# Field Research and Focus Group Research


**Understanding Field Research**
**The Field Research Interview**
**Data Quality**
**Ethical Dilemmas of Field Research**
**Focus Group Research**
**Conclusion**


*Field research is the study of people acting in the natural courses of their daily lives. The fieldworker ventures into the worlds of others in order to learn firsthand about how they live, how they talk and behave, and what captivates and distresses them. . . . It is also seen as a method of study whose practitioners try to understand the meanings that activities observed have for those engaging in them.*

—Robert Emerson, *Contemporary Field Research,* p. 1

*Gender* is an identy and performance that we reproduce and recreate through daily interactions. *Marriage* is a gendered relationship, and weddings are ritualized events with clear norms to reinforce traditional masculinity and femininity. Likewise, the bridal shower is gendered. The word *bridal* rather than *wedding* shower indicates that it is a woman's ritual. A man's complementary prewedding ritual has been the bachelor party. In the past decade, a new social form, the mixed or coed bridal shower, has spread. Montemurro (2005) studied mixed and traditional bridal showers. She conducted in-depth interviews with 51 women using snowball sampling. The women had been guests of honor, planned, hosted, or attended more than 280 bridal showers in 5 years before the interview, but she focused on 148 in the previous year. She also attended five bridal showers as a participant observer; three were traditional (all female) and two were mixed. She noted who attended the shower (age, gender, and relationships), what happened in sequence, what gifts were given, and how attendees acted and felt. In a traditional bridal shower, men were peripheral or absent, together in another area of the home from where the shower was held or in another place. This signified the shower as exclusively feminine space. Many women reported being bored in the traditional shower. Montemurro identified three types of mixed showers: fiancé-only, couples, and groom-centered (a "groomal shower"). Mixed gender showers tended to be a different time (weekend evening) and more informal than traditional showers. They were likely to serve alcohol and not make gift opening the central or exclusive activity. Also, gifts were more varied and less exclusively feminine at mixed than at bridal showers. Gender roles were distinct at mixed showers but tended to be egalitarian. While women-only showers retained formality and expectations that women "do" femininity, mixed showers tended to be lavish and oriented toward status display more than gender transformation.

With this chapter, we shift from the quantitative to the qualitative research and discuss field research and focus group research. *Field research* encompasses many specific techniques but usually the researcher directly observes and participates in small-scale social settings, most often in his or her home culture. As the study of bridal showers in this chapter's opening box illustrates, field research is not just about the urban poor.

Many people enjoy field research because it involves "hanging out" with people. It has no cold mathematics or complicated statistics and no abstract deductive hypotheses. Instead, in involves direct, face-to-face social interaction with "real people" in a natural social setting. Field research appeals to those who like people watching. Field research reports can be fascinating, revealing accounts of unfamiliar social worlds: nude beaches, people who are homeless or professional gamblers, street gangs, police squads, emergency rooms, artists' colonies, and so on. Some field studies are as engaging to read as a work of fiction with the excitement of a thriller or mystery novel.

Field research requires directly talking with and observing the people being studied. Through personal interactions over months or years, you learn about these people and their life histories, hobbies, habits, hopes, fears, and dreams. Meeting new people and discovering new social worlds can be fun. Field research is also difficult, intense, time consuming, emotionally draining, and sometimes physically dangerous.

## UNDERSTANDING FIELD RESEARCH

Field research is appropriate when we want to learn about, understand, or describe a group of interacting people. It helps us answer research questions such as: How do people do *Y* in the social world? or What is the social world of *X* like? We can use field research to identify aspects of the world that are inaccessible using other methods (e.g., survey, experiments) as in studying street gangs or bridal showers.

Most field research studies focus on a particular location or setting. These range from a small group (twenty or thirty people) to entire communities. Beginning field researchers should start with a relatively small group who interact with each other on a regular basis in a fixed setting (e.g., a street corner, church, barroom, beauty salon, baseball field). Some researchers used amorphous social experiences that are not fixed in place but where intensive interviewing and observation are the only way we can gain access to the experience, for example, the feelings of a person who has been mugged or who is the widow of someone who committed suicide.[1]

To use consistent terminology, I will call the people studied in a field setting *members*. They are insiders or natives in the field and belong to a group, subculture, or social setting that the outside field researcher wants to learn about.

Field researchers have explored a wide variety of social settings, subcultures, and aspects of social life[2] (see Figure 1). Places where my students have conducted 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, strip club, tattoo parlor, and weight room.

### A Short History of Field Research

We can trace field research to the reports of travelers to distant lands.[3] Since the thirteenth century, European explorers and missionaries have written descriptions of the strange cultures and peoples they have encountered. Others read these descriptions to learn about foreign cultures. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with European expansion, the travelers had become more literate. The number and quality of such reports of strange lands and peoples grew.

Academic field research began in the late nineteenth century with anthropology. The first anthropologists only read the reports of explorers, government officials, or missionaries. They lacked direct contact with the people they studied. Many travel reports focused on the exotic and were racist and ethnocentric. Travelers rarely spoke the local language and relied on interpreters. Not until the 1890s did European anthropologists begin to travel to faraway lands to learn about other cultures.

**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**
Playgrounds
Little League baseball
Youth in schools
Junior high girl groups
Summer camps

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

British social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinoski (1844–1942) was the first researcher to live with a group of people for a long period of time and write about collecting data. In the 1920s, he presented intensive fieldwork as a new method and argued for separating direct observation and native statements from the observer's inferences. He held that the best way to develop an in-depth understanding of a community or culture was for a researcher to directly interact with and live among the native peoples, learning their customs, beliefs, and social processes.

Soon researchers were applying field research techniques to study their own societies. In the 1890s, Charles Booth and Beatrice Webb used both survey research and field research to study poor people in London. They directly observed people in natural settings and used an inductive data-gathering approach. The field research technique of participant observation may have originated in Germany in 1890. Paul Gohre worked and lived as a factory apprentice for three months and took detailed notes each night at home to study factory life. His published work influenced university scholars including the sociologist Max Weber.

We can trace field research in the United States to the University of Chicago Department of Sociology in what is known as the *Chicago School of sociology.* Its influence on field research had two phases. In the first, from the 1910s to 1930s, researchers used a variety of methods based on the case study or life history approach including direct

observation, informal interviews, and reading documents or official records. In 1916, Robert E. Park (1864–1944) drew up a research program for the social investigation of the city of Chicago. Influenced by his background as a newspaper reporter, he urged researchers to leave the libraries and "get their hands dirty" by making direct observations and listening to conversations on street corners, in barrooms, and in luxury hotel lobbies. Early studies such as *The Hobo* (Anderson, 1923), *The Jack Roller* (Shaw, 1930), and *The Gang* (Thrasher, 1927) established early Chicago School sociology as the descriptive study of street life with little analysis.

Early field research blended journalistic and anthropological techniques. Journalistic techniques require getting behind surface appearances and behavior, using informants, noticing conflicts, and exposing what is "really happening." Anthropological techniques tell us to remain with a small group for an extended time, conduct detailed observations, and then produce a report on how group members interact and see the world.

In the Chicago School's second phase, from the 1940s to the 1960s, scholars developed participant observation as a distinct technique by expanding anthropological technique to study a researcher's own society. Three principles emerged: (1) Study people in their natural settings, or *in situ;* (2) study people by directly interacting with them repeatedly over time; and (3) develop broad theoretical insights based on an in-depth understanding of members' perspectives of the social world.

After World War II, field research faced increased competition from survey and quantitative research. Field research declined as a proportion of all social research until the 1970–1980s. Field researchers began to borrow and adapt ideas and techniques from cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology, folklore, and linguistics. Field researchers also reexamined the epistemological roots and philosophical assumptions of social science to elaborate on the qualitative methods. In addition, these researchers became more self-conscious about research techniques and were more systematic about elaborating on field research as a distinct scientific approach for the study of social life.

Today field researchers directly observe and interact with members in natural settings to acquire an "inside" perspective. Many of these researchers embrace an activist or social constructionist perspective on social life. Instead of viewing people as a neutral medium through which social forces operate or social life as something "out there" to measure, they hold that people continuously create and define social life through their daily interactions. Field researchers assume that people filter human experiences through an ongoing, fluid, subjective sense of reality that shapes how we see and act on events. Such assumptions about social life suggest that we must focus on the everyday, face-to-face social processes of negotiation, discussion, and bargaining by which people construct and modify social meanings. To do field research is simultaneously to describe the social world and to be an actor within it. When the researcher is a part of a social setting, conducting field research is more than a passive or neutral data-gathering activity. It becomes a self-aware lived social experience in itself.

## Ethnography and Ethnomethodology

Two extensions of field research, ethnography and ethnomethodology, build on the social constructionist perspective. **Ethnography** comes from cultural anthropology.[4] *Ethno* means people or folk, and *graphy* refers to writing about or describing something. Ethnography is a description of a people and/or their culture. We constantly make inferences—that is, go beyond what is explicitly said or obvious to see—and move toward what is really meant or implied indirectly. People display their culture (i.e., what they think, ponder, or believe) through external behaviors (e.g., speech and actions) in specific social contexts, yet we cannot capture full social meaning from explicit, externally displayed behavior alone. Thus, by using

**Ethnography** Field research that emphasizes providing a very detailed description of a different culture from the viewpoint of an insider in the culture to facilitate understanding of it.

ethnography, we describe people's lives and behavior but also try to infer the meaning of behavior (i.e., the thoughts or beliefs that reside behind it). The major goal of ethnography is to move from what we can easily observe externally to what the people we observe truly feel and mean internally. For example, someone invites you to a "bridal shower." Based on your cultural knowledge, you may infer that it will be an informal party and you should bring a gift for a person who will soon marry. Cultural knowledge includes symbols, songs, sayings, facts, ways of behaving, and objects (e.g., cell phones, hamburgers). We learn the culture by watching television, listening to parents and friends, observing others, and so on.

*Cultural knowledge* includes both *explicit knowledge* (i.e., what we know and talk about) and *tacit knowledge* (i.e., what we implicitly know but rarely acknowledge directly). For example, explicit knowledge includes the social event (e.g., a shower). Most people can describe what happens at one. Tacit knowledge includes the unspoken cultural norm for appropriate gifts and method of presenting them. People may not even think about the norm or if uncertain may feel anxious about how to use the norm properly. They feel discomfort when someone violates the norm, but it is difficult to pinpoint the source of discomfort. Ethnographers describe the explicit and tacit cultural knowledge that members use. They use detailed descriptions and careful analysis to disassemble and reassemble the events.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) stated that a critical part of ethnography is **thick description**.[5] It is a rich, highly detailed description of specifics (as opposed to a summary, or generalization, or use of standard variables). A thick description of a 3-minute event may take several pages. It captures exactly what has occurred and places the drama of events in a larger context. It permits multiple interpretations or perspectives and gives the broader social-cultural context, allowing the reader to infer deeper cultural meanings.

**Thick description** Qualitative data in which a researcher attempts to capture all details of a social setting in an extremely detailed description and convey an intimate feeling for the setting and the inner lives of people in it.

**Ethnomethodology** A social science approach that combines philosophy, social theory, and method to study commonsense knowledge; investigates ordinary social interaction in small-scale settings to reveal the rules that people use to construct and maintain their everyday social reality.

**Ethnomethodology**, a distinct approach developed in the 1960s, is the study of commonsense knowledge.[6] To study common sense, ethnomethodologists observe its creation and use in ongoing social interactions in natural settings. Ethnomethodology is an extreme form of field research based on phenomenological philosophy and a social constructionist approach that blends theory, philosophy, and method. In Mehan and Wood (1975:3, 5) we see a description of ethnomethodology.

> *[E]thnomethodology is not a body of findings, nor a method, nor a theory, nor a world view. I view ethnomethodology as a form of life. . . . Ethnomethodology is an attempt to display the reality of a level which exists beyond the sociological level. . . . It differs from sociology much as sociology differs from psychology.*

Ethnomethodology involves the specialized, highly detailed analysis of microsituations (e.g., transcripts of short conversations or videotapes of social interactions). Compared to Chicago School field research, it is more self-conscious about method and sees research findings arising as much from the specific method we use to study as from the social life we study.

A core assumption of ethnomethodology is that social meaning is fragile and fluid, not fixed, stable, or solid. We constantly create and recreate meaning as an ongoing process. For this reason, ethnomethodologists closely analyze what we say, including our pauses and the context of our speech. They assume that people "accomplish" commonsense understanding by applying tacit social-cultural rules. Ethnomethodologists wish to reveal the unspoken rules that we follow but about which we are not explicitly conscious. They see us as constantly interpreting (i.e., figuring out or assigning meaning to) everyday events by applying our

cultural knowledge and drawing on clues in specific social contexts.

By examining ordinary social interaction in great detail, ethnomethodologists seek to identify the rules for constructing social reality and common sense. They want to document how we apply micro-level social rules and create new rules "on the fly." For example, a positivist, quantitative researcher sees standardizing tests or formal survey interviews as producing objective facts about a person while the ethnomethodologist sees them as demonstrating the person's ability to pick up implicit clues and apply commonsense cultural knowledge.

One technique used by ethnomethodologists is the **breaching experiment**, a method to make visible and to demonstrate the power of simple tacit rules that we rely on to create a sense of reality in everyday life. In the "experiment," the ethnomethodologist purposefully violates a tacit social norm. The breach usually elicits a powerful social response (e.g., people become anxious and confused, laugh nervously, or express irritation and anger). The response both verifies the rule's existence and demonstrates that such tacit rules are an essential feature of the flow of ordinary social life. The breach also shows the fragility of social reality. In a famous breaching experiment, Harold Garfinkel (1917– ) sent his students to nearby stores. He told them to "mistake" other customers for salesclerks. At first, the customers became confused and stammered explanations, but as the students persisted in the misinterpretation, many bewildered customers reluctantly accepted the new definition of the situation and awkwardly tried to fill the salesclerk role. Others "blew up" and "lost their cool," violating the larger social norm of maintaining polite disinterested interactions with other customers. Such a social breach illustrates how we greatly depend on tacit knowledge for the ongoing operation of social life (e.g., distinguishing salesclerks from other customers). Filmmakers have used similar social situations for comic effect. They have people from a different culture who do not share the same tacit, unspoken rules of proper behavior violate social norms.[7] This is humorous because a capable adult violating a common everyday tacit norm disrupts the flow of everyday social reality and generates social tension that we release through laughter. If a very young child or person who is cognitively impaired were to violate the tacit norm, few see it as humorous but perhaps as "cute" or "sad." Mental health practitioners use a person's ability to recognize and apply everyday tacit cultural knowledge as an indicator of the person's mental competence.

## The Logic of Field Research

Field research is an orientation toward doing social research more than a specific research technique. Field researchers draw on an wide array of specific techniques.[8] As Schatzman and Strauss (1973:14) said, "Field method is more like an umbrella of activity beneath which any technique may be used for gaining the desired knowledge, and for processes of thinking about this information." A field researcher is a resourceful, talented individual with ingenuity and an ability to think on her or his feet while in the field. The field research involves bricolage, which is more than combining diverse pieces of information. It connects what the researcher studies to the contexts in which it appears, links the researcher with people studied, and integrates meaning with experience (Kincheloe, 2005).

Field research rests on the principle of **naturalism**. It applies to the study phenomena such as oceans, animals, plants. Naturalism tells us to observe ordinary events in natural settings, not in contrived, invented, or researcher-created settings. The best way for us to learn is to capture events as they occur in authentic reality, so we must conduct our research in "the field," leaving the predictable, safe settings such as an office, laboratory, or classroom.

Another principle of field research is that ongoing social life contains numerous perspectives that people use in natural social settings. To understand

**Breaching experiment** Research technique by which a field researcher intentionally breaks social rules and patterns of behavior to reveal aspects about social meanings and relationships.

**Naturalism** The principle that researchers should examine events as they occur in natural, everyday, ongoing social settings.

social life, we must include all perspectives. Field researchers try to get inside the "heads" or meaning systems of diverse members and then switch back to an outsider or research viewpoint. As Van Maanen (1982:139) noted, "Fieldwork means involvement and detachment, both loyalty and betrayal, both openness and secrecy, and most likely, love and hate." You want to be able to smoothly and quickly switch perspectives and see events from multiple points of view simultaneously. Usually a single individual conducts a field research study alone, although small teams have been effective. The person must do many things at once and be highly attentive (see Expansion Box 1, What Do Field Researchers Do?)

Because you are directly engaged in "real" social life as you study it, personal characteristics are very relevant in field research, unlike most quantitative research. Wax (1979:509) noted:

> *Informal and quantitative methods, the peculiarities of the individual tend to go unnoticed. Electronic data processing pays no heed to the age, gender, or ethnicity of the research director or programmer. But, in fieldwork, these basic aspects of personal identity become salient; they drastically affect the process of field research.*

Such direct involvement in the field can have an emotional impact. Field research can be fun and exciting, but it can also disrupt your personal life, physical security, or mental well-being. More than other types of social research, it reshapes friendships, family life, self-identity, or personal values:

> *The price of doing fieldwork is very high, not in dollars (fieldwork is less expensive than most other kinds of research) but in physical and mental effort. It is very hard work. It is exhausting to live two lives simultaneously. (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975:vi)*

Field research requires much 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. As Fine (1996: 244) remarked in his study of four restaurant kitchens: "I attempted to be present six days each week . . . and I attempted to stagger my observation times. . . . I spent a month observing in the kitchen in each restaurant then interviewed all the full-time cooks for a total of thirty in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted from one to three hours."

**EXPANSION BOX 1**

### 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 (i.e., 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 record only "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 imposing an outside point of view
10. Copes with high levels of personal stress, uncertainty, ethical dilemmas, and ambiguity

## Steps in Performing Field Research

The process of doing a field research study is more flexible and less structured than quantitative research. This makes it essential for you to be well organized and prepared for the field. The steps of a project serve as only an approximate guide or road map (see Expansion Box 2, Steps in Field Research). We can divide the overall process into six parts: preparation, field site selection and access, field strategies, relations in the field, data gathering, and exit.

**EXPANSION BOX 2**

### Steps in Field Research

1. Prepare oneself, read the literature, and defocus.
2. Select a field site and gain access to it.
3. Enter the field and establish social relations with members.
4. Adopt a social role, learn the ropes, and get along with members.
5. Watch, listen, and collect quality data.
   - Begin to analyze data and to generate and evaluate working hypotheses.
   - Focus on specific aspects of the setting and use theoretical sampling.
   - Conduct field interviews with member informants.
6. Disengage and physically leave the setting.
   - Complete the analyses and write the research report.

*Note:* There is no fixed percentage of time needed for each step. For a rough approximation, Junker (1960:12) suggested that, once in the field, the researcher should expect to spend approximately one-sixth of his or her time observing, one-third recording data, one-third of the time analyzing data, and one-sixth reporting results. Also see Denzin (1989:176) for eight steps of field research.

***Step 1: Prepare to Enter the Field.*** There are four aspects of preparing for the field: learning to be flexible, preparing, defocusing, and being self-aware and having knowledge of yourself.

*Be Flexible.* Agility is a virtue when doing field research. In field research, you will not follow clearly laid-out, preset, fixed steps. Rather than having a set of methods to apply or explicit hypotheses to test, you select techniques based on their value in providing valuable information in specific situations. At the beginning, you should expect little control over data and little focus. You want to be able to shift directions and follow leads as needed, learn to recognize and seize opportunities, and adjust quickly to fluid social situations. You do not want to lock yourself into initial misconceptions; instead, learn to be open to discovering new ideas. Finding the most fruitful questions to ask about a part of social life in the field often requires patience, time, sensitivity, and reflection.

*Organize Yourself.* Human and personal factors can play a role in any research project, but they are crucial ingredients in a field research study. Field projects often begin with chance occurrences or a personal interest, such as working at a job, having a hobby, or being a patient or an activist.[9] To conduct field research, you must refine the skills of careful looking and listening, short-term memory, and regular writing. Before you enter the field site, you will want to practice observing the ordinary details of situations and later writing them down. Extreme attention to details and short-term memory can improve with practice. Likewise, keeping a daily diary or personal journal is good practice for writing field notes. As with all social research, reading the scholarly literature will help you to learn concepts, potential pitfalls, data collection methods, and techniques for resolving conflicts. A beginning field researcher should read dozens of field research reports before starting a study. In addition, you may find diaries, novels, movies, journalistic accounts, and autobiographies valuable tools to gain greater familiarity with and prepare yourself emotionally for entering the field.

*Defocus.* To begin, you need to empty your mind of preconceptions and take a broad view rather than focusing narrowly. Once socialized to the setting, however, you can begin to focus the inquiry. **Defocusing** means consciously beginning fresh, highly aware and curious, unburdened by assumptions and prejudgments. It comes in two types.[10] The first is casting a wide net in order to witness a broad range of situations, people, and settings—getting a feel for the overall setting before deciding what to include or exclude. The second is going beyond the narrow researcher role and not restricting yourself exclusively to being the researcher. As Douglas (1976:122) noted, it is important to extend your experience beyond a strict professional role.

**Defocusing** A technique early in field research by which the researcher removes his or her past assumptions and preconceptions to become more open to events in a field site.

You want to go beyond your "comfort zone" to experience the field as much as possible without betraying a primary commitment to being a researcher.

***Be Self-Aware.*** A good field researcher is a highly self-aware person. As a field researcher, you need to know yourself and reflect on your personal experiences. You can expect to feel 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 emotional turmoil, isolation, and confusion. You may feel doubly marginal: an outsider in the field setting and someone distant from friends, family, and other researchers.[11] Your emotional makeup, personal biography, and cultural experiences are very relevant in field research. This makes it essential to know your limitations, personal commitments, and inner conflicts (see the later section on stress). As Eliasoph discovered when studying a country and western bar, self awareness is essential (see Example Box 1, Field Research at a Country and Western Bar).

Fieldwork can have a powerful impact on your identity and outlook. Many researchers report having been transformed by their field research experiences. Some adopted new values, interests, and moral commitments or changed their religion or political ideology.[12] McDermott (2006:161) studied Black–White racial relations by working in convenience stores in Atlanta and Boston. She remarks that,"I felt like a very different person by the time I completed my work at Quickie Mart." Hayano (1982:148) says something similar after conducting intensive field research on professional gambling:

> *By this time I felt more comfortable sitting at a poker table than I did at faculty meetings and in my classes. Most of my social life focused on poker*

**EXAMPLE BOX 1**

**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, bicoastal, bespectacled, Jewish, Ph.D. candidate from a long line of communists, atheists, liberals, bookreaders, 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 cowboy hats, cowboy 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 spending 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. By contrast, 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.**

*playing, and often, especially after a big win, I felt the desire to give up my job as a university professor in order to spend more time in the cardroom.*

***Step 2: Choose a Field Site and Gain Access.*** Most field research occurs in a particular setting. In the early stages of a study, you need to select a site, deal with gatekeepers, enter and gain access, assume a social role, adopt a level of involvement, and build rapport with members.

***Select a Site.*** We often talk about doing field research on a setting, or **field site**, but this term is misleading. A site is the context in which events or activities occur, a socially defined territory with flexible and shifting boundaries. The case, activity, or group of interest may span 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, and 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. Three factors are relevant when you choose a field research site: richness of data, unfamiliarity, and suitability.[13] Some sites are more likely than others to provide rich data. Sites that present a web of social relations, a variety of activities, and diverse events over time provide richer, more interesting data. It is usually easier for a beginning field researcher to choose an unfamiliar setting because it is easier to see cultural events and social relations in a new site. Bogdan and Taylor (1975:28) noted, "We would recommend that researchers choose settings in which the subjects are strangers and in which they have no particular professional knowledge or expertise." At the same time, the novice field researcher can be overwhelmed or intimidated by an entirely new social setting. As you "case out" possible field sites, 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 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.[14] Sometimes "insider" and "outsider" teams can work together. For example, the outsider Douglas teamed with a member insider, Flanagan, for a study of nude beaches, and a White collaborated with a Black to study a Black housing project.[15]

Physical access to a site can be an issue. Sites are on a continuum, with open and public areas (e.g., public restaurants, airport waiting areas) at one end and closed and private settings (e.g., private firms, clubs, activities in a person's home) at the other. You may find that you are not welcome or not allowed on the site, or there are legal and political barriers to access. Laws and regulations in institutions (e.g., public schools, hospitals, prisons) restrict access. In addition, institutional review boards may limit field research on ethical grounds.

Field research is often a case study, but choosing a field site is not identical to focusing on a case for study. A field site is a social space or location in which activities occur. A case is a type of social relationship or activity. A case can extend beyond the boundaries of one site and link to other social settings. You can select a site and then identify cases to examine within it.

***Deal with Gatekeepers.*** Most field sites have **gatekeepers**. They are people with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site.[16] It 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) rarely have gatekeepers; formal organizations have authorities from whom you must obtain permission. A gatekeeper is a leader, with or without a formal title, that members in the field obey, and it may take time to discover who the gatekeeper is

**Field site** A natural location where a researcher conducts field research.

**Gatekeeper** A person in an official or unofficial role who controls access to a setting.

**EXAMPLE BOX 2**

### 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.

(see Example Box 2, Gatekeepers and Access). You should expect to negotiate with gatekeepers and bargain for access. Gatekeepers may not appreciate the need for conceptual distance or ethical balance. You need to set nonnegotiable limits to protect research integrity. If there are many restrictions initially, you can often reopen negotiations later, and gatekeepers may forget their initial demands as trust develops. It is ethically and politically astute to call on gatekeepers. Many of them do not care about the findings except so far as these findings 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. "Even the most friendly and co-operative gatekeepers or sponsors will shape the conduct and development of research. To one degree or another, the ethnographer will be channeled in line with existing networks of friendship and enmity, territory, and equivalent boundaries" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:73). 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 commonsense judgment and social skills. Field sites usually have different levels or areas, and entry to each is an issue. Entry is more analogous to peeling the layers of an onion than to opening a door. Moreover, bargains and promises of entry may not remain stable over time. You need fallback plans or may have to return later for renegotiation. Because the specific focus of research may not emerge until later in the research process or may change, it is best to avoid being locked into specifics by gatekeepers.

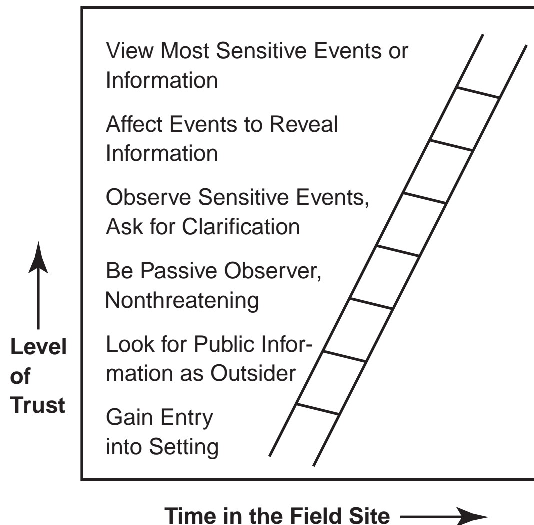



**FIGURE 2 The Access Ladder**

We can visualize entry and access as an **access ladder** (see Figure 2). You begin at the bottom rung. Here access is easy, and you are the naïve outsider looking for visible, public information. The next rung requires increased access. It occurs after serious on-site observation begins. You are a passive observer, not questioning what members say, but you slowly penetrate into local social life. With time in the field, you move up a rung. You observe or hear things that are potentially sensitive, and you begin to seek clarification of what you see or hear. Reaching this access rung is difficult. Finally, you may try to shape interaction so that it reveals specific information to you. You may request to see highly sensitive material. Few attain this highest rung of the access ladder, which requires deep trust.[17]

***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 structured for you. Few people have a choice but to play the role of son or daughter. Some roles are formal (e.g., bank teller, police chief); others are informal (flirt, elder statesperson, buddy, etc.). You can switch roles, play multiple roles, and play a role in a particular way.

You occupy two types of roles in the field: a social role in the site (e.g., customer, patient, employee) and your field researcher role (to be discussed in the next section). Harrington (2003) noted that a field researcher's success depends on how skillfully he or she negotiates symbolic interaction processes, such as presentation of self and performing social roles. She observed (p. 609):

> *Researchers entering a field site encounter not only participants but participants' preexisting categories for understanding the world—categories which will be applied to researchers as a way of getting a definitional "handle" on their presence, and figuring out how to interact with them . . . researchers must be defined in terms that either enhance or do not threaten participants' group identity.*

You must negotiate for preexisting social roles that field site members assign you in early field site interactions. The assigned role and your performance in it influences the ease and degree of access, as well as your success in developing social trust and securing cooperation. Some existing roles provide more access than other roles. The roles give you an ability to observe and interact with all members, the freedom to move around, and a way to balance the requirements of researcher and member. At times, you might be able to introduce a new role or modify an existing one. For example, Fine (1987) created a role of the "adult friend" and performed it with little adult authority when studying preadolescent boys. He was able to observe parts of their culture and behavior that were otherwise inaccessible to adults. You may adopt several different field roles over time in the field.

Your ascriptive features and physical appearance can limit social roles. You can change some aspects of appearance, such as dress or hairstyle, but not ascriptive features such as age, race, gender, and attractiveness. Nevertheless, such factors can

**Access ladder** Field researchers may be able to see and learn about only public, noncontroversial events in the beginning, but with time and effort, they can gain entry to more hidden, intimate, and controversial information.

be important in gaining access and can restrict the available roles. For example, Gurney (1985) reported that being a female in a male-dominated setting required extra negotiations and "hassles." Nevertheless, her gender provided insight and created situations that a male researcher would not have had.

Because many roles are gender-typed, gender is an important consideration. Female researchers often have more difficulty when the setting is perceived as dangerous or seamy and where males are in control (e.g., police work, fire fighting). Female researchers may be shunned or pushed into limiting gender stereotypes (e.g., "sweet kid," "mascot," "loud mouth"). Male researchers have more problems in routine and administrative sites where males are in control (e.g., courts, large offices), nor may they be accepted in female-dominated territory. In sites where both males and females are involved, both genders may be able to enter and gain acceptance.[18]

Almost any role limits access to some parts of a field site. For example, the role of a bartender in a bar 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 trade-offs.

Most social settings contain cliques, informal groups, hierarchies, and rivalries. A role can help you gain acceptance into or be excluded from a clique, be treated as a person in authority or as an underling, or be a friend or an enemy of some members. 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 aspects of some settings (e.g., police work, violent criminal gangs) and influence social roles. You should be aware of risks to safety, assess them, and then decide what you are willing to do. Some observers argue that the field researcher should share in the risks and danger of a setting to understand it and its members. For example, Westmarland (2000) argued that a field researcher could acquire police officers' viewpoints only by putting on a safety vest while rushing to the scene of violent crime and then dodging bullets along with them. Taking risks has meant that some researchers have had "near misses" or have been injured.

In addition to physical injury, you can face legal or financial risks and damage to your professional or personal reputation based on actions in the field. Research into some settings (e.g., mental hospitals, trauma centers, war zones) may create emotional-psychological discomfort and damage a researcher's sense of inner well-being. Field researchers who have studied high-risk settings, such as inner-city drug dealers, offer suggestions for staying safe (see Expansion Box 3, Staying Safe in Unsafe Settings).

**EXPANSION BOX 3**

**Staying Safe in Unsafe Settings**

1. First impressions matter; adopt a personal style and demeanor appropriate to the setting.
2. Learn "street life" and fit in; do not dress or act too much like an outsider.
3. Explain yourself, who you are, and why you are there.
4. Scan the physical environment for obvious signs of danger (e.g., floors likely to collapse, a ceiling likely to fall).
5. Stay alert and be prepared to respond quickly to potentially dangerous circumstances (paranoia, sexual approaches, robbery, theft, shootings, police raids, and arrests).
6. Find a "protector" (i.e., a powerful person in the setting with whom you create strong trust and who will provide verbal/physical protection).
7. Develop an assertive, confident mind-set and do not act like a victim; overly fearful behavior can invite aggression.
8. Acquire a "sixth sense" and use prudence or common sense for changing conditions. Keep some money hidden for an emergency.
9. Develop a "safety zone" of people whom you trust and feel comfortable with and who accept you.
10. If feeling discomfort, leave the setting and return another time. The threat of sexual assault or rape is often a real concern for female researchers and should be taken seriously.

*Sources:* Adapted from Bourgeois (1996), Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000), and Williams and Dunlap (1992).

***Adopt a Level of Involvement.*** We can arrange researcher roles along a continuum by their degree of involvement with members. At one extreme is a detached outsider observer; the opposite extreme is an intimately involved insider participant. Several authors have developed systems for discussing the researcher roles (see Chart 1).

Your level of involvement will vary based on negotiations with members, specifics of the field setting, your personal comfort level, and the social role you occupy within the field site. You may move from outsider to insider levels with more time in the field. Each level has its advantages and disadvantages. Different field researchers advocate different levels of involvement. For example, some criticize the Adlers' (1978) complete member role for overinvolvement and loss of a researcher's perspective. Others argue that it is the only way to understand a member's social world.

Roles at the outsider end of the continuum reduce the time needed for acceptance, make overrapport less an issue, and can sometimes help members open up. These roles facilitate detachment and protect the researcher's self-identity. Rueben May assumed this role over the 18 months as he studied Trena's bar, visiting it three to four times a week. He reports (2001:174), "My goal as an ethnographer was to document the daily lifestyle of Trena's regulars, while being as unobtrusive as possible. . . . I spent most of my time listening to the patrons' exchanges and documenting those topics patrons thought important." Although there is less risk of going native (see later discussion on the subject) the outsider is less likely to capture the full depth of an insider's experience and is more likely to make misinterpretations.

Many reject the outsider observer role and argue that the only way to acquire an understanding

**CHART 1 Involvement in the Field**

**Junker (1960, also see Denzin, 1989, Gold, 1969, and Roy, 1970) describes four researcher roles:**

1. ***Complete observer.*** **The researcher is behind a one-way mirror or taking on an "invisible role" such as an eavesdropping janitor.**
2. ***Observer as participant.*** **The researcher is known from the beginning but has limited contact.**
3. ***Participant as observer.*** **The researcher is overt and an intimate friend of participants.**
4. ***Complete participant.*** **The researcher acts as a member and shares secret information of insiders.**

**Gans (1982) offers a similar scheme but collapses the two middle categories into researcher participant. He emphasizes the degree of attachment/emotional involvement or detachment at each level.**

**Adler and Adler (1987) suggest three roles:**

1. ***Peripheral membership.*** **The researcher maintains distance between her- or himself and the members studied or sets limits based on her or his beliefs or discomfort with the members' activities.**
2. ***Active membership.*** **The researcher assumes a membership role and goes through a typical member induction and participates as a member, maintaining high levels of trust and withdrawing from the field periodically.**
3. ***Complete member.*** **The researcher converts to become a fully committed member, experiencing the same emotions as others. He or she "goes native" and finds it very difficult or impossible to leave the field and return to being a researcher.**

of members is to engage them and participate in the field setting. Holy (1984:29–30) observed:

> *The researcher does not participate in the lives of subjects in order to observe them, but rather observes while participating fully in their lives . . . through living with the people being studied. . . . She comes to share the same meanings with them in the process of active participation in their social life. . . . Research means, in this sense, socialization to the culture being studied.*

A role at the insider end of the continuum facilitates empathy and sharing of a member's lived experience. It helps you to experience fully the intimate social world of a member. Nevertheless, a lack of distance from, too much sympathy for, or over-involvement with members have risks. Readers may question your reports, gathering data is more difficult, the impact on the self can be dramatic, and you may lack the social distance required for serious data analysis.[19]

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

It is not always easy to build rapport. The social world is not all in harmony and does not necessarily have warm, friendly people. A setting may provoke fear, tension, and conflict. Members may be unpleasant, untrustworthy, or untruthful; they may do things that disturb or disgust you. You want to prepare 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 in which cooperation, sympathy, and collaboration are impossible require different techniques.[20] Also, you accept what you hear or see at face value but without being gullible. As Schatzman and Strauss (1973:69) remarked, "The researcher believes 'everything' and 'nothing' simultaneously."

***Step 3: Apply Strategies.*** Once in a field site, you will soon need to apply a range of strategies: negotiate, normalize research decide how much to disclose, sample and focus, use the attitude of strangeness, notice social breakdowns, and cope with stress.

***Negotiate.*** You will negotiate and form new social relations throughout the fieldwork process.[21] You will negotiate with members until you establish a stable relationship as you gain more access, build trust, obtain information, and contain resistance or hostility. Expect to negotiate and explain what you are doing over and again in the field. People who are marginalized, those engaged in illegal or illicit activities, and those who are elites often require more intense negotiations to increase access. For example, to gain access to deviant subcultures, field researchers have used contacts from their private lives, 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. Harper (1982) gained access by living in a skid-row mission without any money and befriending homeless men who knew street life. Bart (1987) argued that her background as a feminist activist and nonprofessional demeanor were essential for gaining access to an illegal feminist abortion clinic. McDermott (2006:160) says,

> *"I was able to fit in at the Atlanta site, as I grew up in South Carolina and had previously worked as a convenience store clerk there. I was thus able to speak and easily understand the local accent, and the fact that we were required to wear uniforms . . . meant that I fit in with everyone else in terms of dress, as well."*[22]

After developing social relations, you may maintain them for months or years. Access to elite people and professional people often depends on luck or personal ties.[23] Hoffmann (1980) gained access to wealthy individuals on the boards of directors by using her family ties and including personal references in letters requesting interviews. Danziger (1979) gained access to physicians' activities because her father was a doctor. Johnson's

(1975) access to a social work agency was aided by mentioning that someone in the agency was a friend of his wife.

***Normalize Research.*** A field researcher not only observes and investigates members in the field but is observed and investigated by members as well. "While the fieldworker is undertaking a study of others, others are undertaking a study of the fieldworker" (Van Maanen, 1982:110). The isolated researcher does not perform fieldwork alone, but everyone in the field setting helps to create it (Wax 1979:363). In overt field research, members are usually initially uncomfortable with the presence of a researcher. Most are unfamiliar with field research and fail to distinguish between sociologists, psychologists, counselors, and social workers. They may see you as an outside critic or dangerous spy or as a savior or all-knowing expert.

When you adopt an overt role, you must **normalize social research**—that is, help members redefine social research from something unknown and threatening to something normal and predictable. You can help members do this by presenting your own biography, explaining field research a little at a time, appearing nonthreatening, or accepting minor deviance in the setting (e.g., minor violations of official rules).[24] For example, in a study of social workers, Johnson (1975:99–104) was accepted after the social workers realized that he accepted their minor deviance (e.g., leaving work early to go swimming) and after he said that he thought others did it also. Co-workers accepted McDermott (2006) after she caught shoplifters and agreed to work the night shift at the convenience store alone, proving her toughness and that she was not afraid of "mundane, thankless work."

Another way to normalize research is to explain it in terms members understand. Sometimes members' excitement about being written up in a book is useful, as Fine and Glassner (1979), LeMasters (1975), and Venkatesh (2008) found. In his study of a neighborhood tavern in Wisconsin, LeMasters became a regular over a 5-year period, going to the bar several nights a week. He (1975:7) stated how he explained what he was doing to members:

> *Initially assumed the role of patron—just another person who liked to drink beer and shoot some pool. This finally became difficult because the amount of time I spent in the tavern began to raise questions. Some of the regular customers, I learned later, had decided I must be an undercover agent from the state liquor commission. . . . I adopted the following stance when queried about being in the tavern: that sociologists have to have some knowledge of various aspects of American society to be effective teachers, that I found The Oasis men and women to be helpful in understanding how blue-collar people feel about American society, and, further, that I became bored by constant association with white-collar people and that the tavern contacts were refreshing. All of the above statements were true.*

***Decide on Disclosure.*** You must decide how much to reveal about yourself and the research project. Disclosing your personal life, hobbies, interests, and background can build trust and close relationships, but you also lose privacy and need to ensure that the focus remains on events in the field.

Disclosure ranges on a continuum from fully covert research, in which no one in the field is aware that research is taking place, to the opposite end, where everyone knows the specifics of the research project. The degree and timing of disclosure depends on your judgment and particulars in the setting. Disclosure may unfold over time as you feel more secure.

It is best to disclose the project to gatekeepers and others unless there is a very good reason for not doing so. Even then, you may disclose your identity as a researcher but may pose as one who seems submissive, harmless, and interested in nonthreatening issues (see later discussion on being an acceptable incompetent). McDermott (2006) developed a cover story, telling people she wanted to study the effects of economic restructuring on working people and did not reveal that her real interest was in racial attitudes. She states (p. 36), "If I had stated my true research intentions at the onset,

**Normalize social research** Technique in field research that attempts to make the people being studied feel more comfortable with the research process and to help them accept the researcher's presence.

it would have very likely have affected the validity of the data. . . .” She debriefed people she worked with and revealed the true purpose of her study when she left the field site.

After you select a field site and obtain access, you must learn the ropes, develop rapport with members, adopt a role in the setting, and maintain social relations. Before confronting such issues, you should ask: How will I present myself? What does it mean for me to be a “measurement instrument”? How can I assume an “attitude of strangeness”?

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 them can differ depending on the occasion.

You should be very conscious of the presentation of self in the field. For example, how should you dress in the field? The best guide is to respect both yourself and the members in the field. 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.[25]

Self-presentation can influence field relations to some degree. However, honesty is usually the best policy. It is difficult to present a highly deceptive front or to present yourself in a way that deviates sharply from who you are normally.

For example, being herself and revealing her personal background as a Jewish woman helped Myerhoff (1989) to gain access and develop rapport in a field site of elderly residents in a Jewish senior citizen home. At the same time, her understanding and awareness of her identity changed as a result of her field interactions. Stack (1989) began as an outsider, a White woman studying a low-income Black industrial community. Eventually, members accepted her into a kinlike relationship. Being assigned the nickname “White Caroline” was a signal of acceptance and endearment. She performed many small favors, such as driving people to the hospital or welfare office, shopping, and visiting sick children. She achieved this by how she interacted with others—her openness and willingness to share personal feelings. Anderson (1989) found social class to be a barrier, although he was a Black man in a Black bar. The setting was a corner bar and liquor store on the south side of Chicago in a poor African American neighborhood. Anderson developed a social relationship of trust with members, and an insider whom he befriended, Herman, “sponsored” him. Herman was a witty, easygoing person who was street smart and socially well connected in the setting. Anderson succeeded by “the low-key, nonassertive role I assumed . . . not to disrupt the consensual definition of the social order in this type of setting” (Anderson, 1989:19).

***Focus and Sample.*** Once in the field, you first acquire a general picture. Only then can you gradually focus on a few specific problems or issues (see Figure 3).[26] You can decide on specific research questions and develop tentative “hypotheses” only after experiencing the field firsthand. At first, everything may appear relevant; later, however, you can selectively focus attention on specific questions and themes.

Field research sampling differs from that in survey research, although sometimes both use snowball sampling.[27] The study on bridal showers that opened this chapter used snowball sampling. In

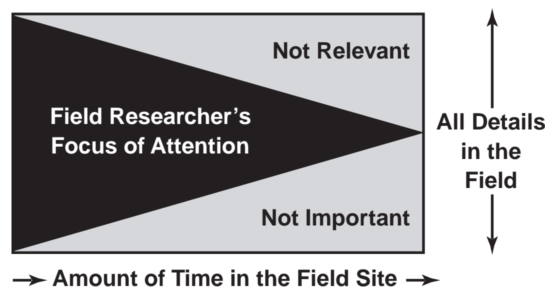



**FIGURE 3 Focusing in Field Research**

field research, we often use theoretical sampling, which is guided by developing theory and sampling times, situations, types of events, locations, types of people, or contexts of interest.

McDermott (2006) sampled a working class, mixed race neighborhood in Boston and one in Atlanta because she theoretically wanted to compare conditions in a northern and a southern city. To get a full sense of how the field site stays the same or changes, you can observe what happens at a setting at various times: the times of the day, each day of the week, and all seasons. It is often best to overlap when sampling (e.g., to have sampling times from 7 A.M. to 9 A.M., from 8 A.M. to 10 A.M., from 9 A.M. to 11 A.M.).

You sample different locations because one may give depth but a narrow perspective. Sitting or standing in different locations helps you get a sense of the whole site. For example, the peer-to-peer behavior of schoolteachers usually occurs in a faculty lounge as well as at a local bar or cafe when teachers gather or in a classroom temporarily used for a teachers meeting. In addition, researchers trace the paths of members to various field locations.

We sample people by focusing attention or interaction on different types of people (old-timers and newcomers, old and young, males and females, leaders and followers). As you identify types of people, or people with opposing outlooks, you may try to interact with and learn about all types.

For example, you might sample three kinds of field events: routine, special, and unanticipated. Routine events (e.g., opening a store for business) happen every day and should not be considered unimportant simply because they are routine. Special events (e.g., annual office party) are announced and planned in advance. They focus attention on members and reveal aspects of social life not otherwise visible. Unanticipated events are those that just happen to occur while a researcher is present (e.g., workers being unsupervised when the manager gets sick and cannot oversee workers at a store for a day). In this case, you see something unusual, unplanned, or rare by chance.

***Assume the Attitude of Strangeness.*** It is difficult to recognize what we are very close to. The everyday world we inhabit is filled with thousands of details. If we paid attention to everything all of the time, we would suffer from severe information overload. We manage by ignoring much of what is around us and by engaging in habitual thinking. Unfortunately, we fail to see the familiar as distinctive and assume that others experience reality just as we do. We tend to treat our own way of living as natural or normal. This "blindness" to the familiar makes field research in familiar surroundings difficult. In fact, "intimate acquaintance with one's own culture can create as much blindness as insight" (McCracken, 1988:12). By studying other cultures or subcultures, you can encounter very different assumptions about what is important and how to accomplish tasks. This confrontation of cultures, or culture shock, makes seeing cultural elements easier and facilitates self-discovery.

Field researchers adopt the **attitude of strangeness** to gain these benefits. This means that you question and notice ordinary details or look at the ordinary through the eyes of a stranger. It helps you to overcome the boredom of observing ordinary details. In addition, it helps reveal aspects of the setting of which members are not consciously aware.

People rarely recognize customs they take for granted. For example, when someone gives us a gift, we say thank you and praise the gift. In contrast, gift-giving customs in many cultures include complaining that the gift is inadequate. The attitude of strangeness helps make the tacit culture visible—for example, that gift givers expect to hear "thank you" and "the gift is nice," and become upset otherwise. You adopt both a stranger's and an insider's point of view. The stranger sees events as specific social processes whereas they seem natural to an insider. Davis (1973) called this the Martian and the convert: The Martian sees everything as strange and questions assumptions, whereas the convert accepts everything and wants to become

**Attitude of strangeness** A field research technique in which researchers mentally adjust to "see" events in the field as if for the first time or as an outsider.

a believer. You need both views as well as an ability to swiftly switch between them.[28]

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 will find reflection and introspection easier and more intense when encountering the unfamiliar, whether it is a different culture or a familiar one seen through a stranger's eyes.

***Notice Social Breakdowns.*** A **social breakdown** occurs when two cultural traditions or social assumptions fail to mesh. It highlights social meanings because hidden routine expectations and assumptions become explicit in the breakdown. Such expectations appear as misunderstandings or confusion over which of several implicit social rules to apply. For example, I go to a restaurant and sit down. I wait for a server to appear. Ten minutes later, having gotten no service, I become angry. I look around and notice that I have not seen any servers. I see customers enter from a doorway carrying their own food and realize my misunderstanding. My implicit expectation was that the restaurant had table service; in fact, it is one where patrons must go to a counter, order, and pick up their own food. Once I recognize which rules to apply in the context, I can resolve the breakdown.

Social breakdowns produce embarrassment because the mismatch of cultural meanings often causes a person to look foolish, ignorant, or uninformed. For example, you are invited to a party that begins at 8:00 P.M. You show up in your usual attire, old jeans and a wrinkled sweater, and arrive at your usual time for an 8:00 party—8:30. The door opens and you enter. Shocked, you see that everyone else is formally dressed and sitting at a formal dinner, which the host served about 30 minutes ago. People stare at you, and you feel out of place. Your cultural expectation (this is an informal student party with loud music, dancing, beer, and informal dress) does not match the setting (this is a formal dinner party, at which people expect to eat, engage in polite conversation, and act professionally). The breakdown makes explicit the unspoken social rules that "everyone knows" or assumes.

Social breakdowns can be unexpected or you can purposefully create them to test working hypotheses. As with an ethnomethodologist's breaching experiments, you may violate social rules to expose the existence of tacit rules and their importance. You can observe unplanned breakdowns or create mini-social breakdowns and then watch reactions to pinpoint implicit social expectations.

**Social breakdown** The failure of social rules and patterns of behavior in a field site to operate as expected, revealing a great deal about social meanings and relationships.

**Go native** Action in which a field researcher becomes overly involved with the people being studied and loses all distance or objectivity and becomes joined with them.

***Cope with Stress.*** Fieldwork can be highly rewarding, exciting, and fulfilling, but it also can be difficult:

> *It must certainly rank with the more disagreeable activities that humanity has fashioned for itself. It is usually inconvenient, to say the least, sometimes physically uncomfortable, frequently embarrassing, and, to a degree, always tense (Shaffir et al., 1980:3).*

New researchers face embarrassment, experience discomfort, and are overwhelmed by the details in the field. For example, in her study of U.S. relocation camps for Japanese Americans during World War II, respected field researcher 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 is stressful; it is difficult to be an outsider who is not fully involved, especially when studying settings full of intense feelings (e.g., political campaigns, religious conversions). The loneliness and isolation of fieldwork may combine with the desire to develop rapport and empathy to cause overinvolvement. You may **go native** and abandon the professional researcher's role to become a full member of the group being studied. Or you may feel guilt about learning intimate details as

members drop their guard and overidentify with members.[29] As Venkatesh (2008:176-177) remarked about his Chicago gang study:

> *I was starting to feel schizophrenic, as if I were one person in the projects—sometimes I caught myself even talking in a different way—and another back in Hyde Park. Increasingly I found that I was angry at the entire field of social science. . . . I felt as though the other scholars were living in a bubble . . . Rather than sharing my frustration with my girlfriend, my roommates, and my friends—most of whom were actually quite supportive—I just kept my experiences to myself. . . . When I did try talking about my fieldwork, I felt awkward. In fact, I sometimes came off as defending gangs and their violent practices or as romanticizing the conditions of the projects. . . . I was growing quieter and more solitary. My fellow graduate students and even some faculty members thought of me as unapproachable. Rumors circulated that I was too ambitious, too aloof, but I figured I'd just have to live with them.*

Some degree of emotional stress is inevitable in field research. Instead of suppressing emotional responses, remain sensitive to 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 in whom you can confide.[30]

***Step 4: Maintaining Relations in the Field.*** You need to use many social strategies and skills as you work to maintain relations in the field.

*Adjust and Adapt.* With time, you develop and modify social relationships. Members who are cool at first may warm up later, or they may put on a front of initial friendliness, and their fears and suspicions surface only later. You are in a delicate position. Early in a project when not yet fully aware of everything about a field site, you should not rush to form close relationships because circumstances may change; yet if you develop close friends, they can become allies who will defend your presence and help you gain access.

You need to monitor 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.[31]

In addition to developing social relationships, you must be able to break or withdraw from relationships as well. You may have to break ties with one member to forge new ties with others or to explore other aspects of the setting. As with the end of any friendly relationship, the emotional pain of social withdrawal can affect both the researcher and the member. You must balance social sensitivity and the research goals.

*Use Charm and Nurture Trust.* You need social skills and personal charm to build rapport. Trust, friendly feelings, and being well liked facilitate communication and can help you 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 feelings are good strategies, but they are not foolproof and depend on the specific setting and members. Your demeanor should always be non-threatening, and if possible and appropriate, warm and friendly.

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. Trust is not gained once and for all. It is a process built up over time through many social nuances (e.g., sharing of personal experiences, storytelling, gestures, hints, facial expressions). Trust is constantly recreated and seems easier to lose once it has been built than to gain in the first place. Establishing trust is important, but it does not ensure that all information will be revealed. Trust may be limited to specific areas. For example, it can be built regarding financial matters but not disclosure of intimate dating behavior. Trust may have to be created anew in each area of inquiry; it requires constant reaffirmation.

Some members may not be open and cooperative. **Freeze-outs** are members who express an uncooperative attitude or an overt unwillingness to

**Freeze-outs** People studied in field research who refuse to cooperate with the researcher or to become involved in the study.

participate. You may never gain the cooperation of everyone, or a lukewarm relationship may develop only after prolonged persistence.

Rapport helps you understand members, but understanding is a precondition for greater depth, not an end in itself. It slowly develops in the field as you overcome an initial bewilderment with a new or unusual system of social meaning. Once you attain an understanding of a member's point of view, the next step is to learn how to think and act from within the member's perspective. This is empathy, or adopting, at least temporarily, another's perspective. Empathy does not necessarily mean being sympathetic, agreeing, or approving; it means feeling things as another does.[32] Rapport helps create understanding and ultimately empathy, and the development of empathy facilitates greater rapport. The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* notes the connection between rapport and empathic understanding:

> *"First of all," [Atticus] said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view."*
> *"Sir?"*
> *"—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." (Lee, 1960:34)*

***Perform Small Favors.*** Exchange relationships develop in the field in which small tokens or favors, including deference and respect, are exchanged.[33] You may gain acceptance by helping in small ways. Exchange helps when access to sensitive issues is limited. You may offer small favors but not burden members by asking for any in return. As you and members share experiences and see each other again, members recall the favors and reciprocate by allowing access. For example, Fine (1987:242) learned a lot when he was providing small favors (e.g., driving the boys to the movies) as part of his "adult friend" role. He (1996:x) also reported that he washed potatoes, cleaned beans, and performed many small chores during his study of restaurant kitchens.

***Avoid Conflicts.*** Fights, conflict, and disagreements can erupt in the field, or you may study groups with opposing positions. In such situations, you will feel pressure to take sides and may be tested to see whether you can be trusted. On such occasions, you usually want to stay on the neutral side and walk a tightrope between opposing sides because once you become aligned with one side, you will be cut off from access to the other side.[34] In addition, you will see the situation from only one point of view. Nevertheless, some (e.g., Van Maanen, 1982:115) argue that true neutrality is illusory. Avoiding conflict entirely is not possible as you become involved with members and embroiled in webs of relationships and commitments.

***Appear Interested.*** We try to maintain an **appearance of interest** in the field. An experienced researcher appears to be interested in and involved with field events by statements and behaviors (e.g., using facial expression, going for coffee, organizing a party) even if he or she is not truly interested. This is so because you can weaken field relationships if members see you as bored or distracted. 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—hardly a way to build trust, intimacy, and strong social bonds. Putting up a temporary front of involvement is a common small deception we use in daily life and is part of the more general social norm of being polite.[35]

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

***Be the Acceptable Incompetent.*** As a researcher, you are in the field to learn, not to be an expert.

**Appearance of interest** A technique that field researchers use to maintain relations in a field site in which they pretend to be interested in and excited by the activities of those studied even though they are actually not interested.

Depending on the setting, you should be a friendly but naïve outsider, an **acceptable incompetent**—someone interested in learning about the social life of the field but only partially competent (skilled or knowledgeable) in the setting and whom members accept as a nonthreatening person who needs to be guided or taught.[36]

You may know little about the setting or local culture at first. You may be seen as a fool who is hoodwinked or shortchanged and may be the butt of jokes for your lack of adeptness in the setting. Even when you are knowledgeable, you can display less than full information to draw out a member's knowledge. Of course, you might overdo this and appear so ignorant that you are not taken seriously.

***Step 5: Gather and Record Data.*** This section considers how to obtain good qualitative field data. Field data are what you experience, remember, and record in field notes.

***Absorb and Experience.*** The researcher is the instrument for measuring 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 and to be disciplined about recording data. Second, it has personal consequences. Fieldwork involves social relationships and personal feelings. You include your own subjective insights and feelings, or "experiential data."[37] Personal, subjective experiences are part of field data. They are valuable both in themselves and for interpreting events in the field. Instead of trying to be objective and eliminate personal reactions, your feelings toward field events are data. For example, Karp's (1973, 1980) personal feelings of tension in his study of pornographic bookstores were a critical part of the data. His personal discomfort in the field revealed some dynamics of the setting. In addition, according to Kleinman and Copp (1993:19), "If we avoid writing about our reactions, we cannot examine them. We cannot achieve immersion without bringing our subjectivity into play."

Field research can heighten awareness of personal feelings. For example, you may not be fully aware of personal feelings about nudity until you are in a nudist colony or about personal possessions until you are in a setting in which others regularly "borrow" many items. Your surprise, indignation, or questioning then may become an opportunity for reflection and insight.[38]

***Watch and Listen.*** A great deal of what you do in the field is to pay close attention, watch, and listen carefully. You must use all of the senses, noticing what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. You should become an instrument that absorbs all sources of information. You want to scrutinize the physical setting to capture its atmosphere. What is the color of the floor, walls, 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, old and worn, dirty, or clean)? What type of lighting is there? Are there signs, paintings, plants? What are the sounds or smells?

Why bother with such details? 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 or that shopping malls stores intentionally send out the odor of freshly made cookies. These subtle signals influence human behavior.

Observing in field research is often detailed, tedious work. You need patience and an ability to concentrate on the slow particulars of everyday life. Silverman (1993:30) noted, "If you go to the cinema to see action [car chases, hold-ups, etc.], then it is unlikely that you will find it easy to be a good observer." Instead of the quick flash, motivation in field research arises out of a deep curiosity about the details. Good field researchers are intrigued about details that reveal "what's going on here" by

**Acceptable incompetent** A field researcher who pretends to be less skilled or knowledgeable in order to learn more about a field site.

carefully listening and watching. Remember that we communicate the core of social life through the mundane, trivial, everyday minutia. Most people overlook the constant flow of details, but you need to learn to notice it.

In addition to physical surroundings, you want to observe people and their actions, noting each person's observable physical characteristics: age, gender, race, and stature. People socially 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. A researcher who ignores the racial composition of a group of Whites in a multiracial society because he or she too is White is being racially insensitive. Likewise, "Gender insensitivity occurs when the sex of participants in the research process is neglected" (Eichler, 1988:51).

You want to record such details because they might reveal something of significance. 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 tee 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 physical appearance such as neatness, dress, and hairstyle because they express messages that can affect 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 a symbolic message by their appearance. No one dresses or looks "normal." Such a statement suggests that you are insensitive to social signals.

What people do is also significant. 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 including gestures, facial expressions, and standing or sitting (standing stiffly, sitting in a slouched position, etc.). People express relationships by how they position themselves in a group and through eye contact. You may read social communication by noting that people are standing close together, looking relaxed, and making eye contact.

You can also 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 may help you assign meaning and understand why an event occurred. If you do not notice details, they are lost as is a full understanding of the event.

Serendipity and chance encounters are important in field research. Many times, you do not know the relevance of what you are observing until later. This has two implications. First is the importance of keen observation and excellent notes at all times even when nothing seems to be happening. Second is the importance of looking back over time and learning to appreciate wait time. Most field researchers say that they spend a lot of time waiting. Novice field researchers get frustrated with the amount of time they seem to waste, waiting either for other people or for events to occur. What novices need to learn is that wait time is a necessary part of fieldwork, and it can be valuable.

You need to learn the rhythms of the setting, to operate on other people's schedules, and to observe how events occur within their own flow of time. Also, wait time is not always wasted time. Wait time is time for reflection, observing details, developing social relations, building rapport, and becoming a familiar sight to people in the field setting. Wait time also displays that you are committed and serious; perseverance is a significant trait to cultivate. You may be impatient to get in, get the research over, and get on with your "real life," but this is "real life" for the people in the field site. You should subordinate your personal wants to the demands of the field site.

A good field researcher listens carefully both to what is said and how it is said or what was implied, and to phrases, accents, and incorrect grammar. 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 you are eavesdropping. Luckily, significant events and themes usually recur.

People who interact with each other over a time period develop shared symbols and terminology. They create new words or assign new meanings to ordinary words. New words develop out of specific events, assumptions, or relations. Knowing and using the language can signal membership in a distinct subculture. You want to learn the specialized language, or **argot**.[39]

You should start with the premise that words and symbols used in your world may have different meanings in the world of the people you study. You must also be attuned to new words and their use in contexts other than the ones with which you are familiar (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975:53).

You want to recognize how the argot fits into social relations or meanings. The argot gives you clues to what is important to members and how they see the world. For example, Douglas (1976:125) discovered the term "vultching" in a study of nude beaches. It was a member's label for the practice of some males who sat around an attractive nude woman on the beach.

In their study of sales practices of a vacation condominium ownership firm, Katovich and Diamond (1986) conducted observations and informal interviews over 6 months when one researcher was employed and the other was a trainee. They analyzed the salesroom as a stage in which a series of events are presented to prospective buyers and discussed the argot used. For example, "drops" occur when the finance manager enters and "drops" information during a discussion between the salesperson and potential buyers. The purpose of such staged events is to stimulate sales. Common revelations were that a major corporation that had bought twenty units just decided it needed only fifteen, so five are suddenly available at a special price; a previous client was denied financing, so a property can be offered at a reduced price; or only a few charter members can qualify for a special deal.

A field researcher translates back and forth between the field argot and the outside world. Spradley (1970:80) offered an example when quoting an "urban nomad." He said, "If a man hasn't made the bucket, he isn't a tramp." This translates: A man is not considered a true member of the subculture (i.e., a tramp) until he has been arrested for public drunkenness and spent the night in the city or county jail (i.e., "made the bucket"). After you have been in the field for some time, you may feel comfortable using the argot, but it is unwise to use it too soon and risk looking foolish.

***Record the Data.*** Information overload is common in field research and stretches an individual's ability, not matter how skilled the person is in recording data. Most field research data are in the form of 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 written away from the field. You can expect to fill many notebooks or the equivalent in computer memory. You may spend more time writing notes than being in the field. Some researchers produce forty single-spaced pages of notes for 3 hours of observation. With practice, you should produce several pages of notes for each hour in the field.

Writing notes is often boring, tedious work that requires self-discipline. The notes contain extensive descriptive detail drawn from memory. Emerson and colleagues (1995) argued that good field notes are as much a mind-set as an activity and remarked (p. 40), "Perhaps more crucial than how long the ethnographer spends in the field is the timing of writing up field notes. . . . Writing field notes *immediately* after leaving the setting provides fresher, more detailed recollections . . ." (emphasis in original). If possible, always write notes before the day's thoughts and excitement begin to fade, without retelling events to others. Pouring fresh

**Argot** The special language or terminology used by the members of a subculture or group who interact regularly.

memories into the notes with an intense immediacy often triggers an emotional release and stimulates insightful reflection. 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 and must organize them because you will return to them over and again. Once written, the notes are private and valuable. You must treat them with care and protect confidentiality. Members have the right to remain anonymous, and most researchers use pseudonyms (false names) in notes. Field notes may be of interest to hostile parties, blackmailers, or legal officials, so some researchers write field notes in code.

Your state of mind, level of attention, and conditions in the field affect note taking. Begin with relatively short 1- to 3-hour periods in the field before writing notes. Johnson (1975:187) remarked:

> *The quantity and quality of the observational records vary with the field worker's feelings of restedness or exhaustion, reactions to particular events, relations with others, consumption of alcoholic beverages, the number of discrete observations, and so forth.*

***Types of Field Notes.*** Field researchers take notes in many ways.[40] The recommendations here (also see Expansion Box 4, Recommendations for Taking Field Notes) are only suggestions. Full field notes have several types. Five major types (see Figure 4) and supplemental types are discussed here. It is usually best to keep all notes for an observation period together and to distinguish various types of notes by putting them on separate pages. Some researchers include inference notes with direct observation notes, but distinguish them by a visible device such as brackets or colored ink.

**EXPANSION BOX 4**

**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, and note the date and time.**
3. **Use jotted notes only as a temporary memory aid, with keywords 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 lasted (e.g., a 15-minute wait, a 1-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 though it had not been cleaned in a long time. Pieces of food and dirty dishes looked as though 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, flood, or theft.**

| 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. |

**FIGURE 4 Types of Field Notes**

The quantity of notes varies across types. For example, 6 hours in the field might result in one page of jotted notes, forty 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 given to note writing is taken from field observation where it belongs. The specific setting determines whether you can take notes in the field. You may be able to write, and members may expect it, or you may have to be secretive (e.g., go to the restroom). As McDermott (2006:88) noted after an important interaction in her field site, "I hastily improvised a trip to the restroom to scribble furiously. . . ."

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

2. *Direct observation notes.* The basic source of field data are **direct observation notes**. You write them immediately after leaving the field, which you can add to later. You want to order the notes chronologically with the date, time, and place written on each entry. They serve as a detailed description of what you heard and saw in very 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 soon remember exact phrases from the field. Verbatim statements should be written with double quote marks to distinguish them from paraphrases. Dialogue accessories (nonverbal communication, props, tone, speed, volume, gestures) should be recorded 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").

Put concrete details, not summaries, in notes. For example, instead of "We talked about sports,"

**Jotted notes** Field notes inconspicuously written while in the field site on whatever is convenient in order to "jog the memory" later.

**Direct observation notes** Field research notes that attempt to include all details and specifics of what the researcher heard or saw in a field site and that are written to permit multiple interpretations later.

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." You should note who was present, what happened, where it occurred, when, and under what circumstances. New researchers may not take notes because "nothing important happened." An experienced researcher knows that events when "nothing happened" can reveal a lot. For example, members may express feelings and organize experience into folk categories even in trivial conversations.

A useful way to think of time in the field comes from Zerubavel (1981), who looked at the rhythms of social life and argued that the coordination of social activities is based on the organization of time.

Four temporal patterns that you may try to notice and record in your direct observations notes are the following: (1) sequential structure—what comes first, second, third and so on—the order in which events happen (out of order, before versus after); (2) duration—the length of time of social events (too long, too short); (3) temporal locations—social meaning of certain times of the day, week, month, year (too early, too late); and (4) reoccurance—the repetition of certain events or a cycle of time that has been attached to social norms (too often, not enough).

3. *Inference notes.* You should listen to members in order to "climb into their skin" or "walk in their shoes."[41] This involves a three-step process: listen without applying analytical categories; compare what you hear to what you heard at other times and to what others say; and then apply your own interpretation to infer or figure out what the information means. In ordinary interaction, we do all three steps simultaneously and jump quickly to our own inferences. In field research, you learn to look and listen without inferring or imposing an interpretation. Your observations without inferences go into direct observation notes.

You can record inferences in a separate section that is keyed to direct observations. We never see social relationships, emotions, or meaning. We see specific physical actions and hear words, then use background cultural knowledge, clues from the context, and what is done or said to assign social meaning. For example, we do not see love or anger; we see and hear specific actions (red face, loud voice, wild gestures, obscenities) and draw inferences from them (the person is angry).

We constantly infer social meaning on the basis of what we see and hear—but not always correctly. For example, my 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 observed our interaction and then inferred a father/daughter, not an uncle/niece, relationship. She saw and heard a male adult and a female child, but she inferred the social meaning incorrectly. You want to keep inferred meaning separate from direct observation because the meaning of actions is not always self-evident. Sometimes people 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 woman, who has a sad facial expression and appears ready to cry, is briefly hugged by the male. They then leave together. Did I witness a couple breaking up, two 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? The **separation of inference** allows multiple meanings to arise on rereading direct observation notes. If you record inferred meaning without separation, you lose other possible meanings. Tjora (2006:433) observed that

**Separation of inference** A process by which a field researcher writes direct observation notes in a way that keeps what was observed separate from what was inferred or believed to have occurred.

you want to "both record 'what you "know" has happened and what you "think" has happened' . . . not mix them with actual observations."

4. *Analytic memos.* We make many decisions about how to proceed while in the field. We plan some acts (e.g., to conduct an interview, to observe a particular activity) while others seem to occur almost out of thin air. Most field researchers keep analytic notes to have a record of 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 methodological strategies and theoretical notes. They are collections of your thoughts, systematic digressions into theory, and a record of your decisions. You use them to elaborate and expand on ideas while still in the field, and to modify or develop more complex theory by rereading and thinking about the memos.

5. *Personal notes.* As discussed earlier, personal feelings and emotional reactions become part of the data and color what you see or hear in the field. You should keep a section of notes that is like a personal diary. You record personal life events and feelings in it ("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 a way to cope with stress; they are a source of data about personal reactions; they help to evaluate direct observation or inference notes when you later reread the notes. For example, being in a good mood during observations might color what you observed.

6. *Interview notes.* If you conduct field interviews (to be discussed), you keep the interview notes separate.[42] In addition to recording questions and answers, you create a **face sheet**. This is a page at the beginning of the notes with information such as the date, place of interview, characteristics of interviewee, content of the interview, and so on. It helps you to make sense of the notes when rereading them.

7. *Maps, diagrams, and artifacts.* You may wish to make maps and draw diagrams or pictures of the features of a field site.[43] This serves two purposes: It helps organize events in the field and it helps convey a field site to others. For example, a researcher observing a bar with 15 stools may draw and number 15 circles to simplify recording (e.g., "Yosuke came in and sat on stool 12; Phoebe was already on stool 10").

Three types of maps are helpful: spatial, social, and temporal. The first helps orient the data; 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 5a). A *social map* shows the number or variety of people and the arrangements among them according to power, influence, friendship, division of labor, and so on (Figure 5b). A *temporal map* shows the ebb and flow of people, goods, services, and communications or schedules (Figure 5c).

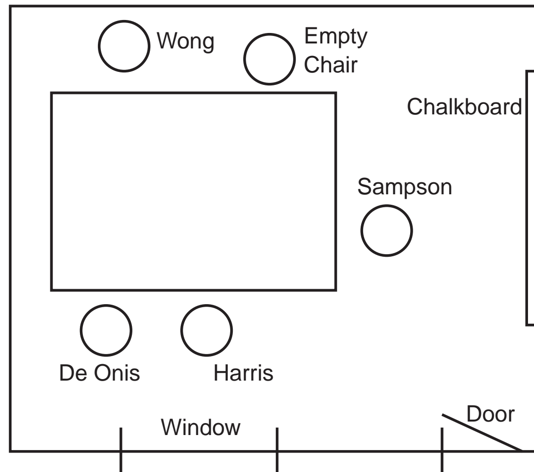
In addition to the maps that we create to analyze the field site, many researchers gather artifacts, or items from the field site. These items of physical evidence (e.g., a brochure, menu, coffee cup, T-shirt, program or roster of participants, party hat) are visible reminders from the site. You can use them to trigger a memory, illustrate a theme, or symbolize some activity or event.

8. *Machine-recorded data.* Photos, tape recorders, and videotapes can be helpful supplements in field research. They never substitute for field notes or your presence in the field. You cannot introduce them into all field sites, and you can use them only after you develop some rapport. Recorders and videotapes provide a close approximation to what occurred and a permanent record that others can review. They help you recall events and observe

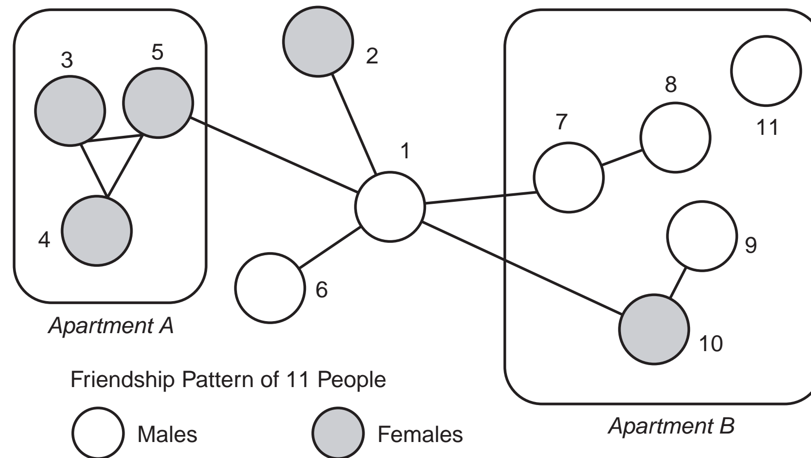
**Analytic memos** Notes a qualitative researcher takes while developing more abstract ideas, themes, or hypotheses from an examination of details in the data.

**Face sheet** A page at the beginning of interview or field notes with information on the date, place of observations, interviews, the context, and so on.

**a. Spatial Map**




**b. Social Map**




**c. Temporal Map**

**Day of Week, Buzz's Bar**

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

**FIGURE 5 Types of Maps Used in Field Research**

what does not happen, or nonresponses, which are easy to miss. Nevertheless, these items create disruption and an increased awareness of surveillance. Researchers who rely on them must address associated problems (e.g., ensure that batteries are fresh, the supply of blank tapes is adequate). Also, relistening to or viewing tapes can be time consuming. For example, it may take more than 100 hours to listen to 50 hours recorded in the field. Transcriptions of tape are expensive and not always accurate; they do not always convey subtle contextual meanings or mumbled words.[44]

***Step 6: Exit the Field Site.*** Work in the field can last from a few weeks to a dozen years.[45] In either case, at some point, it ends. Some researchers suggest that the end comes naturally when theory building ceases or reaches a closure; others believe that fieldwork could go on without end and that a firm decision to cut it off is needed.

Experienced field researchers 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 them and the members. You may experience the emotional pain of breaking intimate friendships when leaving the field. You may feel guilty and depressed immediately before and after leaving. You may find letting go difficult because of personal and emotional entanglements. If the involvement in the field was intense and long and the field site differed from your native culture, you may need months of adjustment before feeling at home with your original cultural surroundings.

Once you decide to leave—because the project reaches a natural end and little new is being learned or because external factors force it to end (e.g., end of a job, gatekeepers order you out)—choose a method of exiting. You can leave by a quick exit (simply not return one day) or slowly withdraw, reducing involvement over weeks. You also need to decide how to tell members and how much advance warning to give.

The exit process depends on the specific field setting and the relationships developed. In general, let members know a short period ahead of time. You should fulfill any bargains or commitments that were made and 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 for members. Feminist researchers advocate maintaining friendships with members after exiting.

Leaving affects members. Some 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 a member, or they may become angry and resentful. They may grow cool and distant because of an awareness that you really are an outsider. In any case, fieldwork is not finished until the process of disengagement and exiting is complete. (See Summary Review Box 1, Overview of the Field Research Process.)

## THE FIELD RESEARCH INTERVIEW

So far, you have read about how field researchers observe and take notes. They also interview members, but field interviews differ from survey research interviews. This section introduces the field interview.

Unstructured, nondirective, in-depth interviews in field research differ from formal survey research interviews in many ways (see Table 1).[46] The field interview involves asking questions, listening, expressing interest, and recording what was said.

The field interview is a joint production of a researcher and one or more members. Members are active participants whose insights, feelings, and cooperation are essential parts of a discussion process that reveals subjective meanings. "The interviewer's presence and form of involvement—how she or he listens, attends, encourages, interrupts, digresses, initiates topics, and terminates responses—is integral to the respondent's account" (Mishler, 1986:82).

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).[47]

**SUMMARY REVIEW BOX 1**

### Overview of the Field Research Process

**Step 1: Prepare To Enter the Field**
- Be flexible
- Organize
- Defocus
- Be self-aware

**Step 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

**Step 3. Apply Strategies**
- Negotiate
- Normalize research
- Decide on disclosure
- Focus and sample
- Assume the attitude of strangeness
- Notice social breakdowns
- Cope with stress

**Step 4. Maintain Relations in the Field**
- Adjust and adapt
- Use charm and nurture trust
- Perform small favors
- Avoid conflicts
- Appear interested
- Be the acceptable incompetent

**Step 5. Gather and Record Data**
- Absorb and experience
- Watch and listen
- Record the data
- Types of field notes

1. Jotted notes
2. Direct observation notes
3. Inference notes
4. Analytic memos
5. Personal notes
6. Interview notes
7. Maps, diagrams, and artifacts
8. Machine-recorded data

**Step 6. Exit the Field Site**

A field interview involves 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 her study of youth subculture, Wilkins (2008:21) says that her own unexpected pregnancy and single motherhood during her field research study "changed my social location in significant and often unexpected ways," including facilitating her research opportunities with wannabes (i.e., white teens who acted Puerto Rican).

In field interviews, members express themselves in the forms in which they normally speak, think, and organize reality. You want to retain members' jokes and narrative stories in their natural form and 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, "Could you tell me things that led up to your quitting in June?" instead of "Why did you quit your job?"

Field interviews occur in a series over time. Begin by building rapport and steering conversation away from evaluative or highly sensitive topics. Avoid probing inner feelings until you establish intimacy, and even then, expect apprehension. After several meetings, you may be able to probe more deeply into sensitive issues and seek clarification of less 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 you started taking things from the store after they reduced your pay. Is that right?"

**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 at a later time. |
| 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 and 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 the 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 infrequent probes. | 7 Open-ended questions are common, and probes are frequent. |
| 8. The interviewer alone controls the pace and direction of the 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 communication pattern into a standard framework. | 10. The interviewer adjusts to the member's norms and language usage. |

*Sources:* Adapted from Briggs (1986), Denzin (1989), Douglas (1985), Mishler (1986), Spradley (1979a).

The field interview is a "speech event," closer to a friendly conversation than the stimulus/response model found in a survey research interview. You are familiar with a friendly conversation, which has its own informal rules and the following elements: (1) a greeting ("Hi, it's good to see you again"); (2) the absence of an explicit goal or purpose (we don't say, "Let's now discuss what we did last weekend"); (3) avoidance of explicit repetition (we don't say, "Could you clarify what you said about . . ."); (4) question asking ("Did you see the race yesterday?"); (5) expressions of interest ("Really? I wish I could have been there!"); (6) expressions of ignorance ("No, I missed it. What happened?"); (7) turn taking so the encounter is balanced (one person does not always ask questions and the other only answer); (8) abbreviations ("I missed the Derby, but I'm going to the Indy," not "I missed the Kentucky Derby horse race but I will go to the Indianapolis 500 automotive race"); (9) a pause or brief silence when neither person talks is acceptable; (10) a closing (we don't say, "Let's end this conversation"; instead, we give a verbal indicator before physically leaving—"I've got to get back to work now. See ya tomorrow.").

The field interview differs from a friendly conversation. It has an explicit purpose: to learn about the member 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?" The field interview is less balanced. A higher proportion of questions come from you, and you express more ignorance and interest. Also, it includes repetition, and you may often ask the member to elaborate about unclear abbreviations.[48]

Field research interviewers watch for **markers**, "a passing reference made [in a field interview] by a respondent to an important event or feeling state" (Weiss, 1994:77). For example, during an interview with a 45-year-old physician, the physician mentions casually while describing having difficulty in a high school class, "It was about that time that my sister was seriously injured in a car accident." The physician had never mentioned the sister or the accident before. By dropping it in, the physician is indicating it was an important event at the time. You should pick up on the marker. You later may ask, "Earlier, you mentioned that your sister was seriously injured in a car accident. Could you tell me more about that?" Most important, you must listen. Do not interrupt frequently, repeatedly finish a member's sentences, offer associations (e.g., "Oh, that is just like X"), insist on finishing asking your question after the member has started an answer, fight for control over the interview process, or stay fixed with a line of thought and ignore new leads.[49] Perhaps you will learn something unexpected, such as the sister's accident started an interest in medicine by the physician and was critical to choosing a medical career.

## Life History

Life history, life story, or a biographical interview is a special type of field interviewing. It overlaps with oral history.[50] Stories of the past have multiple purposes and may shape the forms of interview. In a **life history interview**, we interview and gather documentary material about a particular individual's life. The person, referred to as an informant, usually is elderly. "The concept of life story is used to designate the retrospective information itself without the corroborative evidence often implied by the term life history" (Tagg, 1985:163). We ask open-ended questions to capture how the person understands his or her own past. Exact accuracy in the story is less critical than the story itself. We recognize that the informant may reconstruct or add present interpretations to the past; the person may "rewrite" his or her story. The main purpose of this interview is to get at how the informant sees/remembers the past, not some kind of objective truth (see Expansion Box 5, The Life History Interview).

We sometimes use a *life story grid* when we ask the person what happened at various dates and in several areas of life. A grid may consist of categories such as migration, occupation, education, or family events for each of ten different ages in the person's life. We can supplement the interview information with artifacts (e.g., old photos) and present them during the interview to stimulate discussion or recollection. "Life writing as an empirical exercise feeds on data: letters, documents, interviews" (Smith, 1994:290).

McCracken (1988:20) gave an example of how objects aided an interview by helping him understand how the person being interviewed saw things. When interviewing a 75-year-old woman in her living room, McCracken initially thought the room just contained a lot of cluttered physical objects. After having the woman explain the meaning of each item, it was clear that she saw each as a memorial or a memento. The room was a museum to key events in her life. Only after the author looked at the objects in this new way did he begin to see the furniture and objects not as inanimate things but as objects that radiated meaning.

Sometimes we find an existing archive with a person; other times, we search out the documents and create an archive. Locating such documentary data can be a tremendous task followed by reviewing, cataloging, and organizing the information. The interview and documentary data together form the basis of the life story.

**Marker** A passing reference by a person in a field interview that actually indicates a very important event or feeling.

**Life history interview** Open-ended interview with one person who describes his or her entire life, a subtype of oral history.

**EXPANSION BOX 5**

### The Life History Interview

Life history or life story interviews typically involve two to ten open-ended interviews, usually recorded, of 60 to 90 minutes each. These interviews serve several purposes. First, they can assist the informant being interviewed in reconstructing his or her life memories. Retelling and remembering one's life events as a narrative story can have therapeutic benefits and pass on personal wisdom to a new generation. Second, these interviews can create new qualitative data on the life cycle, the development of self, and how people experience events that can be archived and added to similar data (e.g., The Center for Life Stories at University of Southern Maine is such an archive). Third, life story interviews can provide the interviewer with an in-depth look at another's life. This is often an enriching experience that creates a close personal relationship and encourages self-reflection in ways that enhance personal integrity. Steps in the process are as follows:

1. The researcher prepares with background reading, refines his or her interview skills, contacts the informant, gets permission for the interview, and promises anonymity.
2. The researcher conducts a series of interviews, audio- or video-recording them. The interviewer suspends any prior history with an informant and gives his or her total respect, always showing sincere interest in what another says. He or she asks open-ended questions, but is flexible and never forces a question. The interviewer acts as a guide, knowing when to ask a question that will open up stories; gives intense attentiveness; and is completely nonjudgmental and supportive. Often the interviewer offers photographs or objects to help spark memories and past feelings.
3. The researcher transcribes the recorded interviews in four stages: (a) prepares a summary of each session; (b) makes a verbatim transcription, with minor editing (e.g., adds punctuation for sentences, paragraphs) and stage directions (e.g., laughter, coughing); (c) reviews the whole transcript for clarity of meaning and does further editing and minor rearranging; and (d) has the informant review the transcript for any corrections and modifications.
4. The researcher sends a note of appreciation to the informant and prepares a commentary on major themes and/or sends it to an archive.

*Source:* Adapted from A. B. Atkinson & John Hills, 1998. "Exclusion, Employment and Opportunity," *CASE Papers* 04, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE. http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case/

## Types of Questions Asked in Field Interviews

We ask three types of questions in a field interview: descriptive, structural, and contrast questions. We ask all concurrently, but each type is more frequent at a different stage in the research process (see Figure 6). During the early stage, ask descriptive questions and gradually add structural questions until, in the middle stage after analysis has begun, they make up a majority of the questions. Ask contrast questions in the middle of a study and increase them until, by the end, you ask them more than any other type.[51]

You ask a descriptive question to explore the setting and learn about members. Descriptive questions 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 asking for examples or experiences are descriptive questions: for example, "Could you give me an example of a great date?" "What were your experiences as 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 the argot of the setting: "What

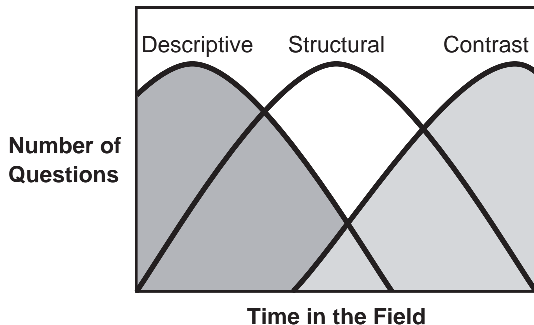



**FIGURE 6 Types of Questions in Field Research Interviews**

do you call a deputy sheriff?" (The answer is a "county Mountie.")

You use a structural question after spending time in the field and starting to analyze data, especially with a domain analysis. It begins after you organize specific field events, situations, and conversations into categories. 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 create a conceptual category, "kinds of customers" and then you talk to members using structural questions to verify types.

One way to pose a structural question is to ask the members whether a category includes elements in addition to those you already have identified. You might ask, "Are there any types of customers other than regulars, greasers, pit stoppers, and long haulers?" In addition, you ask 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 by structural questions. Contrast questions focus on similarities or differences between elements in categories or between categories that you ask members to verify: "You seem to have a number of different kinds of customers 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?"

***Informants.*** An informant in field research is a member with whom a field researcher develops a relationship and who tells about, or informs on, the field.[52] The ideal informant has four characteristics (see Expansion Box 6, The Ideal Field Research Informant).

You may interview several types of informants. Contrasting types 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; frustrated or needy people and happy or secure people; and the leader in charge and the subordinate who

**EXPANSION BOX 6**

**The Ideal Field Research Informant**

1. **The person who is totally familiar with the culture and is in 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. The individual is not a novice but has years of intimate experience in the culture.**
2. **The individual is currently involved in the field. Former 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 person can spend time with the researcher. 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. Even members educated in the social sciences can learn to respond in a nonanalytic manner but only if they set aside their education and use the member perspective.**

follows. Expect mixed and inconsistent messages when you interview a range of informants.

***Interview Context.*** We recognize that a conversation in a private office may not occur in a crowded lunchroom.[53] Often, interviews take place in the informant's home environment so that he or she is comfortable. This is not always best. If an informant is preoccupied or there is no privacy, you move to another setting (e.g., quiet restaurant or university office).

Meaning in an interview is shaped by its Gestalt; that is, the whole interaction of a researcher and an informant in a specific context. Also, nonverbal forms of communication (e.g., shrugs, gestures, etc.) that add meaning should be noted.

## DATA QUALITY

### The Meaning of Quality

What does the term high-quality data mean in field research, and what does a qualitative researcher do to get such data?[54] For the researcher following a positivist, quantitative approach, high-quality data are reliable and valid; they give precise, consistent measures of the same "objective" truth for all researchers. By contrast, a field researcher following an interpretive approach believes that instead of assuming one single, objective truth, members subjectively interpret experiences within a social context. What a member takes to be true flows from social interaction and interpretation. Thus, high-quality field data capture such processes and provide an understanding of the member's viewpoint. You want "rich" data. This means the data are diverse and you gathered data systematically over a prolonged period. We do not eliminate subjective views to get quality data; rather, quality data include subjective responses and experiences. Quality field data are detailed descriptions from your immersion into the authentic experiences in the social world of members.[55]

### Reliability in Field Research

The reliability of field data addresses whether your observations about a member or field event are internally and externally consistent. **Internal consistency** refers to data that are plausible given all that is known about a person or event and eliminating common forms of human deception. In other words, the data fit together into a coherent picture. For example, a member's actions are consistent over time and in different social contexts.

**External consistency** refers to data that have been verified or cross-checked with other, divergent sources of data. In other words, the data all fit into the overall context. For example, others can verify what you observed about a person. It asks: Does other evidence confirm your observations?

Reliability in field research also includes what is not said or done but is expected or anticipated. Such omissions or null data can be significant but are difficult to detect. For example, when observing a cashier end her shift, you notice that she did not count the money in the drawer. You may notice the omission only if other cashiers always count money at the end of the shift.

Reliability in field research depends on your insight, awareness, suspicions, and questions. You look at members and events from different angles (legal, economic, political, personal) and mentally ask questions: Where does the money come from for that? What do those people do all day?

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 or he in a position to know that? What are the person's values, and how might that shape what she or he says? Is the person just saying

**Internal consistency** Reliability in field research determined by having a researcher examine the plausibility of data to see whether they form a coherent whole, fit all else that is known about a person or event, and avoid common forms of deception.

**External consistency** Reliability of data in field research demonstrated by having the researcher cross-check and verify qualitative data using multiple sources of information.

that to please me? Is there anything that might limit her or his spontaneity?

Take subjectivity and context into account as you evaluate credibility. A person's subjective perceptions influence his or her statements or actions, which 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.

As mentioned before, the context shapes actions and statements. 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. It is not that the member is lying but that the answer is shaped by the context. Four other obstacles to reliability include behaviors that can mislead you: misinformation, evasions, lies, and fronts (see Expansion Box 7, Obstacles to Reliable Field Data).[56]

### Validity in Field Research

Validity in field research comes from your analysis of data as accurate representations of the social world in the field. Replicability is not a criterion because field research is virtually impossible to replicate. Essential aspects of the field change: The social events and context change, the members are different, the individual researcher differs, and so on. There are four types of validity or tests of research accuracy: ecological validity, natural history, member validation, and competent insider performance.

**EXPANSION BOX 7**

**Obstacles to Reliable Field Data**

1. *Misinformation* is an unintended falsehood caused by the uncertainty and complexity of life. For example, nurses in a hospital state something as "official hospital policy" when, in fact, there is no such written policy.
2. *Evasions* are intentional acts of not revealing information. Common evasions include not answering questions, answering a different question than was asked, switching topics, or answering in a purposefully vague and ambiguous manner. For example, a salesperson appears uncomfortable when the topic of using call girls to get customers comes up at a dinner party. He says, "Yes, a lot of people use them." But later, alone, after careful questioning, the salesman is drawn out and reveals that he himself uses the practice.
3. *Lies* are untruths intended to mislead or to give a false view. For example, a gang member gives you a false name and address, or a church minister gives an inflated membership figure in order to look more successful. Douglas (1976:73) noted, "In all other research settings I've known about in any detail, lying was common, both among members and to researchers, especially about the things that were really important to the members."
4. **Fronts** are shared and learned lies and deceptions. They can include the use of physical props and collaborators. An example is a bar that is really a place to make illegal bets. The bar appears to be legitimate and sells drinks, but its true business is revealed only by careful investigation. Fronts are not always malicious. A common example is that of Santa Claus—a "front" put on for small children.

**Fronts** People in a field site who engage in actions and say things that give an impression or appearance that differs from what is actually occurring.

**Ecological validity** Authenticity and trustworthiness of a study; demonstrated by showing that the researcher's descriptions of the field site match those of the members and that the field researcher's presence was not a disturbance.

**Natural history** A detailed description of how a project was conducted.

1. **Ecological validity** is the degree to which the social world you describe matches the members' world. It asks whether the natural setting described is relatively undisturbed by your presence or procedures. A study has ecological validity if events would have occurred without your presence.
2. **Natural history** is a detailed description of how you conducted the project. 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 and they judge the adequacy of the results. 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.[57]
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.[58]

## ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF FIELD RESEARCH

Your direct, personal involvement in the social lives of other people during field research introduces ethical dilemmas. Some of them arise when you are alone in the field and have little time to deliberate over ethics. You may be aware of general ethical issues before entering the field, but they often arise unexpectedly in the course of observing and interacting in the field. We consider five ethical issues in field research: covert research, confidentiality, involvement with illegal behavior, the powerful, and publishing reports.[59]

1. *Covert research.* The most debated of the ethical issues is that of covert versus overt field research.[60] It involves the broader issue of deception both in fully secret or covert research and when the researcher assumes a false role, name, or identity, or lies to members in some way. Some in the research community support covert research or deception and see it as necessary to enter into and gain a full knowledge of some areas of social life. Others oppose it absolutely. They argue that it undermines a trust between researchers and society.[61] Although its moral status is questionable, some field sites or activities can be studied only covertly.

Covert research is never preferable and rarely easier than overt research because of the difficulties of maintaining a front and the constant fear of being caught. Lofland et al. (2006:39) note, "the ethical sensitive, thoughtful, and knowledgeable investigator is the best judge of whether covert research is justified. However . . . we suggest you undertake no covert research . . . before you have acquainted yourself with the problems, debates, and dilemmas associated with such research and local IRB protocols and mandates."

2. *Confidentiality.* You may learn intimate knowledge revealed in confidence and have a strong moral obligation to uphold the confidentiality of data. This obligation includes keeping information confidential from others in the field and disguising members' names in field notes. Sometimes you cannot directly quote a person in a research report. One strategy is to find documentary evidence that says the same thing and use the document (e.g., an old memo, a newspaper article) as the source of the information instead of the member.

A more serious ethical difficulty arises when a field researcher and a member develop a close,

**Member validation** A method that field researchers use to demonstrate the authenticity and trustworthiness of a study by having the people who were studied read and confirm as being true what the researchers have reported.

**Competent insider performance** Action that field researchers use to demonstrate the authenticity and trustworthiness of a study by having the researcher "pass" as a member of the group under study.

personal relationship in addition to their researcher-researched person relationship. Based on deep trust, a member may share intimate secrets with the field researcher alone. As Howell (2004:346) found in her study of women from Oaxaca, Mexico:

> *Ethnographers typically present detailed descriptions of their subjects' lives and circumstances to portray fully the cultural and personal events. Yet informants may try to hide from the general public the more sensitive of the myriad topics . . . including infidelity, wealth accumulation, criminal activities, and violence . . . culturally and personally sensitive subjects—such as sexual assault—may be difficult, if not impossible, to probe with strangers and acquaintances. . . . When informants volunteer information about these experiences, standard channels for maintaining ethical guidelines are invoked. . . . The situation becomes more delicate when information is volunteered as a confidence between "friends," one of whom is also an ethnographer in a position to publish potentially damaging secrets from another's life. . . . The importance of presenting as accurately as possible the realities—including violence and fear of violence—that affect informants' opportunities and choices compels ethnographers to discuss these carefully guarded secrets that are not necessarily revealed within the researcher-researched paradigm. Yet doing so reinforces the importance of considering anew the issues of confidentiality, betrayal, and power. . . .*

3. *Involvement with illegal behavior.* Researchers who conduct field research on people who engage in illegal, immoral, or unethical behavior know of and are sometimes involved in illegal activity. Fetterman (1989) called this **guilty knowledge**. Such knowledge is of interest not only to law enforcement officials but also to other field site members. The researcher faces a dilemma of building trust and rapport with the members, yet not becoming so involved as to violate his or her basic personal moral standards. Usually, the researcher makes an explicit arrangement with the deviant members.

4. *The powerful.* Many field researchers study society's people who are marginal and powerless (e.g., people who live on the street, the impoverished, children, low-level workers in bureaucracies). Some criticize researchers for ignoring the powerful, yet the wealthy and powerful people in society have effective gatekeepers and can easily block access. At the same time, elites and officials criticize researchers for being biased in favor of the less powerful.

Becker (1970c) explained this by the **hierarchy of credibility**. It says that those who study people who are powerless, criminals, or low-level subordinates are often viewed as being biased, whereas people with official authority are assumed to be credible. Many people assume that people at the top of organizations have the right to define the way things are going to be, have a broader view than people at lower levels, and are in a position to do something. Thus, "the sociologist who favors officialdom will be spared the accusation of bias" (Becker, 1970c:20). Researchers who immerse themselves in the world of people who are disadvantaged by developing an in-depth understanding of that side of social life and then publicize a rarely heard perspective may be accused of bias simply because they are giving a voice to a rarely heard sector of society.

5. *Publishing field reports.* The intimate knowledge researchers obtain and report on can create a dilemma between the right of privacy and the right to know. Researchers cannot always reveal all secrets they learn without violating privacy or harming reputations, yet failure to make public what the researchers have learned keeps that information and details hidden. When the researchers are not giving a complete and accurate account of events, others may question a report that omits critical details.

Some researchers suggest asking members to look at a report to verify its accuracy and to approve of their portrayal in print. Such reviews of studies

**Guilty knowledge** Information of illegal, unethical, or immoral actions by the people in the field site that are not widely known but the researcher learns.

**Hierarchy of credibility** Concept of ranking of believeability that refers to situations in which a researcher who learns much about weaker members of society whose views are rarely heard is accused of "bias" while the views of powerful people are accepted as "unbiased" based on their high social status.

that involve marginal groups (e.g., those who are addicts, prostitutes, crack users) may not be possible because we must always respect member privacy. On the other hand, censorship or self-censorship can be a danger. A compromise position is to reveal truthful but unflattering material only if it is essential to a larger argument or to present an accurate total picture.[62]

## FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

The **focus group** is a special qualitative research technique in which people are informally "interviewed" in a group discussion setting.[63] Focus group research has rapidly grown in the past 20 years. The procedure is that a researcher gathers together six to twelve people in a room with a moderator to discuss issues, generally for 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 homogeneous but not include close friends or relatives. A typical study uses four to six separate groups. Focus group topics might include public attitudes (e.g., race relations, workplace equality), personal behaviors (e.g., dealing with AIDS), a new product (e.g., breakfast cereal), or a political candidate (see Example Box 3, Focus Group on Father Loss and Manhood). We often combine focus groups with quantitative research, and the combination has its own specific strengths and weaknesses (see Expansion Box 8, Advantages and Limitations of Focus Groups).

Providing very clear instructions and carefully selecting participants for focus groups can greatly shape their outcome. As Wibeck, Dahlgren, and Öberg (2007:262) observed, "Since the interpretative frames and the previous experience of the participants may differ, it is crucial to ensure that the preconditions for focus group participation are clear to all participants before the discussion starts." Although participants should be moderately homogeneous, this does not always ensure an openness and a willingness to share beliefs and opinions candidly. For example, to discuss gender-sensitive

**Focus group** A group of people informally "interviewed" in a discussion setting that is participating in a qualitative research technique.

**EXAMPLE BOX 3**

### Focus Group on Father Loss and Manhood

Hunter et al. (2006) conducted focus group research with young African American men about what it is like to grow up without a father. Because fewer than 40 percent of African Americans grow up in two-parent households, the researchers were interested in how adolescent boys and young men acquire their sense of manhood. The authors held two focus groups at a local community recreation center where the youth and their families received social services and where many of the youth played basketball. Each session was 75 to 90 minutes long and was audiotaped and later transcribed. The groups had twenty African American men aged 15 to 22. The authors recruited participants through counselors and other connections to the center. Most participants (92%) had less than a high school education and were currently in school. Most (91%) grew up in households without a father. All had a low income or were from a low working class situation. The primary question to the focus groups was what participants thought "being a man" meant, and what type of man they wanted to become. In their analysis of the transcripts, the authors learned that father loss was central to the young men's perspectives about becoming a man. This information came out in two ways: general perspectives about fatherhood and manhood and specific autobiographical reflections about fathers who had influenced the participants as young men. Father loss was a recurrent issue linking general perspectives and autobiography. The authors found several themes expressed in the narratives of the young men, including the following four: (1) some things only a daddy can teach you; (2) if daddy could have taught you anything, he would still be here; (3) momma's both my momma and my daddy; and (4) I will be the man, my father was not.

**EXPANSION BOX 8**

### Advantages and Limitations of Focus Groups

**ADVANTAGES**

- The natural setting allows people to express opinions/ideas freely.
- Open expression among members of social groups who are marginalized is encouraged.
- People tend to feel empowered, especially in action-oriented research projects.
- Survey researchers have 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 one another.

**LIMITATIONS**

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

issues the presence of one gender is not enough. Hollander (2004) found that many participants still fear disclosing stigmatized, traumatic experiences (rape, domestic abuse). She (p. 626) argued, "What individual participants say during focus groups cannot necessarily be taken as a reliable indicator of experience. Participants may exaggerate, minimize, or withhold experiences depending on the social contexts." Context includes not only other participants but also the facilitator, as well as the larger social context (e.g., major social events and trends), the institutional context (e.g., location and sponsor of the focus group), and the status context (e.g. people of different social status or position). Focus groups should be segmented by status. For example, rather than mixing supervisors and their employees, each should be in different group. Likewise, mixing teachers and their students together in the same focus group is unwise because people often respond very differently when people of higher or lower status are present.

## CONCLUSION

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

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

Performing good field research requires a combination of skills. In addition to a strong sense of self, the researcher needs 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 your feet," the ability to see subtle interconnections among people/events, and a superior ability to express oneself in writing.

Field research is strongest when used to 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
access ladder
analytic memos
appearance of interest
argot
attitude of strangeness
breaching experiment
competent insider performance
defocusing
direct observation notes
ecological validity
ethnography
ethnomethodology
external consistency
face sheet
field site
focus group
freeze-outs
fronts
gatekeeper
go native
guilty knowledge
hierarchy of credibility
internal consistency
jotted notes
life history interview
marker
member validation
natural history
naturalism
normalize social research
separation of inference
social breakdown
thick description

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the two major phases in the development of the Chicago School, and what are its journalistic and anthropological models?
2. List five of the ten things that the "methodological pragmatist" field researcher does.
3. Why is it important for a field researcher to read the literature before beginning fieldwork? How does this relate to defocusing?
4. Identify the characteristics of a field site that make it a good one for a beginning field researcher.
5. How does the "presentation of self" affect a field researcher's work?
6. What is the attitude of strangeness, and why is it important?
7. What are relevant considerations when choosing roles in the field, and how can the degree of researcher involvement vary?
8. Identify three ways to ensure quality field research data.
9. Compare differences between a field research and a survey research interview and between a field interview and a friendly conversation.
10. What are the different types or levels of field notes, and what purpose does each serve?

## NOTES

1. See Lofland et al. (2006:2–20).
2. For studies of these sites or topics, see Neuman (2000: 345–346). 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 people who are homeless, see Lankenau (1999) and on studies of female strippers, see Wood (2000).
3. For a background in the history of field research, see Adler and Adler (1987:8–35), Burgess (1982a), Douglas (1976:39–54), Holy (1984), and Wax (1971:21–41). On the Chicago School, see Blumer (1984) and Faris (1967).
4. Ethnography is described in Agar (1986), Franke (1983), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), Sanday (1983), and Spradley (1979a:3–12; 1979b:3–16).

5. See Geertz (1973, 1979) on "thick description." Also see Denzin (1989:159–160) for additional discussion.
6. For more on ethnomethodology, see Cicourel (1964), Denzin (1970), Leiter (1980), Mehan and Wood (1975), and Turner (1974). Also see Emerson (1981:357–359) and Lester and Hadden (1980) on the relationship between field research and ethnomethodology. Garfinkel (1974a) discussed the origins of the term *ethnomethodology.*
7. The misunderstandings of people resulting from the disjuncture of different cultures is a common theme.
8. For a general discussion of field research and naturalism, see Adler and Adler (1994), 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).
9. See Georges and Jones (1980:21–42) and Lofland et al. (2006:11–15).
10. Johnson (1975:65–66) has discussed defocusing.
11. See Lofland (1976:13–23) and Shaffir et al. (1980: 18–20) on feeling marginal.
12. See Adler and Adler (1987:67–78).
13. See Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:42–45) and Lofland et al. (2006:17–32).
14. Jewish researchers have studied Christians (Kleinman, 1980), Whites have studied African Americans (Liebow, 1967), and adult researchers have become intimate with youngsters (Fine, 1987; Fine and Glassner, 1979; Thorne and Luria, 1986). Also see Eichler (1988), Hunt (1989), and Wax (1979) on the role of race, gender, and age in field research.
15. See Douglas and Rasmussen (1977) and Yancey and Rainwater (1970).
16. For more on gatekeepers and access, see Beck (1970:11–29), Bogdan and Taylor (1975:30–32), Corra and Willer (2002), and Wax (1971:367).
17. Adapted from Gray (1980:311). See also Hicks (1984) and Schatzman and Strauss (1973:58–63).
18. For discussions of ascribed status (and, in particular, gender) in field research, see Adler and Adler (1987), Ardener (1984), Ayella (1993), Denzin (1989:116–118), Douglas (1976), Easterday et al. (1982), Edwards (1993), Lofland et al. (2006:22-24), and Van Maanen (1982).
19. Roy (1970) argued for the "Ernie Pyle" role based on his study of union organizing in the southern United States. In this role, named after a World War II war correspondent, the researcher "goes with the troops" as a type of participant as observer. Trice (1970) discussed the advantages of an outsider role. Schwartz and Schwartz (1969) discussed various roles.
20. See Douglas (1976), Emerson (1981:367–368), and Johnson (1975:124–129) on being patient, polite, and considerate.
21. Negotiation in the field is discussed in Gans (1982), Johnson (1975:58–59, 76–77), and Schatzman and Strauss (1973:22–23).
22. On entering and gaining access to field sites with deviant groups, see Becker (1970a:31–38), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:54–76), Lofland et al. (2006:30–47), and West (1980). Elite access is discussed by Hoffman (1980).
23. See Lofland et al. (2006:22-25).
24. For discussion of "normalizing," see Gans (1982: 57–59), Georges and Jones (1980:43–164), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:70–76), Harkens and Warren (1993), Johnson (1975), and Wax (1971). Mann (1970) discussed how to teach members about a researcher's role.
25. For more on roles in field settings, see Barnes (1970:241–244), Emerson (1981:364), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:88–104), Warren and Rasmussen (1977), and Wax (1979). On dress, see Bogdan and Taylor (1975: 45) and Douglas (1976).
26. See Lofland (1976) and Lofland et al. (2006) on focusing. Spradley (1979b:100–111) also provides a helpful discussion.
27. See Denzin (1989:71–73, 86–92), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 45–53), Honigmann (1982), and Weiss (1994:25–29) on sampling in field research.
28. See Gurevitch (1988), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), and Schatzman and Strauss (1973:53) on "strangeness" in field research.
29. See Gans (1982), Goward (1984b), and Van Maanen (1983b:282–286).
30. See Douglas (1976:216) and Corsino (1987).
31. See Warren and Rasmussen (1977) for a discussion of cross-gender tension.
32. See Wax (1971:13).
33. Also see Adler and Adler (1987:40–42), Bogdan and Taylor (1975:35–37), Douglas (1976), and Gray (1980: 321).
34. See Bogdan and Taylor (1975:50–51), Lofland et al. (2006:57–60), Shupe and Bromley (1980), and Wax (1971).
35. See Johnson (1975:105–108).
36. The acceptable incompetent or learner role is discussed in Bogdan and Taylor (1975:46), Douglas (1976), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:92–94), Lofland et al. (2006:55-57), and Schatman and Strauss (1973:25).
37. See Strauss (1987:10–11).

38. See Georges and Jones (1980:105–133) and Johnson (1975:159). Clarke (1975) noted that it is not necessarily "subjectivism" to recognize this in field research.
39. See Becker and Geer (1970), Spradley (1979a, 1979b), and Schatzman and Strauss (1973) on argot.
40. For more on recording and organizing data, see Bogdan and Taylor (1975:60–73), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:144–173), and Kirk and Miller (1986:49–59).
41. See Schatzman and Strauss (1973:69) on inference.
42. See Burgess (1982b), Lofland et al. (2006:99-108), and Spradley (1979a, 1979b) on notes for field interviews.
43. See Denzin (1989:87), Lofland et al. (2006: 88), Schatzman and Strauss (1973:34–36), and Stimson (1986) on maps in field research.
44. See Albrecht (1985), Bogdan and Taylor (1975:109), Denzin (1989:210–233), and Jackson (1987) for more on taping in field research.
45. Altheide (1980), Bogdan and Taylor (1975:75–76), Lofland et al. (2006), Maines et al. (1980), and Roadburg (1980) discuss leaving the field.
46. Discussion of field interviewing can be found in Banaka (1971), Bogdan and Taylor (1975:95–124), Briggs (1986), Burgess (1982c), Denzin (1989:103–120), Douglas (1985), Lofland et al. (2006), Spradley (1979a), and Whyte (1982).
47. See Fontana and Frey (1994).
48. On comparisons with conversations, see Briggs (1986:11), Spradley (1979a:56–68), and Weiss (1994:8).
49. See Weiss (1994:78).
50. See Atkinson (1998), Denzin (1989:182–209), Nash and McCurdy (1989), Smith (1994), and Tagg (1985) on life history interviews.
51. The types of questions are adapted from Spradley (1979a, 1979b).
52. Field research informants are discussed by Dean et al. (1969), Kemp and Ellen (1984), Lofland et al. (2006: 93-94), Schatzman and Strauss (1973), Spradley (1979a:46–54), and Whyte (1982).
53. Interview contexts are discussed in Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:112–126) and in Schatzman and Strauss (1973:83–87). Briggs (1986) argued that nontraditional populations and females communicate better in unstructured interviews.
54. For additional discussion of data quality, see Becker (1970b), Dean and Whyte (1969), Douglas (1976:7), Kirk and Miller (1986), and McCall (1969).
55. Douglas (1976:115) argued that it is easier to "lie" with "hard numbers" than with detailed observations of natural settings.
56. Adapted from Douglas (1976:56–104).
57. See Bloor (1983) and Douglas (1976:126).
58. For more on validity in field research, see Briggs (1986:24), Bogdan and Taylor (1975), Douglas (1976), Emerson (1981:361–363), and Sanjek (1990).
59. See Lofland et al. (2006), Miles and Huberman (1994:288–297), and Punch (1986).
60. Covert, sensitive study is discussed in Ayella (1993), Edwards (1993), and Mitchell (1993).
61. See Douglas (1976), Erikson (1970), and Johnson (1975).
62. See Barnes (1970), Becker (1969), Fichter and Kolb (1970), Goward (1984a), Lofland et al. (2006), Miles and Huberman (1994:298–307), and Wolcott (1994) on publishing field research results.
63. For a discussion of focus groups, see Bischoping and Dykema (1999), Churchill (1983:179–184), Krueger (1988), Labaw (1980:54–58), and Morgan (1996).