*

Eliasoph introduced herself as a student. During her two years of research, she endured smoke-filled rooms as well as expensive beer and bottled-water prices; attended a wedding and many dance lessons; and participated in countless conversations and heard many abusive sexist/racist jokes. She listened, asked questions, observed, and took notes in the bathroom. When she returned home after hours with club members, it was to a university crowd who had little understanding of the world she was studying. For them, witty conversation was central and being bored was to be avoided. The club members used more nonverbal than verbal communication and being bored, or sitting and doing nothing, was just fine. The research forced Eliasoph to reexamine her own views and tastes, which she had taken for granted.

Step 2. Choose a Site and Gain Access

You do not follow fixed steps to conduct a field research study; nonetheless, some common concerns appear in the early stages. These include selecting a site and gaining access to the site, entering the field, learning the ropes, and developing rapport with members in the field.

Most field research examines a particular setting. In the early stages of a study, you need to select a site, deal with gatekeepers, enter and gain access to the setting, assume a social role, adopt a level of involvement, and build rapport with members.

Select a Site.   You hear about field research being conducted on a setting or *field site*, but this is a misleading term. A field site is a context in which events or activities occur. It is a socially defined territory with flexible and shifting invisible boundaries. The case, activity, or group you wish to study may span across several physical sites. For example, a college football team may interact on the playing field, in the locker room, in a dormitory, at a training camp, or at a local hangout. The team's field site includes all five locations. Selecting a field site is an important decision, and you should take notes on the site selection processes.

Your research question should guide you in site selection. Keep three factors in mind as you choose a field research site: richness of data, unfamiliarity, and suitability.[6] Some sites provide richer data than others. Sites that present a web of social relations, a variety of activities, and diverse events over time provide richer, more interesting data. It is easier if you are a beginning field researcher to study an unfamiliar setting. Although you may want to stay with what is familiar and comfortable, it is easier to see cultural events and social relations with a researcher's "eye" in a new site. A novice field researcher is easily overwhelmed or intimidated by an entirely new social setting. As you "case out" possible field sites, you also want to consider practical issues such as your time and skills, serious conflicts among people in the site, your personal characteristics and feelings, and access to parts of a site.

Your ascriptive characteristics (age, race, gender, stature) can limit access to some sites. For example, an African American researcher cannot hope to study the Ku Klux Klan or neo-Nazis, although some researchers have successfully crossed ascriptive lines. In addition, a team with an "insider" (with local knowledge or one kind of ascriptive characteristic) and the "outsider" researcher can work together as a team.[7]

Gaining physical access to a site can be an issue. Field sites are on a continuum. Open and public areas (e.g., public restaurants, airport waiting areas, etc.) are at one end and closed, private settings (e.g., corporate inner offices, private clubs, activities in a person's home, etc.) are at the other. You may find that you are not welcome on the site, or face legal and political barriers to access. Laws and regulations in institutions (e.g., public schools, hospitals, prisons, etc.) can also restrict access.

Deal with Gatekeepers.   Most field sites have *gatekeepers*. They are people with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site.[8] The gatekeeper can be the thug on the corner, an administrator of a hospital, or the owner of a business. Informal public areas (e.g., sidewalks, public waiting rooms, etc.) rarely have gatekeepers, but formal organizations have authorities from whom you must obtain explicit permission. A gatekeeper is someone that members in the field obey, whether or not he or she has an official title. It may take time for you to discover who the gatekeeper is (see Example Box 2). You should expect to negotiate with gatekeepers and bargain for access.

It is ethically and politically astute to call on gatekeepers. Gatekeepers may not appreciate the need for conceptual distance or ethical balance. You will need to set nonnegotiable limits to protect research integrity. If a gatekeeper imposes many restrictions initially, often you can reopen negotiations later. Gatekeepers may forget their initial demands as trust develops.

Gatekeepers and Access

In his study of a crack-dealing gang, the Black Kings, in Chicago's low-income housing projects, Venkatesh (2008) had difficulty in gaining access. He describes in detail how he gained access and luckily came upon the sympathetic gang leader, J.T., who was the critical gatekeeper for both the gang's activities and the housing project. A graduate student of South Asian ancestry from middle-class California suburbs, Venkatesh naïvely entered the projects with a pile of survey questionnaires. He was not prepared for the extreme poverty, perils, and everyday reality of life in the dilapidated high-rise housing projects. Soon after he entered a building, a gang of menacing young men accosted him in a dark, dirty, urine-smelling stairwell. They mistook him for a Mexican-American (and member of rival gang, Latin Kings) and appeared ready to harm him, until J.T. arrived. As Venkatesh (2008:17-19) reports,

> J.T. shot the young man a look, then turned to me. "You're not from Chicago," he said. "You should really not be walking through the projects. People get hurt."

> J.T. started tossing questions at me. . . . I spent most of the night sitting on the cold steps, trying to avoid protruding shards of metal. I would have liked to sleep also, but I was too nervous.

The next afternoon Venkatesh returned with a six-pack of beer.

> "Beer?" I said, tossing him a bottle. "You said I should hang out with folks if I want to know what their life was like." J.T. didn't answer. A few of the guys burst out laughing in disbelief. "He's crazy, I told you!" said one. "Nigger thinks he's going to hang out with us! I still think he's a Latin King." Finally J.T. spoke up. "All right, the brother wants to hang out," he said, unfazed. "Let him hang out." (p. 23)

In gaining access to the site, Venkatesh made many missteps and mistakes, confronted serious physical danger, overcame uncertainty and fear, and had some fantastic good luck, particularly with the gatekeeper.

Many gatekeepers do not care about the findings, except insofar as they might provide evidence for someone to criticize them.

Dealing with gatekeepers is a recurrent issue as you enter new levels or areas of a field site. In addition, a gatekeeper can shape the direction of research. In some sites, gatekeeper approval creates a stigma that inhibits the cooperation of members. For example, prisoners may not be cooperative if they know that the prison warden gave approval to the researcher.

Enter and Gain Access. Entering and gaining access to a field site requires common-sense judgment and social skills. Most field sites have different levels or areas, and entry can be an issue for each. Access is more analogous to peeling away the layers of an onion than to opening a door. Moreover, bargains and promises of entry may not remain stable over time. You should have fallback plans or you may have to return later for renegotiation. Because your specific research focus may not emerge until later in the research process or may change, try not to get locked into rigid specifics by gatekeepers.

Assume a Social Role. You play many social roles in daily life—daughter/son, student, customer, sports fan—and maintain social relations with others. You choose some roles and others are given to you. Few of us have a choice but to occupy the role of son or daughter. Some roles are formal (e.g., bank teller, police chief, etc.); others are informal (flirt, elder statesperson, buddy, etc.). Every day you might switch roles, play multiple roles, and occupy a role in a particular way.

You occupy two kinds of roles in the field site; a social role (e.g., customer, patient, employee) and a researcher role (to be discussed in the next section). You may need to negotiate which preexisting social role field site members assign to you early in field site interactions. The role others assign to you and how you perform it can influence your access and success in developing trust and cooperation in the field. Some roles provide you with greater access than others. In better roles, you can observe and interact with all members, are free to move around, and can balance the requirements of researcher and member. At times, you might be able to introduce a new role or modify an existing one.

Your ascriptive features and physical appearance can restrict the social roles you can occupy. You can change some aspects of your appearance, such as dress or hairstyle, but not the ascriptive features such as age, race, gender, and attractiveness. Nevertheless, such factors may affect your ability to gain access or restrict roles available to you. For example, Gurney (1985) reported that being a female in a male-dominated setting required extra negotiations and "hassles." Nevertheless, her gender provided insights and created situations that would have been absent with a male researcher.

Almost any role will limit access to some parts of a field site. For example, the role of a bartender in a tavern limits knowledge of intimate customer behavior or presence at customer gatherings in other locations. You want to take care when choosing a role (or having it assigned) but should recognize that all roles involve tradeoffs.

Most social settings contain cliques, informal groups, hierarchies, and rivalries. A role can help you gain acceptance into or exclude you from a clique. It might help others treat you as a person in authority or as an underling. You need to be aware that by adopting a role, you may be forming allies and enemies who can assist or limit research.

Danger and high risk are features of some settings (e.g., police work, violent criminal gangs). You should be aware of risks to safety, assess the risks, and then decide what you are willing to do. Some observers argue that a field researcher must share in the risks and danger of a setting to understand it and its members. In addition to physical injury, you could face legal or financial risks based on actions in the field. Research into some settings (e.g., the severely mentally ill, trauma centers, war zones) may create emotional-psychological discomfort and damage a sense of inner well-being.

Adopt a Level of Involvement. Researcher roles are on a continuum and vary by degree of involvement with members in the field. At one end is a detached outsider observer; the opposite extreme is an intimately involved insider participant. Your level of involvement will vary by negotiations with members, specifics of the field setting, your personal comfort level, and your social role in the field site. You may move from outsider to insider levels with time in the field. Each level has its advantages and disadvantages.

Roles at the outsider end of the continuum reduce the time needed for acceptance, make overrapport less an issue, facilitate detachment that might help some members open up, and insulate your self-identity. Some field researchers reject the outsider observer role and argue that you can only acquire an understanding of members by engaging them and participating with them in the field setting.

Roles at the insider end of the continuum facilitate empathy and sharing of a member's lived experience. These roles help you to experience fully the intimate social world of a member. Nevertheless, a lack of distance from or overinvolvement with members has risks. Readers may question your study findings, gathering data is more difficult, their impact on the self can be dramatic, and you may lack the social distance required for serious data analysis.

Build Rapport. You want to begin to build rapport with members as soon as you enter the field. At one level, it simply means getting along with members and takes time, tenacity, and openness. To do this, you forge a friendly relationship, share the same language, and learn to laugh and cry with members. It is a step toward obtaining an understanding of members and moving beyond understanding toward empathy—that is, seeing events from another's perspective.

It is not always easy to build rapport. The social world is not all in harmony, with warm, friendly, trusting people. A field site may contain fear, tension, and conflict. Members may be unpleasant, untrustworthy, or untruthful; they may do things that disturb or disgust you. You should prepare yourself for a range of events and relationships. You may find, however, that it is impossible to penetrate a setting or get really close to members. Settings where cooperation, sympathy, and collaboration are impossible require different techniques. Also, you accept what you hear or see at face value, but without being gullible.[9]

Step 3. Apply Strategies

Once in a field site, you will soon need to apply a range of strategies: negotiate, decide on how much to disclose, use personal charm and nurture social trust, sample and focus, and use the attitude of strangeness.

Negotiate. You will negotiate and form new social relations throughout the fieldwork process.[10] You need to negotiate with members until you establish a stable relationship. It is part of the process as you gain access, build trust, obtain information, and contain resistance or hostility. Expect to negotiate and explain what you are doing over and over again in the field. Marginalized people, those engaged in illegal or illicit activities, and elites often require more intense negotiations to open access. For example, to gain access to deviant subcultures,

field researchers have used contacts from the researcher's private life, gone to social welfare or law enforcement agencies, advertised for volunteers, offered a service (e.g., counseling) in exchange for access, or gone to a location where deviants hang out and joined a group.

Normalize Research. As a field researcher, you not only observe members in the field but the members are observing you as well. Field research is not an activity of the isolated researcher alone; rather, everyone in the field setting together creates a research outcome. In overt field research, many members will be uncomfortable at first with the presence of a researcher. Few may know about field research, and they may not distinguish among sociologists, psychologists, counselors, and social workers. They may see you as an outside critic, dangerous spy, a savior, or all-knowing expert.

It is important for you to ***normalize social research***—that is, help members to redefine social research from something unknown and threatening into something normal and acceptable. To do this, you might present your own biography, explain field research a little at a time, appear nonthreatening, or accept minor deviance in the setting (e.g., minor violations of official rules). You can normalize research by explaining it in terms members understand. Sometimes, members' excitement about being written up in a book is useful.

Decide on Disclosure. In all social research, you need to decide how much to reveal to participants about yourself and the study. In field research, disclosing your personal life, hobbies, interests, and background can build trust and close relationships with members. In the process, you may lose privacy and have to direct the focus to events in the field. Disclosure ranges on a continuum. At one end is covert research, in which members are unaware that research is taking place. At the opposite end is a situation in which everyone knows all the specifics of the study. The degree and timing of disclosure

depends on your judgment and particulars in the setting. Disclosure may unfold over time, as you feel more comfortable and secure.
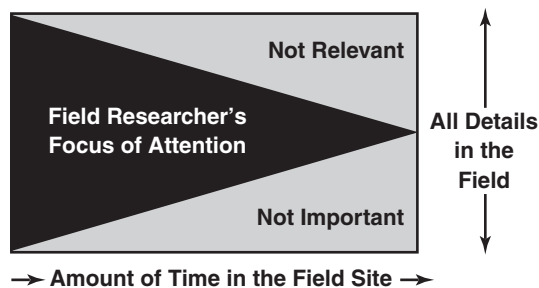
You will want to disclose the study to gate-keepers and others unless there is a very good reason for not doing so. Even in these cases, you may disclose that you are a researcher, but you may pose as one who appears to be submissive, harmless, and interested in nonthreatening issues.

People explicitly and implicitly present themselves to others. We display who we are—the type of person we are or would like to be—through our physical appearance, what we say, and how we act. The presentation of self sends a symbolic message. It may be, "I'm a serious, hard-working student," "I'm a warm and caring person," "I'm a cool jock," or "I'm a rebel and party animal." Many selves are possible, and presentations of selves can differ depending on the occasion.

In field research, you want to be highly conscious of the presentation of self. For example, how should you dress in the field? The best guide is to respect both yourself and the members in the field. It is difficult to present a highly deceptive front or to present yourself in a way that deviates sharply from who you are ordinarily. Do not overdress in a manner that offends or stands out. Copying the dress of the people you study is not always necessary. A professor who studies street people does not have to dress or act like one; dressing and acting informally is sufficient. Likewise, more formal dress and professional demeanor are usually required when studying corporate executives or top officials.

Focus and Sample. Once in the field, you first acquire a general picture. Only then can you gradually focus on a few specific issues (see Figure 2). You can only decide on specific research questions after experiencing the field firsthand. At first, everything may appear to be relevant; later, you can selectively focus your attention on specific questions and themes.

FIGURE 2   Focusing in Field Research

Field Researcher's Focus of Attention

Not Relevant

Not Important

All Details in the Field

→ Amount of Time in the Field Site →

Field research sampling differs from that in survey research, although sometimes both use snowball sampling. You may also wish to sample times, situations, types of events, locations, types of people, or contexts of interest. To sample times, observe a setting at various times of the day and days of the week. It is often best to overlap when sampling (e.g., to have sampling times from 7:00 A.M. to 9:00 A.M., from 8:00 A.M. to 10:00 A.M., from 9:00 A.M. to 11:00 A.M., etc.). You can sample locations by sitting or standing in different places to get a better sense of the whole site. For example, the peer-to-peer behavior of schoolteachers usually occurs in a faculty lounge, but it also occurs at a local bar or café where teachers gather or in a classroom temporarily used for a teacher meeting. To sample people, you want to focus attention or direct your interaction to different kinds of people (old-timers and newcomers, old and young, males and females, leaders and followers). As you identify the range of types of people in a field site, including people with diverse outlooks, you will want to interact with and learn about all the types.

You can also sample events or activities. For example, you might sample three kinds of events: routine, special, and unanticipated. Routine events (e.g., opening up a store for business) happen every day. You should not consider them unimportant simply because

they are routine, but do not ignore them. Special events (e.g., annual office party) are announced and planned. They focus member attention and reveal aspects of social life not otherwise visible. Unanticipated events just happen to occur while you are present (e.g., unsupervised workers when the manager gets sick and cannot oversee workers at a store for a day). Try to pay attention and notice the full range of events and reflect on their meaning.

Assume the Attitude of Strangeness. It is hard to recognize what you are very close to. The everyday world you inhabit contains thousands of details. If you pay attention to everything all the time, you would suffer from severe information overload. What you do naturally is to ignore much of what is around you, engage in habitual thinking, and notice what stands out or is new. Unfortunately, this means you cease to see what is familiar to you and to treat your own way of living as being natural or normal. This "blindness" to what is familiar makes field research in familiar surroundings especially difficult.

By studying different cultures or subcultures, you will encounter assumptions and views about what is important or how to accomplish tasks that are divergent from what you consider normal or natural. A confrontation of cultures, or mini culture shock, can be a powerful analytic technique. Through it, you will find it easier to recognize assumptions or cultural elements that are otherwise invisible to you.

Field researchers use a version of the confrontation of cultures, the ***attitude of strangeness***, to gain these benefits. The attitude tells you to notice ordinary details and look at them through the eyes of a stranger. It also helps you to overcome the boredom of observing ordinary details. In addition, it reveals aspects of a setting that even field site members are not consciously aware.

Here is a simple example of how the attitude of strangeness reveals assumptions in a custom you may take for granted. How do you respond when someone gives you a gift? Do you say "thank you" and praise the gift? Do you say the gift is unnecessary? This is not "natural" but a cultural custom. The attitude of strangeness can make the tacit culture visible—for example, that gift givers expect to hear "thank you" and "the gift is nice." They may feel offended or even become upset otherwise. Think of the reaction if you said nothing at all, or remarked, "Is that all?" when you received the gift.

In field research, you want to adopt both the attitude of strangeness and an insider's point of view. A stranger sees action or events as distinct or specific social processes, whereas to the insider, the same events or actions are unquestioned and seem natural. You need both views, as well as an ability to swiftly switch back and forth. The attitude of strangeness also encourages you to reconsider your own social world. Immersion in a different setting breaks old habits of thought and action. You may find reflection and introspection easier and more intense when encountering the unfamiliar, whether it is a different culture or a familiar culture seen through a stranger's eyes.

Cope with Stress. Fieldwork can be highly rewarding, exciting, and fulfilling, but it also can be difficult. New field researchers frequently face embarrassment, experience discomfort, and are overwhelmed by the fast flow of details in the field. For example, in her study of U.S. relocation camps for Japanese Americans during World War II, respected field researcher Rosalie Wax (1971) reported that she endured the discomfort of 120-degree Fahrenheit temperatures, filthy and dilapidated living conditions, dysentery, and mosquitoes. She felt isolated, she cried a lot, and she gained 30 pounds from compulsive eating. After months in the field, she thought she was a total failure; she was distrusted by members and got into fights with the camp administration.

Maintaining a "marginal" status in any social setting is stressful. In field research, you are often an outsider who is not fully involved, especially when you study a setting full of intense

feelings (e.g., political campaigns, religious conversions, etc.). The loneliness and isolation of fieldwork may combine with a desire to develop rapport and empathy. This can cause overinvolvement. You may *go native* and abandon a professional researcher role to become a full member. Or you may feel guilt about learning intimate details as members drop their guard and overidentify with members.

A degree of emotional stress is inevitable in all field research. Instead of suppressing emotional responses, remain sensitive to your emotional reactions. Some ways to help you cope in the field include keeping a personal diary, emotional journal, or written record of inner feelings, or having a few sympathetic people outside the field site with whom you can confide.

Step 4. Maintaining Relations in the Field

There are many diverse strategies for maintaining relations in the field site. These include a need to adjust and adapt, use charm and nurture trust, perform small favors, avoid conflicts, appear interested, and become an acceptable incompetent.

Adjust and Adapt.   With time in the field site, you can develop and modify social relationships. Members who are cool at first may warm up later. Or, members who put on a front of initial friendliness may show fears and suspicions later. You are in a delicate position. Early in a study, when you are not yet fully aware of all in a field site, you should avoid rushing to form close relationships. This is because you do not yet have a full picture of the field site and members, and circumstances may change. On the other hand, if you develop close friends early on, you may develop vital allies in the field who can defend your presence to others and help you gain access.

As a field researcher, you need to monitor continuously how your actions or appearance affects members. For example, a physically attractive researcher who interacts with members of the opposite sex may encounter crushes, flirting, and jealousy. He or she develops an awareness of these field relations and learns to manage them.

In addition to developing social relationships, you must be capable of breaking off relationships as well. You may need to break off ties with one member to forge ties with others or to explore other aspects of the field site. As with the end of any friendly relationship, the emotional pain of social withdrawal can have an impact on you and on the member who you befriended. In field research, you must learn to balance social sensitivity and your research goals.

Use Charm and Nurture Trust.   To build rapport with members in a field site, you need social skills and personal charm. Trust, friendly feelings, and being liked by others can facilitate communication, and communication will help you to better understand the inner feelings of others. There is no magical way to do this. Showing a genuine concern for and an interest in others, being honest, and sharing your feelings can be effective. Yet, they are not foolproof. It depends on the specific setting and members. Your demeanor should always be nonthreatening. If possible, be warm and friendly, it can open many doors.

Many factors affect trust and rapport—how you present yourself; your role in the field; and the events that encourage, limit, or make achieving trust impossible. You do not gain trust once; it is a continuous process. You built up trust over time through many social nuances (e.g., sharing of personal experiences, storytelling, gestures, hints, facial expressions). Social trust is constantly re-created and needs regular "care and feeding." It is much easier to lose trust after you have built it up than to gain it in the first place.

Establishing trust is important, but it does not ensure that members will reveal all information to you. It may be limited to specific areas. For example, you might build up trust with someone regarding financial matters but

not trust about intimate romantic behaviors, or vice versa. You may need to build trust anew in each area of inquiry.

You may wish to establish trust and rapport with everyone in a field site, but find that some members are not open or cooperative. Others may express an uncooperative attitude, hostility, or an overt unwillingness to participate. Do not expect to gain the cooperation of everyone. Sometimes the best you can hope for is a lukewarm relationship that only develops after prolonged persistence.

Rapport can help you to understand members, and understanding is a precondition for greater depth and analysis. It slowly develops in the field as you overcome an initial bewilderment with a new system of social meaning. Once you attain an understanding of the member's point of view, your next step is to learn how to think and act from the member's perspective. This is empathy, or adopting another's perspective. Empathy does not necessarily mean sympathy, agreement, or approval; it means being able to see and feel things as another does. Rapport helps create understanding and ultimately empathy, and empathy, in turn, will facilitate greater rapport.

Perform Small Favors. Exchange relationships develop in the field, in which small tokens or favors, including deference and respect, are exchanged. You may gain acceptance by helping out in small ways, offering to "lend a hand," running a quick errand, or doing "acts of kindness" expecting nothing in return. You may offer small favors but not burden members by asking for return favors. In his study of informal sidewalk vendors, Duneier (1999) used the small favor of watching tables for vendors when they have to leave a short time, such as going to the bathroom.

As you and members share more experiences and see each other repeatedly, members will recall the favors and may reciprocate by allowing you greater access. They may feel as if they "owe" you similar consideration and acts of kindness.

Avoid Conflicts. Fights, conflicts, and disagreements can erupt in the field, or you may study groups that adopt opposing positions. In such situations, you will feel pressure to take sides. You may be "tested" to see whether a side can trust you. In such occasions, you will want to stay on the neutral sidelines and walk a tightrope between opposing sides if you can. Once you align with one side, you will be cut off from access to the other side. In addition, after you align with one side, you will be seeing the situation only from one side's point of view.

Appear Interested. You will want to maintain an ***appearance of interest*** in the field. This simply means that you outwardly appear to be interested in and involved with field events by your statements and behaviors (e.g., facial expression, going for coffee, organizing a party, etc.) even if you are not truly interested. Once members see you acting bored or distracted, it can weaken field relationships. When you appear uninterested in field site activities, you are sending a message that the members are dull, boring people and you do not want to be there. This is hardly a way to build trust, intimacy, and strong social bonds. Putting up a temporary front of involvement is a common small deception you probably use in daily life because it is part of the social norm of being polite.

Of course, selective inattention (i.e., not staring or appearing not to notice) is also part of acting polite. If someone makes a social mistake (e.g., accidentally uses an incorrect word, passes gas, etc.), the polite thing to do is to ignore it. Selective inattention also works in field research. If you are alert, it gives you an opportunity to casually eavesdrop on conversations or observe events that are not meant to be known or seen by the public.

Be the Acceptable Incompetent. As a researcher, you are in the field to learn, not to be an expert. Depending on the setting, you want to be a friendly but somewhat naïve outsider, an ***acceptable incompetent***. You want to present

yourself as someone who is interested in learning about the social life of the field, but who is only partially competent (skilled or knowledgeable) in the setting. It is a strategy for encouraging members to accept you as a nonthreatening person. They will view you as someone who they need to guide or teach.

You probably know little about a specific field site or the local culture at first, and members might see you as a bit of a fool who can be easily hoodwinked or shortchanged. You might be the butt of jokes for your lack of adeptness in the setting. Do not let your ego get in the way; instead, use this social perception as a way to learn more about the field site and its members. Even when you become knowledgeable, you can display less than full information. This will help you to draw out a member's knowledge. In the field site, members are the experts and you should defer to their expertise. If you know more about something that they are talking about than they do, keep silent. Remember, you are primarily in the field to listen and learn from members, not to instruct, correct, or preach to them. Of course, you do not want to overdo this and appear so ignorant that they do not take you seriously.

Step 5. Gather and Record Data

This section looks at how to get good qualitative field data. Field data are what you experience, remember, and record in field notes.

Absorb and Experience. You, as the researcher, are the measurement instrument for field data. As Lofland et al. (2006:3) observed, "In subjecting him- or herself to the lives of others and living and feeling those lives along with them, the researcher becomes the primary instrument or medium through which research is conducted." This has two implications. First, it puts pressure on you to be alert and sensitive to what happens in the field. You must be highly disciplined about recording data. Second, it has personal consequences. Doing research in the field involves your social relationships and personal feelings.

Your own subjective insights and feelings are "experiential data." Data in field research are not just "out there" in what other people say or do. The data are also your personal, subjective experiences in the field site. The experiences are valuable in themselves and for helping you to interpret events.

Instead of being completely neutral or objective and eliminating all your personal reactions to get good data, in field research your feelings are part of the data. Field research can heighten awareness of personal feelings. For example, you might be unaware of personal feelings about nudity until you go to a nudist colony for a study, or you have not thought about your feelings concerning personal possessions until you study a field site where others regularly "borrow" items from you. Your surprise, indignation, or questioning can become an opportunity for reflection and insight.

Watch and Listen. A great deal of what you do in the field is to pay close attention, watch, and listen carefully. You use all senses, noticing what you can see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. You try to absorb all sources of information and scrutinize the physical setting so you can fully capture its atmosphere. As you observe ask yourself, What is the color of the floor, walls, and ceiling? How large is a room? Where are the windows and doors? How is the furniture arranged, and what is its condition (e.g., new or old, dirty or clean)? What type of lighting is there? Are there signs, paintings, or plants? What are the sounds or smells?

Why should you bother with such minor details? Think about it. You may have noticed that stores and restaurants often plan lighting, colors, and piped-in music to create a certain atmosphere. Maybe you know that used-car salespeople spray a new-car scent into cars. Perhaps you noticed bakeries in shopping malls intentionally send out the odor of freshly made cookies. Many realtors advise a fresh coat of paint and shampooing carpets to help sell a house. Many subtle, unconscious signals combine to influence human emotions and behavior.

If you are not noticing and recording such details of the field site, you will not be capturing everything that is affecting what occurs in a field site.

Observing in field research can be monotonous, tedious work. You need patience and an ability to concentrate on the particulars of everyday life. To understand a setting, the accumulated mountains of mundane, trivial, everyday minutia matter. Most people tend to overlook the constant flow of details, but to become a good field researcher you should notice and learn from it.

In addition to noticing physical surroundings, observe people and their actions, noting each person's observable physical characteristics: age, sex, race, and stature. This is because people generally interact differently depending on whether another person is 18, 40, or 70 years old; male or female; White or non-White; short and frail or tall, heavyset, and muscular. When noting such characteristics, include yourself. For example, an attitude of strangeness heightens sensitivity to a group's racial composition. Someone who ignores the racial composition of a group in a public setting that is 100 percent White in a multiracial society because he or she too is White is being blind to a potentially important dimension of that public setting.

Not everything you notice in the field will be significant, but you want to record all details because they could reveal something of significance. You may not know what is significant until later, and it is better to err by including everything than to ignore potentially significant details. For example, "The tall, White muscular 19-year-old male in a torn t-shirt and dirty jeans sprinted into the brightly lit room just as the short, overweight light-skinned Black woman in her sixties who was professionally dressed eased into a battered chair" says much more than "One person entered, another sat down."

You should note aspects of a person's physical appearance, such as neatness, dress, and hairstyle because they convey information that may influence social interactions. People spend a great deal of time and money selecting clothes, styling and combing hair, grooming with makeup, shaving, ironing clothes, and using deodorant or perfumes. These are part of their presentation of self. Even people who do not groom, shave, or wear deodorant present themselves and send messages by their appearance. No one dresses or looks "normal," and such statements suggest that you are not being sensitive to social signals.

In addition to appearance, actions can have significance. You want to notice where people sit or stand, the pace at which they walk, and their nonverbal communication. People express social information, feelings, and attitudes through nonverbal communication. These include gestures, facial expressions, and how one stands or sits (standing stiffly, sitting in a slouched position, etc.). People express relationships by how they position themselves in a group and the use of eye contact. You may read social communication by noting who stands close together, looks relaxed, and makes eye contact.

You also want to notice the context in which events occur: Who was present? Who just arrived or left the scene? Was the room hot and stuffy? Such details can help you assign meaning and understand why an event occurred. If you fail to notice details, they are lost, as is a full understanding of the event.

Serendipity and chance encounters can be important in field research. Many times, you do not know the relevance of what you are observing until later. This has two implications. First, keen observation and excellent notes are important at all times, even when it seems that "nothing is happening." Second, "wait time" and regularly reviewing field notes are important. In field research, you will spend a lot of time "waiting." Novice field researchers get frustrated with the amount of time they seem to "waste." It may be waiting for other people or waiting for events to occur. What novices need to learn is that "wait time" is a critical aspect of field research and can be valuable.

You need to learn the rhythms of the setting, learn to operate on other people's schedules,

and learn to observe how events occur within the flow of time. "Wait time" does not need to be wasted time. It is time for reflection, for observing details, for nurturing social relations, for building rapport, and for becoming a familiar sight in the field setting. "Wait time" also displays your commitment and seriousness. Perhaps you are impatient to get in, do some research, finish it up, and get on with your "real life." For the people in the field site, this is their real lives. A good field researcher learns to subordinate personal desires and wants to the demands of life in the field site.

When in the field you will want to listen carefully to phrases, accents, and incorrect grammar. Listen to what people say as well as how they say it and what they do not state explicitly but imply. For example, people often use phrases such as "you know" or "of course" or "et cetera." You want to learn the meaning behind such phrases. You can try to hear everything, but listening is difficult when many conversations occur at once or when eavesdropping. Luckily, significant events and themes usually recur.

People who interact with each other over time often develop an insider's set of shared symbols and terminology. They will create new words or assign new meanings to ordinary words. New words or meanings arise from specific shared events, assumptions, or relationships. Knowing and using the language can signal membership in a distinct subculture.

In the field, you should begin with the premise that some words and symbols from your world might have different meanings for the people you are studying. Try to stay attuned to new words and the use of words in ways other than those with which you are familiar. They can be important source of insights and are a form of field data.

Record the Data. Information overload is common in field research. Doing field research and recording data can stretch a person's abilities, not matter how skilled he or she might be. The bulk of field research data are in the form of field notes. Full field notes can contain maps, diagrams, photographs, interviews, tape recordings, videotapes, memos, objects from the field, notes jotted in the field, and detailed notes you wrote away from the field. You can expect to fill many notebooks or the equivalent in computer memory. It is not unusual to devote as much or more time writing notes than being in the field site. Some researchers produce 40 single-spaced pages of notes for three hours of observation. With practice, you should produce several pages of notes for each hour in the field.

Writing field notes can be boring, tedious work that requires perseverance and self-discipline. Good field notes will contain extensive descriptive detail drawn from memory. If possible, always write notes before the day's thoughts and excitement begin to fade, without retelling events to other people. Pouring fresh memories into the notes with an intense immediacy often triggers an emotional release and it stimulates insightful reflection. At times, especially after a long, tiring day, writing may feel more like painful drudgery. Begin by allocating about a half hour to writing your field notes for each hour you spend in the field site.

You must keep notes neat and organized. They contain valuable information and you will return to them over and again. Once written, the notes are private. You should treat them with care and protect confidentiality. People in the field site have a right to remain anonymous. For this reason, most researchers use pseudonyms (false names) in the field notes. Field notes may be of interest to hostile parties, blackmailers, or legal officials. As a result, some researchers even write field notes in code.

Your state of mind, level of attention, and conditions in the field affect note taking. Begin with relatively short one- to three-hour periods in the field before writing notes.

Types of Field Notes. Field researchers take notes in many ways.[11] The recommendations here (also see Expansion Box 3) are suggestions. Full field notes have several types. Here I describe

3 EXPANSION BOX
Recommendations for Taking Field Notes

1. Record notes as soon as possible after each period in the field, and do not talk with others until observations are recorded.

2. Begin the record of each field visit with a new page, with the date and time noted.

3. Use jotted notes only as a temporary memory aid, with key words or terms, or the first and last things said.

4. Use wide margins to make it easy to add to notes at any time. Go back and add to the notes if you remember something later.

5. Plan to type notes and keep each level of notes separate so it will be easy to go back to them later.

6. Record events in the order in which they occurred, and note how long they last (e.g., a 15-minute wait, a one-hour ride).

7. Make notes as concrete, complete, and comprehensible as possible.

8. Use frequent paragraphs and quotation marks. Exact recall of phrases is best, with double quotes; use single quotes for paraphrasing.

9. Record small talk or routines that do not appear to be significant at the time; they may become important later.

10. "Let your feelings flow" and write quickly without worrying about spelling or "wild ideas." Assume that no one else will see the notes, but use pseudonyms.

11. Never substitute tape recordings completely for field notes.

12. Include diagrams or maps of the setting, and outline your own movements and those of others during the period of observation.

13. Include your own words and behavior in the notes. Also record emotional feelings and private thoughts in a separate section.

14. Avoid evaluative summarizing words. Instead of "The sink looked disgusting," say, "The sink was rust-stained and looked as if it had not been cleaned in a long time. Pieces of food and dirty dishes looked as if they had been piled in it for several days."

15. Reread notes periodically and record ideas generated by the rereading.

16. Always make one or more backup copies, keep them in a locked location, and store the copies in different places in case of fire.

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six types: jotted, direct observation, inferences, analytic, personal journal, and interview notes. See Figure 3 for an example of the four major types. You usually will want to keep all the notes for an observation period together and to distinguish various types of notes by separate pages. Some researchers include inference notes with direct observation notes, but distinguish them by a visible device such as brackets or colored ink. The quantity of notes varies across types. For example, six hours in the field might result in one page of jotted notes, 40 pages of direct observation, five pages of researcher inference, and two pages total for methodological, theoretical, and personal notes.

1. *Jotted Notes.* It is nearly impossible to take good notes in the field. Even a known observer in a public setting looks strange when furiously writing. More important, when looking down and writing, you cannot see and hear what is happening. The attention you give to note writing reduces attention to observation, which is where it belongs. The specific setting will determine whether you can take notes in the field. You may be able to write, and members

FIGURE 3   Types of Field Notes

Direct Observation	Inference	Analytic	Personal Journal
Sunday, October 4. Kay's Kafe 3:00 pm. Large White male in mid-40s, overweight, enters. He wears worn brown suit. He is alone; sits at booth #2. Kay comes by, asks, "What'll it be?" Man says, "Coffee, black for now." She leaves and he lights cigarette and reads menu. 3:15 pm. Kay turns on radio.	Kay seems friendly today, humming. She becomes solemn and watchful. I think she puts on the radio when nervous.	Women are afraid of men who come in alone since the robbery.	It is raining. I am feeling comfortable with Kay but am bored today.

may expect it, or you may have to be secretive (e.g., go to the restroom).

The only notes you write in the field are *jotted notes*. They are very short memory triggers such as words, phrases, or drawings. You take them inconspicuously, perhaps scribbling on a convenient item (e.g., napkin, matchbook). Later you will incorporate them into your direct observation notes. They are never a substitute for the direct observation notes.

2. *Direct Observation Notes.* The primary source of field data are *direct observation notes*. You should write them immediately after leaving the field. You can add to them later. Organize the notes chronologically, and put the date, time, and location on each entry. These notes serve as a detailed description of everything you heard and saw in concrete, specific terms. To the extent possible, they are an exact recording of the particular words, phrases, or actions.

Your memory improves with practice and you will find that you can soon remember exact phrases. You should write verbatim statements with double quote marks to distinguish them from paraphrases. You should record dialogue accessories (nonverbal communication, props, tone, speed, volume, gestures) as well. Record what was actually said and do not clean it up; include ungrammatical speech, slang, and misstatements (e.g., write, "Uh, I'm goin' home, Sal," not "I am going home, Sally").

Your notes should have specific, concrete details, not summaries. For example, instead of "We talked about sports," write "Anthony argued with Sam and Jason. He said that the Cubs would win next week because they traded for a new shortstop, Chiappetta. He also said that the team was better than the Mets, who he thought had inferior infielders. He cited last week's game where the Cubs won against Boston by 8 to 3." When writing about an encounter or conversation, include details of the context—who was present, what happened, where did it occur, exactly when, and under what circumstances. Novice researchers may say they do not take notes because "nothing important happened." An experienced researcher knows even when "nothing happened" you can record a lot. For example, members may express feelings and organize experience into folk categories even in trivial conversations.

3. *Inference Notes.* You want to listen closely to what people say in the field so you can "climb into their skin" or "walk in their shoes." This involves a three-step process: (1) listen without applying analytical categories; (2) compare what you hear now to what you heard at other times and to what others say; and (3) apply your interpretation to infer what it means. In ordinary interaction, you do all three steps simultaneously and jump quickly to your own inferences. In field research, you want to look and listen without inferring or imposing an interpretation at first, and to put your observations without inferences into your direct observation field notes.

Recording observations without inferences does not mean you stop inferring. Rather, you record inferences in a separate section that you key to the direct observations. This separation has advantages. Although you may talk about social relationships, emotions, or the meanings of human actions, you never see those relations, emotions, or meaning directly. Instead, you infer them from the specific physical actions you see and words you hear. You apply background cultural knowledge, clues from the context, and an awareness of what occurred earlier to infer relations, emotions, or meanings. For example, you never see anger. You observe specific actions (red face, loud voice, wild gestures, obscenities, clenched hand) and use them to draw inferences (the person is angry).

We are all constantly inferring social meaning based on what we see and hear, but we do not always do so correctly. For example, my 5-year-old niece visited me and accompanied me to a store to buy a kite. The clerk at the cash register smiled and asked her whether she and her "Daddy" (looking at me) were going to fly the kite that day. The clerk had observed our interaction, then inferred a father/daughter, not an uncle/niece relationship. What she saw and heard was a male adult and a female child interact, but she inferred the social relationship incorrectly.

You want to keep inferred meaning separate from direct observation because the meanings of actions are not always self-evident. People may try to deceive others. For example, an unrelated couple register at a motel as Mr. and Mrs. Smith. More frequently, social behavior is ambiguous or multiple meanings are possible. For example, I see a White male and female, both in their late twenties, get out of a car and enter a restaurant together. They sit at a table, order a meal, and talk with serious expressions in hushed tones, sometimes leaning forward to hear each other. As they get up to leave, the man briefly hugs the woman, who has a sad facial expression and appears ready to cry. They then leave together. Did I witness a couple breaking up, two close friends discussing a third, two people trying to decide what to do because they have discovered that their spouses are having an affair with each other, or a brother and sister whose father just died? If you record an inferred meaning without separating it from direct observation, you lose the ability to assign other possible meanings to the direct observation.

4. *Analytic Memos.* You will make many decisions about how to proceed while in the field. You might plan some acts (e.g., to conduct an interview, to observe a particular activity, etc.) while others will happen spontaneously, almost "out of thin air." You will want to keep methodological notes to have a record of your plans, tactics, ethical and procedural decisions, and self-critiques of tactics.

Theory emerges in field research during data collection and when reviewing field notes. Theoretical notes are a running account of your attempts to give meaning to field events. You "think out loud" in the notes. In them, you might suggest new linkages between ideas, create hypotheses, propose conjectures, and develop new concepts. **Analytic memos** include your methodological and theoretical notes. They are collections of your thoughts, digressions into theory, and a record of your decisions. You can use them to elaborate and expand on ideas

while still in the field. You can modify them or develop them into more complex theory by rereading and reflecting on the memos.

5. As discussed earlier, your personal feelings and emotional reactions are part of the data in field research. They color what you see or hear in the field. You should keep a section of notes that is like a personal diary. In it, record your personal life events and feelings ("I'm tense today, I wonder if it's because of the fight I had yesterday with …"; "I've got a headache on this gloomy, overcast day").

Personal notes provide you with a way to cope with stress; they are also a source of data about personal reactions. Use them to evaluate direct observation or inference notes when you read your notes later. For example, if you were in an especially good mood during observations, it might color what you observed in the field differently from when you feel a little depressed or are fighting a cold.

6. *Interview Notes.* If you conduct field interviews (to be discussed), keep the interview notes separate from other notes. In addition to recording questions and answers, you want to record information such as the date, place of interview, characteristics of interviewee, content of the interview, and so on. It helps you when rereading and making sense of the notes.

Maps, Diagrams and Artifacts. Many field researchers make maps and draw diagrams or pictures of the features of a field site. This serves two purposes: It helps to organize events in the field, and it helps you convey a field site to others. For example, you observe a restaurant counter with 15 stools. You might draw and number 15 circles to simplify recording (e.g., "Yosuke came in and sat on stool 12; Phoebe was already sitting at stool 10").

Three types of maps may be helpful: spatial, social, and temporal. The first helps you orient the data in space; the latter two are preliminary forms of data analysis. A spatial map locates people, equipment, and the like in terms of physical space to show where activities occur (Figure 4a). A social map shows the number or variety of people and the arrangements among them of power, influence, friendship, division of labor, and so on (Figure 4b). A temporal map shows the ebb and flow of people, goods, services, and communications in time (Figure 4c).

In addition to using maps, you may wish to gather artifacts. These are items from the field site that provide physical evidence (e.g., a brochure, a menu, a coffee cup, a t-shirt, a program or roster of participants, a party hat) and visible reminders of a specific site. You can use them to trigger a memory, illustrate a theme, or symbolize some activity or event.
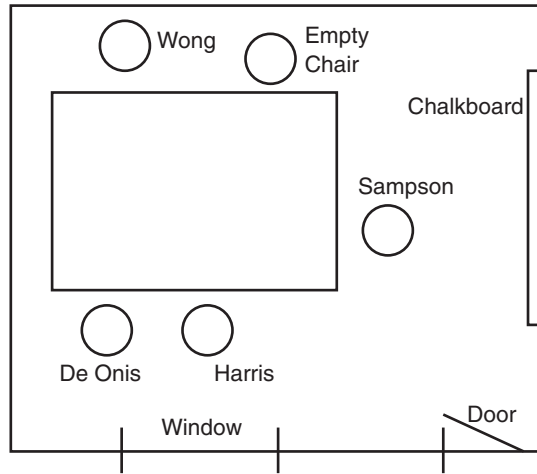
Machine-Recorded Data. Photos, tape recorders, and videotapes can be helpful supplements in field research. However, they are never a substitute for field notes or your presence in the field. You cannot introduce them into all field sites, and you can only use them after you develop some rapport. Recorders and videotapes provide a close approximation to what has occurred. They are a permanent record that others can review, and can help you recall events and observe what does not happen, or nonresponses, which are easy to miss. Nevertheless, recording devices create disruption and an increased awareness of surveillance by people in the field. They can bring associated problems (e.g., ensure that batteries are fresh). Also, listening to or viewing videos can be time consuming. For example, it may take you over 100 hours to listen to 50 hours recorded in the field. Transcriptions are expensive and not always accurate; they cannot always convey subtle contextual meanings or mumbled words.
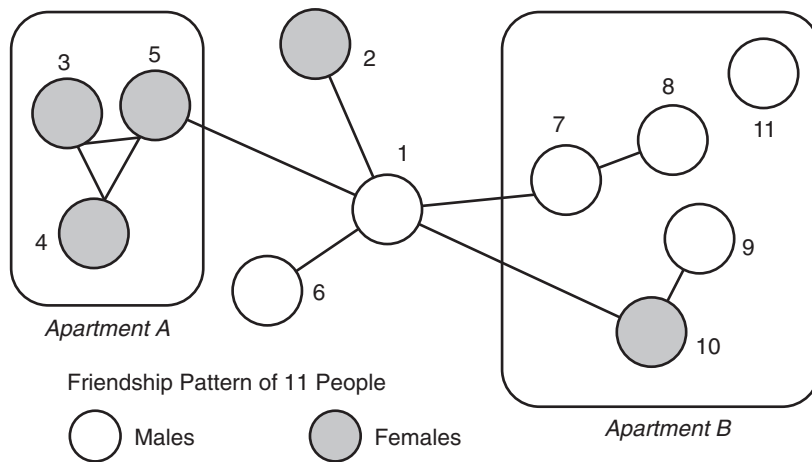
Step 6. Exit the Field Site

Researchers are often in a field site for weeks or years. In either case, at some point work in the field ends and you leave. Some researchers

FIGURE 4   Types of Maps Used in Field Research

A Spatial Map

[Spatial map diagram showing a room with: Wong (circle, top left), Empty Chair (circle, top), Chalkboard (right side), Sampson (circle, right), De Onis (circle, bottom left), Harris (circle, bottom), a large table in the center, Window (bottom), and Door (bottom right)]

B Social Map

[Social map diagram showing Apartment A with people 3, 5, 4, 2; person 1 and 6 in the middle; Apartment B with people 7, 8, 11, 9, 10. Lines connect friendships.]

Apartment A

Friendship Pattern of 11 People

○ Males   ● Females

Apartment B

C Temporal Map

Day of Week, Buzz's Bar

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thr	Fri	Sat
Open 10:00	Old Drunks	Old Drunks	Old Drunks	Old Drunks	Skip Work or Leave Early	Going to Fish
5:00	Football Watchers	Neighbors and Bridge Players	Softball Team (All-Male Night)	Young Crowd	Loud Music, Mixed Crowd	Loners and No Dates
Close 1:00						

suggest that the end comes naturally when theory building ceases or reaches a closure; others feel that fieldwork could go on without end and that a firm decision to cut off relations is needed.

You want to anticipate a process of disengaging and exiting the field. Depending on the intensity of involvement and the length of time in the field, the process can be disruptive or emotionally painful for both you and others. You may experience the emotional pain of breaking intimate friendships or feel guilty just before and after leaving. You may find breaking off personal and emotional entanglements to be difficult. If your involvement in the field was intense and long, and the field site was very different from your native culture, you may need a long adjustment period before you feel "at home" with your original life again.

Once you decide to leave, choose a method of exiting. You can leave by a quick exit (simply not return one day) or slowly withdraw, reducing involvement over weeks. Decide how to tell members and how much advance warning to give. In general, let members know a short period ahead of time. You should fulfill any bargains or commitments that you made to leave with a clean slate. Sometimes, a ritual or ceremony, such as a going-away party or shaking hands with everyone, helps signal the break. Feminist researchers advocate maintaining friendships with members after exiting.

As you leave, some members may feel hurt or rejected because a close social relationship is ending. They may react by trying to pull you back into the field and make you more of a member, or they may become angry and resentful. They may grow cool and distant because they are aware that you are an outsider.

THE FIELD RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Interviewing members in the field involves the unstructured, nondirective, in-depth interview, which differs from the formal survey research interview in many ways (see Table 1). Field research interviews go by many names: unstructured, depth, ethnographic, open ended, informal, and long. Generally, they involve one or more people being present, occur in the field, and are informal and nondirective (i.e., a member may take the interview in various directions).

The field interview is a joint production between you and the member. Members are active participants in the process with a mutual sharing of experiences. You might share your background to build trust and encourage the informant to open up, but do not force answers or use leading questions. You want to encourage and guide a process of mutual discovery.

In field interviews, members express themselves in the forms in which they normally speak, think, and organize reality. They may talk in anecdotes, meandering stories, wander into gossip, go off on tangents, and tell a few jokes. You want to retain everything—anecdotes, stories, gossip, tangents, and jokes—in their natural form. Do not repackage them into a standardized format. Focus on the member's perspective and experiences. To stay close to the member's experience, ask questions in terms of concrete examples or situations—for example, "What kinds of things happened before you decided to quit in June?" instead of "Why did you quit your job?" You want to elicit long, elaborate answers, not short, survey research–type responses.

Unlike one-time survey research interviews, field interviews occur in a series over time. You can start and stop it over the course of days or even months, interspacing it with "ordinary talk." You begin by building rapport. Avoid probing inner feelings or sensitive issues until you establish intimacy, and even then, expect apprehension. After several meetings, you may be able to probe into sensitive issues. In later interviews, you may return to topics and check past answers by restating them in a nonjudgmental tone and asking for verification—for example, "The last time we talked, you said that

TABLE 1   Survey Interviews versus Field Research Interviews

Typical Survey Interview	Typical Field Interview
1. It has a clear beginning and end.	1. The beginning and end are not clear. The interview can be picked up later.
2. The same standard questions are asked of all respondents in the same sequence.	2. The questions and the order in which they are asked are tailored to specific people and situations.
3. The interviewer appears neutral at all times.	3. The interviewer shows interest in responses, encourages elaboration.
4. The interviewer asks questions, and the respondent answers.	4. It is like a friendly conversational exchange, but with more interviewer questions.
5. It is almost always with one respondent alone.	5. It can occur in a group setting or with others in area, but varies.
6. It has a professional tone and businesslike focus; diversions are ignored.	6. It is interspersed with jokes, asides, stories, diversions, and anecdotes, which are recorded.
7. Closed-ended questions are common, with rare probes.	7. Open-ended questions are common, and probes are frequent.
8. The interviewer alone controls the pace and direction of interview.	8. The interviewer and member jointly control the pace and direction of the interview.
9. The social context in which the interview occurs is ignored and assumed to make little difference.	9. The social context of the interview is noted and seen as important for interpreting the meaning of responses.
10. The interviewer attempts to mold the framework communication pattern into a standard.	10. The interviewer adjusts to the member's norms and language usage.

Source: Based on Briggs (1986), Denzin (1989), Douglas (1985), Mishler (1986), Spradley (1979a).

you started taking things from the store after they reduced your pay. Is that right?"

The field interview is similar to a friendly conversation but differs slightly. It has an explicit purpose—you want to learn about the person and setting. You include explanations or requests that diverge from friendly conversations. For example, you may say, "I'd like to ask you about . . . ," or "Could you look at this and see if I've written it down right?" A typical conversation tends to have balance, with each participant asking and answering somewhat equally. In the field interview, you will ask more questions and express more ignorance and interest than you might in a typical conversation. You also may ask a member to elaborate or explain more often.

An *informant* in field research is a member with whom you develop a relationship and who tells about, or informs on, the field.[12] Who

makes a good informant? The ideal informant has four characteristics:

1. The informant is familiar with the culture and is in a position to witness significant events makes a good informant. He or she lives and breathes the culture and engages in routines in the setting without thinking about them.
2. The informant is currently involved in the field. Ex-members who have reflected on the field may provide useful insights, but the longer they have been away from direct involvement, the more likely it is that they have reconstructed their recollections.
3. The informant can spend time with you. Interviewing may take many hours, and some members are simply not available for extensive interviewing.
4. Nonanalytic individuals make better informants. A nonanalytic informant is familiar with and uses native folk theory or pragmatic common sense. This is in contrast to the analytic member, who preanalyzes the setting, using categories from the media or education.

You might interview several types of informants. Contrasting types of informants who provide useful perspectives include rookies and old-timers, people in the center of events and those on the fringes of activity, people who recently changed status (e.g., through promotion) and those who are static, people who are frustrated or needy and those who are happy or secure, and the leader in charge and the subordinate who follows. You should expect mixed messages when you interview a range of informants.

Types of Questions in Field Interviews

A field interview can contain three types of questions: descriptive, structural, and contrast questions.[13] You can ask all concurrently, but each type is more frequently at a different stage in the process (see Figure 5). During the early stage, ask descriptive questions. Gradually add structural

FIGURE 5   Types of Questions in Field Research Interviews
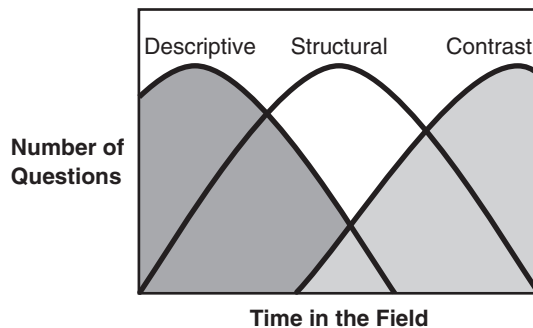
questions until, in the middle stage after you start analysis, structural questions become the majority. Begin to ask contrast questions in the middle and increase them until, by the end, you ask them more than the other types.

Descriptive questions help you explore the setting and learn about members. They can be about time and space—for example, "Where is the bathroom?" "When does the delivery truck arrive?" "What happened Monday night?" They can also be about people and activities: "Who is sitting by the window?" "What is your uncle like?" "What happens during the initiation ceremony?" They can be about objects: "When do you use a saber saw?" "Which tools do you carry with you on an emergency water leak job?" Questions that ask for examples or experiences are descriptive questions—for example, "Could you give me an example of a great date?" "What happened when you were a postal clerk?" Descriptive questions may ask about hypothetical situations: "If a student opened her book during the exam, how would you deal with it?" Another type of descriptive question asks members about terms they use in the field site: "What do you call a deputy sheriff?" (The answer is a "county Mountie.")

After you spent time in the field and have started to analyze data, you can ask more structural questions. They begin after you started to

organize specific field events, situations, and conversations into categories. You use them to verify the categories you developed. For example, your observations of a highway truck-stop restaurant revealed that the employees informally classify customers who patronize the truck stop. In a preliminary analysis, you created a conceptual category, "type of customers." You may have started to recognize several types. As you talk to members, you start using structural questions to verify the types you think you have identified.

You can pose a structural question by asking whether a category includes elements in addition to those you already identified. For example, you might ask, "Are there any types of customers other than regulars, greasers, pit stoppers, and long haulers?" Another kind of structural question asks for confirmation: "Is a greaser a type of customer that you serve?" "Would you call a customer who . . . a greaser?" "Would a pit stopper ever eat a three-course dinner?"

The contrast question builds on the analysis that you verified using structural questions. These questions focus on similarities or differences between the elements in categories or distinguish categories. In them, you ask members to verify similarities and differences you believe exist: "You seem to have a number of different kinds of customers that come in here. I've heard you call some customers 'regulars' and others 'pit stoppers.' How are a regular and a pit stopper alike?" or "Is the difference between a long hauler and a greaser that the greaser doesn't tip?" or "Two types of customers just stop to use the restroom—entire families and a lone male. Do you call both pit stoppers?"

Data Quality

The Meaning of Quality.   In a quantitative study, high-quality data are reliable and valid; they give you precise, consistent measures of the "objective" truth. In qualitative field research, data quality differs because instead of assuming

all members experience the same single, objective truth, the assumption is that members subjectively interpret events and actions as shaped by the social context, and they may do so differently. What a member takes to be true results from social interaction and interpretation. Thus, high-quality field research data captures such fluid processes and provides an understanding of the members' viewpoints.

In field research, you seek "rich" data. This means data that are diverse and detailed. To get them, you must gather many forms of data systematically over a prolonged period. The data have many sizes and shapes (e.g., memories, field notes, photos, conversations, artifacts). Quality data do not eliminate subjective views; rather, they purposely include subjective responses and experiences. High-quality field research data are detailed descriptions based on your immersion and authentic experiences in the social world of members.

The different notion of high-quality data in field research implies different ways to apply the general ideas of reliability and validity.

Reliability in Field Research.   Field data reliability has internal and external consistency. *Internal consistency* asks whether the data are plausible given all that is known about a person or event. It means common forms of human deception have been minimized. It asks, how well do the pieces fit together into a coherent picture of this person or event? For example, are a member's actions (e.g., Susan acts distrustful and a little fearful of her supervisor) consistent over time and across situations? *External consistency* situates data in a specific social context. It means verifying and cross-checking all observations against one other and integrating divergent sources of data. You ask, does it all fit into this specific context? What is said in one setting may differ in other contexts. For example, when asked, "Do you dance?" a member may say no in a public setting full of excellent dancers, but yes in a semiprivate setting with few dancers and different music. The context shaped the answer.

For external consistency ask, Can others verify what you observed? Does a wide range of evidence confirm it?

Reliability means consistency. In a field research study it includes both what you consistently observed happening or heard said, as well as what was not done or said but you expected or anticipated. Such omissions or null data can be significant but are difficult to detect. For example, you observed the cashier JoAnne end her shift. You observed that each time JoAnne did not count the money in a cash register drawer, but locked it then left. You noticed this omission because all other cashiers always counted money at the end of the shift before they locked the drawer.

In the field site, you depend on what members tell you. This makes the credibility of members and their statements part of reliability. To check member credibility, you must ask, Does the person have a reason to lie? Is she in a position to know that? What are the person's values and how might that shape what she says? Is he just saying that to please me? Is there anything that might limit his spontaneity? Take subjectivity and context into account as you evaluate credibility. A person's subjective perceptions influence his or her statements or actions. Statements and actions are colored by an individual's point of view and past experiences. Instead of evaluating each statement to see whether it is true, you may find statements useful in themselves. Even inaccurate statements and actions can be revealing.

Validity in Field Research. Validity in field research comes from your analysis and data as accurate representations of the social world in the field. Replication is not a major criterion for validity in field research, because the specific events in a particular setting are virtually impossible to replicate. Essential aspects of the field site may change over time: Events and context change, the members change, the field researcher differs, and so on.

The fluidity and subjective features of field research does not mean that validity is impossible. Rather, it shifts the nature of validity from that of quantitative research. There are four kinds of validity or ways to evaluate research accuracy: ecological validity, natural history, member validation, and competent insider performance.[14]

1. *Ecological validity* is the degree to which the social world you describe matches the world of members. It asks, Is the natural setting described relatively undisturbed by the researcher's presence or procedures? A study has ecological validity if events would likely have occurred without your presence.

2. **Natural history** is a detailed description of how you conducted the study. It is a full and candid disclosure of your actions, assumptions, and procedures for others to evaluate. A study is valid in terms of natural history if outsiders see and accept the field site and your actions.

3. *Member validation* occurs when you take field results back to members, who judge their adequacy. A study is "member valid" if many members recognize and understand your description as reflecting their intimate social world. Member validation has limitations because conflicting perspectives in a setting produce disagreement with your observations, and members may object when results do not portray their group in a favorable light. In addition, members may not recognize the description because it is not from their perspective or does not fit with their purposes.

4. *Competent insider performance* is the ability of a nonmember to interact effectively as a member or pass as one. This includes the ability to tell and understand insider jokes. A valid study gives enough of a flavor of the social life in the field and sufficient detail so that an outsider can act as a member. Its limitation is that it is not possible to know the social rules for every situation. Also, an outsider might be able to pass

simply because members are being polite and do not want to point out social mistakes.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF FIELD RESEARCH

Your direct, personal involvement in the social lives of other people during field research introduces ethical dilemmas. Dilemmas will arise when you are alone in the field and have little time to deliberate over ethics. Even if you are aware of general ethical issues before entering the field, situations arise unexpectedly. We look at five ethical issues in field research: covert research, confidentiality, involvement with illegal behavior, the powerful, and publishing reports.[15]

Covert Research. The most debated issue is that of covert versus overt field research. Should you conduct secret or covert research and assume a false role, name, and identity, and consistently lie to members? Some in the research community support covert research and see it as necessary to enter into and gain a full knowledge of certain areas of life. Others oppose it absolutely and argue that it undermines a fundamental trust between social researchers and society. Although its moral status is questionable, you can only study certain field sites or activities with some degree of secrecy or deception. It is rarely easier than overt research because of the difficulties of maintaining a front and the constant fear of getting caught. The general principle is that covert research is never preferable.

Confidentiality. You may learn intimate knowledge revealed in confidence and have a strong moral obligation to uphold the confidentiality of data. This includes keeping what you learn confidential from others in the field and disguising members' names in field notes. You may not be able to directly quote a person in a research report. One strategy is to find some public, documentary source that says the same thing and use the document (e.g., an old memo, a newspaper article, etc.) as the source of the information. A more serious ethical difficulty arises when you develop a close, personal friendship relationship with members. Based on deep trust, a member may share intimate secrets with you alone. Although this adds to your understanding of the person and field site, you cannot betray the confidence by referring to it explicitly in a report about the study.

Involvement with Illegal Behavior. If you conduct field research on people who engage in illegal, immoral, or unethical behavior, you will learn of and might be indirectly involved in illegal activity. *Guilty knowledge* is of interest not only to law enforcement officials but also to other field site members.[16] You face a dilemma of building trust and rapport with the members, yet not becoming so involved as to violate your basic personal moral standards. One strategy is to be open about the issue and make an explicit arrangement with the deviant members.

The Powerful. Many field research studies have been conducted on marginal, powerless people (e.g., street people, the poor, children, and low-level workers in bureaucracies), and elites and high officials have criticized the studies for having a bias in favor of the less powerful. The public often assumes that people with official authority and who are at the top of an organization are creditable and have a right to define events. This creates a tension between official, authoritative versions of events from elites or officials and the versions offered by field researchers who immerse themselves in the world of the disadvantaged. Field researchers often acquire an in-depth understanding of that side of social life that is a rarely heard perspective. Because field researchers are revealing, or "give a voice to" a perspective that is rarely heard or that differs from official versions, they are accused of bias. An ethical issue arises when the researcher's commitment to scientific evidence and documenting authentic life in the

field site clashes with the official or widely held views on events or situations.

Publishing Field Reports. You may gain intimate knowledge about people and events in a field research study, and there is a right of privacy. This means you cannot always reveal all member secrets you learn without violating privacy or harming reputations. Yet, if you fail to make public what you learned in a report of the research, it will remain hidden. If you keep details hidden, you are not giving a complete and accurate account of the people and events. Others may question a report with critical details omitted.

Some researchers suggest asking members to look at a report to verify its accuracy and to approve of their portrayal in print. Yet, censorship or self-censorship can be a danger. A compromised position is to reveal truthful but unflattering material only if it is essential to your larger argument or to present an accurate total picture.

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

Focus group research is a qualitative technique in which you informally study a group-discussion setting.[17] In focus group research, you gather together 6–12 people in a room with a moderator to discuss a few issues. Most focus group sessions last about 90 minutes. The moderator is trained to be nondirective and to facilitate free, open discussion by all group members (i.e., not let one person dominate the discussion). Group members should be homogenous, but not include close friends or relatives. A typical study has four to six groups. Focus group topics can include public attitudes (e.g., race relations, workplace equality, homeless people), personal behaviors (e.g., dealing with a terminal disease, feelings about sexual orientation), a new product (e.g., breakfast cereal), or a political candidate (see Expansion Box 4).

EXPANSION BOX

4

Advantages and Limitations of Focus Groups

Advantages

- The natural setting allows people to express opinions/ideas freely.
- Open expression among members of marginalized social groups is encouraged.
- People tend to feel empowered, especially in action-oriented research projects.
- Survey researchers are provided a window into how people talk about survey topics.
- The interpretation of quantitative survey results is facilitated.
- Participants may query one another and explain their answers to each other.

Limitations

- A "polarization effect" exists (attitudes become more extreme after group discussion).
- Only one or a few topics can be discussed in a focus group session.
- A moderator may unknowingly limit open, free expression of group members.
- Focus group participants produce fewer ideas than in individual interviews.
- Focus group studies rarely report all the details of study design/procedure.
- Researchers cannot reconcile the differences that arise between individual-only and focus group-context responses.

In focus group settings, you need to provide clear instructions and carefully select participants. Although participants should be moderately homogenous, this does not always ensure openness and a willingness to share beliefs and opinions candidly. What people reveal in a focus group is influenced by the context. Context includes not only other participants, but also the broader social context (e.g., major news events and social trends), the institutional context (e.g.,

Brown et al. (2009) used focus groups to explore how people with disabilities develop an understanding and self-identity of being disabled. They formed nine focus groups in three cities (Atlanta, Newark, and New Orleans), with three focus groups in each city. They recruited 58 people with disabilities using public radio, intermediary agencies (such as local employment providers and state agencies), and disability advocacy organizations. All participants were working or searching for work. Each group had 4–10 people with a facilitator and cofacilitator. Each focus group session lasted about 90 minutes. The authors tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed sessions. They used coding and analytic memo writing to analyze the session data. The types of questions introduced in the sessions included: What are employment services like in your state? How did you find out about employment services? Has anyone used multiple employment services? Many participants emphasized the difficulties they had in finding work because of inadequate public transportation, lack of assistive technology, and discrimination. A couple mentioned negative effects stigmas. The authors concluded that events that occurred as participants tried to become employed shaped their understanding of disability. The authors argued the multiple meanings of disability and several ways that a self-identity of being disabled is formed are both shaped by the context of seeking work and working.

location and sponsor of the focus group), and the status context (e.g., people of different social status or position). You should segment focus groups by status. For example, rather than mixing supervisors and their employees, each should be in different group. Likewise, it is unwise to mix teachers and their students together in the same focus groups. We do this because people often respond very differently when people of higher or lower status are present.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, you learned about field research and the field research process (choosing a site and gaining access, relations in the field, observing and collecting data, and the field interview). Field researchers begin data analysis and theorizing during the data collection phase.

You can now appreciate the implications of saying that in field research, the researcher is directly involved with those being studied and is immersed in a natural setting. Doing field research usually has a greater impact on a researcher's emotions, personal life, and sense of self than doing other types of research. Field research is difficult to conduct, but it is a way to study parts of the social world that otherwise could not be studied.

Good field research requires a combination of skills. In addition to a strong sense of self, the best field researchers possess an incredible ability to listen and absorb details; tremendous patience; sensitivity and empathy for others; superb social skills; a talent to think very quickly "on one's feet"; the ability see subtle interconnections among people and/or events; and a superior ability to express oneself in writing.

Field research is strongest when you study a small group of people interacting in the present. It is valuable for micro-level or small-group face-to-face interaction. It is less effective when the concern is macro-level processes and social structures. It is nearly useless for events that occurred in the distant past or processes that stretch across decades. Historical–comparative research is better suited to investigating these types of concerns.

Key Terms

acceptable incompetent
analytic memos
appearance of interest
attitude of strangeness
competent insider performance
defocusing
direct observation notes
ecological validity
ethnography
ethnomethodology
external consistency
field site
focus group
gatekeeper
go native
guilty knowledge
internal consistency
jotted notes
members
member validation
naturalism
normalize social research

Endnotes

1. For studies of these sites or topics, see Neuman (2000, 2003). On studies of children or schools, see Corsaro (1994), Corsaro and Molinari (2000), Eder (1995), Eder and Kinney (1995), Kelle (2000), and Merten (1999). On studies of homeless people, see Lankenau (1999), and on studies of female strippers, see Wood (2000).

2. Ethnography is described in Agar (1986), Franke (1983), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), Sanday (1983), and Spradley (1979a:3–12, 1979b:3–16).

3. For a general discussion of field research and naturalism, see Adler and Adler (1993), Georges and Jones (1980), Holy (1984), and Pearsall (1970). For discussions of contrasting types of field research, see Clammer (1984), Gonor

(1977), Holstein and Gubrium (1994), Morse (1994), Schwandt (1994), and Strauss and Corbin (1994).

4. See Lofland (1976:13–23) and Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz (1980:18–20) on feeling marginal.

5. See Adler and Adler (1987:67–78).

6. See Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:42–45) and Lofland et al. (2006:17–32).

7. See Neuman (2011:429) for examples and discussion.

8. For more on gatekeepers and access, see Beck (1970:11–29), Bogdan and Taylor (1975:30–32), and Wax (1971:367).

9. See Douglas (1976), Emerson (1981:367–368), and Johnson (1975:124–129) on the question of whether the researcher should always be patient, polite, and considerate.

10. Negotiation in the field is discussed in Gans (1982), Johnson (1975:58–59, 76–77), and Schatzman and Strauss (1973:22–23).

11. For more on ways to record and organize field data, see Bogdan and Taylor (1975:60–73), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:144–173), and Kirk and Miller (1986: 49–59).

12. Field research informants are discussed in Dean and associates (1969), Kemp and Ellen (1984), Schatzman and Strauss (1973), Spradley (1979a:46–54), and Whyte (1982).

13. The types of questions are adapted from Spradley (1979a, 1979b).

14. For more on validity in field research, see Briggs (1986:24), Bogdan and Taylor (1975), Douglas (1976), Emerson (1981:361–363), and Sanjek (1990).

15. See Lofland and Lofland (1995:26, 63, 75, 168–177), Miles and Huberman (1994:288–297), and Punch (1986).

16. Fetterman (1989) discusses the idea of guilty knowledge.

17. For a discussion of focus groups, see Bischoping and Dykema (1999), Churchill (1983:179–184), Krueger (1988), Labaw (1980:54–58), and Morgan (1996).