

Observation

Michael Agar (1986) has described a 'received view' of science which approaches any research project with these kinds of questions: 'What's your hypothesis?' 'How do you measure that?' 'How large is your sample?' 'Did you pre-test the instrument?'

Agar argues that it does not always make sense to ask such questions about every piece of social science research:

For some research styles, especially those that emphasize the scientific testing role, those questions make sense. But for other styles - when the social researcher assumes a learning role - the questions don't work. When you stand on the edge of a village and watch the noise and motion, you wonder, 'Who are the people and what are they doing?' When you read a news story about the discontent of young lawyers with their profession, you wonder, 'What is going on here?' Hypotheses, measurement, samples, and instruments are the wrong guidelines. Instead, you need to learn about a world you understand by encountering it firsthand and making some sense out of it. (Agar: 1986, 12)

Although I would dispute Agar's apparent dismissal of the relevance of issues of validity and reliability to qualitative research (see Chapter 7), his examples give us an initial hold on the questions that can animate observational studies.

However, perhaps there is a simpler way of expressing Agar's question 'what is going on here?'. Let me use the example of police movies. If you go to the cinema primarily in order to see 'action' (car chases, hold-ups, etc.), then it is unlikely that you will find it easy to become a good observer. On the other hand, if you are intrigued by the details of policework and of criminal activity, you are very much on the right lines.

This is because social science observation is fundamentally about understanding the routine rather than what appears to be exciting. Indeed, the good observer finds excitement in the most everyday, mundane kinds of activities. For example, how police do their paperwork and assemble their files may tell us more about their activities than the occasional 'shoot-out'. For a sociological focus on this, see Cleourel (1968) (discussed in Chapter 4, p. 67). For a recent movie along these lines, see Bertrand

Tavernier's *L627*, concerned with a Paris police drug-squad. Tavernier shows us how much police time is taken up with assembling files that tell the 'right' kind of story (e.g. emphasising 'clear-up' rates on crimes). Elsewhere, Bryman (1988, 61-66) has provided a useful list of the principal characteristics of much observational research, as follows:

- 1 'Seeing through the eyes of': 'viewing events, actions, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of the people being studied'.
- 2 Description: 'attending to mundane detail . . . to help us to understand what is going on in a particular context and to provide clues and pointers to other layers of reality'.
- 3 'Contextualism': 'the basic message that qualitative researchers convey is that whatever the sphere in which the data are being collected, we can understand events only when they are situated in the wider social and historical context'.
- 4 Process: 'viewing social life as involving interlocking series of events'.
- 5 Flexible research designs: 'qualitative researchers' adherence to viewing social phenomena through the eyes of their subjects has led to a wariness regarding the imposition of prior and possibly inappropriate frames of reference on the people they study'. This leads to a preference for an open and unstructured research design which increases the possibility of coming across unexpected issues.
- 6 Avoiding early use of theories and concepts: rejecting premature attempts to impose theories and concepts which may 'exhibit a poor fit with participants' perspectives'.

Bryman's list provides a useful orientation for the novice: However, the reader should proceed with caution. As I suggested in Chapter 2, any attempt to base observation on an understanding of how people 'see' things (item 1) can speedily degenerate into a commonsensical or psychological perspective. Indeed, the last third of this chapter is devoted to approaches which eschew the pursuit of 'meanings' in favour of the study of 'practices'.

The Ethnographic Tradition: From Observation to Gender

Just as, according to Bryman, the qualitative researcher seeks to see things in context, so the student needs some basic knowledge of the historical tradition from which observational studies arose. For: 'Qualitative research is an empirical, socially located phenomenon, defined by its own history, not simply a residual grab-bag comprising all things that are "not quantitative"' (Kirk and Miller: 1986, 10).

The initial thrust in favour of observational work was anthropological. Anthropologists argue that, if one is really to understand a group of people, one must engage in an extended period of observation. Anthropological fieldwork routinely involves immersion in a culture over a period

Exercise 3.1

An instructor begins an introductory sociology course with the following statement:

The problem with everyday talk is that it is so imprecise. For instance, sometimes we say: 'too many cooks spoil the broth'. On other occasions, we say: 'many hands make light work'. On this course, based on scientific research, I will demonstrate which of these proverbs is more accurate.

The instructor now reports on laboratory data from an experiment where students have been assigned tasks and then work either in teams or on their own. This experiment seems to show that all things being equal, teamwork is more efficient. Therefore, the instructor claims, we can have more confidence in the validity of the proverb: 'many hands make light work'.

Using Agar's criticisms of the 'received view' of science (p. 30), answer the following questions:

- 1 Are you convinced by the instructor's claim (e.g. what assumptions does the experiment make? Can proverbs be equally appropriate in different contexts?)?
- 2 Outline how you might do *observational* work on people's use of such proverbs (e.g. what settings would you look at? What sort of things would you be looking for?)
- 3 Examine *either* newspaper advertisements *or* advertisements on radio or television. Make a note when proverbs are used. What *functions* do these proverbs seem to have? Do they make the advertisement more convincing? Why?

of years, based on learning the language and participating in social events with them.

In an earlier text (Silverman: 1985), I discussed cognitive anthropology as one form of such fieldwork. As its name suggests, cognitive anthropology seeks to understand how people perceive the world by examining how they communicate. This leads to the production of *ethnographies*, or conceptually derived descriptions, of whole cultures, focussed on how people communicate. For instance, Basso (1972) discusses the situations in which native American Apache people prefer to remain silent and Frake (1972) shows how the Subanon, a people living in the Philippines, assign social status when talking together during drinking ceremonies.

Sociological work based on observational methods is usually assumed to originate in the 1920s, although many of the theoretical issues about group interaction raised in the nineteenth century by the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1950) offer an interesting basis for observational research.

The 'Chicago School', as it became known in the 1930s, had two strands. One was concerned with the sociology of urban life, represented by the work of Park and Burgess on the social organisation of the city into different 'zones' and the movement of population between zones over time. The second strand, associated with Everett Hughes, provided a series of vivid accounts of urban settings, particularly focussed on 'underdog' occupations and 'deviant' roles.

The Chicago School tradition continued for two decades after the Second World War. In the 1950s, Becker (1953) conducted a classic observational study of drug use. He was particularly concerned with the relationship between marijuana smokers' own understandings and the interactions in which they were involved. He discovered that people's participation in groups of users taught them how to respond to the drug. Without such learning, novices would not understand how to smoke marijuana nor how to respond to its effects. Consequently, they would not get 'high' and so would not continue to use it.

Becker outlines a number of stages through which novices pass on their path to become a regular smoker. These include:

- 1 Direct teaching – e.g. being taught the difference between how to smoke marijuana and how to smoke tobacco; learning how to interpret its effects and their significance.
- 2 Learning how to enjoy the effects – through interaction with experienced users, the novice learns to find pleasure in sensations which, at first, may be quite frightening.
- 3 Resocialisation after difficulties – even experienced users can have an unpleasant or frightening experience either through using a larger quantity or a different quality of marijuana. Fellow users can 'cool them out', explaining the reasons for this experience and reassuring them that they may safely continue to use the drug.
- 4 Learning connoisseurship – through developing a greater appreciation of the drug's effects, becoming able to distinguish between different kinds and qualities of the drug.

Becker stresses that it is only in the context of a social network, which provides a means of interpreting the effects of the drug, that people become stable marijuana users. It is unlikely, however, that such a network could have been identified by, say, survey research methods concerned with the attitudes of marijuana users.

A second example will show how the Chicago School encouraged research on 'underdog' occupations. Whyte (1949) carried out over a year's participant observation in a number of Chicago restaurants. He points out how, in a service trade like a restaurant, the organisation of work differs from other settings. Instead of the industrial pattern, whereby a supervisor gives orders to a worker, in a restaurant work originates from a customer's order.

Whyte shows this difference generates a number of problems for restaurant workers: Who originates action? For whom? How often? With what consequences? The social structure of the restaurant functions as an organised response to these problems.

This can be seen in the following three patterns:

- 1 Many of us will have had the experience of a member of staff snatching away a menu which we have innocently picked up on sitting down at a restaurant table. Whyte argues that this occurs because the skilful waitress/waiter attempts to fit customers into *her* pattern of work (e.g. her need to ensure that the table has been cleared before she takes an order). By not passively responding to the initiatives of customers, serving staff preserve their own work routines.
- 2 Back in the 1940s, widespread gender inequalities caused a particular problem for waitresses because they were expected to transmit orders to mainly male cooks. A structure emerged which concealed this initiation of work by waitresses: rather than shout out orders to the cooks, the women wrote out slips which they laid on the counter to be attended to in the cooks' own time.
- 3 Barmen also engaged in informal behaviour to distance themselves from the initiation of orders by waitresses. When they had lots of orders, they would not speed up. Moreover, at busy times, they would not mix one cocktail until they had several orders for it which could be mixed together.

Half a century later, Whyte's work remains impressive. Following Bryman's list, the restaurant study shows the importance of *context* and *process* in understanding behaviour. Thus Whyte cleverly focusses on how occupational and gender hierarchies are used to influence the flow of work and redefine apparently simple acts. Moreover, he does not let a preference for an unstructured research design lead to a study which merely tells anecdotes on a few choice examples. For instance, the restaurant study uses powerful *quantitative* measures of the number of times different types of people initiate actions.

However, although Whyte treats gender as a topic, it was not until twenty years later that social scientists began to think systematically about the impact of gender on the fieldwork process as a whole. In part, this reflected an interest in the interplay between gender and power. For instance, almost all the 'classics' of the Chicago School were written by men; and those researchers who rose up the academic hierarchy to become full professors were also almost all men (see Warren: 1988, 11).

Increasingly, the gender of fieldworkers themselves was seen to play a crucial factor in observational research. Informants were shown to say different things to male and female researchers. For instance, in a study of a nude beach, when approached by someone of a different gender, people emphasised their interest in 'freedom and naturalism'. Conversely, where

the researcher was the same gender as the informant, people were far more likely to discuss their sexual interests (Warren and Rasmussen: 1977, reported by Warren: 1988).

In studies which involved extended stays 'in the field', people have also been shown to make assumptions based upon the gender of the researcher. For instance, particularly in rural communities, young, single women may be precluded from participating in many activities or asking many questions. Conversely, female gender may sometimes accord privileged access. For instance, Oboler (1986) reports that her pregnancy increased her rapport with her Kenyan informants, while Warren (1988, 18) suggests that women fieldworkers can make use of the sexist assumption that only men engage in 'important business' by treating their 'invisibility' as a resource. Equally, male fieldworkers may be excluded or exclude themselves from contact with female respondents in certain kinds of situations (see McKegane and Bloor: 1991).

One danger in all this, particularly in the past, was that fieldworkers failed to report or reflect upon the influence of gender in their fieldwork. For instance, in a study of a large local government organisation, referred to in Chapter 4, we reported but did not discuss the different kinds of situations to which the male and female researchers gained easy access (Silverman and Jones: 1976). Moreover, even as the role of doing fieldwork as a woman has become more addressed, hardly any attention has been paid by researchers to questions of male gender (McKegane and Bloor: 1991, 198).

Nonetheless, as fashions change, it is possible to swing too far and accord gender issues too much importance. As McKegane and Bloor (1991, 195-196) argue, there are two important issues relevant to the significance of gender in fieldwork. First, the influence of gender may be negotiable with respondents and not simply ascribed. Second, we should resist 'the tendency to employ gender as an explanatory catch-all' (196). For instance, McKegane and Bloor suggest that other variables than gender, like age and social class, may also be important in fieldwork. Equally, I would argue, following Schegloff (1991), that we need to demonstrate that participants are actually attending to gender in what they are doing, rather than just work with our intuitions or even with statistical correlations.

None of this should imply that it would be correct to swing full circle and, like an earlier generation, ignore gender issues in research. It is incumbent upon fieldworkers to reflect upon the basis and status of their observations. Clearly, how the researcher and the community studied respond to their gender can provide crucial insights into field realities.

Indeed, we would do well to become conscious that even taken-for-granted assumptions may be culturally and historically specific. For instance, Carol Warren (1988) suggests that: 'The focal gender *myth* of field research is the greater communicative skills and less threatening nature of the female fieldworker' (64, my emphasis). As Warren notes, the

important thing is to resist treating such assumptions as 'revealed truths' but to treat them as 'accounts' which are historically situated.

Organising Observational Research

Bearing in mind both Warren's and Whyte's work, it is now appropriate to think a little more systematically about how to organise an observational study. Simplifying, I will suggest five stages:

- beginning research
- writing fieldnotes
- looking as well as listening
- testing hypotheses
- making broader links

These steps are not arranged in any particular order. For instance, one should be making broader links at quite an early stage. Of course, making such links implies the relevance of theoretical perspectives on observational research - to be discussed in the subsequent section.

Beginning Research

In Chapter 1, I argued that premature definition of 'variables' was dangerous in field research. Early 'operational' definitions offer precision at the cost of deflecting attention away from the social processes through which the participants themselves assemble stable features of their social world. So, for instance, the qualitative social scientist may be reluctant to begin by defining, say, 'depression' or 'efficiency'. Instead, it may be preferable to examine how, in different contexts, 'depression' and 'efficiency' come to be defined.

The assumption that one should avoid the early specification of definitions and hypotheses has been common to field researchers since the 1930s. As Becker and Geer argued many years ago, for the field researcher:

a major part of . . . research must consist of finding out what problems he [sic] can best study in this organisation, what hypotheses will be fruitful and worth pursuing, what observations will best serve him as an indicator of the presence of such phenomena as, for example, cohesiveness or deviance. (Becker and Geer: 1960, 267)

However, this does not mean that the early stages of field research are totally unguided. The attempt to describe things 'as they are' is doomed to failure. Without *some* perspective or, at the very least, a set of animating questions, there is nothing to report. Contrary to crude empiricists, the facts *never* speak for themselves.

One way to assemble data is to begin with a set of very general questions. A good example of such questions is provided by Wolcott:

What is going on here? What do people in this setting have to know (individually and collectively) in order to do what they are doing? How are skills and attitudes transmitted and acquired, particularly in the absence of intentional efforts at instruction? (Wolcott: 1990, 32)

Already here, we can see that Wolcott's questions are guided by a particular theoretical focus on people's knowledge and skills. This emerges out of a set of assumptions common to many field researchers. These assumptions may be crudely set out as follows:

- 1 *Common sense* is held to be complex and sophisticated rather than naive and misguided.
- 2 *Social practices* rather than perceptions are the site where common sense operates: the focus is on what people are doing rather than upon what they are thinking, e.g. talking to one another, having meetings, writing documents, etc.
- 3 '*Phenomena*' are viewed within such inverted commas. This means that we seek to understand how any 'phenomenon' is locally produced through the activities of particular people in particular settings.

Of course, any such list glosses over the range of theoretical directions to be found in field research. Later we will look at two key theories deriving from the work of Erving Goffman and Harvey Sacks. For the moment, however, let us assume that we have established a particular focus. How then do we proceed?

Writing Fieldnotes

Let us assume that you are not using electronic recordings (audio- or video-tapes) or that you wish to supplement such recordings with observational data. How should you write fieldnotes? (Working with transcripts deriving from recordings is discussed in Chapter 6.)

The greatest danger is that you will seek to report 'everything' in your notes. Not only does this overlook the theory-driven nature of field research, it gives you an impossible burden when you try to develop a more systematic analysis at a later stage: 'The critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to "can" (get rid of) most of the data you accumulate. This requires constant winnowing' (Wolcott: 1990, 35).

At the outset, however, it is likely that you will use broad descriptive categories 'relating to particular people or types of people, places, activities and topics of concern' (Hammersley and Atkinson: 1983, 167). Moreover, items may be usefully assigned to more than one category in order to maximise the range of hypotheses that can be generated. To do this, it may help to make multiple copies of each segment of data, filed under several categories (*ibid*, 170).

One useful aid in filing and indexing is provided by computer software programs. ETHNOGRAPH allows you to code a text into as many as seven different categories. QUALPRO allows text to be broken into still

more flexible units and codes. NUDIST will store information in tree-structured index systems with an unlimited number of categories and highly complex index structures. You can then search your data by these indexes or look for overlap between data indexed under different categories. The NUDIST program thus helps in the generation of new categories and the identification of relationships between existing categories (see Richards and Richards: 1987, Tesch: 1991).

In order to make this discussion of note-taking more concrete, I want to give an example from a piece of research I carried out in the early 1980s (see Silverman: 1987, Chs. 1-6). The study was of a paediatric cardiology unit. Much of my data derived from tape-recordings of an outpatient clinic that lasted between two and four hours every Wednesday.

Secure in the knowledge that the basic data were being recorded, I was free to use my eyes as well as my ears to record more data to help in the analysis of the audio-tapes. Gradually, with the help of my co-worker Robert Hilliard, I developed a coding sheet to record my observations.

As an illustration of how I coded the data, I append in Table 3.1 below the full coding sheet used in this study. In order to show how we derived the categories, I have included explanations of some of the categories in square brackets.

I ought to stress that this coding form was only developed after observation of more than ten outpatient clinics and after extensive discussions between the research team. During this time, we narrowed down what we were looking for. Increasingly, we became interested in how decisions (or 'disposals') were organised and announced. It seemed likely that the doctor's way of announcing decisions was systematically related not only to clinical factors (like the child's heart condition) but to social factors (such as what parents would be told at various stages of treatment). For instance, at a first outpatients' consultation, doctors would not normally announce to parents the discovery of a major heart abnormality and the necessity for life-threatening surgery. Instead, they would suggest the need for more tests and only hint that major surgery might be needed. They would also collaborate with parents who produced examples of their child's apparent 'wellness'.

This step-by-step method of information-giving was avoided in only two cases. If a child was diagnosed as 'healthy' by the cardiologist, the doctor would give all the information in one go and would engage in what we called a 'search and destroy' operation, based on eliciting any remaining worries of the parent(s) and proving that they were mistaken. In the case of a group of children with the additional handicap of Down's Syndrome, as well as suspected cardiac disease, the doctor would present all the clinical information at one sitting, avoiding a step-by-step method. Moreover, atypically, the doctor would allow parents to make the choice about further treatment, while encouraging parents to focus on non-clinical matters like their child's 'enjoyment of life' or friendly personality (see Chapter 8, pp. 186-188 for more details of this study).

The coding form in Table 3.1 allowed us to identify these patterns. For instance, by relating item 14 on the scope of the consultation to the decision-format (item 20), we were able to see differences between consultations involving Down's children and others. Moreover, it also turned out that there were significant differences between these two groups in both the form of the elicitation question (item 16) and the diagnosis statement (item 19).

The coding form in Table 3.1 followed a practice described elsewhere which derives from:

that well-established style of work whereby the data are inspected for categories and instances. It is an approach that disaggregates the text (notes or transcripts) into a series of fragments, which are then regrouped under a series of thematic headings. (Atkinson: 1992, 455)

As Atkinson points out, one of the disadvantages of coding schemes is that, because they are based upon a given set of categories, they furnish 'a powerful conceptual grid' (459) from which it is difficult to escape. While this 'grid' is very helpful in organising the data analysis, it also deflects attention away from uncategorised activities.

In these circumstances, it is helpful to return occasionally to the original data. In our research, we had our tapes and transcripts which offered endless opportunities to redefine our categories. Lacking tapes of his data on medical education, Atkinson returned to his original fieldnotes. He shows how the same, original data can be reread in a quite different way.

Atkinson's earlier method had been to fragment his fieldnotes into relatively small segments, each with its own category. For instance, a surgeon's description of post-operative complications to a surgical team was originally categorised under such headings as 'unpredictability', 'uncertainty', 'patient career' and 'trajectory'. When Atkinson returns to it, it becomes an overall narrative which sets up an enigma ('unexpected complications') which is resolved in the form of a 'moral tale' ('beware, unexpected things can always happen'). Viewed in this way, the surgeon's story becomes a text with many resemblances to a fairytale, as we shall see in Chapter 4, pp. 73-75.

There is a further 'moral tale' implicit in using Atkinson's story. The field researcher is always torn between the need to narrow down analysis through category construction and to allow some possibility of reinterpretation of the same data. So, while the rush to categorise is laudable, it should always occur in the context of a solid body of original data. The ideal form for this is a tape-recording or original document. Where these cannot be used, the field researcher must attempt to transcribe as much as possible of what is said and done - and the settings in which it is said and done.

In such transcription, Dingwall (personal correspondence) notes how important it is to record *descriptions* rather than mere impressions. In practice, this means that we should always try to note concrete instances of

Table 3.1: *Outpatient Analysis*

1	Name of patient	
2	Age	
3	Clinic and date	
4	Doctor	
5	Family present	
6	Non-family present	
7	Length of co-presence of doctor and family [we wanted to record the time of the encounter not including periods when the doctor was out of the room]	
8	Diagnosis	
9	Stage of treatment: 1st consultation Pre-inpatient Post-catheter [test requiring inpatient stay] Post-operation	
10	Outcome of consultation: Discharge or referral elsewhere Non-inpatient follow-up Possible eventual catheter or surgery Catheter Surgery No decision	
11	Consultation stages [this derived from Robert Hilliard's attempt to identify a series of stages from a greeting exchange to elicitation of symptoms, through to examination and diagnosis statement (see Silverman: 1985, especially pp. 265-269)]: Stage Questions asked Topics covered Notes/Markers	
12	Does doctor invite questions? No Yes (When:)	
13	Use of medical terminology: Stage Doctor/Family	
14	Scope of consultation:	
	Prior treatment history Extra-cardiac physical states Child development Child behaviour Family's practicalities of treatment or attendance	Family Doctor

Table 3.1: *Continued*

		Family	Doctor
15	Family's presentation of a referral history		
16	Format of doctor's initial elicitation question [e.g. how is she? is she well?]		
17	Patency [this referred to whether symptoms or diseases were visible or 'patent' to the family]: Family's presentation of problems/symptoms Dr's mention of patient symptoms Family's assent to problems/symptoms 'Not patent'?		
18	Location of examination: desk couch side-room		
19	Diagnosis statement: (a) Use of 'well' (Dr/Family/Both) (b) Use of 'normal' (Dr/Family/Both) (c) Possible diagnoses mentioned (0/1/ > 1)		
20	Decisions: (a) Possible disposals mentioned (0/1/ > 1) (b) Medical preference stated (Yes/No) (c) Medical intention stated (Yes/No) (d) Family assent requested (Yes/No) (e) Family allowed to make decision (Yes/No) (f) Family wishes volunteered (Yes/No) (g) Family dissent from doctor's proposed disposal (Yes/No)		
21	Uncertainty expressed by Dr: (a) over diagnosis (b) over treatment		

what people have said or done, using verbatim quotations and 'far' (or unadorned) descriptions.

Looking as Well as Listening

The attentive reader will have recognised that the coding frame used in Table 3.1 depended, in part, upon what we could see as well as hear (for instance, items 5 and 6 on the people present and item 18 on the location of

the examination). As we have seen, W.F. Whyte (1949) also reaped rich rewards by paying attention to the spatial organisation of activities.

Using his observation of hospital wards, Anssi Peräkylä (personal correspondence) notes how spatial arrangements differentiate groups of people. There are the wards and patient rooms, which staff may enter anytime they need to. Then there are patient lounges and the like, which are a kind of public space. Both areas are quite different from areas like the nurses' room and doctors' offices where patients enter only by invitation. Finally, if there is a staff coffee room, you never see a patient there.

As Peräkylä points out, one way to produce different categories of human beings in a hospital is the allocation of space according to categories. At the same time, this allocation is reproduced in the activities of the participants. For instance, the perceptive observer might note the demeanour of patients as they approach the nurses' room. Even if the door is open, they may stand outside and just put their heads round the door. In doing so, they mark out that they are encroaching on foreign territory.

Unfortunately, we have all become a little reluctant to use our eyes as well as our ears when doing observational work (possible reasons for this are discussed in Chapter 4, p. 70). Notable exceptions are Humphrey's (1970) *Tea Room Trade* (a study of the spatial organisation of gay pick-up sites) and Lindsay Prior's (1988) work on hospital architecture. Michel Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish* offers a famous example of the analysis of prison architecture, while Edward Hall's (1969) *The Hidden Dimension* coined the term 'proxemics' to refer to people's use of space – for instance, how we organise an appropriate distance between each other. However, these are exceptions. Stimson (1986) has noted how 'photographs and diagrams are virtually absent from sociological journals, and rare in sociological books' (641). He then discusses a room set out for hearings of a disciplinary organisation responsible for British doctors. The Professional Conduct Committee of the General Medical Council sits in a high-ceilinged, oak-pannelled room reached by an imposing staircase. There are stained-glass windows, picturing sixteen crests and a woman in a classical Greek pose. As Stimson comments:

This is a room in which serious matters are discussed: the room has a presence that is forced on our consciousness . . . speech is formal, carefully spoken and a hushed whispers, for their speech is not part of the proceedings. (Stimson: 1986, 643–644)

In such a room, as Stimson suggests, even without anything needed to be said, we know that what goes on must be taken seriously. Stimson aptly contrasts this room with a McDonald's hamburger restaurant:

Consider the decorations and materials – plastic, paper, vinyl and polystyrene, and the bright primary colours. (Everything) signifies transience. This temporary character is further articulated in the casual dress of customers, the

institutionally casualised dress of staff and the seating that is constructed to make lengthy stays uncomfortable. (*ibid.*, 649–650)

Exercise 3.2

This is a research exercise to improve your observational skills. These are your instructions:

- 1 Select a setting in which you regularly participate – good examples would be a student restaurant, a bus or train or a supermarket check-out queue.
- 2 Make a sketch map of the site. What sort of activities does the physical lay-out encourage, does it discourage or is it neutral towards? (Think of Stimson's comparison of the room for medical hearings and MacDonal's.)
- 3 How do people use the space you are studying? What do they show they are attending to? How do they communicate with one another or avoid communication? Do they look at one another or avoid it? What distance do they keep between one another?
- 4 In what ways are people using the space to co-operate with one another to *define* themselves (e.g. as a restaurant crowd but not bus passengers)?
- 5 Is there any difference between how people organise their activities when they are on their own, in pairs or in a crowd?
- 6 How do people use the setting as a resource for engaging in activities not specifically intended (but not necessarily inappropriate) in that setting (e.g. displaying particular personal characteristics such as wanting to communicate or not wanting to communicate)?

In a setting like McDonald's, we know that casual enjoyment and informality are appropriate. In addition to all its other differences from the oak-pannelled room, this restaurant is not an area for confidences, cut off from the public gaze, but offers an open vista from street to kitchen. Imagine attempting to conduct a disciplinary hearing in such a setting!

Testing Hypotheses

One of the strengths of observational research is its ability to shift focus as interesting new data become available. For instance, during a study of two cancer clinics at a British National Health Service hospital, I unexpectedly gained access to a 'private' (fee-paying) clinic run by one of the doctors in his spare time. I was thus able to change my research focus towards a comparison of the 'ceremonial orders' of public and private medicine (Silverman: 1984).

However, a strength can also be a weakness. Some qualitative research can resemble a disorganised stumble through a mass of data, full of 'insightful' observations of a mainly 'anecdotal' nature. For instance, in a

survey of qualitative papers in two journals in the area of health and social science, I was struck by the number of articles based on one or two 'convincing' examples (Silverman: 1989a).

There is absolutely no reason why observational research cannot combine insight with rigour. In other words, it is right to expect that such research should be *both* original *and* valid. This will involve testing hypotheses that we have generated in the field. Increasingly, however, as our knowledge of micro-social processes expands, it will mean that we can enter the field with a hypothesis we already want to test. So, in my comparative study of medical practice, Strong's (1979a) work on the 'ceremonial orders' of doctor-patient interaction gave me a clear hypothesis which became testable when I gained access to a private clinic.

But how then do we test hypotheses using qualitative data? Many years ago, Becker and Geer (1960) gave us some useful guidelines. In a study of the changing perspectives of medical students during their training, they found three ways of testing their emerging hypotheses:

- 1 Comparison of different groups at one time and of one cohort of students with another over the course of training. For instance, it could only be claimed with confidence that beginning medical students tended to be idealists if several cohorts of first year students all shared this perspective.
 - 2 Ensuring that the responses given in interviews were also replicated by what students said and did in more 'naturally-occurring' situations (e.g. speaking to one another in classrooms and over lunch).
 - 3 A careful inspection of negative or deviant cases leading to the abandonment, revision or even reinforcement of the hypothesis. For instance:
 - if it can be shown that the person who acts on a different perspective is socially isolated from the group or that his deviant activities are regarded by others as improper, unnecessary, or foolish, then one can argue that these facts indicate use of the perspective by all but deviants, hence, its collective character. (Becker and Geer: 1960, 289)
 - 4 The use of simple tabulations where appropriate. For instance, counting statements and activities by whether they were generated by the observer or were more naturally occurring.
- More than thirty years later, Dingwall (1992) underlines this search for validity via the comparative method and the use of deviant cases. He adds two further ways of establishing validity:

- 5 The provision of sufficient 'raw' data (e.g. in long transcripts) to allow the reader to separate data and analysis. As Dingwall comments:

Clearly, it is no more possible to reproduce all the data than it is for a filmmaker to show every inch of film . . . What I am taking exception to, though, is the kind of report that is purely a redescription of the researcher's impressions or sensations. Empathy has its place in ethnography but it

should enter after recording rather than being confused with it. (Dingwall: 1992, 169)

- 6 Avoiding the temptation, at its height in the 1960s, to favour the 'underdog' at the expense of everybody else. One should have doubts about a study which fails to deal even-handedly with the people it describes or to recognise the interactive character of social life. Dingwall's ethic of 'fair dealing' implies that we should ask of any study: 'Does it convey as much understanding of its villains as its heroes? Are the privileged treated as having something serious to say or simply dismissed as evil, corrupt or greedy without further enquiry?' (*ibid.*, 172). Clearly, this is as much a scientific as an ethical issue.

Provided it attends to these sorts of issues, observational research can produce findings every bit as 'hard' as those derived from other methods. Indeed, sometimes it can deliver valid information on topics which are intractable when we are limited by purely quantitative methods. For instance, Bloor *et al* (1991) show that it is possible to establish a reliable estimate of the proportion of drug-injecting female street prostitutes using observational methods on a cohort of women and identifying new fieldwork contacts.

How we test hypotheses in qualitative research is a crucial matter which I have only touched upon here. It is treated in much greater depth in Chapter 7.

Exercise 3.3

This exercise is meant to encourage you to think about how you would test hypotheses derived from observational research. You need to go through the following steps:

- 1 Review your answers to Exercise 3.2 and consider how you might go about testing each of your conclusions, e.g.
 - comparison of different settings or of different groups or activities within the same setting
 - the use of simple tabulations
 - the use of negative or deviant cases.
- 2 Turn your answers to 3.2 into hypotheses (i.e. give them the form: if A then B). Return to the field and try to gather the kind of data which might test your hypotheses.
- 3 Distinguish those hypotheses which have been confirmed from those which have been disconfirmed and those which you remain unsure about.
- 4 What kind of further data (from this setting or other settings) would allow you (a) to test your initial hypotheses more thoroughly and (b) to generate other testable hypotheses?

No hypotheses are ever 'theory-free'. We only come to look at things in certain ways because we have adopted, either tacitly or explicitly, certain ways of seeing. This means that, in observational research, data collection, hypothesis-construction and theory-building are not three separate things but are interwoven with one another.

This process is well described by using an analogy with a funnel:

Ethnographic research has a characteristic 'funnel' structure, being progressively focused over its course. Progressive focusing has two analytically distinct components. First, over time the research problem is developed or transformed, and eventually its scope is clarified and delimited and its internal structure explored. In this sense, it is frequently only over the course of the research that one discovers what the research is really 'about', and it is not uncommon for it to turn out to be about something quite remote from the initially foreshadowed problems. (Hammersley and Atkinson: 1983, 175)

For instance, my research on the two cancer clinics unexpectedly led into a comparison of fee-for-service and state-provided medicine. Similarly, my observation of a paediatric cardiology unit moved unpredictably in the direction of an analysis of disposal decisions with a small group of Down's Syndrome children.

We may note three features which these two cases had in common:

- 1 The switch of focus – through the 'funnel' – as a more defined topic arose.
- 2 The use of the comparative method as an invaluable tool of theory-building and testing.
- 3 The generation of topics with a scope outside the substantive area of the research. Thus the 'ceremonial orders' found in the cancer clinics are not confined to medicine, while the 'democratic' decision-making found with the Down's children had unexpected effects of power with a significance far beyond medical encounters.

Working this way parallels Glaser and Strauss' (1967) famous account of grounded theory. A simplified model of this involves these stages:

- an initial attempt to develop categories which illuminate the data
- an attempt to 'saturate' these categories with many appropriate cases in order to demonstrate their relevance
- developing these categories into more general analytic frameworks with relevance outside the setting.

Glaser and Strauss use their research on death and dying as an example. They show how they developed the category of 'awareness contexts' to refer to the kinds of situations in which people were informed of their likely fate. The category was then saturated and finally related to non-medical settings where people learn about how others define them (e.g. schools).

'Grounded theory' has been criticised for its failure to acknowledge implicit theories which guide work at an early stage. It also is clearer about the generation of theories than about their test. Used unintelligently, it can also degenerate into a fairly empty building of categories (aided by the computer software programs already discussed) or into a mere smoke-screen used to legitimise purely empiricist research (see Bryman: 1988, 83–87). At best, 'grounded theory' offers an approximation of the creative activity of theory-building found in good observational work, compared to the dire abstracted empiricism present in the most wooden statistical studies.

Styles of Theorising in Observational Work

Throughout this chapter, I have used relevant examples to give concrete illustrations of the methodological issues I have been covering. Now it is time to examine the competing claims of two different theories underlying observational research: interactionism and ethnomethodological ethnography.

However, I do not want to provide a purely theoretical discussion of rival 'schools' of sociology. My solution is to offer some illustrations of how different sociological traditions have provided different but fruitful ways of thinking about observational data.

Interactionism

Interactionist principles: Interactionism is concerned with the creation and change of symbolic orders via social interaction. For instance, Goffman (1964) has shown how social stigma is recognised by the rest of us and how stigmatised people manage their status. In another famous study, Goffman (1961a) outlines what he calls a 'mortifying process' whereby 'total institutions' (like armies, boarding schools and monasteries) strip away previous identities in order to create an identity that is consistent with the institution.

This concern with identity and the symbolic order has an important implication for how interactionists view methodology. While positivists can view methods as mere techniques of more or less efficient data-gathering, the interactionist is bound to view research itself as a symbolic order based on interactions. Consequently, Denzin properly points out that for him, as an interactionist, 'Methodology . . . represents the particular ways the sociologist acts on his environment' (1970, 5).

For Denzin, methods cannot be neutral instruments because they define how the topic will be symbolically constituted and how the researcher will adopt a particular definition of self vis-à-vis the data. For instance, interactionists are likely to define themselves in a subject-to-subject relation to their data, while positivists pursue an object-to-object model.

Denzin presents seven methodological principles which stem from this perspective. I have amalgamated some of his points in Table 3.2, while citing some examples for each principle taken from an early study by Becker (1953) 'Becoming a Marhuana User' (see p. 33, above).

Table 3.2: *Interactionism's Methodological Principles*

Principle	Implication	Example
1 Relating symbols and interaction	Showing how meanings arise in the context of behaviour	Behaviour of marhuana users in the presence of non-users (Becker 1953)
2 Taking the actors' points of view	Learning everyday conceptions of reality; interpreting them through sociological perspective	Becker's observations of a drug culture
3 Studying the 'situated' character of interaction	Gathering data in naturally-occurring situations	Observing people in their own environments
4 Studying process as well as stability	Examining how symbols and behaviour vary over time and setting	Studies of 'moral careers' (Becker 1953, Goffman 1961a)
5 Generalising from descriptions to theories	Attempting to establish universal interactive propositions	Goffman (1981) on 'forms' of interaction

Source: adapted from Denzin: 1970, 7-19

Following a practice common to interactionists, Denzin uses the term 'participant observation' rather than 'ethnography' to index the research methodology most appropriate to his perspective. Such a method involves sharing in people's lives while attempting to learn their symbolic world. The way it is used will depend on the precise role carved out by the researcher, varying from a 'complete participant' to the 'complete observer'.

Denzin rightly suggests that participant observation embodies the principles as set out in Table 3.2. It involves taking the viewpoint of those studied, understanding the situated character of interaction and viewing social processes over time, and can encourage attempts to develop formal theories grounded in first-hand data. Unlike survey research, Denzin points out, 'the participant observer is not bound in his field work by pre-judgements about the nature of his problem, by rigid data-gathering devices, or by hypotheses' (*ibid*, 216).

Unlike some interactionist work which may fail to improve upon good descriptive journalism, Denzin's principle 5 proposes that a description of content serves only as a prelude to analytic work. Basing himself on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) distinction between 'substantive' and 'formal' theory, he reminds us that the intrinsic fascination of much ethnographic data should be a stepping stone towards the attempt to establish 'universal interactive propositions' (Denzin: 1970, 19).

In this respect, Denzin's approach shares the analytic breadth that we found in cognitive anthropology. It underlines the point that good ethnography should not limit itself to a set of descriptions about how people behave in different settings. On the contrary, ethnography shares the social science programme of producing general, possibly even law-like, statements about human social organisation.

Denzin also notes that participant observation is not without its own difficulties. First, its focus on the present may blind the observer to important events that occurred before his entry on the scene. Second, as Dalton (1959) points out, confidants or informants in a social setting may be entirely unrepresentative of the less open participants. Third, observers may change the situation just by their presence and so the decision about what role to adopt will be fateful. Finally, the observer may 'go native', identifying so much with the participants that, like a child learning to talk, he cannot remember how he found out or how to articulate the principles underlying what he is doing.

It is now time to turn from principles and consider some exemplary interactionist studies.

Interactionist studies: When you observe face-to-face behaviour within a part of your culture with which you are familiar, it may all strike you as terribly 'obvious' and unremarkable. Perhaps that was your experience when you attempted some of the early exercises in this chapter.

If so, you would have been helped by reading the early work of Erving Goffman. Goffman shows us two recurrent kinds of rules used to organise social interaction:

- 1 Rules of courtesy, manners and etiquette (who is able to do and say what to whom and in what way?).
- 2 Depending upon the definition of the situation, rules of what is relevant or irrelevant within any setting.

As Goffman points out, these rules give us a clue to understanding what is going on in definitions of situations in face-to-face encounters. For: instead of beginning by asking what happens when this definition of the situation breaks down, we can begin by asking what perspectives this definition of the situation *excludes* when it is being satisfactorily sustained' (Goffman: 1961b, 19, my emphasis). In Goffman's later terminology, rules of relevance and irrelevance constitute the *frames* through which a setting is defined.

Viewing 1000 doctor-parent consultations in Scottish clinics in the 1970s, Strong at first struggled to see anything remarkable about what was going on. Only when he gathered some comparative data on private and 'charity' clinics in the United States did the relevance of 'frame' become so apparent. Now he saw cases where medicine was individualised and parents identified their child's medical history in terms of named special-

