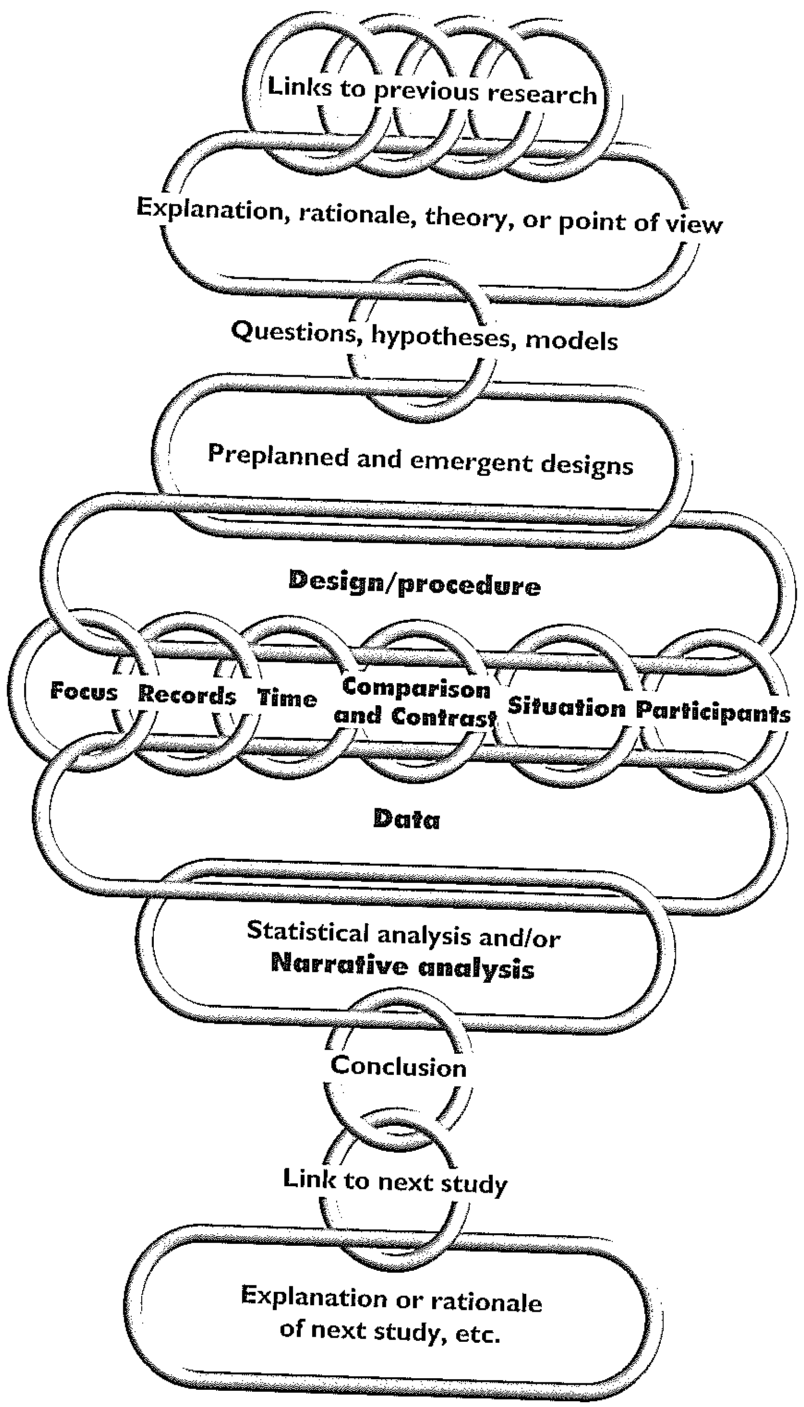


13

Fieldwork and Observation

> Unfortunately, events do not come with labels on them. . . . Such labels must be imposed. . . . Until they have been, a scientist has nothing to work with.
>
> —G. A. Miller, *Spontaneous Apprentices*
>
> To be perceptive, we must . . . recognize the role . . . bias plays in everything. . . . Once we acknowledge that our perceptions are selective, we can allow the point of view to enrich our experience with information. When we know that Monet's eyesight . . . approached near-blindness as he got older, we can begin to understand his water lily paintings.
>
> —R. S. Wurman, *Information Anxiety*

Most of this chapter's content applies to any kind of data gathering, but, you don't just do fieldwork; you do it in a context—observing, interviewing, video or audio recording, and/or gathering documents. Therefore, this chapter describes the tasks of fieldwork in the context of observation. So, bear in mind that "observer" really refers to any fieldworker. The chapter has two tasks: (1) to discuss observation, how it is done, its possibilities and its problems; and (2) to describe the tasks of fieldwork, both in general and in particular observation.

Introduction

Fieldworkers are faced with many tasks beyond first deciding how best to gather data:

- if by observation, choosing how best to observe;
- gaining entry;
- finding a way to preserve the naturalness of the situation while gathering data and securing acceptance;
- on the basis of successive visits, deciding which persons, activities, situations, events, documents, pictures, and so forth to sample and which informants to query;

- capturing what is significant in descriptive **fieldnotes**;
- writing memos that form the basis for coding and analysis and for eliminating rival explanations;
- analyzing data as it is accumulated;
- developing constructs that help reduce the mass of detail to what is important;
- using emerging hunches to guide further data collection;
- triangulating to assure accuracy;
- testing explanations;
- resolving ethical dilemmas on the spot; and
- deciding how much fieldwork is enough.

When listed in the abstract so many operations may seem overwhelming, yet most fieldworkers find themselves capable of handling these requirements as they arise and, with practice, becoming skilled at them. They form the topics of this chapter and are taken up in the order described above.

Ways of Observing

Observation is like a flashlight: It reveals only where it is directed. Indeed, observers are judged by whether they are sensitive enough to capture the critical aspects of what is occurring, how well they can make sense of these aspects, and how accurately their explanations fit the data.

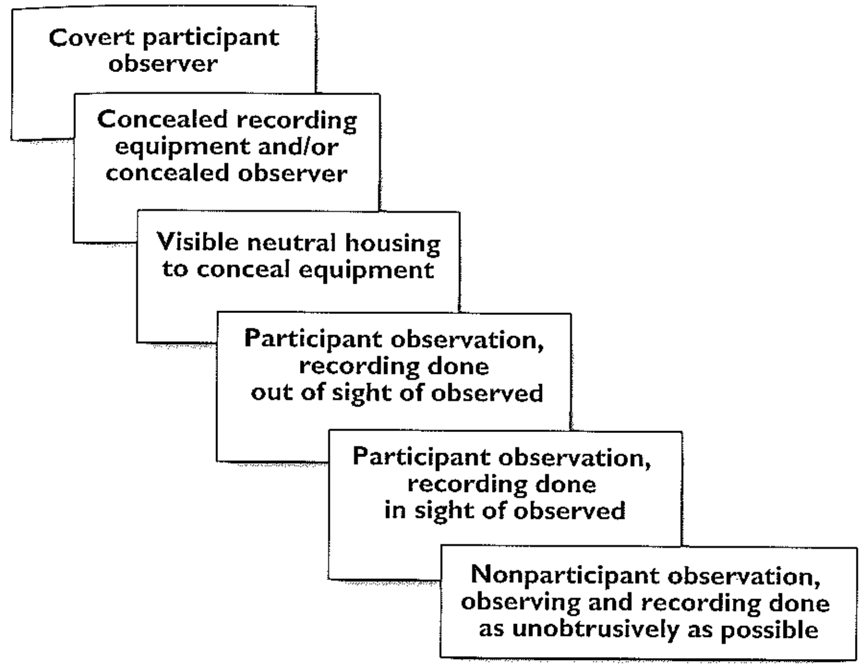
A central problem of observation is that individuals typically behave differently when conscious of being studied, often exhibiting more socially approved behavior or acting in accord with perceived expectations. But there are exceptions, such as resentful experimental school pupils who are tired of being observed and may purposely act atypically. Indeed, it is often hard to predict how individuals will react to observation; we just know that they usually do, at least initially.

Covert observation, in which the individual is not aware of being observed, is one way of solving the problem. A more common solution is to reduce obtrusiveness by having the observer participate as one of the group—**participant observation**. With extended contact, it is usually assumed that reaction to an observer diminishes. We can construct a continuum of observation techniques from a combination of the dimensions: obtrusiveness, fidelity, and secretiveness. Obtrusiveness in the sense that the natural situation is least disturbed, fidelity in the sense of "ability-to-get-what-is-really-happening" in the situation, and secretiveness in the sense that there is no attempt to hide the observation. In the following, we discuss positions on the continuum beginning with the least obtrusive, best able to get what is going on, and most to hide—the top section of the continuum in Figure 13.1.

Covert Participant Observation

The most difficult of all the observation roles is **covert participant observation**. There is a constant tension between the mental vigilance needed to stay in character and the effort to relax so the role seems natural. The former is physically exhausting,

Figure 13.1 Observation methods placed on a continuum of obtrusiveness (adapted from Bouchard, 1976).



yet the latter—too much naturalness—runs the risk of "going native." How exhausting is it? Sullivan, Queen, and Patrick's (1958) covert observer of basic military training lost 35 pounds, presumably from role tension.

There are other difficulties as well. Reconstruction of events over a long time period between debriefings can be a problem. If a group is small and the behavior of the participants is neither routine nor prescribed, the observer's role may affect what the group does. To maintain a natural role, covert observers may initiate action, thus causing group outcomes different from those without their presence.

Inquiries are limited to those consistent with the observer's role. Questions may be too personal, too prying, or too naive (Ornstein & Phillips, 1978). Interpersonal relationships must be consistent with one's role. A teacher would not be expected to spend too much time with the school superintendent. Certain records may be inaccessible as well.

Cultural background, age, sex, race, appearance, manner of speaking, physical build, family situation, and other relatively unchangeable characteristics may preclude not just covert but any kind of participant observation in certain groups. Age, for instance, precludes participation roles by senior professors in any kind of youth situation.

Of course, there are problems if the ruse is discovered and the questionable ethics of spying are brought to light. Negotiated entry is already difficult enough for non-covert observers. It is not made easier with publicized academic prying. Like research fraud (discussed further in chapter 28), it reflects on the rest of us who did not transgress.

On the positive side, however, participants gain access to behavior uninhibited by the presence of an outsider—behavior to which no one else could be privy. How else could a researcher record how a mental, penal, or other institution looks to an inmate; how the army feels to a recruit; or how certain religious, fraternal, and political groups view their world? Further, as participants, researchers do not have to rely on marginal and often atypical persons to be their informants. Despite these advantages, this method of observation is rarely used because of the difficulties involved, as well as the dilemma of whether to report illegal or unethical behavior (discussed later in the chapter).

Concealed Observation or Recording from a Hidden or Unobtrusive Viewpoint

In institutional settings, **concealed observation** (the second position down in the continuum) from behind two-way mirrors or from some hidden or unobtrusive location is often feasible. Experimental schools associated with universities frequently have such observation rooms. Teachers and students are usually informed when they are "on stage," and permission of the students' parents is usually obtained. With nothing visible to remind them that they are being observed, behavior usually returns to what appears to be normal. Because the ability of the human ear to follow one conversation when several are occurring has yet to be duplicated in video recording, the sound track for such observations may not always be understandable.

Unobtrusive placement of the equipment, the third position down in the continuum in Figure 13.1, eliminates the need for a special room and is probably as effective. Kounin (1970), for instance, placed empty boxes in the classroom that might be interpreted as concealing cameras; left in place, they came to be regarded as part of the furniture. Equipment was installed in the boxes when the room was empty. Tracking, close-ups, and perspective views require additional equipment. Audio recording alone produces voluminous records that are expensive and often difficult to transcribe. They also miss nonverbal cues.

Unconcealed Participant Observation

The role of an active onlooker (the fourth and fifth positions down the continuum in Figure 13.1) is preferred by most observers. Although the observation is obvious, the fact that the researcher is acting as a participant at some level reduces the obtrusiveness. At the same time, it instructs the researcher as to what it is like to be in the situation. *Unconcealed participant observation* allows the researcher access to important places and people while remaining "in character." With a high level of participation (the fourth position on the continuum), note taking may have to be done on the side, but with less engagement (the fifth position) it is often done openly.

Nonparticipant Observation

The most obtrusive of the roles, **nonparticipant observation** (the sixth and bottom position in Figure 13.1), nevertheless provides the researcher with the freedom

to concentrate entirely on observation and on the significance of what is occurring. Just as it is difficult for an observer to sustain an unnatural role, however, so too is it difficult for those observed to maintain "on-stage" behavior over a long period of time. Thus, even under obvious surveillance, those observed usually relax into more normal behavior over time.

Some people might argue that without participation we are unable to appreciate fully the affective reactions of participants, but there is little evidence that this is the case. Good observers train themselves to be as sensitive as possible. They cultivate a combination of empathy and detachment—the former so that they can understand, the latter so that they can record and place in perspective what they are observing. Hughes (1971) has noted that a person who is of a culture, but feels not wholly a part of it, often is a good observer of that culture.

Awareness of observation changes the behavior of the people being observed. Efforts to avoid this effect result in a continuum of observation roles:

- Covert observation provides exceptional access to the observed's point of view and to other unobservable behavior. It may involve complications if the ruse is discovered or if illegal or unethical behavior is observed or participated in.
- Concealed observation is usually made known to those being observed, but they grow accustomed to it more rapidly in the absence of a constant visual reminder.
- Unconcealed participant observation makes the observer less obtrusive because he or she becomes a member of the group. It also informs the observer what being a group member is like.
- Nonparticipant observation requires a longer time period before accommodation by those being observed returns to natural behavior (if it ever entirely does), but it also allows the observer to concentrate on the observation process.

INITIAL STEPS IN OBSERVATION

Gaining Entry

Fieldworkers seek a way of **gaining entry** that conveys they can be trusted. Often they seek the help of a friend or colleague who either is a part of the setting or is trusted by those within it. The process is often complex. The experience of Bosk (1979), who studied surgeons' errors, is an example. Bosk's department provided a letter of introduction. He started with a surgeon he had met at a party who, as supervisor of residents, was a **gatekeeper**—someone with authority to give permission for entry to the desired field of observation. Although the surgeon expressed enthusiasm about Bosk's proposed fieldwork, he also feared his sponsorship would be a "kiss of death." He felt that Bosk needed to talk to the residents directly and be seen as his own person: "I learned . . . there was no instant access for the fieldworker." When sent to the chief resident, Bosk was not sure whether he was being given assistance or the runaround. The chief resident said he also approved of Bosk's research project, but he needed to check with his supervisors prior to granting access. "Gaining my initial entrée was a multistage diplomatic problem," Bosk explained. "Each action was a test, and access was the result of continual testing and retesting. Entrée was not something negotiated once and then over and done with . . . but a continuous process" (p. 194).

Bosk is absolutely correct! Entrance and acceptance are continuous processes. Researchers not only are making an entrance with each new person and situation, they also are seeking acceptance to gain access to the data or situation they choose to study.

Bosk's experience is not uncommon, nor is his paranoia about possibly being given the runaround. Respondents may not like granting access but fear being labeled "against research and progress." They may refer the request to others in the hope that someone will find a legitimate objection. Organizations that might gain favorable publicity are much easier to access than those wary of criticism. The latter, however, are more often desired as subjects of study.

Sometimes one can enter a secure area of an organization and use trust established there to enter less accessible parts. This strategy is advantageous for researchers who do not know all they will ultimately want to observe.

Administrators often ask for something in exchange for access. They want a report on some subordinates or an evaluation of "how we are doing." They may want to exercise some control over the project or the report, to see fieldnotes, to view the draft and make suggestions, to rule certain aspects of their operation "off limits," or perhaps even to approve the report's release. Such requirements create difficult situations that may violate academic freedom and might possibly abrogate the necessary confidentiality of informants. Clearly, the fewer restrictive conditions the better. Some argue for renegotiating once the initial fear has been replaced by trust. Although this tactic may be successful, it may be better to use another site.

For many researchers, especially new ones, entering the field is an anxiety-producing experience. Ely (1991)[1] quotes Hillary:

> A cold shudder hit . . . the selfsame shyness which helped make me an attentive observer . . . could sabotage . . . my efforts to place myself. . . . What is this terror . . . all about? . . . Among my fellow classmates, the sense of angst and inertia . . . is all too common. . . . I think this feeling comes from human self-doubts and fear of rejection. . . . So? So you could be refused! So what's so devastating about that? The trouble is that this rational line doesn't really reach what these fears may be all about. (pp. 17–18)

Experienced researchers suggest you acknowledge such fears and then work through or around them. Writing **memos** about your feelings or keeping a log of them are helpful in this regard. Hillary further states:

> The first and most important thing to do, I found, was to confront my feelings . . . via the log, where . . . researchers record what they plan and feel about their experiences. . . . Here is a "safe-place," a haven where feelings, fears, doubts, suspicions, intuitions all have an honored place. . . . [It] gets them "up front," and gives them a reality and sense that they are perfectly legitimate and human. (Ely, 1991, p. 18)

Students are often tempted to study situations where they already have entry, or that are familiar to them. There is a saying that the intent of qualitative researchers is

"to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange"—that is, looking at a familiar situation as though they were a stranger, or trying to learn what is going on by emptying themselves of their presuppositions. In a familiar situation this is difficult to do, not only because of previous experiences but also because others may not accept your new role.

A principal who decides to observe in the rooms of her teachers may be doing so as a student practicing for a research course. But, to the teacher, she is still the school principal and she cannot escape that role—especially when principals are involved in teacher competency evaluations. At least initially, choose a different context from what you usually encounter every day. There will be less of a problem of "making the familiar strange," and you can concentrate on "making the strange familiar."

- Find a way of gaining entry that will convey your trustworthiness.
- Negotiating entry is a continuous process that must be repeated at each level in the organization.
- It may be best to enter where those observed feel comfortable about being observed; then, having established trust, move to other initially less accessible areas.
- Writing in fieldnotes about discomfort in seeking entry or observing helps to objectify these feelings; it places them "out there" where they can more easily be seen as expected and normal.
- Gaining entry to institutions requires the approval of administrators who may impose conditions on the process or ask for something in exchange. This can be a serious problem.
- Choosing a situation because prior familiarity makes entry problems minimal but may result in problems in making the "familiar strange," especially when the familiar includes the baggage of past experience and expectations regarding your role.

Securing Acceptance

To quote Bosk (1979) again, "Access—being allowed in the scene—is one thing, but approval and trust . . . is quite another. Just like access, cooperation . . . is earned again and again when the fieldworker shows that he or she is trustworthy" (p. 194). In part, the act of participating demonstrates researcher approval of what is going on; in return, **acceptance** of the researcher is expected. Sometimes this means doing menial tasks, as when Bosk was asked to open bandage packages or retrieve charts. Acceptance may be enhanced when the researcher's professional knowledge is used to assist, as when Rist (1977) was asked to comment on classroom situations while observing the integration of black children bused out of inner-city schools.

The observer as participant must maintain close rapport with all from whom information is sought while maintaining sufficient psychological distance so as not to be identified with one adversarial group. Wax (1971) appropriately calls this *instrumental membership* and notes that host and researcher jointly construct a suitable role. Sometimes it helps if the observer simply explains that a researcher is not supposed to take sides. The observed may understand, even though they will believe that, as Ornstein and Phillips (1978) put it, "'deep down' he or she is on our 'side.'"

Acceptance does not necessarily mean acting like the rest of the group. Whyte (1993) tried using some of the obscenities he heard all around him. Conversation stopped, and one of the members said, "Bill, you're not supposed to talk like that. That doesn't sound like you" (p. 304). Patton (1987) points out that the ideal is not necessarily full participation, but *"that degree of participation which will yield the most meaningful data given the characteristics of the participants, the nature of questions to be studied, and the sociopolitical context of the setting"* (p. 76, emphasis in the original).

Even though access to public places requires no permission, acceptance in the sense of appropriate behavior—that is, suitable lack of eye contact, studied lack of interest in others, and careful management of physical contact—is important (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Loitering so as to observe may need to be explained (collecting for a charity, passing out advertising material) and otherwise carefully managed (leaving the site at random times).

- Administrative approval of entry does not guarantee acceptance; indeed, it may delay it. Acceptance, like entry, is a continuous process and must be negotiated anew at each level and with each new informant.

Data Gathering

Most observers start at the same place, a first phase of trying to find what is significant in a situation. In that initial stage, the researcher is like a sponge, soaking up all that is around and listening intently. Interviewing is open ended, and sometimes just observing is best. Starting with a broad focus can be very confusing to the newcomer—there is so much to attend to! One of Ely's (1991) students, Belén Matías, observing in a classroom put this very well:

> There are so many things going on at the same time! My head is spinning. What should I write in my log? What should I leave out? And to top it all, . . . the minute I write . . . I'm disconnected from what's happening. . . . If I'm the instrument, I need to be sent to the repair shop. (p. 48)

Before you despair, just jot down as much as you can. Even things that don't seem significant at first may later turn out to be important. Gradually, it will become apparent what is relevant, and what your focus will be. This is not to say that the whole process is automatic; you will have to think about what you have observed in the time between observations. Try to understand what is happening, and what is significant about it for your purposes. As you work at that (and it does take work!), you will find yourself more interested in certain aspects than in others, and the focus will emerge from those. Here is an example, again from one of Ely's students, Marcia Kropf:

> As I reread my log entries each week, it became increasingly clear that, because . . . of my own fascination with people, my topic had changed! I no longer noted, in explicit detail, the computer programming functions being explored and how students gained insight into how they worked. Instead, I was describing in great detail when students came to class, how they behaved when they entered the room, where they stood, what they said and to whom, and how they were greeted. . . . I did not develop insights into how students learn computer programming. . . . I did, however, learn a great deal about how students can be invited to participate in a class. (p. 55)

Recall the six rings in the chain of reasoning and their relation to the journalist mantra of finding the "who, what, where, when, why, and how" of any situation. Many researchers (Bogdewic, 1999; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) suggest that these are useful questions to bear in mind when doing fieldwork. Consider how using these questions might have broadened and perhaps led to new questions in the Hoffmann-Riem study in the first chapter. *Who* is doing the adopting? What are their characteristics? *What* kinds of adoptions are occurring? What is being said about them? *Where* is this happening? Are there norms or characteristics of the community that affect it—many same-age families having children? *When* does it occur? At what time of life? *Why* does it occur? What triggers it—failed infertility treatments, miscarriages? What keeps it going—contact with mothers of young children? What slows it down—problems of new mothers? What accelerates it—birthdays after 40? What stops it—bureaucratic red tape? *How* does it occur? What are the steps involved? How are they perceived? How do they affect the adoption process? How do couples feel about the process? These questions provide a framework for gathering data and can also serve as an early structure for organizing it. Drawing a map of the situation serves both to help you find the best situation for observation and to locate individuals and objects in space for later reference.

But Whyte (1993) notes that we must "learn when to question and when not to question as well as what questions to ask" (p. 303). For example, conversation stopped when Whyte remarked to a gambler who was telling the group about his operations, "I suppose the cops were all paid off?" His friend Doc commented the next day that he should go easy on all the who, what, why, and when stuff or people would clam up. If he'd just hang around long enough, he would learn the answers without asking. Whyte declares, "I found this was true. As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to questions that I would not even have had the sense to ask" (p. 303). Apropos of the same point is this beautiful quotation from Huxley (1982, as found in Worthen & Sanders, 1987):

> The best way to find things out is not to ask questions at all. If you fire off a question, it is like firing off a gun—bang it goes, and everything takes flight and runs for shelter. But if you sit quite still and pretend not to be looking, all the little facts will come and peek round your feet, situations will venture forth from thickets and intentions will creep out and sun themselves on a stone: and if you are very patient, you will see and understand a great deal more than a man with a gun does. (p. 138)

It is important to remember that no matter how unobtrusive you try to remain, your merely having entered the situation may have changed it. Ely (1991) notes an instance in which a teacher-friend who had invited the observer into his classroom became increasingly defensive and argumentative. Discussing this situation with other student researchers, one of them remarked, "That is because you have introduced the reflective mode into that room. No matter how unobtrusive and nonjudgmental your presence, it is *heightening his own awareness of what he is doing*" (p. 196, emphasis added). Few are entirely comfortable with their performances, and when they become reflective their behavior is likely to change.

While unobtrusiveness is the rule for participant observation, Harrington (2002) notes there are exceptions that can strengthen a study. She gives as an example Schwalbe's (1996) study of the men's movement, a reaction to the feminist movement. Participant observing over a three-year period, Schwalbe became a movement insider and intentionally on occasion, in Harrington's words, a "critic and provocateur." In doing so, she points out that he discovered individuals appreciated his taking this role, which allowed them to be more freely critical. Harrington notes that this enabled "Schwalbe to present the men's movement in all its texture and complexity—not [as] a monolith. . . . These shadings lend authenticity and credibility to . . . [the] account" (p. 57). Like all rules, there are instances where they should be broken.

Over the course of a study, researchers may consult a variety of documents—transcripts and minutes of meetings, court proceedings, diaries, letters, questionnaire responses, census statistics, photos and so forth. They also look for artifacts—pieces of art, choices of furniture, items on desks or tables, available equipment. In short, they will seek any evidence that will be helpful in extending and deepening their understanding.

Learning to Observe

Ely (1991) quotes one of her students: "Well, thank heavens! I've finally come to an easy part in this. Participant observation is a snap," and continues, "Well, it isn't . . . [as if] an attitude of curiosity and a heightened attention are required in order to attend to those very details that most of us filter out automatically in day-to-day life" (p. 42). Van Maanen (2002) quotes Sherlock Holmes as saying, "The world is full of obvious things . . . which nobody will ever see" (p. 165). Spradley (1980) lists six "dos" that distinguish the participant observer from a participant:

- Watch yourself as well as watching others.
- Try to become explicitly aware of what others take for granted.
- Look beyond the immediate focus of your activity—use a "wide-angle lens."
- Try to experience the situation simultaneously as both an insider and an outsider.[2]
- Be introspective as you watch.
- Keep a record, not only of what you see but also of how you experience the situation, and mark the latter in such a way that you can separate what you see occurring from how you experience it.

The last, separating observations from reactions, is important. Reactions in the context of greater experience may lead you to perceive the same events differently. You must then sort out the more appropriate interpretation.

Information-Processing Limitations

In an article discussing the mind's cognitive limitations as they affect qualitative data gathering, Sadler (1981) lists a number that are research supported, of which two critical ones are listed below. Knowing these limitations is the first step toward disciplining their effect.

Data overload. Research suggests that most individuals are able to keep only about seven things in their mind at one time. The mind can beat this limit by "chunking" things as we routinely do—we don't see four legs and a top; we see a table. When many aspects of a situation must be considered at once, however, observers may be fooling themselves in thinking that they are attending to more of the information than they really are. When others are also observing, comparing perceptions may help identify overload situations.

First impressions. We know that first impressions are important, something that has also been confirmed in research. For instance, research with regard to physical stimuli in situations where individuals must estimate size indicates that estimations can be manipulated by the first stimuli they receive. First impressions tend to be enduring, perhaps because after the first piece of knowledge is retained, the second piece constitutes only half our knowledge base; the next increases the base only 33%, the next 25%, and so on. Because each new piece is a smaller part of the base, it may be more difficult for it to markedly affect the whole. If we are aware of this problem, later efforts to distinguish and then verify early impressions become important.

The Multiple Demands of Participant Observation

As you may have already sensed, the role of the participant observer is complex. Trying to monitor all aspects from the very beginning may easily swamp the neophyte observer. As Winne (1995) indicates, monitoring one's own thoughts and behavior reduces the mental resources available to observe and select significant aspects from the situation one is observing. (Remember the limitations noted above.) As greater comfort in observing develops, attending and noting become routinized and resources are freed for examining one's own behavior for relational and bias problems. Novices should probably build their repertoire of observation behaviors gradually over successive sessions. Transferability of repertoire probably varies with both the nature of the situation and the skills of the observer, but it appears that for many observers there may be a period of adjustment in each new situation.

- Gradually build up a repertoire of observation skills.
- Observe and record what you are doing and thinking as you observe others.
- Try to keep everything in a larger perspective as an outsider would. At the same time, empathically try to sense how those in the situation are experiencing it.
- Learn when to question.
- Be aware of data overload.
- Double-check first impressions.

Informants

As noted earlier, qualitative researchers treat those being observed as individuals to learn from—an egalitarian perspective that contrasts with the term *subjects*, formerly universally used in experimentation. Qualitative researchers see this as more than a difference in designation, involving a change in attitude that has implications for how we interact with those we observe and how we treat the data we obtain from them.

Bouchard (1976) distinguishes between respondents and informants. **Informants** are selected for their sensitivity, knowledge, and insights into their situation, their willingness to talk about it, and their ability to help gain access to new situations. **Respondents** are random or systematic samples and may be considered replicable. Bouchard warns that it is important to distinguish between data from informants (especially whose reasons for informing may influence what they say) and data from respondents. (Since typically, obtaining information from informants basically involves interviewing, much of the next chapter's advice applies here as well.)

Persons who have less stake in the system (and thus are less defensive about it) are particularly sensitive informants, as are those who view it from a standpoint different from those of more central players. Examples are persons who come from another culture, social class, or community and who can contrast their impressions with their previous experience. Newcomers and individuals with a new role or status are especially likely to note things that others might take for granted, having left one role but not yet being comfortable in the other. However, beware of their viewing their new situation in terms of their old role.

Other informant types may similarly have hidden agendas: rebels or malcontents welcome the opportunity to "get things off their chest." Former insiders who have lost power usually eagerly share views of current insiders, most likely negatively. Flattered by the attention, some say whatever they think the observer wants to hear. Persons too well entrenched to worry about repercussions from communicating with outsiders may be harder to tap; they have the least to gain—unless they magnify their own roles in past actions.

Although we intend to represent a situation as viewed by its participants, we often wind up with what Sieber (1973) calls an **elite bias**, an overweighting of the elite in the selection of informants and in the interpretation of data. Sieber notes that there are many reasons for this. Elites are likely to be more articulate and give the impression of being better informed. The observer is careful to keep on the good side of those who are gatekeepers. Sieber discovered this type of bias when he tried to predict the results of a survey he had given teachers. "It became obvious . . . that I had unwittingly adopted the elites' version of reality. For example, I overestimated the extent to which teachers felt that the administration accepted criticism" (p. 1353).

The most desirable informant is the "natural" (Bouchard, 1976); he or she has a perspective on the situation and is able to communicate it. Whyte's (1993) "Doc" is the prototype of such individuals. Doc had a perspective not only on his situation but also on the role that Whyte should play in the community. He steered Whyte to situations and introduced him to persons who were helpful in the study. Every researcher should be so lucky!

The main caveat with informants is a continual concern with the questions: "Why are these persons willing to talk to me? What point of view are they using?" Whereas only you can answer these questions satisfactorily, only you will be able to determine the extent to which you must discount the information. Interviewing in front of others who can correct misstatements facilitates identifying informant bias. Don't

assume informants will necessarily confront misstatements at the time; provide private opportunities later. In addition, you might let the informants know that you are also gathering data from others. This not only helps you determine consistency but also likely makes them more careful about their statements. Remember too, that these are not independent cases but instead a social network whose members will be interacting with each other after you have left the scene; they must protect themselves. With much at stake, they may get together, compare notes, and possibly align their stories or otherwise misguide you.

- Informants help the observers to understand the views of the people being observed, introduce them to new individuals and situations, and may teach the observer how to behave unobtrusively.
- Such cooperation may not be without its price. Therefore, observers must ask themselves, "Why is this person talking to me and being so helpful?"
- Informants are often new and/or marginal persons who have less stake in the status quo or are not constrained by it. Because they may be atypical, their information must be appropriately discounted ("taken with a grain of salt").

Inferring Cognitive and Affective Processes

Qualitative methods are particularly useful in studying cognitive and affective processes that cannot be directly observed but must be inferred from overt behavior. Indeed, inferring from careful observation is often the first method of studying such behavior. Sometimes such observation can be augmented by careful analysis of behavior in video recordings, especially nonverbal reactions.

A second approach involves *retrospection*—reviewing the situation and behavior with the respondent, asking her to describe what was going on in her mind. Such review can be enhanced by **stimulated recall**, described in the previous chapter (p. 248). Still another way is to have the respondents think out loud, reporting on their thoughts as the process takes place. Review of a recording of the think-aloud session in stimulated recall mode can show where their processes were slowed or otherwise changed by having to think aloud.

Fieldnotes and Annotations

Fieldnotes and logs are the observer's records of what has been observed; they should begin as soon as the project gets underway. Notes on the initial contacts with gatekeepers as you seek access should be part of the record. They may shed light on something that occurred later, but without your notes you would have missed the connection. Rile's term *thick description* aptly captures the character of fieldnotes (in Geertz, 1973).

Typically, fieldnotes are a chronological account. They may include relevant incidents from outside the formal observation process as well—comments elicited at a party, reflections from an informant encountered later, and so on. They may include